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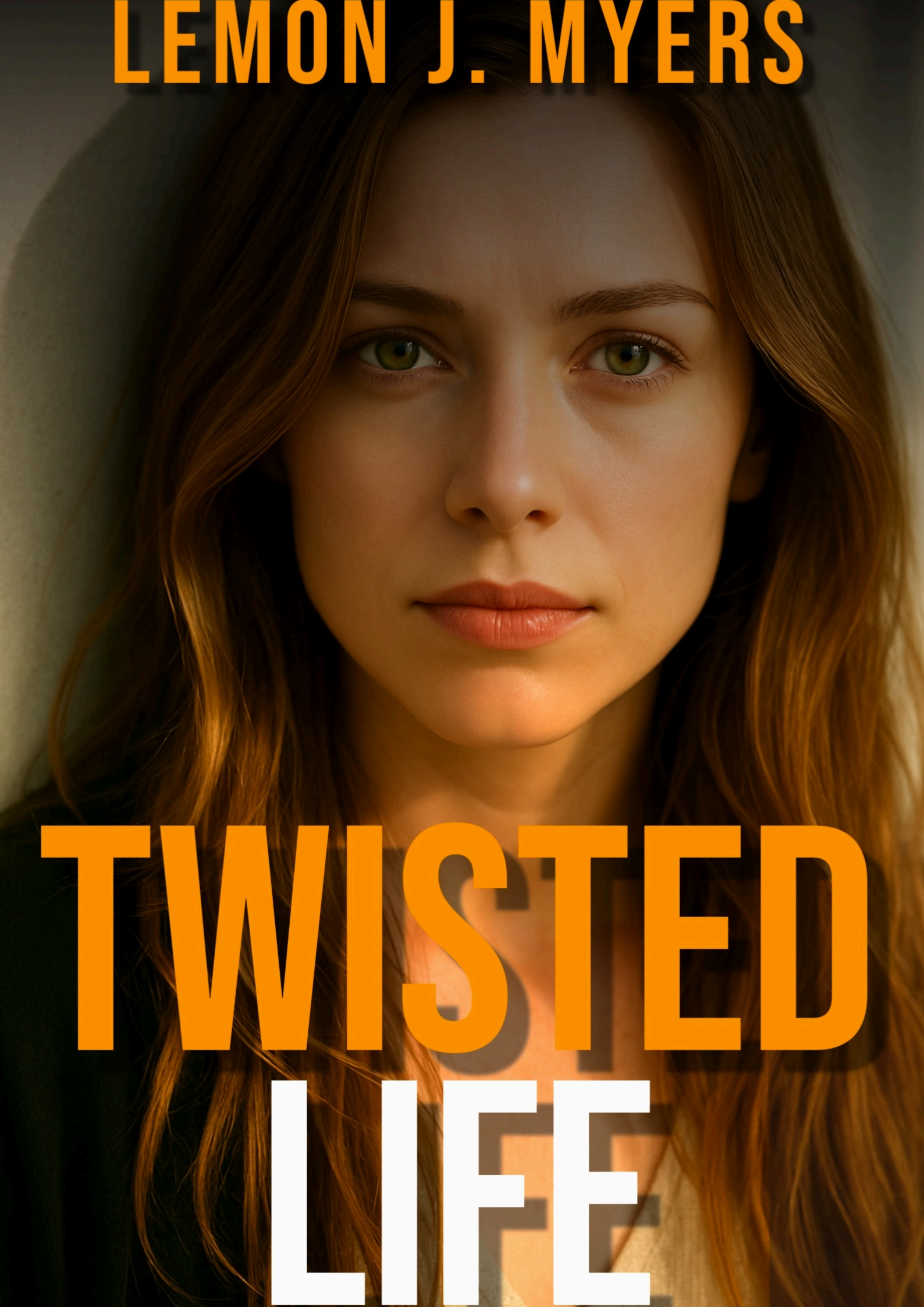

TWISTED LIFE

Twisted Life

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Published in the United States of America

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Twisted Life

Chapter 1

Alex jumped at the sharp crack echoing from the front door, his heart suddenly pounding in his chest.

"Someone is trying to enter the apartment!"

Fear surged through him. He dashed into his small room, and hid under the bed. Through the slightly open bedroom door, he stared anxiously, barely breathing, as the front door slowly opened.

An older man appeared, stout and slightly hunched, his thinning gray hair combed carefully over his balding scalp. His gray shirt hung loosely from his broad shoulders, and his dark gray pants were oversized and creased. Scuffed black leather shoes shuffled slowly across the worn tiles. The stranger moved hesitantly, as though he wasn't sure why he was there at all.

Alex felt his body trembling uncontrollably. He wished desperately that his mother hadn't stepped out—even if it was only next door, even if it was just for a moment. He'd seen enough in his nine years to know that moments like these could change everything.

The stranger slumped into one of the chairs at the small dining table, staring blankly around the modest one-room apartment. His expression was confused, lost. Suddenly, as if startled by some invisible thought, the man rose, wavered slightly, and walked back out the door, closing it gently behind him.

Silence fell again. Alex's breath came in short, sharp gasps.

Another crack echoed loudly, and Alex's heart leaped.

"He came back!" he thought desperately.

But this time, his mother's warm voice broke the quiet tension. "Alex! I am back! Where are you?"

Linda stepped into their small apartment carrying a plate of cookies borrowed from their neighbor. At thirty-something, Linda was still strikingly beautiful despite years of hardships that had etched worry into her soft hazel eyes. Her long, wavy dark-blonde hair framed her symmetrical face. She stood tall at five-foot-five, athletic yet feminine, dressed stylishly even in clothes faded by time—a beige skirt that shimmered subtly in the dim light, accented with thin diagonal lines of brown and gold, paired with a dark brown tank top and matching sandals.

Men often looked twice at Linda, but their admiration went unnoticed. Her mind was always preoccupied with survival, with making sure Alex had a better life than she'd ever known herself.

As she closed the door behind her, Alex burst from beneath the bed, running straight into her arms, his eyes wide and fearful.

“Mom! Mom! A man was here in the apartment while you were out! He went to the table and sat on the chair. I was hiding under my bed! Then, he just left!” Alex’s voice trembled.

“What? Are you okay?” Linda asked, her voice tight with sudden worry. Her grip tightened protectively around her son.

“Yes. It was scary at first, but he didn’t seem to be dangerous.”

Alex was small for his age, skinny yet handsome, with delicate features and rosy cheeks beneath his fine, chin-length blonde hair. His blue eyes, large and sparkling with innocence, held wisdom beyond his years. He wore his favorite red-and-blue Spider-Man T-shirt and faded blue shorts. Linda’s heart ached at seeing fear in those eyes again, eyes that deserved nothing but happiness.

“Oh! I’m happy nothing bad happened,” she whispered soothingly, hiding the tremble in her own voice. “I'll call Juan and ask him to change the lock.”

Juan was the landlord’s representative in Torremolinos, a rare beacon of kindness in Linda's unstable world. The landlord himself was a heartless man in distant Sevilla, threatening to drive down and throw Linda and Alex onto the street, even as Christmas approached.

“Juan? It’s Linda. Someone entered the apartment with a key. Could you please change the lock?” She quickly explained the unsettling situation.

Juan sighed deeply on the other end of the line, his voice heavy with regret. He gently explained to Linda that it must have been a former tenant, a confused old man suffering from memory issues, who probably believed he still lived there.

Linda hung up and embraced Alex again, feeling the familiar ache of helplessness mixed with fierce determination. They had moved here from Hungary, hoping desperately for a fresh start. Yet, each day tested Linda’s strength, challenging her in ways she'd never imagined. She looked down at her son, promising silently that no matter how dark things got, she would never stop fighting for him.

Chapter 2

It was the early 1980s, and Linda was only six years old. She lived in a large, imposing house that crowned the top of a mountain overlooking Budapest, Hungary. From the outside, the home appeared grand and inviting, with its sprawling garden, lush greenery, fruit trees, bushes, and blooming flowers. But appearances could be deceiving.

Linda was small and painfully thin, her dark-blonde hair falling loosely down her back. She quietly crept down the stairs early one morning, drawn by strange sounds echoing through the hallway. As she approached her older brother Peter's room, the shouting became clear—sharp, angry words that sent a chill through her slender frame.

"Come on! Do it! Bend your knee!" her father's voice thundered harshly.

She stepped cautiously inside the doorway, afraid of what she might find. Peter lay on the floor, tears streaming silently from his eyes. He was desperately trying, but his knees would not bend, his muscles unwilling to obey. Linda's father, towering above Peter, struck him repeatedly in his legs, each slap echoing sharply through the room.

Peter had been born with cerebral palsy, a cruel consequence of oxygen deprivation during their mother's premature labor. Despite his physical limitations—his knees locked stiff, hands bent inward, and one leg shorter than the other—Peter was bright, gentle, and handsome, with intelligent, asymmetrical blue-gray eyes and soft, dark-blonde hair. At nine, he navigated life with a walking frame, his thin legs devoid of muscle tone, nearly useless.

Their father believed fiercely in discipline, though his methods were harsh, a cruel legacy passed down by his own father, a wealthy but uneducated farmer who'd beaten obedience into his children. He did not mean harm, yet harm was all he knew. He had rejected the family farm and forged his own path, becoming a diplomat with a PhD in politics. But his temper was volatile, exacerbated by heavy drinking. A burly man with dark, curly, messy hair, a large belly, and a thick mustache, he often spent hours digging and working in their garden, his skin sunburned, slick with sweat, and smelling sharply of alcohol.

Linda stood frozen in the doorway, her heart hammering painfully in her chest, as Peter sobbed quietly.

*

"Aaaaaah!"

Linda was running frantically through the house, her bare feet slapping hard against the cold wooden floors. Her father chased behind, angry and violent, though she had no idea what she'd done this time to provoke his rage. The acrid smell of alcohol filled her lungs as

she raced toward Peter's room, desperate for escape. Without hesitation, she leaped through Peter's open window onto the wrap-around porch, narrowly evading her father's grasp—

Suddenly, Linda jolted awake in her bed, sweat soaking her thin pajamas. She trembled, heart pounding, fighting the panic left over from yet another recurring nightmare.

It was a nightmare drawn directly from her daily life. Her father often struck her, leaving painful, red handprints on her small body. Sometimes she knew the reason, but often she did not. Once, during math homework, each incorrect number brought a swift slap and tears she struggled to hide. When the teacher had forbidden erasers, her father had angrily grabbed a hard piece of bread, using it roughly to erase Linda's mistakes from the paper, each harsh motion carving deeper wounds into her memory.

Mealtimes were equally tormenting. Lunch was served exactly at noon, a ritual Linda dreaded. Her father ate quickly and impatiently, leaving the table early to resume work in the garden. Linda, a picky eater, lingered, staring at the food she hated.

"You can't leave the table until you've eaten your lunch," her father warned, sternly.

"But I don't like it!" Linda protested bitterly.

"I don't care! My dad never let me leave the table until I ate everything on my plate. And now, look at me! I am eating everything. I don't want to see anything on your plate when I come back."

Linda would sit there helplessly, stomach knotted with dread. Her younger sister, Nora, sat beside her. Nora, just four, was also thin, with short, curly dark hair and deep brown eyes. She wasn't as picky and usually escaped punishment.

"Put the food on my plate. I will eat it, and you can say that it was you," Nora whispered quietly, glancing nervously toward their mother, busy in the kitchen.

A few minutes passed before heavy footsteps announced their father's return. Both girls sat frozen, empty plates in front of them, fear gripping them as his shadow darkened the doorway.

"Did you eat your lunch?" he demanded sharply.

"Yes!" the girls answered in unison.

"You didn't eat your lunch, Linda. Was it you, Nora? Did you eat her lunch as well?" he asked sternly, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"No, it wasn't me," Nora replied, voice quivering.

"Yes, it was you! I know, Linda, that you didn't eat the beans," he declared coldly.

Before Linda could protest, his hand struck sharply, pain radiating through her small body.

"Ouch! Noooo!" Linda screamed, tears flooding her eyes.

Later, Linda cautiously approached the front gate, craving freedom. Her father, working in the garden, shouted firmly, "Do not go anywhere!" He slammed the gate closed, securing it tightly with a padlock.

But Linda waited quietly until his back was turned, her tiny hands gripping the decorative metal as she climbed over the seven-foot green gate, slipping quickly down the other side. She ran into the vast, open territory nearby—an old salt mine now covered in wildflowers, frequented by neighbors walking their dogs.

She returned home silently, knowing her father would be drunk somewhere, unconscious in the garage or the garden. Linda had become adept at invisibility.

School lunches were another torment. Linda escaped daily after classes ended, frightened of the school food she hated as much as home meals. She wandered home, took her large German Shepherd dog for comforting walks, or watched longingly through the fence as her classmates played, yearning for the normalcy she never experienced.

The house she lived in was grand but isolated, parts of it built by her father's own hands. There were two floors, a basement, large rooms, and spaces filled with loneliness. Linda spent hours alone in the garden, her knees often bloodied and bruised from falls, pain no longer registering in her mind.

Linda's mother, a sophisticated, attractive high-voltage engineer in her late thirties, rarely noticed her daughter's silent suffering. Always impeccably dressed, blonde curls styled perfectly, blue eyeliner framing youthful eyes, she drew admiring glances wherever she went. Her career and endless energy left little room for maternal warmth.

One afternoon, when their mother had to leave the girls home with their drunk father, she summoned their strict maternal grandmother to watch them. A former primary school teacher known for punishing students with a stick, Grandma was thin yet deceptively strong, her gray hair meticulously curled, eyes magnified sternly behind thick glasses.

"What are you cooking?" Linda asked cautiously.

"Milk rice," Grandma replied curtly.

"I hate milk rice! I don't want to eat it!" Linda shouted defiantly.

"But you will," Grandma answered coldly, raising an enormous wooden spatula.

"Aaaaaah! Are you going to hit me with that!?"

"Yes, if you don't eat the milk rice."

Linda ran outside, desperate, finding her father digging in the garden. "Granny wants to hit me with the spatula if I don't eat the milk rice!" she cried, voice cracking.

Her father paused briefly, then burst into laughter. "What?! Granny wants to hit you? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" he laughed cheerfully, shaking his head dismissively. He offered no protection, no comfort, returning to his digging without another word.

In the end, Linda reluctantly ate the milk rice, discovering to her quiet surprise that it wasn't as awful as she'd imagined. But the fear, the deep-rooted anxiety, remained. It always did.

Chapter 3

Linda's eyes flashed with frustration, anger radiating from every inch of her small frame.

"I don't want to do this! I hate Russian language! And I hate YOU!" Linda shouted angrily at her teacher, crumpling the Russian notes into a tight ball and throwing it across the classroom.

"Calm down, Linda!" the Russian teacher exclaimed, visibly astonished.

"No! I don't care about this. We are going to Spain anyway."

She had good reason to feel rebellious. Linda's father had recently announced that he had been assigned to a post at the Hungarian Embassy in Madrid. They were finally leaving Hungary behind—but first, they needed approval for their visas. It was no small task in a communist nation, under strict Soviet control, where leaving the country for the West was a rare privilege, sometimes taking months of anxious waiting.

Linda was excellent in Russian—she was the best student in her class, in fact—but the language reminded her of everything she hated. School had become a daily nightmare since transferring down from the peaceful, sheltered school on the hill. Here, in the city, communism felt suffocatingly close. Linda was forced into uniforms she resented—black skirts and stark white shirts, accented by mandatory scarves and badges bearing the old Hungarian coat of arms. She found herself marching through forests in regimented lines to celebrate Russian holidays she neither understood nor cared for.

Worst of all was lunch. Teachers sat beside her, forcing Linda to eat at least half of every meal served. The sight of cabbage or lentils made her physically sick. The teachers didn't care. They just watched sternly until she forced it down, often barely keeping it inside. She counted the days desperately until their move.

Finally, the visas arrived, and Linda's family landed in Madrid. It was 1986. For a short while, they lived inside the Hungarian Embassy itself, a large, imposing building filled with bustling officials and whispered secrets. Here, Linda made her first real friends, playing carefree games with her sister Nora and a Hungarian girl named Anita. The embassy became their playground, from the echoing stairwells to the noisy parking lot. Linda especially loved sneaking into the secretary's office, fascinated by the shrill whine of the fax machine printing long, narrow sheets, and the clacking of typewriter keys.

But soon enough, Linda found herself alone again. Her parents enrolled her and Nora in different public schools, leaving Linda in a class filled with Spanish-speaking strangers. She didn't know a single word of Spanish. She spent weeks silently studying comic books, deciphering them page by page. By the end of the year, she spoke Spanish fluently, a skill born of necessity and quiet determination.

Their next move was to a luxurious apartment in an affluent neighborhood of Madrid, located on the fourteenth floor of a tall building. From the wrap-around balcony, Linda

could see a private park with swimming pools, tennis courts, and manicured gardens. Yet, the elegance and beauty couldn't mask the isolation she often felt. The apartment was grand, with four bathrooms, rooms for servants they didn't have, and ornate furniture. She spent countless lonely hours in the kitchen, watching cartoons on a tiny TV, while her parents sat apart in the elegant living room.

Her brother, Peter, was far away in Benicasim, at a therapeutic care home, receiving treatment for his cerebral palsy. Linda missed him terribly. Nora, meanwhile, spent most of her time alone in Peter's empty room.

When summer came, Anita and her mother visited often, and Linda cautiously began making friends with neighboring kids. Eventually, she and Nora enrolled in a Catholic private school nearby, led by nuns who where kind. Linda struggled at first, forced to memorize rather than truly understand the lessons as she needed context. Unlike Nora, who adapted easily to the rote memorization.

But amid the daily difficulties, there was one bright spot—the computer room, a tiny room housing a handful of bulky IBM PCs running DOS. Linda loved learning command-line codes, carefully saving her work onto floppy disks. Computers felt orderly, predictable, safe—a small refuge in her turbulent world.

At school, things weren't easy socially. Linda approached a group of girls she considered friends as they played basketball.

"Can I play?" Linda asked hopefully.

"No," one of the girls responded sarcastically, deliberately shooting the ball into the basket.

Linda felt the sting of rejection deeply, wondering silently why she wasn't allowed to play. Among this group was Maria, a girl Linda genuinely liked and trusted. Yet another friend, Julia, constantly bullied Linda, mocking her openly and calling her names.

That summer, as Linda turned twelve, her confidence took another hit. Her father, fearful and controlling, forbade her from going down to the nearby bakery to buy a cake, claiming it was dangerous. Which made Linda spend weeks alone on the balcony, quietly watching other children play happily at the pool below. Even when she invited classmates for her birthday, excitedly preparing games and treats, no one showed up. Not even Maria, her best friend. Hurt and confused, Linda tried calling, only reaching Maria hours later. Maria invited her over the next day, offering a small measure of comfort.

In the quiet of that disappointing summer, something inside Linda shifted. Hurt hardened into resolve. She realized she couldn't rely on anyone else to make her feel strong or valued. By summer's end, a subtle transformation occurred—Linda vowed to stand up for herself, to face her tormentors with confidence, even humor.

When school started again, she approached her usual group of girls on the basketball court, chin held high.

"Can I play?" she asked again, calmly this time.

"Nope," came the sarcastic reply.

Linda ignored the dismissal and joined the game anyway, daring them to stop her. Julia mocked her again, laughing and calling Linda a "Toxicomana," teasing her for chewing on erasers. But this time, Linda merely laughed along, refusing to show any sign of weakness or pain. After that, the teasing slowly faded away.

Finally, Linda felt her quiet strength rise back from beneath layers of hurt and humiliation. She was determined to let no one break her again—not teachers, not classmates, not even her own fears.

Chapter 4

Linda felt drawn to the Spanish way of thinking—it was flexible, positive, free in a way she'd never known in Hungary. She loved that she could casually greet her classmates' grandmothers with a simple "Hi," not worrying about formal speech and expectations. But living in Madrid also opened Linda's eyes to something she hadn't fully realized before—her father's drinking problem.

Back in Hungary, in that grand house on the hill, her father's absences were frequent, hiding the extent of his drinking from the family. Here, in their Madrid apartment, there was no place for secrets. The truth was unavoidable.

"Dad? Can you help me with my homework, please?" Linda asked tentatively one evening, approaching the imposing man she'd always feared and respected.

"Tjoeamkadadfkmkjadfakdn," her father mumbled incoherently from his chair.

"What? I don't understand you."

"Flsfakadfaknasdkwweffa," he repeated, his words slurring heavily.

Linda stared, unable to comprehend the scene before her. Her father—usually stern, harsh, frighteningly composed—was barely able to speak. On another evening, she walked into the living room to find him lying flat on his back on the sofa, legs kicking strangely in the air. When he caught her stunned gaze, he began making exaggerated, childish motions, accompanied by odd sounds. His face was bright and carefree—a sight she'd never witnessed before. The man who chased her, who disciplined her harshly, now looked helplessly like a child himself.

It was bewildering. Linda didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Yet even in Madrid, there were darker moments. Her father once chased her around the apartment, determined to force her to taste an apple and a pear. She'd fled beneath the dining room table, then out onto the balcony, hiding until he eventually gave up in drunken frustration.

Then there was the afternoon Linda decided to attend her Taekwondo and Judo class alone, even though her father had explicitly forbidden it, saying he couldn't drive them that day.

"Where were you?!" her father demanded when she finally returned home, his voice tight with anger.

"I was in school," Linda lied instinctively, knowing her father hated when they walked alone.

"You are lying. I called the school. You weren't there."

“But I was in school!” she insisted, her voice rising sharply in panic. Before she could react, his large hand slapped her across the face with shocking force.

“Aaaaaaagh!” Linda cried out, pain and humiliation stinging her cheeks. Tears filled her eyes, but a terrible thought echoed in her mind: she believed she deserved it.

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Weeks later, the family faced another challenge. Linda’s mother had undergone plastic surgery on her abdomen, trying to smooth and tighten her loose skin. The surgery had gone badly, leaving her bedridden with a large, angry, purple-red scar across her stomach. Linda didn’t fully understand the gravity of her mother’s condition at first, but soon it became all too clear.

“What’s that smell?” Peter asked suddenly from his room.

“I can’t smell it,” Linda replied distractedly, but something tugged at her instincts. She stepped cautiously out onto the balcony, walking slowly toward the living room. There, she froze—a thick plume of smoke was pouring from the kitchen.

Panic surged through her as she entered the kitchen, where her father stood, wearing only a pair of white briefs, frantically pulling smoking steaks off the stove. Linda stared, too stunned to speak. He looked almost comical, but the danger was real.

Linda quickly returned to the balcony, where the neighbor’s boy had leaned out, concern etched on his young face.

“We called the firefighters,” the boy announced calmly. “They’re coming.”

Linda felt embarrassment flood her cheeks. Without a word, she hurried back inside to her father, urgently relaying the boy’s message.

“We don’t need the firefighters. I am already handling the issue. There’s no fire. I fell asleep and forgot about the steaks,” he said dismissively, clearly intoxicated but trying to sound composed.

A loud banging suddenly shook the apartment door, urgent and commanding.

“Firefighters! Let us in!” someone shouted from outside.

“Don’t let them in!” her father barked firmly, eyes wide in sudden shame. “I don’t want them to see me like this.”

Since no one opened the door, the firefighters climbed over from the neighbor’s balcony to enter the apartment. By then, the fire had been extinguished, leaving behind only the lingering, pungent odor of smoke that would cling stubbornly to the furniture for weeks.

Years later, Linda would learn the deeper truth about her mother's surgery—about how she had actually died on the operating table, her heart stopping until the surgeons miraculously revived her. Even afterward, recovering at home, her mother had another brush with death, slipping away one night into an eerie, near-death experience. She remembered clearly leaving her body, floating silently through the apartment, desperately trying to pull a blanket back over Linda, who had kicked it off in her sleep, only to find she couldn't physically grasp it. She'd visited each of her children, checking lovingly on Peter, and finally reaching her husband, who lay passed out drunk in the servant's room.

In that silent, spectral moment, she realized clearly she couldn't leave—not yet. Her children still needed her. She could never abandon them to their father's drunken neglect. With that thought, life surged back into her body.

That haunting experience had changed everything. She knew immediately that her marriage was over. As she lay helpless in bed, her husband continued to drink, oblivious and uncaring. It was then she understood the brutal truth—he would never change. For the sake of herself and her children, she had to find the strength to leave.

Chapter 5

Linda's return to Hungary was far from the joyful homecoming her parents had promised. She was fourteen, freshly arrived from Madrid, and stepping nervously into the imposing corridors of secondary school. Her Hungarian felt rusty and stiff, frozen in childhood, untouched by the new slang and casual ease her peers effortlessly wielded. Communism had fallen just a year earlier, and Hungary had become a country transformed overnight. Linda found herself a stranger in her homeland.

Although she'd learned fluent Spanish from television and neighborhood friends in Spain, the Hungarian she spoke at home with her parents had remained formal, rigid, unchanged by time. Now, in classrooms filled with teenagers fluent in the rhythms of a rapidly changing language, Linda felt out of place and painfully inadequate.

The textbooks felt alien, especially the history book—each chapter seemed written in a language utterly foreign to the one spoken on Budapest's streets. Linda spent hours at night translating sentence by sentence into simpler Hungarian just to grasp the material. Her classmates moved on effortlessly, leaving her stranded, confused, and increasingly anxious.

Math was another painful surprise. Linda never imagined she'd struggle in math, but the new math teacher, Mr. Kiss, was a fresh university graduate whose teaching methods baffled everyone. Tall, gaunt, and pale-skinned, with messy dark brown hair and an ever-present odor of cigarettes and bitter coffee, Mr. Kiss would scribble complex equations on the chalkboard and abruptly announce:

"And the variable is 5. Clear. Right?"

The students sat in confused silence, staring helplessly at the incomprehensible scribbles.

No one dared say anything. Linda felt trapped, her stomach knotting in frustration and embarrassment.

One morning, Linda stood quietly in the corridor during break, hovering uncertainly near a small group of classmates. She listened to them talk, hoping to slip unnoticed into their conversation.

"Did you hear what Mr. David said—that people in the Middle Ages combed their hair to distribute grease to the tips?" one boy asked, smirking.

Another laughed softly. "I zoned out during history class and missed that."

Linda frowned, hesitating. Finally, unable to stay silent, she timidly asked, "Sorry? What does it mean, 'zoned out'?"

Instantly, laughter erupted around her. Faces turned toward her, amused and mocking.

“You don’t know what ‘zoned out’ means?” one boy sneered sarcastically. “Are you stupid or what?”

Linda’s face burned, humiliation flooding her body. In that moment, her reputation was sealed. The whispers began immediately—Linda was the clueless outsider, the dumb girl who didn’t even understand simple slang.

The bullying started soon after, quiet at first, then growing steadily louder and crueler.

By the end of the year, Linda’s grades had plummeted. She failed math, history, and literature, forced into humiliating retests. Weeks of tutoring and anxious study finally paid off when she passed them all. Relief washed over her, fragile yet profound.

But as Linda gathered her things after the math retest, a teacher she’d never seen before approached her, his expression cold.

“Do you know that you only passed the test because I was easy on you? If you fail it again next year, don’t even bother coming to the retest. I won’t let you pass to the next year,” he said very seriously.

Linda stood frozen in disbelief. Who was this man? She’d never even spoken to him. The bitterness in his eyes shocked and frightened her.

The next year, Linda returned cautiously to school. Much to her relief, classmates soon forgot her awkward moments from the year before, their teenage minds eager for fresh gossip. She gradually made new friends, even among students from higher grades, slowly reclaiming the confidence she'd lost.

Yet, her heart sank when she walked into her math class and saw him again—Mr. Kiss, the same unreadable, disorganized teacher whose presence filled her with dread.

Linda squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. She’d endured worse. She would find a way through this, too.

Chapter 6

While school presented endless struggles, home had turned into a battlefield for Linda.

Her parents were divorcing. Slowly, their once comfortable home became a place of suspicion and hostility. Furniture began disappearing, one piece at a time, and her mother grew increasingly secretive. She moved the refrigerator and freezer into Peter's room, locking the door to prevent Linda's father from taking them. When that wasn't enough, she began locking valuables in the downstairs rooms, hiding them from her soon-to-be ex-husband.

Linda came home from school one afternoon to raised voices echoing through the house. Her parents were yelling in a childish tug-of-war, fighting over an *aguayo*—a traditional woven cloth her father had brought back from his diplomatic assignment in Bolivia.

"This is mine! You brought it for me from Bolivia," Linda's mother shouted, pulling fiercely at one end.

"No, it is mine! I brought it for myself. I was in Bolivia; you weren't," her father yelled back, refusing to let go.

Watching them fight filled Linda with dread. These were her parents—grown adults, powerful figures in her life—now reduced to two angry children. It frightened and embarrassed her to see them like this.

Linda knew their story well, despite her parents' silence. Her father had once worked in the Hungarian Embassy in Bolivia, married out of obligation to another woman he'd never loved. Her mother, a high-voltage engineer, had also been married to a jealous, controlling man. Their paths had crossed by chance at a friend's gathering when her father returned to Hungary for the holidays. After divorcing their respective spouses, they married quickly, driven by passion and desperation to escape their past lives. Later, during her father's posting at the Hungarian Embassy in Mexico, Linda and her younger sister Nora had been born.

Now, years later, the passion had turned toxic, reduced to bitter arguments over meaningless objects.

Another day, Linda heard loud shouting coming from the garage. Curious and anxious, she approached cautiously. Inside, her parents fought over the car keys like two desperate teenagers.

"Give me the car keys! I need to go to do the shopping," her mother demanded, furious, trying to wrestle the keys from her husband's grip. "Give me the keys!"

Laughing drunkenly, Linda's father leaped onto the hood of their old gray BMW, waving the keys high above his head. "Here you have it! Catch it if you can!" he taunted, laughing until he lost his balance and tumbled clumsily onto the concrete.

Linda's heart ached with shame and helplessness. She turned away, unable to witness any more humiliation. As she walked briskly out of the garage, her mother shouted after her: "Don't go anywhere! I need you to be a witness."

But Linda didn't stop. She couldn't breathe in this chaos. Without any real destination, she fled to the nearest bus stop. Nora followed silently behind her. They boarded the bus that circled endlessly around the hill, a safe haven from their home's madness. They sat together in silence, riding around and around, trying to forget.

At one of the bus stops—a gathering place for neighborhood boys—a group waved cheerfully at the passing bus each time it stopped. Eventually, one of the boys gestured clearly for Linda and Nora to join them.

Linda impulsively stepped off the bus. Nora stayed behind, hesitant and uncertain. At fifteen, Linda felt brave enough to escape—Nora, only thirteen, didn't yet share her courage.

This impulsive decision brought Noah into Linda's life. Noah became her boyfriend, gentle and carefree, with short blonde hair, bright cheeks, and an easy smile. He had a motorcycle, an MZ ETZ that Linda loved riding. They spent long afternoons at the top of the hill, breathing fresh air scented with gasoline, surrounded by open green fields where she once rode horses and trained ponies. With Noah, she briefly forgot her troubled home, letting herself laugh and feel young again.

Yet, even as she dated Noah, Linda secretly longed for someone else. A boy named Adrian, whom she saw regularly on the bus home from school. Adrian stood out from the others, tall and slim with dark blonde, shoulder-length hair, intense blue eyes, and a confident, easy manner. He always wore the same red baseball jacket and jeans, standing casually at the back of the bus, elbows resting against the rear window. He watched Linda boldly, openly, his gaze making her heart race with nervous excitement.

Linda was shy, uncertain how to approach Adrian. Some days she dared to hold his gaze boldly; other days she nervously avoided looking at him altogether, leaving Adrian confused and hesitant. Neither ever took the first step.

Months later, when Noah dropped Linda off after a ride, he leaned forward suddenly to kiss her. Linda panicked—she'd never kissed anyone before—and turned quickly so his lips touched her cheek instead. Hurt or embarrassed, Noah broke up with her the very next day. She felt a pang of loss, missing the freedom of those motorcycle rides, the sweet mix of wind and gasoline, and Noah's comforting warmth. But her mind still lingered on Adrian.

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At home, the fights never ceased. Linda lived every day as though trapped in a tense, explosive drama—like the "War of the Roses," she thought bitterly, hoping desperately it wouldn't end in tragedy.

She shared a large bedroom with Nora, their white study desks placed opposite each other, the room offering a beautiful view over the sprawling garden and city below. Yet, it was no sanctuary. Even small noises triggered Nora's temper. One evening, as Linda studied, her large biology book slipped from the desk, crashing loudly to the floor.

"Stop making noises! I am studying!" Nora shouted angrily.

Nora had grown increasingly irritable since their years in Madrid, memorizing each school subject word-for-word and unable to tolerate distractions.

"My book fell. Give me a break," Linda responded defensively, weary from fighting at home and tired of being blamed for things beyond her control.

She stared silently at the pages scattered on the floor, gathering her strength, reminding herself she was stronger than all this madness. Somehow, despite everything, Linda knew she'd find her way out.

Chapter 7

One day, an old classmate named Ben reappeared in Nora's life. She remembered him vaguely from their first grade together on the hill. Ben mentioned casually that everyone from the hill was now hanging out at the new Rainbow teen nightclub downtown. Linda's pulse quickened—this was her chance to see Adrian, the boy from the bus.

That night, as she prepared to leave, her mother's voice echoed sharply from behind her:

"Don't go anywhere! If you go out, don't even come home!"

Linda paused, fear gripping her for a moment, but her resolve was stronger. She didn't care. She had to see Adrian, no matter the consequences.

He was there. But their eyes barely met before another boy swept her away. Bobby was handsome—tall, confident, with dark blonde hair and eyes as blue as Adrian's. They sat hidden away in a quiet booth, and Bobby taught Linda how to kiss. His lips tasted cool, like the menthol gum he was chewing. Linda liked the sensation. She felt seen, attractive and desired.

"Do you want to come with me to check out something in the car?" Bobby asked softly.

Linda hesitated, unsure why he'd want to move somewhere else when they were already comfortable and hidden. Her instincts whispered caution.

"No," she replied quietly.

Moments later, Linda went to the restroom, where another girl from the group pulled her aside urgently.

"If any of the boys ask you to go out and see the cars—don't. He's trying to have sex with you. That's what they do."

Linda's heart jumped in fear and relief. She had made the right choice. These boys were older—two years above her—and clearly more experienced.

Returning to the group, Linda barely had time to breathe before Adam, another boy from the hill, cornered her with a cocky grin.

"I heard that Bobby just taught you to kiss. Give me a kiss," Adam demanded, and without waiting for permission, he forced his tongue into Linda's mouth. "Did you like it?"

Linda stood frozen. Adam was familiar but made her uneasy—he'd pursued her persistently before, always aggressive. Not ugly, but not quite handsome either. His face was harsh, his manner overwhelming. Linda felt defenseless against him, trapped by her own innocence.

It grew late, and Ben had disappeared, leaving Linda stranded. Nervously, she walked to the night bus stop, unsure how she'd get home. To her astonishment, Adrian stood waiting there with his best friend, Leo. Linda's heart skipped—perhaps this night could end differently.

The bus arrived suddenly. Linda ran to catch it.

"Hi," Adrian and Leo greeted her casually.

"Hi," she replied softly, breathless.

Yet, they didn't say much to her on the ride. After disembarking miles from home, Linda found Adrian and Leo lounging on a bench, laughing quietly to themselves.

"How do I get home from here?" Linda asked anxiously.

"We called a taxi. You can come with us," Adrian said easily. He offered her a cigarette from a small box. "Do you want one?"

"No, thanks," Linda said softly.

"Come on. Take one," Adrian insisted playfully.

"No. I don't like it."

"Did you even try it?" he teased.

"No, but my mom smokes and I don't like the smell of it."

"You don't know what you are losing," Adrian joked lightly.

In the taxi, Leo sat upfront, while Linda and Adrian sat quietly in the back. After Leo got out, Adrian's hand suddenly grasped Linda's arm, firm yet gentle. He looked at her intensely, his smile unreadable. But then, just as quickly, he let go, turning away. Confused, inexperienced, and afraid to misinterpret the moment, Linda stepped out silently when the taxi stopped at her home.

*

A week passed. Ben invited Linda to a party at one of the guys' houses, and her heart jumped with hope again. Maybe Adrian would be there.

Yet, arriving at the crowded house, her heart sank—no sign of Adrian. Someone mentioned he and Leo had gone to check out the nightclub, making sure no one was left behind.

Before Linda could gather herself, Adam appeared again, pulling her into an intense, unwanted kiss. Lost in discomfort, Linda barely noticed Adrian returning until he shouted playfully, "Stop! Stop! The shooting is over!"

The kissing abruptly ended. Adrian sat down immediately beside another girl but reached behind the girl's shoulder to pinch Linda playfully yet painfully. Her heart ached with confusion and hurt. What did he want from her? Why flirt, only to reject her so openly?

"Are you coming up?" Adrian asked the other girl cheerfully.

"Yes," the girl replied softly, and they disappeared upstairs.

Linda stared after them, bewildered and wounded. Before she could react, Adam grabbed her hand roughly and led her out to his car. Once inside, he suddenly unzipped and pulled out his penis.

"Grab it," he ordered.

Linda recoiled. "I don't want to," she said bitterly.

Ignoring her, Adam forced her hand onto his junk. Linda shuddered, revolted by the touch —by the ugliness and violation. Immediately, she pulled her hand away, stronger now in her resolve.

"I don't want to do this," she said firmly, though fear still colored her voice.

"Let's go back then," Adam snapped angrily.

Back on the couch, Linda felt trapped again until Max approached, smiling warmly. He was different—handsome, confident, yet gentle in manner. Relief washed through Linda. Max distracted Adam, giving her space to breathe.

"He has a small penis," Adam mocked bitterly, trying to embarrass Max, who just laughed it off gracefully.

Max leaned closer to Linda, whispering softly, "Do you want to come up with me?"

"Yes," she said quickly, eager to escape Adam.

Upstairs, in the quiet privacy of a bedroom, Max surprised Linda by keeping his distance, making no move on her. Instead, he spoke softly, warmly, asking gentle questions about her family and life. Linda relaxed slightly, grateful for his unexpected respect.

"Did you ever have sex? Are you a virgin?" Max asked gently.

"Yes, I am a virgin," Linda admitted shyly.

"Then I don't recommend you have sex with me. You want to have your first time with someone you're in love with. Believe me."

Linda felt deep relief. After Adam's ugliness, the thought of sex terrified her.

"The girls at this party are all sluts because they had their first-time sex with some random guy that they just met," Max explained matter-of-factly.

Linda absorbed his words quietly. They talked softly about lighter things, easing the tension until they finally returned downstairs.

Adrian soon reappeared, walking down with the girl from earlier. Their faces were flushed as their friends whistled teasingly. Linda's stomach twisted. Gathering courage, she approached Adrian.

"I like you," she said softly, vulnerably.

"You don't know me," Adrian replied coldly, barely glancing her way.

Hurt, Linda turned away, feeling humiliated again.

Years later, Linda would discover through a mutual friend named Martha that the truth of that night had been very different. Adrian and the other girl had never done anything upstairs—they'd only gone to spy on Max. Likewise, Max had taken Linda upstairs merely to see what Martha was doing with another boy. In fact, no one had actually had sex at that party.

Linda understood then how misunderstandings, fears, and youthful naïveté had trapped her that night in a cycle of confusion and pain. But back then, standing alone in the party's dull lights, all she'd felt was sadness, betrayal, and a longing to escape.

Chapter 8

Linda had just finished second grade of secondary school, and once again, she'd failed math and history. It wasn't even a surprise anymore—it was just another wound added to the list. Another reminder that no matter how hard she tried, it never seemed to be enough.

She remembered that teacher's words like a punch to the stomach. Cold. Final.

"Don't even bother coming to the retest. I won't let you move on to the next year."

He hadn't even looked her in the eye when he said it.

But her mom wasn't about to accept that. She went straight to the school principal and told him, clear as day, "We'll move her to another school if we have to—but you let her take the tests."

The room for the oral history exam felt like a courtroom. Long rows of desks were pushed together in a straight line, and the teachers sat behind them like judges. It was quiet, too quiet. Chairs sat across from each teacher, ready to hold failed students like Linda—scared, sweating, hearts thudding through thin shirts.

She stepped inside and pulled a paper slip with three questions on it. One glance and her stomach sank. She didn't know the answers to any of them.

She walked slowly to the seat in front of her history teacher. He was one of the kind ones. He always told her she was capable of more than she believed. That she had it in her—she just didn't see it yet.

Linda handed him the slip.

He looked at her gently. "When was Hungary invaded by the Mongols?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," Linda mumbled, eyes down.

"Yes, you do. It was in 1241, under Batu Khan. Five separate Mongol armies invaded Hungary, right?"

"Right," she said, her voice unsure.

"Next question. What happened in AD 453?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you do. The Huns reached the height of their expansion in Hungary under Attila the Hun. After Attila died, the empire collapsed in 455, and Pannonia became part of the Ostrogothic Kingdom. Right?"

“Right,” she whispered.

He looked at her one more time, his tone steady but kind. “Last question: What happened to the Austro-Hungarian Kingdom after World War I?”

Linda didn’t answer. Her face had gone pale. The kind of pale that happens when you’re bracing for another failure.

He didn’t scold her. He didn’t sigh. He filled in the silence instead. “You know this too. The Austro-Hungarian Kingdom collapsed after World War I. Then the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 established Hungary’s current borders. Two-thirds of Hungary’s territory was taken away—to Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria, Poland, and Italy. Right?”

“Right,” Linda said quietly.

“Thank you. You can go,” he said, giving her a soft smile.

She waited outside with the others, the air thick with nerves and fear. Time dragged. Then the teachers stepped out.

And there he was—that teacher who told her not to bother. He was reading off the names with cold detachment, announcing whether each student had passed or not.

Linda held her breath as he reached her name.

“Mate, Linda…” he said, his voice slow, dragging like it hurt him to say it. “Passed.”

That was it.

Linda was stunned. She felt relief, sure—but mostly confusion. Why did this man—this teacher who barely knew her—hate her so much?

*

Not long after, the family went to visit Peter in the hospital. The room smelled like antiseptic and metal. The lights were too bright, the air too still.

Peter was lying in bed, pale and still, with a weight hanging from his foot.

“What’s that?” Linda asked, stepping closer, her voice tight with worry.

“They’re trying to pull my hip back into place,” Peter said, his tone tired and bitter.

The surgery was something new—experimental. The doctors had added weight to his foot. The idea was that it would shift how his hip aligned, changing the way his pelvis balanced when he walked.

“Does it hurt?” Linda asked, already bracing for the answer.

“Yes, it hurts here,” he said, pointing at the sharp ache. “But what I hate the most is when they put me to sleep with the mask before surgery. The taste is horrible. That’s the worst part for me.”

His voice cracked, like he was holding back everything he didn’t say.

Peter had nightmares about that mask—the smell of the gas mixed with oxygen, the suffocating sensation. It clung to him long after the surgery was over. This was his sixteenth surgery.

Sixteen.

Three of them happened when he was just a newborn. The doctors tried to fix his hip, but none of them worked.

He’d spent years in hospitals. His life was a cycle of therapy and recovery. When he was four, he began working with a conductor —a specialist in conductive education, a system created in Hungary to help children with cerebral palsy. It helps retrain the brain and body to work together. Peter worked with Linda’s godmother, who created the program and would later become one of the most well-known conductors in the world. She was kind. Brilliant. She helped Peter make real progress—he even started to walk.

But then she got pregnant, and someone else took over. That person didn’t have her heart. Everything Peter had worked for slowly disappeared.

There were even times when he had a metal frame strapped to his legs—step by painful step, trying to retrain a body that never wanted to cooperate.

But Peter never gave up. He was smart. Kind. Strong. Braver than anyone ever gave him credit for. He finished primary school. Finished secondary school. He kept going, even when everything hurt.

Peter was Linda’s mother’s first child. Born three months early. The lack of oxygen during delivery had changed everything.

Two years later, Linda’s mom went into early labor again—but that time, the baby didn’t make it. He was stillborn. Buried in Mexico.

Eventually, they learned her cervix opened too early, causing the premature births.

By the time she was pregnant with Linda, a doctor in Mexico had figured it out. He put a ring around her cervix to keep it from opening. It held.

Linda was born by C-section—healthy. And so was Nora.

Still. The things no one talked about. The surgeries. The silence. The grief. The way pain stayed in the family even when the scars had healed.

Chapter 9

Summer rolled in, —warm nights, loud music, and sunshine. For a moment, it felt like maybe things could be normal.

Linda went to a nightclub with her friends, hoping for a moment of happiness. They didn't stay long—just enough to feel the music in their chest, just enough to taste freedom before stepping back into the night.

Outside, the group scattered across different cars parked along the street. Laughter, headlights, open windows, boys leaning on hoods, engines humming in the background. Linda stood there, uncertain, watching them all pile in. Someone called her over and pointed to a car.

When she opened the door —no empty seats.

But there was Adrian, sitting in the middle of the back seat.

Her heart jumped.

His voice cut through the moment, smooth and inviting. "Come, sit here in my lap."

The same boy she'd been waiting for, thinking about for a year now. The boy who smiled at her like he knew things she didn't. The boy she let herself believe might feel something too.

Her body moved before her mind could catch up, and she slid onto his lap, heart pounding against her ribs.

His hand reached for hers, his fingers moving slowly, gently tracing slow circles on her skin. The car drove through the winding streets to the top of the hill where the Statue of Liberty stood like a quiet witness.

When they got out, Adrian kept holding her hand.

And she let him.

They walked together, hand in hand. For a moment, it felt real. Like maybe he was more than just a crush she'd clung to in silence.

On the way back, he didn't drop her off at her house like before. Instead, they turned off toward the big open field just up on the road—what used to be the old salt mine. Linda had spent so much of her childhood there, chasing wind through the tall grass. Back when things were simple. Back before boys and shame and fear.

There was no conversation. Just movement. He kissed her, and she kissed him back. Then it moved fast—faster than she was ready for. Adrian laid his red sweatshirt on the ground, and Linda found herself lying on it while he pulled down her trousers.

She didn't stop him.

She didn't really know if she should.

In her head, she was thinking about Adam—about how aggressive he was, about how he might take her virginity if she didn't give it to Adrian first. She thought about Max and what he told her.

Only do it with someone you love.

She thought she loved Adrian. That had to be enough.

He penetrated her.

It didn't hurt much. It didn't feel good either. She didn't really feel anything except her heart, hammering in her chest while her thoughts tried to make sense of what was happening. It ended quickly.

He walked her back to the house. Said nothing. Then left.

And just like that, Linda had lost her virginity. She was sixteen.

A few days passed. Then came Adam.

He showed up at her house with fire in his eyes and something nasty behind his smile — angry, cocky, cornering her like a threat.

"I'm going to tell your parents you lost your virginity," he snapped, almost spitting the words. "And I have proof. Your blood's on Adrian's sweatshirt."

Linda's stomach turned.

Shame hit her like a slap. The blood. The red sweatshirt.

She wanted to disappear. Shame washed over her in a way that felt permanent. She couldn't believe Adrian had told him. Bragged about it like it was some joke. Like she was a prize passed between them.

Later, Adam showed up again.

"We're gathering at my house with the guys and girls on Saturday. You coming?" he asked like nothing had happened.

She said yes.

Even after what he said. Even after how he made her feel. Because Adrian might be there. Because a part of her still wanted something from him—some closure, some explanation.

Saturday came. She walked to Adam's house and stepped inside.

No music.

No voices.

Nobody else there.

"Where are the others?" she asked, confused.

Adam smiled, too pleased with himself.

"They're not coming. I lied."

Before she could react, he grabbed her from behind. His aftershave stung her nose—sharp, spicy, overwhelming. His left hand slid up to her breast. The other slipped under her top, trying to lift it off.

"Nooo! I don't want this!" Linda shouted, fear clawing at her throat. She pushed against him with shaking arms, but he didn't let go.

She felt trapped. Stupid. Angry at herself for falling for it.

Then, something rose up inside her—something fierce.

She pushed him hard, summoning every bit of strength she had. He stumbled back.

She ran—straight through the front door, down the street, not stopping until she reached home.

He didn't follow.

She made it home safe—but shaken. Humiliated. Furious with herself for falling into the trap.

How could she have been so stupid? She should have known. She should've seen it coming.

That night, her mother sat her down.

"We're moving," she said calmly, but firmly.

Linda stared at her, wide-eyed. "What?! I don't want to. I like living here."

The panic in her voice instant and loud.

"We need to move because we can't come to an agreement with your father," her mom explained. "We tried to separate the house into two parts, but he won't accept the one room and bathroom I offered him. He's alone, while you three are with me. We need more room."

Linda understood, in a way. Her dad liked spending time in the basement. That would've been gone if they split the house.

Still, none of that made it easier. This place was hers. The garden. The wide-open rooms. The memories. Even with all the pain—it was home. And now they had to leave.

Part of her felt crushed.

But part of her—after Adrian, after Adam—was ready to escape.

Her mom looked at her and asked gently, "And by the way… how are you doing?"

That question. Too little. Too late.

"Leave me alone!" Linda snapped, voice sharp, eyes hard.

She didn't want to hear it. Not now.

Because when she really needed her—when Linda needed advice about boys, about her body, about what love should feel like—her mom wasn't there.

She'd been too busy fighting with her dad. Too lost in her own battles to see the war going on inside her daughter.

So Linda was left alone to figure it all out herself.

Chapter 10

Linda moved with her mom, brother, and sister to the sixth floor in a cold apartment building in the city. From the balcony, she could almost see the hill where their old house had stood—almost. But a ten-story building blocked the view like a wall that life had slammed down between her past and present.

She had to switch schools again, this time because of that math teacher. But Linda didn't feel much about it. Changing schools again didn't faze her; she was used to it. This was her seventh move, her seventh school. From Mexico City to Budapest, Madrid to here, she had learned not to get too attached.

This new school was nothing like the last. Gone were the plays, the scavenger hunts, the school parties that brought everyone together. There was no gym. Instead, they had classes like psychology, pedagogy, music history, and art history. It felt cold. Disconnected. Linda didn't have any friends here. But she quickly rose to the top of her class in math. It turned out her last teacher had been skipping steps in equations, leaving everyone confused. Here, each step was explained clearly. It made sense to her. Numbers gave her a sense of control in a world that offered none.

Linda got a dog, an Irish Setter named Dante. He was tall, graceful, with silky red hair and deep, gentle eyes. Playful. Loyal. Linda loved him fiercely. He was her best friend. Her escape. The only one who loved her without taking something in return.

Dante gave her a reason to walk outside, to meet people in the neighborhood. Boys noticed her. She was tall, pretty, curvy. She had big breasts, and that alone made them stare. That's how she met David. He wasn't special, but they went out for a while.

She still kept in touch with a few people from the hill—like Ben. He invited her to a house party.

"Hey, Linda!" someone called from behind.

She turned around.

Her stomach dropped.

It was Adam.

Of all the people to run into again, it had to be him.

There weren't many people at the party. She didn't recognize most of them. Just Ben. And Adam. She didn't want to cause a scene, so she stayed.

Later, she went to the bathroom, but just as she was closing the door, Adam slipped in behind her, and slammed it shut.

In a heartbeat, he yanked down his pants and forcefully pushed her head toward his exposed crotch.

“Put it in your mouth,” Adam demanded, pressing himself against her. “Come on. Suck it.”

Linda jerked her head back, his penis slipping out of her mouth. "Leave me alone!" she cried, her voice raw with panic. She pushed past him, bolted out of the bathroom, and ran from the house.

She never wanted to see Adam again and cut all ties with the hill group.

That moment destroyed something in her.

After Adam, Linda couldn’t enjoy sex. She never even got to experience it in a gentle, loving way. He took that from her before she ever had a chance to find it on her own.

*

Walking Dante one afternoon, she met Niki.

They clicked right away. Niki was a troubled girl. Her mom had died. Her dad remarried a woman with two daughters. She didn't get along with her stepsisters. It was like living a twisted Cinderella story. But Niki wasn’t delicate. She was rough around the edges. Small, blue-eyed, dark brown straight hair to her shoulders. She wore boys’ clothes.

They spent most of their time together. Linda tried to soften Niki a little—help her dress more feminine, talk about life like girls do. But Linda’s mom hated her. She didn’t like anyone, really. Since coming back from Madrid, their family felt even more fractured. They never hugged. Never kissed. They were like strangers. That went for her mom, Nora, Peter, and even her dad.

Her mom never fussed over them like other moms. Never brought snacks or tucked them in when they were sick. She’d just say, "Take an aspirin from the cupboard," or take them to the doctor for antibiotics. That was it.

She yelled. A lot.

If you broke a glass.

"You break everything you touch! How can you not be careful with the glass?!" she'd scream.

Linda heard it so many times, she started believing it. And the more she believed it, the more it happened. Until one day, she stopped caring. And then the breaking stopped too.

Her mother yelled at Peter too. “Pull yourself up! Don’t drool!” she'd shout while bringing him lunch to his desk.

She’d sweep the floor and mutter under her breath like she was casting spells. “Dirty assholes. Look at this! Look how much dirt I collected! You nasty kids.”

Even Nora yelled.

One day they were laughing together, were having fun, the next day Linda walked into her room and got blasted:

“Get out of here!” Nora screeched.

That was why Linda avoided being home.

*

Linda and Niki frequented teen nightclubs. That's how Linda met Erik. Niki introduced them. She wasn't sure she liked him, but Niki convinced her to go out with him.

He looked decent—average height, skinny, pale skin, short, light blonde hair, blue eyes. He wore a blue t-shirt, jeans, a white sports jacket, and sneakers. He seemed nice, but Linda soon saw his dark side.

Erik was no prince. He was cruel.

One day at Erik's home, he pushed his frail, bony grandmother to the floor. She couldn't get up without her walker. Erik ignored her cries and dragged Linda into another room. Linda wanted to help, but Erik wouldn't let her.

He was a thief. A liar. And half-gypsy, part of a gang who were all the same.

One night, Linda climbed into his room through the window—like they always did—and walked into something out of a nightmare. One boy was on his knees, crying. Another guy —stocky, big head, tan skin—was cutting lines into the boy’s arm with a large knife. Blood dripped onto the carpet.

"What are you doing?" Linda asked, staring at the crying boy. She didn’t flinch.

"He’s my puppy," the stocky one said like it was normal. Linda could feel the tension in the room. The others were silent. Even Erik. That guy was their leader. Everyone feared him.

She went to the bathroom. He followed.

He pulled out the knife and said, "Take off your clothes."

Linda didn’t move. Didn’t blink. She wasn’t afraid.

What could he take from her that hadn't already been taken?

She just stared at him, daring him to try.

He laughed.

"I was just kidding," he said, cheerful now, like it was a game, and put the knife away.

She found out later they all were pickpocketing in the subway and downtown. Erik had stolen Linda's jewelry—a gold necklace with an emerald from Colombia and a chain from L.A. she got from her dad, and a tricolor gold ring her mom gave her in Greece for her birthday.

He pawned them all.

Her mom pressed charges.

Later, Erik called.

"Come downtown. Bring me something I can sell."

She didn't bring anything, but she went anyway.

"Come here," he said, and led her inside a building.

Then he hit her.

"You didn't bring anything. You need to be punished," he snarled, then hit her hard.

When he let go, she ran. And never looked back.

But it wasn't over.

She found out she was pregnant.

Almost 18. Her mom didn't even know she wasn't a virgin. She had no time left to waste.

"Mom, I'm pregnant," she said, her voice shaking.

"What?! How?! From who?!" Her mom's face twisted with shock. "I thought you were still a virgin. You never told me otherwise."

"It's Erik's. I don't want the baby. I want an abortion," Linda said firmly.

To Linda's surprise, her mother supported her. Took her to the doctor. But first, Linda had to see a counselor who tried to talk her out of it.

"Look at this model," the woman said. "This is how your little baby looks right now. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

But Linda was sure.

“I’m only 18. I got pregnant by a half-gypsy thief who lives a low life. I’m not stupid. I don’t want to destroy my life. Yes, I want the abortion.” she said, eyes steady.

After she recovered, confronted Niki.

“Why didn’t you tell me Erik was a monster? Didn’t you know?” she asked, her voice full of betrayal.

Niki looked down. “Yeah, I knew. But… I don’t know.” Niki said flatly.

No apology. No regret.

That was the end of their friendship. Friends are supposed to protect you. Stand by you. Tell you the truth.

Niki had betrayed her.

Chapter 11

Linda finished school, but even though she tried applying to university, she didn't get in. Deep down, she wasn't even sure what she wanted to study. Her mom didn't help her figure it out either. There was no guidance, no support—just silence where encouragement should have been.

She ended up in a tourism course, something she found. But she didn't enjoy it. The other students were fluent in English, and she couldn't keep up. She started falling behind quickly. At the same time, she started seeing a new guy.

His name was Rocky.

He was tall, good-looking, with short dark blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. Always dressed like he was about to be photographed—fashionable, showing off bold outfits like he wanted all eyes on him. Maybe they were, but Linda didn't understand the appeal.

Rocky was possessive. Controlling. He didn't like Linda going to her tourism course and pushed her to quit. He made her drop her friends too—always convincing her not to go to meet-ups or reunions. He made sure she had no one else but him. Slowly, she became more and more isolated.

Because of him, her relationship with her mother grew colder. When Linda dropped out, her father stopped sending child support. The state also cut off her mom's child benefits. And with that, her mom changed. She locked up the bathroom supplies—shampoo, conditioner, everything. Only Nora, had a key. All Linda was allowed to use was lavender hand soap from the sink. It left her hair dry and brittle.

"You're eighteen. I'm not responsible for you anymore. You're an adult now," her mom said flatly.

Linda felt like the floor had dropped out beneath her.

Her mother's father had said the same thing to her—he left the second his kids turned eighteen. He couldn't stand his wife. Linda's mom grew up in a cold house that used to be upper class before the war, then slipped into a tight-lipped middle class. Her grandfather was strict. Once, when she and her brother refused to eat chocolate because it looked like poop, their dad forced them to kneel on raw corn until they gave in. He made the boys go to church every Sunday, no excuses. Their mother banned long hair and refused to let Linda's mom study medicine. They weren't allowed to call them "Mom" or "Dad," only "Mother" and "Father," and they had to greet them formally. There was no affection. No warmth.

Linda didn't understand why, knowing that pain, her mother would repeat it.

Nora, meanwhile, got nastier. One evening, she walked into their mom's room to watch TV. Linda heard their mother say, "Don't change the channel. I was watching the news."

"I don't care. I want to watch this," Nora snapped.

Their mom didn't argue. She just gave in.

Another day, Linda heard them screaming at each other. The next morning, a note lay on the kitchen table: "Give me money for my contact lenses and liquid." The money was right there. And this kept going.

Rocky became more than just possessive. He started hitting Linda.

One night, his grandmother made soup. Rocky brought it to the living room, which also doubled as his bedroom at night. He placed the bowl on the bed where Linda was already sitting. When he sat down, the soup spilled.

He kicked her in the back.

"Ouch! Why did you kick me?" she asked, stunned.

"Because it was your fault the soup spilled," he growled.

He had a habit of throwing his heavy legs over her while they watched movies, like she was just a piece of furniture. It made her feel small. Worthless.

And once, she was talking about her day, and just because she told him Dante had chased after a female dog, he got up and kicked the dog who was asleep.

"What are you doing!? Why are you kicking him? He didn't do anything! He's just sleeping!" she yelled, heart pounding.

Linda wanted to leave him, but Rocky clung to her tightly, while her mother pushed her out.

"Go. This is not your home anymore," her mom demanded. Cold. Heartless.

Once, Linda came home and found her mom in her room, watching TV.

"What are you doing in my room?" she asked, confused.

"This is my room, not yours. It's in my apartment. Leave. I want you to go," her mom said coldly.

It was easier to stay with Rocky. He always tore her down. He made her believe she was nothing without him.

One night, he punched one of their friends just because the guy liked Linda. She had to stand there and watch.

Another day, they were sitting on a park bench when a guy on a bike kept circling them. Rocky stood up.

“What are you staring at?!” he shouted.

The guy didn’t answer, just kept circling. Rocky grabbed him.

“I asked you what the hell are you looking at?!”

“Nothing,” the boy muttered before pedaling away. He got lucky.

Linda learned Rocky’s parents had him young. Then they split. His mom remarried, had another son, and left Rocky with his grandmother. That woman was unstable—one week loving, the next abusive. On her bad days, whenever Rocky and Linda came in late, she’d yell from the other room, “Don’t bring your whore here!” Linda had to stay silent. She couldn’t even go to the bathroom. She peed in a bag.

They’d walk the streets, killing time, waiting for the old woman to fall asleep. But on her good days, she cooked and baked whatever Rocky wanted. She was sweet and warm to Linda as well. Like two different people.

Rocky’s dad? He was part of an organized crime. He kept a low profile, stayed invisible. Smart, because someone was killing everyone above him, one by one.

He was rich, though. Rocky told Linda about one time when a man owed his father money. They pulled up beside the man’s car. The man dropped a Davidoff watch through the window. It became Rocky’s.

His dad had another family—two little girls. It was shaky, on and off. One day, the man held them at gunpoint, cornered them in their home for hours. He even kicked his wife in the head. Linda started to understand where Rocky got his violence from.

Rocky never let Linda leave until he fell asleep. They were together for five and a half years. Every summer, he’d take a break to mess around with other girls. But he always came back. And every time she tried to see someone new, he’d scare them off.

He’d threaten them with stories. About his dad. About the forest. About wooden handles.

He’d say, “My dad will take you to the forest. Sew a wooden handle into your ass.”

*

One afternoon, she was riding a bike near her father’s house. It was an old village bike—just a metal frame and two tires. Her late grandmother’s. The brakes barely worked. She took a turn down a narrow street that turned into a steep hill covered in gravel. She tried to steer onto a side path, but the bike slid out. She hit the ground hard. The bike landed on top of her.

Her tooth snapped, the broken piece lodged in her lip. Blood poured from her mouth.

A boy saw everything and rushed to help. He took her inside and cleaned her face. When she looked in the mirror, she wanted to scream. Her lips were destroyed. Her front tooth—half gone.

The boy drove her to her dad, who then brought her to her mom. Her mom took her to emergency care. She got stitches and a built-up tooth. She stayed in the hospital a few days.

At night, she couldn't sleep. So she'd talk to other patients and nurses. Two boys had broken jaws—one had rubber bands holding his mouth shut so he could only sip through a straw. The other had also crashed a bike that day.

She felt lucky. Her lips were torn, her tooth broken—but she was alive.

But just days after getting out of the hospital, Rocky punched her. A fresh wound opened on her cheek.

"Why did you hit me?" she asked shocked, blood running down her face.

"Because you were disrespectful," he snapped.

She hadn't done anything. She hadn't said a word to him. She hadn't even looked at him.

Her mom rushed her to the hospital for stitches.

"But how did he do this? Did he have a knife?" she asked, shaken.

"No. He just hit me with his fist," Linda said softly.

Another day, they argued. Linda tried to run.

Rocky grabbed her ponytail and yanked her down to the ground. People walked by, but no one helped. She got up and ran.

*

One day, while walking Dante, she saw a girl struggling to hold back a big mixed-breed dog.

"You have to hold the leash like this. So he can't pull you," Linda said, showing her.

Her name was Vicky. Skinny, pretty, with long dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a white busted winter coat she couldn't zip up. Her family didn't have money to buy a new one.

They became close. Vicky lived in the building next door. Linda could cross over inside their building and go up to the tenth floor, where Vicky lived with her parents, sister, and brother.

Her dad was dangerous. Once, he held Vicky upside down out the window—ten stories up—because she dared to stand up to him when he mistreated her little brother. Her mom was depressed, on Xanax and beer all day, but she was kind.

Despite it all, Vicky and her siblings loved each other deeply. They hugged. They talked. They felt like a real family—something Linda had never had.

She and Vicky would stay up until 6 a.m. talking. Finally, Linda had a friend who understood her. Someone who listened. Someone who helped her feel strong again.

Vicky gave Linda back her confidence—confidence Rocky had spent years tearing apart.

Finally, she was able to get away from Rocky. And broke free.

Chapter 12

Linda spent most of her days at Vicky's place. It felt welcoming there. Vicky's brother Oliver was always around, along with his best friend Dani. Sometimes Igor showed up too. Vicky's dad had run off with another woman, leaving their mom behind to carry the weight alone.

Igor had met Oliver in a neighborhood bar. He was older than the rest of them—tall, with dark blonde curls that clung to his greasy scalp, and a rough, unwashed look. He wore black everything: jeans, T-shirts, boots, jacket. His skin was pitted and blotchy, like his life had left marks even time couldn't erase. Nobody knew much about him. But the longer he hung around, the more obvious it became—he wasn't only there for the company. He was there for the free Xanax and beer from Vicky's mom. He pushed the group to try weed. And sometimes, he inhaled heroin. He wanted to numb everything. And he didn't care who he dragged down with him.

Somehow, in the middle of all that, Linda started dating Dani.

He was tall and blonde with short hair, blue eyes, and a strong build. His shoulders were broad, and he always wore oversized clothes and listened to rap. Linda didn't love that his forehead was long and flat—like a wall—but he made her laugh. That meant more. He lived just a building away with his parents and twin brothers who didn't look alike. He also had a sister, and an older brother he adored. Dani was the youngest in the family. Linda found out he wasn't planned, but they had loved him anyway.

Dani was different. Kind. Gentle. For the first time, Linda had a boyfriend who didn't hit her, who didn't make her feel small. There was love in his family. Still, it wasn't all perfect.

Dani's brother once grabbed her hand in a family reunion when no one was watching and later messaged her to meet in secret. Linda showed it to Dani, but he didn't really react. Worse, the brother's wife seemed to hate her. Maybe it was jealousy. Maybe something else. She mocked Linda for sitting on the couch with her shoes off, legs tucked underneath. She flirted with Dani in front of her, just to get under her skin.

Dani's mom wasn't warm to Linda either. She didn't want a girlfriend in her son's life. She wanted a helper.

One day, while Linda was over for lunch, Dani's mom dropped a plate. It shattered across the kitchen floor. Without a word, she picked up a broom and started sweeping.

"That's it?" Linda asked, surprised. "No yelling?"

"What can you do? It's broken. You throw it out," Dani's mom said calmly.

Just like that. A simple truth. You clean it up. You move on.

For Linda, it was like a window cracked open in a stuffy room. Back home, breaking a plate meant screaming. Accusations. Fear. Here, it was just a plate. Nothing more.

It made her start to see things differently.

*

Later, at a family gathering, her dad pulled her aside.

"You know, I've been assigned to the embassy in Argentina," he said, beaming. "The ministry wants me to be married. So I asked your mom, and she accepted. I want you to be my wedding witness."

"Sure," Linda said, completely uninterested.

She wasn't happy about it. She knew her mom didn't say yes out of love. It was all about Argentina. Her parents had become friendly again after her dad's partner disappeared to Ukraine and never came back. But this was no fairy tale. It was a transaction.

The wedding was held at city hall. Just her parents, Linda, Nora, the officiant, and another woman helping with the paperwork. When the ceremony ended, the officiant smiled.

"You may kiss the bride."

Linda watched her father lean in. Her mother twisted her head, trying to avoid it. He kissed her cheek instead.

"Oh no, I had the camera facing the wrong way," the helper lady said. "Can you do the kiss again?"

Linda had to watch it again.

This time, her mother couldn't dodge. She leaned back, trying to escape, but he managed a kiss on her lips. Linda's stomach turned. She wanted to throw up.

After the wedding, they went to a restaurant. Nora tried to convince their parents to let her move to Argentina too.

"You can come to Argentina with us if you have a job there and a place to live," their dad said. "You can't live with us."

"But until she finds something, can't she stay with you?" Linda asked, confused.

"No, no. I'll find her a job and a place. But she can't stay with us," he replied confidently.

"You?! You always say that and never do anything," Linda said, her voice tight.

Her dad's face turned red. He raised his hand and threatened to slap her. Linda got up and ran from the restaurant. She had only tried to stand up for Nora. She knew her sister relied heavily on their mother for everything. Always had.

Nora once joined a school program where she hosted girls from the U.S. They were earning school credit, and Nora got paid to house and feed them. Four girls came, each for four days. Nora was supposed to show them around, take them to group events.

At the Basilica, she waited outside while one of the girls paid to go in alone. When they went to McDonald's, Nora sat and watched while the girl ate. She wasn't about to spend any of the money she was paid. Her mom bought and cooked all the food.

She did this with everything. When both girls got ice skates, Linda used hers. Nora hid hers away so they wouldn't get ugly. By the time she wanted to wear them, they didn't fit anymore.

"Since I'm going to Argentina," their mom said one day, "you'll need to maintain the apartment and pay the bills. Also, find tenants for my room."

Linda felt the panic set in. The building had central heating—they couldn't turn it down to save money. They paid for both hot and cold water, and the cost was high. The place had four rooms. But Nora wouldn't let Linda rent hers. She had run off to Belgium with her Portuguese boyfriend, leaving Linda to figure things out alone.

Peter's room was in the middle. Linda had to cross through it to get to hers. The only suitable room to rent out was their mother's.

The university semester was about to begin, so finding tenants wasn't hard. Two girls from the countryside moved in. They shared the room, each with her own bed. Things were stable—until Nora returned.

She ate one of the girl's groceries. When Linda asked her to please just ask next time, Nora exploded. She screamed at Linda, caused chaos, and scared the girls off. They packed up and left almost immediately. Then Nora vanished again.

Linda was left picking up the pieces. Again.

Chapter 13

Linda, Dani, Oliver, and Igor were walking along the tram station platform when Linda's voice tore through the air like a blade.

"YOU COULD HAVE WAITED FOR ME! AND—"

Igor cut her off, eyeing the people who turned to stare. "Doesn't it bother you that everyone's looking at us?"

"NOOO! AND YOU ALWAYS DO THIS..." she yelled, ignoring him, her voice sharp with frustration.

Later, when the adrenaline wore off and her nerves settled, she replayed the moment in her head. Shame followed. Her yelling must've embarrassed Dani—and their friends too. But yelling was second nature to her. That's how her mother communicated: volume, rage, and never-ending blame. It wore on Linda, dug under her skin like a splinter. She always believed that if her mother hadn't gotten to her nerves so deeply, she'd be a peaceful person. A calm one and easy-going.

But right now?

Right now, she was still fighting through the wreckage.

Being away from her mother helped. Being with Dani helped. He was calm, steady. And slowly, Linda began to quiet too. But in that stillness, something darker crept in. Not having a family that loved or supported her left an ache in her that only grew. A deep, gnawing depression.

*

Someone finally responded to the room-for-rent ad Linda had posted on the supermarket board. A girl. She seemed nice enough at first. But when she moved in, she brought her boyfriend too—who never left.

Linda approached her about it. "You only rented the room for yourself. What's going on?"

"Oh, he's just here for a few days," the girl said casually, giving a half-smile. "He's applying to the French Foreign Legion. He has to get his teeth fixed—they only accept people with perfect teeth."

Linda didn't believe it for a second. But she didn't argue. Days turned into weeks. The guy was still there, camped out in the room like it belonged to him. And rent for the next month? Never showed up.

"Yes, yes, we're leaving today," the girl promised after Linda confronted them again.

But they didn't.

Linda was intimidated. There was something off about them—something that told her not to push too hard. They didn't strike her as the talk-it-out type.

One night, Dani and a few friends were over when Linda vented her frustration. Nora had just popped in for a few days. Unexpectedly. That's when Igor smirked and gave her an idea.

"Tell your sister they won't leave," he said.

Linda turned to Nora. "The couple in Mom's room—they haven't paid. And they won't leave."

Nora's face turned to stone. She walked straight to the room like a storm rolling in.

"Are you leaving?" she asked, voice sharp and ice-cold.

The girl froze. "Yes, we are," she stammered. And just like that, they started packing.

They were gone in a few hours.

Linda had to start all over again.

Not long after, another girl answered her ad. This one turned out to be gypsy. In Hungary, Linda had grown up hearing that most trouble came from the gypsies. But this girl? She was different. She was kind. She even taught Linda a cooking trick —adding marjoram and black pepper to her paprika potatoes to made them taste better.

But soon, the girl began dating Oliver and spent nearly all her time with his family upstairs. She only came home every few days to shower. Hygiene wasn't her strong point.

One day Vicky pulled Linda aside. "We had to kick her out. She was stealing money from us. Oliver's still seeing her. We don't know how to make him stop."

"Really? She never stole from me," Linda said, genuinely surprised.

But the girl hadn't paid rent in over a month. She wasn't working. Her first month's rent had been paid by the boyfriend she later cheated on with Oliver.

When Linda asked her to leave, she didn't pack. So Linda waited until the girl was out, gathered her things, placed them outside the door, and locked the door with a key the girl didn't have.

That was the end of that.

As fall approached, a new university student —a guy this time—rented the room. Quiet. Strange.

He barely left his room, and when he did, he was unpleasant. He left containers of rotting food in the fridge—leftovers his mom gave him each weekend.

Then he started complaining. About the heating bill. About other things.

One afternoon, Linda came home early from work. She ran into the guy's family on the stairs. They were moving furniture.

"What's happening here?" she asked, confused.

"I'm moving out," he said coldly.

"But you haven't paid this month's rent." Her voice was bitter. "Were you trying to leave while I wasn't home?"

"Yes." He turned and bolted down the stairs. "Go, go, go!" he shouted at his mother, who was waiting in the car.

"But Billy, you have to pay what you owe," his mom replied, clearly uncomfortable.

"I'll send it! Just go, Mom!"

He sent some money. Not all of it. When Linda called his mother to explain, she only said, "Billy handles his own stuff."

That was the last straw.

Linda gave up on the idea of renting the room. Every single tenant had left her worse off than before.

*

Her depression deepened. Even though Dani practically lived with her, he barely spoke when he got home. He just collapsed into bed and fell asleep like she wasn't even there.

She didn't even know if he loved her. Maybe he was just... there.

But what crushed her most wasn't Dani. It was everything else. Her parents. Her childhood. Her life. She felt invisible. Unloved. Alone.

One afternoon, she gathered all the pills her mother had left behind—blood pressure meds, heavy sedatives—and placed them in front of her. She wrote Dani a goodbye letter through tears, the ink smudging where the drops fell.

But before swallowing the pills, something told her—a flicker of instinct—to see Vicky.

She went upstairs. Didn't mention a word of her plan. Just dropped by. Spent time with her friend. Sat in that warmth she never had at home.

When she got back and saw the letter she had written, she picked it up, read it—and laughed. Not because it was funny. But because it was ridiculous now. Empty.

She crumpled it, tossed it in the trash. And with it, the pills.

She still has some good in all the bad, like Vicky. Her friend. And her dog, Dante, of course.

Chapter 14

Christmas was coming, and Linda brought Peter home from the care facility where he lived. It should have been a warm, peaceful time—but nothing about Linda's life was ever simple.

One day, she was upstairs at Vicky's place. When she came back home, she found a large bottle of Fanta tipped over on the floor, orange soda pouring out slowly across the parquet.

"It was too heavy, and it slipped from my hands! I couldn't pick it up!" Peter said, his voice shaking. His legs twitched, straightened the way they always did when he got scared or excited.

Linda dropped to her knees, grabbing a towel. "It's okay, Peter. Don't worry about it. I'll clean it up," she said gently.

Her chest ached. She knew what was going through his head. He thought she'd be furious. Just like their mom would've been. Years of being yelled at for tiny mistakes had left scars on both of them—some you couldn't see, but they never faded.

Peter wasn't just living with cerebral palsy. He also had schizophrenia, something that took root in his early twenties. It started after a summer camp trip to Czechoslovakia. He fell hard for a caretaker there, and when he came back, he begged Linda to take him to a phone booth so he could call her. At home, their mom had locked the rotary phone with a padlock —sick of Peter calling long-distance every day.

He said the girl's parents were keeping her from him. He believed they locked her away. But heir dad contacted the girl who told him she had a boyfriend. She didn't feel the same way.

Peter's heart broke—and something inside his mind did, too.

"If I don't go back to Czechoslovakia, I'll die," he told Linda. "The devil will come for me. He'll take me straight to hell."

Sometimes, he talked about the sky there. How it felt close enough to touch. Then, at a concert, people jumped on stage and started banging on the walls. When someone called his name, he couldn't turn because the Czechoslovakian prime minister was standing next to him. How a singer had pointed at him and said, "You rock."

There was magic in Peter's voice when he remembered. And Linda never stopped listening, even when the stories became harder to believe.

She invited their grandmother to Christmas dinner. The same grandmother who once tried to beat her with a spatula for refusing to eat milk rice. The same woman who had nearly strangled Linda's mom when she was a child. Who had pulled their ears when they

misbehaved, and who'd swallowed pills more than once, not to die, but to force someone—anyone—to care.

She was tiny now, almost skeletal. Her short white curls framed a face that had once been iron-hard but was softening. After her last suicide attempt, her body never fully recovered. The pills were for the heart, and at her age, they did more damage than she expected. She used to be strong. Now, she shuffled when she walked.

But strangely, she'd mellowed. As if the frailty softened her soul too.

"I'll be gone soon. I know it," she said softly at dinner.

She stayed the night.

Later, Linda returned home from Vicky's to a scene that made her heart drop. Peter was on the floor, panicked.

"What happened?!" she cried, rushing over.

"Grandma fell, and I tried to help her up... but I fell instead!" Peter stammered.

Their grandma was okay. Just shaken. But Peter—he was too heavy for her to lift. Linda helped him back to his walker.

The next morning, Peter sat in their mother's old room and whispered, "I don't like being here. Once, I saw Mom standing on the balcony, staring. Then she came at me with a knife."

Linda sat beside him, listening. Her heart aching.

"There's a man too," he whispered. "He wears a hood. His face is dark. He gets real close. I can't see his face. He freaks me out."

"Tell him to go," Linda said gently. "Tell him to leave you alone."

"But do you know how scary he is?"

"I can imagine."

She never told Peter it wasn't real. Because if he saw it, if he felt it, then in his world—it was real. And that mattered.

*

Linda was always bouncing from job to job. Offices. Pet stores. Currency exchange booths. Back to offices. Over and over. No place ever felt right. Every office treated her like trash—just another assistant to boss around. So she'd run to retail. But the weekend shifts wore her down.

When she worked in a pet store with a girl named Chilly, things finally lightened up. Chilly was average height, pretty, with shoulder-length blonde waves and bright blue eyes. She was thin, always cracking jokes, always wearing jeans and sneakers.

One day she shouted, "Don't come over here! I just farted."

Linda burst into laughter.

That was Chilly. Honest. Blunt. Hilarious.

Turned out, Chilly needed a place to stay. Her boyfriend barely noticed her. Left her at home with his mom while he was always out. She wanted to see if moving out would make him miss her. So she moved in with Linda.

She was nothing like the others. She felt like family. Like a sister.

Both of them loved animals. Linda still had her Irish Setter, Dante—her loyal friend. But he was ten now. And the dysplasia in his hips had gotten worse. Pills didn't help anymore. One day, he just gave up. Wouldn't eat. Wouldn't look at her.

He collapsed on the street two days later.

At the vet, Linda had to make the call. To put Dante to sleep.

It broke her.

Dani and Chilly were heartbroken too. Dante was special. He looked both ways before crossing the street. He always waited where Linda and him last made eye contact. When she didn't want to go outside the building entrance to the freezing cold, she'd say, "Go. Do your thing. Then come back, okay?" He always did.

He was irreplaceable.

To cheer her up, Dani and Chilly bought her a Basset Hound. It was sweet.

But it wasn't Dante.

*

Linda's father invited her to Argentina. He even paid for her flight. They were moving back to Hungary soon, and he wanted her to see the country before they left.

Linda went. But she only spent a few days with her parents. They were back to fighting again. The peace hadn't lasted long. It shattered during a trip to Rio de Janeiro, when they were robbed on Copacabana beach.

They'd brought everything with them—passports, camera, money. They were too scared to leave it in the hotel. Window washers were hanging outside the building, watching.

They didn't notice when it happened. But somehow, after countless beach sellers came and went, everything was gone. Each blamed the other.

After that, they couldn't be in the same room without venom.

Linda found herself stuck again—listening to her mom vent hate and her dad ramble about love. He even admitted he hadn't accepted Peter's condition. Said he thought the surgeries would fix everything.

Linda traveled to Iguazu Falls and Rio. She was alone, which was both freeing and terrifying. The plane dropped her at a tiny Argentine airport—barely more than a shack. Her tour group was nowhere.

"Taxi?" a man asked, standing behind a tiny desk.

She hesitated. The car had no taxi sign.

But the man seemed calm, so she got in. Her hotel was across the Brazilian border. As they drove through the jungle, the car stopped.

"I need your passport. Gotta get it stamped," the driver said.

He stepped out, walked over to a guard shack.

Linda sat frozen. Her heart was pounding. This was it. This was where she'd disappear.

But he came back, calm as before, passport stamped.

She made it to the hotel.

The next day, since she missed the agency shuttle, had to see both sides of the amazing Iguazu falls in a single day—no guide, no group. Just four Israeli guys and one woman climbing through jungle trails. At the top, they were picked up by a van.

They were kind. The Israelis offered her a Coke while they waited at the hotel. Just small kindnesses. They made her feel less alone.

In Rio, she was careful. Studied the map before stepping outside. Hid her camera. Watched every shadow.

The last day, she went to the bathroom at McDonald's and jumped when she caught her reflection in the mirror—a pale blonde surrounded by a sea of dark-haired locals.

For a second, she didn't recognize herself. She couldn't believe no one had robbed her yet.

She made it back to her parents in Buenos Aires.

Back to Hungary, on her way to the airport, she accidentally left behind a bag full of souvenirs in the taxi.

She got it back—one year later, through diplomatic channels.

Even though Linda's parents were battling, the Brazilian trip filled Linda up with some positive energy. At least for a while.

Chapter 15

Linda's phone buzzed. It was her mother.

"Grandma died," she said, voice flat, cold.

There was a pause before she added, "I want you to go to Grandma's apartment and take anything valuable. She used to hide money in her socks—check those too. I don't want my brother to take everything."

No grief. No emotion. Just instructions.

Linda stood still, letting her mother's voice echo in her head. She knew the history, the layers of bitterness built up over decades. When Linda was just a newborn, her mother had been in Mexico, preparing to bring her miracle baby home—Linda, the first healthy child born into the family. But her uncle had gotten to their grandmother's place first and taken everything valuable. Even the crystal vase that was a wedding gift to Linda's parents.

Years later, the same uncle tricked their dying grandfather into signing over the apartment while lying in a hospital bed. Then, after Linda's step-grandmother passed—a woman who survived Auschwitz—he broke into her home and stole all the gold jewelry she had hidden away.

So Linda knew what her mother feared. But it was too late.

By the time she got to her grandmother's place, the apartment had been picked clean. Nothing valuable. No hidden cash. Just old souvenirs, and the hollow silence of a home already stripped of meaning. Her uncle had gotten there first. Again.

Some of the missing things could've been taken by the gypsies who had a habit of visiting old ladies like her grandmother, pretending to help while stealing whatever they could.

In Hungary, it happened all the time. And no one stopped them.

Chilly decided to move out. Linda's mom was coming back, and the apartment would be crowded again. Around the same time, Linda and Dani broke up.

"I don't know if what I feel is love," Dani had said. "I've got nothing to compare it to."

Linda had nodded, her heart aching. "Maybe someday you'll find someone you really love," Linda said softly.

"Maybe."

It wasn't bitter. Just sad. They'd been together for four years. They still saw each other now and then, giving each other space, but the air between them felt thinner every time.

“I still can’t believe you two aren’t a couple anymore,” Vicky said. “You looked so good together.”

They stayed friends. But it wasn’t the same.

Linda started a new job—office manager at a small family company. It sounded manageable. But she quickly found herself buried. Her boss loaded her with tasks, and even with twelve-hour days, she barely finished half the list. The stress gnawed at her. Her friends started complaining that she was never around anymore.

Then came the day he called her into his office.

He gave her some tasks, then, casually, like it meant nothing, touched her bum.

Linda froze. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t know how.

Then came the team building dinner at the boss’s brother’s place. His brother had shot a deer, another coworker had taken down a stag, and they made two big stews for the whole company.

After dinner, the drinking started. Everyone was laughing, loosening up.

Linda didn’t even notice when her boss appeared next to her. He grabbed her hand.

She pulled it back instinctively, confused.

He was drunk. Married. With two little girls. But that didn’t stop him.

Later, out on the balcony, he kissed her—sloppy, aggressive, rough. He shoved his tongue deep into her mouth. Linda tried to push him away and the moment someone opened the balcony door, he quickly stepped back, acting like nothing happened.

She didn’t know what to do the next day.

Was this just the alcohol? Or was this who he really was?

On Monday, she went in like normal. When he called her into the office, he acted like nothing happened.

“I want you to find a cleaning company for the office,” he barked. “And why don’t we have plants yet?”

Linda blinked. “Because I’ve had more urgent tasks to finish.”

“This is a priority. Take Bobby. Go to the garden center. I want plants everywhere.”

She walked out, heart pounding.

A few days later, he called her in again. She was updating him on a report when he reached out and touched her breast.

“What are you doing?!” she snapped, pulling back. Stunned.

“Don’t you like it?” he grinned.

“No. Please stop.”

“I want to fuck you,” he whispered, his voice low, full of heat. Then he started to slide his hand under her shirt.

Linda shoved his hand away, grabbed her things, and walked straight out.

She didn’t look back.

The next morning, she emailed her resignation.

And never went back.

Chapter 16

When Linda's mom moved back in, the tension thickened like a storm cloud that refused to break. She kept pressuring Linda to leave. But then something unexpected happened—her mother offered to buy her an apartment. It sounded almost like kindness, but Linda couldn't trust it. Not after everything.

She felt like it had to be a trap. Her relationship with her mother had always been sharp-edged, and the offer felt like a hook hidden beneath sweet bait. But things got real when her mother gave her a budget to look within.

Linda found an apartment she liked, but her mother immediately began tearing it down.

"There are too many windows," she said with a frown. "Where will you put a wardrobe? The trash chute's too close to your door—it's going to stink."

Linda bit her tongue. Why did she even care? She wasn't the one who'd be living there.

Eventually, Linda found another place and sat in the lawyer's office ready to sign. And of course, there was a catch. Her mother handed her another contract first—one that made Linda give up her right to inherit from her after she died.

At first, it felt like betrayal. But legally in Hungary, no will can erase a child's right to a portion of inheritance. What her mother really wanted was to make sure each child got exactly the same amount—no more, no less.

Linda signed. She got the apartment. And finally, for the first time in her life, she was alone in her own space.

But peace didn't follow.

Every time her mother called, her stomach twisted into knots.

Her dad, meanwhile, started coming by more often. He was newly retired and needed something to fill his days, so he offered to help with small repairs. Linda appreciated it—at first. But then it started to feel like he'd moved in. She was suffocating under the weight of needing space and not knowing how to ask for it.

When she couldn't reach him one day, she called her mother, knowing she and her father had somehow become friends again. That made everything even more surreal. Linda feared the worst. Her dad had been sinking. He had told her more than once he didn't want to live.

He called her back that night. He was fine.

But Linda wasn't.

Broken in her own quiet way, didn't have enough strength to help him.

Weeks later, during her lunch break at work, her phone rang.

Her mom's voice was quiet, almost distant.

"It happened. What you were afraid of. Your dad died."

Linda's chest caved in.

She had just started feeling close to him—truly close—and now he was gone. He died alone. Found two days later in his house after the summer heat. His body already started to decompose. Her mom said it was a heart attack. His second.

The first one had happened in midair. He'd been drinking, stressed, and the flight had to make an emergency landing in London. Doctors told him straight: if he kept drinking, it would happen again—and next time, it would kill him.

Her mom said he drank on purpose. Linda believed it.

Linda blamed herself. She'd snapped at him for fixing things she could do herself. She asked him to come over only when she'd already left for work, just so she didn't feel like he was living there. Before he died, he'd apologized for hitting her and Nora when they were kids. He thought that was how you raised children—because his own father had done it to him.

The guilt swallowed Linda whole. And it dragged her to the edge.

The only thing keeping her from ending her life was her white Persian cat—a stray brought into the pet store by someone who didn't know what to do with her. She had given the Basset Hound back to the breeder—she just didn't have the strength to give him the care he needed. The cat, quiet and low-maintenance, stayed. The cat was her only anchor.

Linda thought about writing a note to the neighbor with four cats to come get her Persian. But then she worried: what if she changed her mind? What if she left the letter and didn't go through with it? The shame would bury her deeper than death ever could.

She had planned it out. The cleanest way, she thought, was to take a large knife and drag it across her neck. Quick. But then she imagined her cat, starving, stepping in blood. No.

The other idea was slower—cross the road by the bridge where the cars sped down without stopping. Just walk out and let one of them hit her. But then she thought about the driver. What that would do to them. Still, the pain was so loud she couldn't think straight anymore.

She felt like nobody would notice she was gone until the stench from her apartment gave her away. She was buried under debt she couldn't climb out of. Her mom hadn't paid the purchase tax on the apartment, so Linda had to. She didn't have that kind of money. The bills were piling up. The walls were closing in.

She wasn't afraid of death. She was curious about it. Maybe it would be better than this life.

She spent most of her time on the balcony, smoking cigarette after cigarette, even though she hated it. The taste. The smell. The way it made her feel. She ate only to survive—one sandwich a day.

Then, one day, the girl from the video store handed her a book.

It was a children's novel. About catacombs.

It shouldn't have mattered. But it did.

It was about a boy raised by priests in the Vatican. When one priest died, everyone had to kiss his forehead. When the boy touched him, the dead priest whispered, "Get me out of here."

The boy discovered he could speak to the dead. He could see how and when people would die.

He got lost in the catacombs. A skeleton helped him escape. He met a girl he liked. The priest who raised him said his gift was inherited. His mother had been in a coma when she was impregnated. The boy had to pass it on. That was his purpose.

When the girl he loved fell into a coma, he knew what he had to do.

Later, the priest died. The boy asked him: "What's after death?"

"Nothing," the priest replied. "Burn my body to free my soul."

"What's the meaning of life?"

"Nothing."

That word. *Nothing.* That stopped Linda cold. If there's nothing after death, why be in such a rush to get there?

Maybe there was still something worth staying for.

In the book's end, the Vatican tried to silence the boy. He was too dangerous. He might change what people believed. On a plane full of reporters, the boy looked in the mirror and saw a dead man staring back. He laughed, walked down the aisle, and saw the same dead face on every passenger.

Then the plane exploded.

Linda closed the book and breathed.

Maybe the point wasn't to follow the script. Maybe it wasn't about finding a partner, getting married, and having kids. Maybe it was just about enjoying the moment.

And maybe, just maybe, something good was still waiting for her.

She stopped smoking.

Chapter 17

Linda finally landed a job that didn't make her feel like someone's shadow. It was a customer service position for eBay, answering emails in Spanish. No phones, no meetings, no people in her face. Just her and a screen. For the first time in a long while, something felt manageable.

On her first day, the manager introduced her to the team.

"This is Emilio," he said, nodding toward a guy across the room.

When Linda looked at him, every instinct inside her flared up like warning lights—*Trouble. Stay away.* But feelings are one thing. Real life's a whole different battlefield.

Emilio was from Argentina. Average height, tanned skin, a lean athletic frame. His short dark brown hair was just messy enough to seem styled. His eyes were light greenish brown. Not hazel. They didn't change colors like Linda's. And those lips—soft, full, inviting. He wore black jeans, a faded blue T-shirt with some dark graphic print, and black sneakers. He had that effortless charm. And a story that made him seem fragile.

She had a crush on him, though she tried to hide it.

He told Linda about his ex—Emma—how she'd crushed him. He played the wounded man so well that Linda didn't see the edges underneath. Or maybe she did, and just chose to look away.

When Emilio found out Linda had an apartment, he asked if he could rent one of the rooms. She only had a bedroom and a living room, but he insisted. She needed the money, especially with the government hounding her for the purchase tax. So she said yes.

He started slipping into her life like smoke. Teasing her, making comparisons. "I don't like your shoes. Emma was so special. So woman," he once said, offhand.

Emilio's moods swung like a wrecking ball. Sometimes he was gentle, even fun. Other times, cruel. One evening, he said something just to push her. She tossed a slipper at him. It didn't even reach him. He got up slowly, his expression unreadable, and then he grabbed her. Without a word, he started hitting her on the head—only where her hair would cover the bruises. Fifteen, twenty blows. Hard. Unforgiving. Linda froze, her mind fractured. Not just from the shock of the pain, but from the realization: he knew exactly what he was doing.

The pain came later. Her entire head was swollen, every inch tender and burning. But what hurt more was the betrayal, the violence she couldn't understand. She hadn't deserved it. She hadn't even seen it coming.

And then came the kindness. When Emilio noticed how broken she was, he turned sweet. Caring. Like it had never happened.

And Linda—she didn't kick him out. She should have. But she didn't.

He didn't hit her again. Not like that. Once, he threw a glass that shattered on her waist. She bled. He patched her up like a guilty child. Another time, he shoved her hard into a doorframe during an argument. And that was it. Physical, at least.

Still, they kept living together. When a heavy snow blanketed the city in January, Emilio marveled like a kid. Linda took him to Buda Castle. He snapped photos of her, laughed, acted like he cared. But when someone offered to take a photo of the two of them, he muttered, "We're not together," and left space between them.

They slept together anyway. He stayed in more often. He said he preferred being home. Told her he liked being with her better than out partying.

Then one day, Emilio was teasing her saying she'd never leave Hungary.

"Yes, I will," she said firmly. "I'm going back to Spain."

"Then prove it. Buy the ticket now."

She did.

A one-way ticket to Barcelona.

Then, the test stick turned positive.

She was pregnant.

She knew Emilio wouldn't want the baby. He'd always made it clear—they weren't a couple. But Linda didn't care. She wanted the child. She'd had an abortion before. This time felt different. Emilio had good genes. She was ready to do this alone.

Emilio's mom was deeply religious. Abortion was a sin. So Emilio didn't push either way. He was distant.

"What about Spain?" he asked.

"I'm still going" she said. "I want a better life for my child."

She packed her suitcase and left.

Barcelona was harder than she expected. The shared rental was loud and filthy. Her roommates partied every night, left food to rot on plates. Finding work was harder than she thought. They were part-time gigs with odd hours that didn't line up.

Money vanished. Hunger set in.

She saw someone drop twenty euros and kept it. She hated herself for it, but she needed to eat. She stole a few coins from a roommate's jar. She was pregnant, and her baby needed to survive.

She had no choice.

Every day, she cared more and more about the life inside her.

She couldn't pay next month's rent. She had to go back to Budapest.

When she called Emilio, he barely reacted.

He didn't sound thrilled. "I haven't seen the cat since yesterday," he said. "Maybe she fell from the balcony like before. Wait. I'll check."

Silence.

Then, "Can't find her."

Linda flew back. Emilio had moved out. He left behind a few coins—just enough for her to print flyers for the missing cat. Nothing else. No note. No money for food. No acknowledgment of the baby she was carrying.

Her friends showed up with food. Her manager at eBay hadn't submitted her resignation. He'd filed it as unpaid leave.

A few days later, Linda found out where her cat had landed. A woman had taken her in a week ago with broken legs and a broken jaw. A week ago. Emilio lied to her.

The fall from the fifth floor had nearly killed the cat.

"Did you push her?" the woman asked.

"No. Why would I do that? I wasn't even in the country."

The woman stared. "You need to pay for her surgeries. I took her to my village vet."

Linda's heart sank. "I didn't ask you to. I can't even afford to feed myself."

Linda told her to keep the cat. The animal wouldn't even look at her. She had a new home now, with another cat, a dog, and a twelve-year-old boy.

The woman pressed. "Why won't you pay? Did you push her?"

"I already told you—I didn't. I'm pregnant. I'm alone."

Linda didn't understand why this woman, who worked in a hospital caring for newborns, could be so heartless to someone carrying a baby alone.

But she was still standing.

Chapter 18

Linda didn't have much of a choice. The debt felt like it was pressing down on her chest, tighter with every passing day. So she did what she had to—she took out a mortgage. The relief was only temporary, like breathing through a straw. The payments came fast and hard, and her paycheck barely stretched enough to cover the basics. Electricity. Water. Heating. And now, she had a baby on the way.

The baby didn't wait for her finances to recover. She had to take out another loan just to get what she needed—crib, stroller, baby clothes, diapers. It felt like she was building a life on a sinking ship.

Making matters worse, Emilio still worked with her. Same office. Same air.

"How are you doing? Everything all right with the baby?" he asked one morning, acting like he cared.

But the next day, his words stabbed her.

"You're a black hole in my life. Why the hell did you come back? I was happy with Lia in your apartment. You ruined everything. Now she's asking about the baby. You're the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

It was cruel. It was Emilio.

"You know what? Linda said, her voice low and hard. "I'd rather you not speak to me at all. Just ignore me,"

From then on, they didn't talk. Didn't even look at each other. But some days, the only open desk was the one across from hers. She'd feel his presence like a headache she couldn't shake.

Still, Linda made a decision: she was going to be happy. Because her baby needed her to be. She found out it was a boy. She had always imagined having a girl, but she adjusted her heart quickly. A boy or girl—it didn't matter. This baby was hers, and she was going to love him with everything she had left.

Then something unexpected happened.

"Linda?" one of the guys at work said, gently. "We collected some money for you. Juan will take you to the store to get groceries. We're sorry Emilio doesn't care. Everyone pitched in—except him. We didn't tell him."

Linda stared at them, stunned. She was speechless. The kindness knocked the air from her lungs. She hadn't expected this. Not here.

*

By her ninth month, Linda was painting the apartment walls, setting up the crib piece by piece. She was tired, sore, and aching, but she pushed through the fatigue. That's when the doorbell rang.

It was Emilio.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, confused.

"I just came to check in. Lia dumped me, and I'm bored," he said like it meant nothing.

That was it. No apology. No concern. Just boredom.

He stayed for two weeks. Didn't lift a finger. Didn't help. He was just… there. Taking up space because he had nowhere else to go.

Meanwhile, Linda's analysis wasn't good. Her platelet count was low, her blood pressure high. The doctor had her coming in daily to test her blood pressure. No one explained why, so she turned to Google—and she found that her baby could be in danger in her uterus.

The doctor finally spoke to the Chief Medical Officer. They decided to induce labor. She was due in four days.

They'd break her water the next day.

Emilio tagged along. Not out of love. Curiosity. Boredom.

Four and a half hours later, Linda was ready to push.

After four pushes, her son, Alex, was born.

Emilio stuck around for two weeks. Then he left to crawl back to Lia. After that, his behavior changed again. Moody. Distant. Sometimes cruel.

Linda kept letting him in—not because she trusted him, but because she was scared. Scared he'd try to take Alex away. Not to raise him, but to ship him off to Argentina, to his mother. Linda hid her and Alex's passports at her neighbor's, just in case.

Emilio would show up now and then, insult her, question her as a mom.

"You're a bad mother," he said once. "My mom's a much better one than you'll ever be."

He hadn't even been around. He didn't get to say that.

But Linda knew something Emilio didn't: strength doesn't mean never falling. It means getting up every time you do.

Chapter 19

Linda needed money. The state help barely covered enough to survive, let alone pay the bills stacking higher each month. So she started giving private Spanish lessons at home, hoping to stay afloat. But Alex, her baby, often cried for half an hour straight through the sessions. He was only one, and some days, he just wouldn't stop.

"I can't take this crying. I'll look for another teacher. Sorry," one student said, flustered and gathering his things.

Because of the constant interruptions, Linda couldn't charge much. That meant the people who showed up for lessons were... unreal. One student came just to talk about her emotional problems.

"I had such a bad day today. A Really. Bad. One," the woman sighed.

"So, this is where we left off last time. Please read from here," Linda said, trying to steer the lesson back to Spanish grammar.

"Was So. Bad…"

The woman wanted Linda to ask her back, but she didn't react. She continued with the lessons instead.

She didn't come back after that. Truth was, she needed a therapist, not a Spanish tutor.

Another woman, middle-aged and desperate, came to learn Spanish because she'd met a much younger Colombian man online. He had already ghosted her, but she was planning to fly to Colombia anyway to find him.

While the woman read aloud, Linda slipped over to Alex, handing him colored pencils and paper to keep him busy.

"I don't like that you're not listening to me when you're with your child," the woman snapped.

"I was listening. I even corrected your conjugation," Linda said calmly, refusing to let the chaos crack her.

A strange man offered to pay for lessons by turning Linda's bicycle—that she didn't have—into an electric one. She declined.

Then came a real creep. A tour guide, he said. During one lesson, he shared a disturbing story:

"One time in Canada, I was in an elevator with two beautiful girls—maybe 14 and 16. I said in Hungarian, 'I'd love to lick your pussy.' Thought I'd never see them again. Then, boom,

I'm invited to dinner with the Hungarian ambassador—and guess who's there? The girls. They were his daughters."

He laughed, shameless. Then he touched Linda—slow, deliberate. She froze. Thankfully, another student arrived early and saved her. Linda never scheduled him again.

*

One night, Linda woke to a strange, tight sound. A wheeze. High-pitched and terrifying.

It was Alex. His tiny chest struggled with each breath.

Panicked, Linda called an ambulance. At the hospital, doctors told her he had croup. She'd never even heard the word before.

No one explained anything. They kept Alex in a bed with rails. Linda got a chair. Not one with arms. Just a cold, hard seat. She spent the night half-asleep, waking with her head against another child's bed. The boy—twelve, with pneumonia—offered her his bed in the morning. She climbed in, grateful, only to be woken moments later.

"It's six a.m. Wake-up time," the nurse said briskly.

Alex wheezed for three days. No meds. No real care. Just a humidifier they handed her when she started complaining. Another mother lent Linda clothes. On day four, they were moved upstairs, and Linda finally got a real bed. It was the first comfort in days.

Alex hadn't pooped in three days, so they gave him an enema. It didn't work. Watching her baby's discomfort—the way his body went stiff—haunted her.

"Please, let us go home," Linda begged the doctor.

They let her go. But once home, Alex developed bronchitis—likely picked up in the hospital.

From then on, croup attacks came every two to three weeks. The doctor gave her steroid suppositories and said to try cold air first before using it.

Linda tried to take Alex outside to the balcony in the freezing night, but his wheezing didn't stop. And if done with the suppository, this took 5 to 6 hours.

Instead, Linda wrapped Alex and herself in layers, opened the balcony door, let the freezing air flood the room.

One night, in spring—when the freezing cold was gone—she carried Alex down to the bench in front of their building.

"Are you okay?" a woman with a tiny Shih Tzu asked concerned.

"Yes, thank you. He has croup. The cold helps," Linda explained.

The woman squinted at her. "Do you have somewhere to go?"

“We live right there,” Linda said, pointing to her building.

The woman didn’t look convinced. Maybe she thought Linda had fled a violent partner.

She wasn’t wrong about the trauma, though.

The humidifier helped grow mold more than it helped Alex breathe.

Some days, when she ran out of steroids, she called the ambulance. Sometimes the paramedics didn’t have the meds either, so they called Linda’s family doctor, then drove her there.

Another time, a weekend visit to emergency care, finally gave her answers.

An emergency pediatrician finally explained everything.

“It’s the dry mucus blocking his airway. Panic makes it worse. Always keep a window cracked. Rub Vicks on his chest—it opens the lungs.”

Linda started sleeping with a jar of Vicks beside her bed. Every time she heard Alex wheeze or cough, she’d held it under his nose like it was life itself.

*

Months passed. Then Emilio showed up again.

“Lia and I broke up. I don’t have anywhere to go. Can I stay?” he asked, shameless.

Linda let him in. She shouldn’t have. But she was tired.

“Alex! Alex!” Emilio called playfully.

“Please don’t,” Linda said, nervous. “I just got him to play on his own. He wouldn’t let me go to the other room before.”

“I just want him to look at me. And don’t tell me what to do. He’s my son. I’ll raise him how I want.”

“No,” she said firmly. “You don’t get to say that. You never took responsibility. You never even signed him into your name.”

“Don’t talk to me like that or you know what’ll happen,” Emilio snapped, his voice cold, his face unreadable. Just like last time, before he hit her in the head.

Linda’s stomach turned. The last time he raised his hand to her, it left invisible bruises that never healed.

She had the domestic violence hotline saved in her phone, thumb hovering over it anytime he was near.

Eventually, after telling him to leave over and over again, Emilio finally did.

Maybe he didn't dare touch her again because he already had a record. In Spain, he hit Emma, his ex. The girl who kicked him out just before Linda and him met. She called the police. He had to attend a weeklong abuse course. If he didn't, he'd never be allowed back to Spain.

That fear, maybe, is what kept her safe.

Chapter 20

Raising Alex on her own tested Linda in ways she never saw coming. Some days, she felt okay, she even felt it to be easy. Other days, she wanted to scream into the sky for help until someone answered. What made it harder was Emilio—showing up without warning, charming Alex for an afternoon, then vanishing for two months.

Every time he left, Alex broke down—screaming, crying, dropping himself to the floor of stores, sidewalks, wherever they were. Linda didn't know how to comfort him. Her heart broke every time.

Then Emilio left for Spain. Then Argentina. He said he wasn't coming back. But Alex didn't understand that. Two months passed, and Alex started asking.

"Where's Dad?" he asked, eyes wide, voice full of worry.

"I'm sorry, baby," Linda said softly, holding back tears. "He's gone. He's not coming back."

"Dad. Dad. Dad…" Alex sobbed so hard it shook his body. Linda cried with him. There's nothing worse than watching your child hurt and knowing you can't fix it.

*

Alex was three and a half when he started public daycare. It was a new section with new caregivers. But it didn't take long before mornings turned into battles. He fought her every step, pulling away, refusing to get dressed.

One day, she brought him in late. The entry had lockers, benches, a bathroom—standard setup. But something felt off. A little girl stood alone in the entryway, silent, eyes down.

"Hey, sweetie, what are you doing out here alone?" Linda asked gently.

"Miss Regina locked me in here," the girl whispered, her eyes filled with tears, her voice trembling. She touched her cheek to show Linda what Miss Regina had done to her.

Linda's stomach dropped.

"She slapped you?"

The girl nodded slowly.

Was Regina hurting Alex, too? She had suspected something, but this made it real.

Later, one of the caregivers snapped at Linda, "Your son needs to go to the bathroom alone. He wants help, but we won't give it to him. He has to learn."

The coldness in her tone sent a chill down Linda's spine.

Then she met two gypsy mothers whose daughters had vanished from the group.

"Miss Regina was hitting my daughter too," one said. "Locked her in the bathroom. I had to pull her out."

Linda marched to the director's office.

"I want Alex moved," she said, voice shaking but firm. "You've had complaints. What are you doing about them?"

The director waved it off. "Mothers exaggerate—especially people with darker skin."

Linda was stunned. Racism. Neglect. Abuse. She demanded Alex be moved.

They agreed to move Alex—but later that day, he was back in his old group.

"The other caregiver didn't want to insult Miss Regina," they told her.

That was it. Linda pulled Alex out and transferred him to a new center.

At first, it seemed better. But Alex was placed in a mixed-age group. And that's when things got worse.

A much older boy began bullying him, pushing him around until he hit the floor.

And then one day, Alex came home and repeated something that made Linda's skin crawl.

"Show me your weenie, and then you can lick my butt," the boy had said to him.

Linda was horrified.

She reported it to the staff.

The caregiver laughed. "We can't even let that boy nap near the girls. He touches them under the blanket."

The boy's father was aggressive and violent. The staff was scared of him.

Alex also told Linda the caregiver sometimes shook him—hard. He didn't understand why.

One day, a new caregiver arrived to show these caregivers how to prepare the kids for school.

Miss Andy. She was gentle. Patient. She smiled easily. Alex lit up around her.

"I'll take you to my group," she told him one day with a grin.

Linda asked if she meant it.

“If the director approves, I will.” Miss Andy said.

Linda didn’t wait. She filed the request. And soon, Alex was moved again—this time for good.

The new daycare, run by the same director, somehow felt like a different world. Alex was safe. Happy. He loved Miss Andy.

She taught him to try new foods, even if just to spit them out. This made Alex try everything. But he was still just as picky as Linda.

Chapter 21

Linda had gone as long as she could without paying the bills, but the weight of the debt was catching up to her. The anxiety clawed at her day and night. She felt it in her chest like a ticking clock. Any day now, she feared the bank would come knocking and throw them out. She had to act first. So, she made the hard choice to sell the apartment.

She listed it low—almost too low—and buyers rushed in like water through a broken dam. The first to reach out was a young married couple. But it wasn't really their money; the girl's father was footing the bill. They knew the risk—Linda's debts were high—but they signed the contract. Linda would only see fifteen percent of the sale. The rest went straight to settle her debts.

She asked her neighbor to watch Alex while she cleared out everything they could take. The furniture too big to move had to stay behind. Just then, as if the universe needed to twist the knife, the electricity was cut. Linda stood in the dark, knowing it was because the bill hadn't been paid.

The first rental they moved into was a disappointment. Dark as a cave and damp with black mold. It clung to the walls like a warning. They didn't stay long.

Soon after, they moved again—this time to a place at the top of a hill. Just one room with an open kitchen, but it felt like peace. From their window, they could see the entire city stretching below. Snow came and stayed white—unlike in the city where it turned to brown slush. Linda and Alex went sledding, laughing down the slope like nothing else mattered.

Her relationship with her mother had also started to change. They weren't close, not really, but her mom would help by watching Alex while Linda took a chef course. She hoped cooking could be her way into Spain someday. Cooking seemed promising. She loved creating.

But once the course started, she learned the ugly truth. In real kitchens, the hours were brutal—12 to 16 hours a day. Chefs yelling, insulting, name-calling, barking orders like soldiers in battle. Still, she pushed through. She was used to hardship. She wasn't going to quit now.

As New Year's Eve crept up, Linda was studying for her economics math test for the chef course while Alex jumped around the room, leaping from one piece of furniture to the next.

"Don't do that, Alex," she warned, her voice sharp with worry.

"Why not?" he grinned.

"Because you'll fall."

And then he did.

Right then, as if her words summoned it, he slipped and smacked his forehead against the dining table. Linda's heart stopped. Blood poured from the gash—two inches wide, raw and red. It looked like an open mouth smiling back at her.

She didn't panic. She moved by instinct. Somewhere in a drawer, she still had those steri-strips from Madrid when she was twelve—when she split her head, racing her sister down fourteen flights of stairs. She grabbed them and pulled the wound closed. The bleeding slowed, but her heart didn't. She called the ambulance.

The paramedics said she did the right thing. Head wounds were always dangerous in kids. On the way to the hospital, she sang Alex's favorite songs, watching him drift into sleep from the shock.

The very next day, another accident. Alex misstepped between the bed and the bench and cut his knee on a metal plate. It was a three-inch gash. Linda cleaned it, used her new steri-strips, and patched him up herself.

*

Around that time, Linda had been chatting online with a guy named Charlie. He lived in Ventura, California. They'd been messaging for a while. The conversations were shallow—nothing about dreams or pasts—just everyday things. What Charlie saw while diving. He was a scuba diver and cook on a boat. He sent photos of sunfish, whales, seafoam skies.

Then, he flew out to Hungary to meet her. When she saw him at the airport, there was no spark. Charlie was tall with messy blond hair, blue eyes, tanned skin, and a round face. A bit chubby. He wore khaki cargo pants, a dark blue shirt, dark blue sneakers. But what struck her wasn't how he looked—it was that he had no hotel. He assumed they were already a couple.

Linda didn't feel the same. Sharing a bed with him felt off. He kept trying to touch her. She kept pulling away. Still, she played host, took him sightseeing, even brought him along to CrossFit.

"Why don't you give him a chance?" her friend asked. "He's trying. You can tell he really likes you. He was lifting weights while you worked out, just to be near you. It's kind of cute."

Maybe it was.

Before he left, Charlie invited her to California.

"I can't," she said quietly with a slight Spanish accent. "I don't even have money for next month's rent."

"Do you want me to help? I could pay it."

"No," she said quickly. "That wouldn't really fix anything. I'm thinking about going to Sheffield. I have a friend there. Might be easier to find work."

He didn't push. He flew home. And Linda, with her chef certification in hand, started packing for the next move. A new city waited. Maybe a better chance.

Her mom helped her box up what was left in the apartment. Linda didn't know what was coming next. But she was going anyway.

Chapter 22

When Linda and Alex arrived in Sheffield, it wasn't the welcome she'd expected. Her friend Kamila met them with a tight smile and a shrug. "My mother-in-law moved in," she said, not meeting Linda's eyes. "We don't have space anymore."

Linda's heart sank. She had come all this way hoping for a roof, even just for a few weeks. Instead, Kamila offered a room her friend was renting out for fifty pounds a week. Linda only had money to pay for two-week stay. And no money for food or anything else. She thought Kamila would help her until she found work. She had believed they were real friends. Turns out, that word meant different things to different people.

Sheffield wasn't what she imagined. It was small, quiet, and the job market was dry. Snow blanketed the streets in March, stubborn and heavy, making the whole city feel colder than it already was. The Hungarian girl renting them the room was kind, at least. But Linda felt stranded.

Kamila offered nothing. No help, no encouragement. Just distance. Linda had seen this before—especially with other Hungarians. There was a mindset, one she hated: "No one helped me, so why should I help you?"

She wasn't like that. She'd help anyone if they asked. That's just who she was.

Then Charlie messaged.

"Come to California," he wrote.

"I can't," Linda replied. "I have no money. I can't find a job here. You can either wait until we settle and I can pay for the tickets—or if you want us to come now, you'll have to support us. I'm completely out of money."

The next day, Charlie wrote again. "I got the money. I went scuba diving with my boss, harvesting sea cucumbers. Just got the permit. They sell for a lot in Asian cuisine."

Just like that, he bought their plane tickets.

Linda and Alex flew into LAX and were met by Charlie, who took them straight to his new house in Ventura County, between Oak View and Ojai. The area was breathtaking—rolling hills on three sides, wide sky, the salty whisper of the Pacific not too far off. It could've been paradise.

The property had trees, wild land, and silence.

But the house was something else.

It was a disaster. Ugly, broken, with missing ceilings in one room. The previous owners had used it for growing marijuana. They'd been raided. That's how Charlie got it cheap.

Lizards skittered everywhere, even inside the house. However, Linda loved them. They reminded her of resilience—tiny creatures surviving in forgotten places.

They could only use the kitchen, bathroom, and living room. The other rooms were wrecked. The place was filthy. Linda spent hours vacuuming the stained carpet. Just as she started to feel it was livable, Charlie stomped in with muddy boots.

"Please, don't come inside with those dirty shoes," Linda asked gently.

"It's my house," he snapped. "I'll do what I want."

That was her first sign—things weren't going to be easy here. Not at all.

In the morning, Charlie asked Linda where she wanted to go. The sun was out, and the heat wrapped around the house like a blanket. For once, the weather felt like a gift.

"To the beach," Linda said. After the icy streets of Sheffield, all she wanted was to feel warmth on her skin. She'd never lived anywhere close to the sea, and it felt like something her soul needed.

He exploded.

"Why the beach?! I WANT TO GO HIKING! I WANT TO GO BIKING!" he shouted, hands flying wildly.

Linda stared at him, stunned. He looked ridiculous—like a grown man throwing a tantrum. Like a hysterical woman, she thought.

The next day, he asked the same question again. Linda repeated her answer.

"To the beach."

Charlie exploded. "We already went to the beach! I WANT TO GO HIKING! I WANT TO GO BIKING!"

"I'm scared of bikes," Linda admitted quietly. "I had a bad fall once. I broke my tooth. I can't—"

Before she could finish, Charlie shoved a bike toward her. "Get on."

Her hands trembled as she climbed on, her legs shaking beneath her. The trauma came rushing back. She couldn't do it.

By the third day, he turned on Alex.

"Why isn't Alex behaving?" Charlie asked sharply, his voice cold and accusing.

"He's not misbehaving," Linda said. "He's four and a half. This is his first time seeing me with someone. We're in a new country. He's anxious. It's normal. With time, he'll be fine."

"I don't want time. I want him to behave NOW. You need to teach him to behave," he demanded.

At the playground, Charlie pushed Alex to climb a pole. The boy refused.

“You don’t have to, Alex,” Linda said softly. She trusted his instincts. He never took risks he wasn’t ready for. He even once pulled another boy back from traffic. He was careful. Smart.

When they left the park, Charlie pulled up to a ballet studio.

“What are we doing here?” Linda asked, confused.

“Take him here,” Charlie said gruffly.

“Where?”

“Here.”

“I don’t get it.”

“If you want him to be a pussy, take him here,” Charlie spat.

Linda’s mouth fell open, stunned by his cruelty.

On Charlie’s birthday, Linda decided to bake him a cake. She wanted to do something kind —even if she was holding herself together with strings.

As she mixed the batter, Charlie came in, fuming.

“How long is it going to take to bake that cake? You promised you’d help me clean up the leaves. Instead, you’re here baking.”

Linda blinked in confusion. “How do you expect me to help you while I’m still making your cake?”

Charlie didn’t answer. He just stormed outside, his mood black as ever.

And Linda stood there, holding the spoon, wondering how she ended up in a place that didn’t even feel like earth anymore.

At night, the house was quiet except for the steady rhythm of Alex’s breath. He was curled up on the sofa bed, finally asleep. Linda lay next to him. She always stayed by Alex’s side until he drifted off. Sometimes it took a while.

Charlie lay on the mattress they had bought the first day, just a few feet away, watching them. His voice cut through the silence.

“You're always with him. Never with me,” he said, clearly upset.

“I’m only with him until he falls asleep,” Linda answered, trying to stay calm. “Then I’m there with you. I don’t understand what the problem is.”

“The problem is he falls asleep too late. You need to cut his sugar. My sister works in childcare. She says sugar makes kids hyper.”

Linda shook her head. “It’s not the sugar. He doesn’t do anything all day to tire himself out. We’re stuck out here like it’s a deserted island. Sometimes you’re gone for two days. The bus only comes once an hour, and we have to walk alongside two busy roads to even get to it.”

“Start giving him cheese or ham instead of cereal,” he demanded.

Later that night, they had sex—something Linda couldn’t stop thinking about afterward. It felt strange. Off. Charlie had asked her to lick his nipples. She did, but it left her unsettled.

The next morning, Linda tried to follow Charlie’s instructions. She turned to Alex.

“Do you want ham?”

“No.”

“Cheese?”

“No.”

She poured him a bowl of Coco Pops.

Charlie saw and snapped. He ripped the bowl away and tossed it out into the garden. Alex screamed in English, “IT’S MY CHOCOLATE!” His little voice filled with disbelief.

Charlie ignored him. He went to the freezer, pulled out ice cream he had bought, and started ripping off the plastic and throwing it outside.

Linda watched, horrified.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! HAVE YOU GONE MAD?!” she yelled.

Charlie looked insane. Linda was starting to feel something worse than anger—disgust. Fear.

He was a mess. Dirty clothes scattered across the floor. He lay in bed wearing them, never bothering to change. One morning, while Linda made toast, she saw him in the garden, fingers deep in the soil around the strawberry plants. He came back inside with dirt on his elbow.

“You have dirt on your elbow,” she pointed out, frowning.

Charlie grabbed the towel she used to dry her hands and wiped it off, then sat down to eat.

“Aren’t you going to wash your hands?” she asked, appalled.

“Why? They’re not dirty.”

“You just touched the earth.”

“The earth isn’t dirty,” he snapped and pulled out his phone. “See? Google says it’s not dirty.”

Linda had to throw leftover food out the kitchen window into the yard. Charlie insisted it was good compost for his plants. But to her, it was disgusting. There were eggshells, plastic bags, half-rotted scraps—all just dumped into the garden.

Once, she and Alex fed a gopher that had made its home near the pile. They offered it apple slices, laughing as it peeked out. Linda took pictures of it.

When she showed them to Charlie, he frowned.

“You know I’ve been shooting at that thing with my air rifle? I’ll have to kill it.”

“What?” Linda asked, stunned. “Can’t you just move it? Poor thing.”

“No. If I don’t kill it, it’ll come back.”

“Don’t do it in front of Alex,” she said, alarmed.

“He has to see it. That’s who I am. I hunt.”

“Are you crazy? He’s too young for that,” she said firmly, her voice now edged with real concern.

Charlie’s obsession with guns made her uneasy. He collected them. He once texted her, saying, “Too bad you’re not here. You should see the squirrels playing in the trees.” Now she wondered if he had been aiming at them while he typed that.

When Linda cried, Charlie didn’t comfort her. He became crueler. Meaner. Like her sadness made him angrier.

Sometimes he’d disappear for hours, then come home smelling like liquor. She was starting to see signs—he was turning into a heavy drinker.

She couldn’t take it anymore.

He wouldn’t let her message her mom. He didn’t want her talking to her sister. When his parents visited from Los Angeles, Linda asked why he hadn’t told them they were a couple.

“Because if I tell them that, they’ll think you’re only with me for the residency,” he said coldly.

Linda’s stomach dropped.

“It’s better if I meet them alone. You stay here,” he added, still angry.

She didn’t argue. She didn’t care anymore. Her mind was already elsewhere, making plans.

What if she took a cooking job in Austria? Alex could stay with her mom in Budapest during the week. She’d visit on weekends until she was stable enough to bring him with her.

She messaged her mom.

Her mom responded with open arms.

Linda finally had a plan. An exit. A way out.

And she was ready to take it.

When Charlie came back, Linda stood in the doorway, calm but firm. "I want to go home," she said. "Not to Sheffield. I want to go back to Budapest."

Charlie looked disappointed, maybe even shocked, but he didn't argue. He bought the tickets without a fight. There was still one long week left before they'd finally be free of him.

The next day, Linda and Alex made their usual long walk to the supermarket—one hundred and twenty miles round trip. Just as they were walking along the roadside, a little blue van pulled up beside them. The window rolled down.

"Do you need a lift?" a woman called out.

Linda was used to this kind of kindness here. Locals often stopped when they saw her struggling with a little boy near a busy road.

"Oh, yes. Thank you!" Linda replied with a grateful smile as she and Alex climbed in.

A small girl sat in the passenger seat, swinging her feet.

"I take my daughter to jiu jitsu," the woman said. "Then I drive back the same way. Want me to pick you up again?"

"Yes, thank you so much!"

"I'll be back in ten minutes."

When they pulled up in front of Charlie's house, the woman turned to Linda, curious.

"So, what are you two doing here in the U.S.?"

Linda said it like it was just another thing. "I'm dating a guy who turned out to be crazy. We're going home."

The woman's smile faded into concern. "Oh… do you need help? Is he dangerous?"

"No, I don't think so. Thanks," Linda answered, trying to sound sure.

"If you want to go to the beach sometime, I take the kids and their friends all the time. Here's my number—call if you need a lift."

That last week before their flight, Linda and Alex spent every day at Ruth's house—the kind woman in the van. Ruth had five kids and ran the house like a soft-hearted general. They were homeschooled in a church community where every parent taught different subjects. It worked.

Linda was amazed by how Ruth managed it all: cooking full meals for her entire family and guests, using the cheapest ingredients. Only her husband worked, and even though she stretched every dollar, she still worried about the price of the insurance.

Linda and Alex found peace there. They even stayed when the family wasn't home, just to use the internet—a luxury Charlie's house didn't offer. There was no washing machine either. Laundry had to be done at Charlie's cousin's place in Ventura.

Ruth offered Linda and Alex her guest room, but Linda politely declined. She didn't want to overstep. Charlie may have agreed to support them, but Linda didn't want to owe him anything else. She hadn't spoken to him all week. At night, she slept beside Alex.

On their last evening, Ruth gave them a ride home in her van. Though their houses were only four apart, the wide properties made the walk feel much longer.

As they stepped out of the van, Charlie stood at the gate, arms crossed, watching them talk.

Linda tried to act casual. She didn't want a scene, not now, not the night before they left.

"Who was that?" Charlie asked, his tone neutral but firm.

Linda smiled politely. "Hi. How are you?" she said, dodging. "Just someone we met here."

"You're not nice to me," he muttered.

"What do you mean? I asked how you are."

"No. You're not nice."

Linda blinked. She didn't even care to argue. Not anymore.

Later, lying in bed beside Alex, he whispered it again.

"You're not being nice."

That's when it clicked. He didn't want kindness. He wanted sex. After a week of silence, after making her feel like a burden and a bad mother, he expected her to pretend nothing had happened.

"I am nice to you. I asked how you are," she repeated, voice flat.

"Tomorrow we leave at 8:30. If you're not ready, I won't wait," he said coldly.

Linda said nothing.

Later that night, she heard him in the dark—relieving himself.

She stayed perfectly still, pretending to sleep. Her stomach tightened with fear. She didn't want him touching her. Not ever again.

The next morning, they haven't said a word during the road trip. Charlie pulled up to LAX. He gave Linda a hug.

“I’m really sad this didn’t work out,” he said.

Linda stayed quiet. She thought to herself, he must be insane.

As the plane took off, she looked out the window. Clouds swallowed the coast.

Charlie was behind her now.

But the memories of Ruth, of her family’s warmth, of Ventura’s wild hills and Santa Barbara’s quiet charm—those, she would carry with her.

Six strange, heavy weeks. Some of the worst. But also a few bright spots.

And one truth carved deep: strength means leaving, even when you don’t know where you’re going next.

Chapter 23

Linda and Alex were flying back to Manchester. Charlie had messed up the travel dates—something about the time difference—so they had no choice but to stay one night in the UK. They caught the train to Sheffield to spend the night at Kamila's.

When they got to the station, they needed to catch a bus. Linda rushed Alex toward it.

"Come, come, run. The bus is here!" she said breathlessly.

She leapt onto the bus, but the door slammed shut behind her—Alex was still outside.

"PLEASE STOP! MY KID IS AT THE BUS STOP! PLEASE STOP!!" Linda screamed, her heart leaping into her throat. Panic spread through her like wildfire. "STOP!! MY KID!!"

The driver finally spoke, calm and almost detached. "Yeah, I'm stopping. Just needed to find a safe place."

The moment the doors opened, Linda bolted off, sprinting back to the stop. Alex stood there, wide-eyed, scared, and still.

"Mom!"

She scooped him up in her arms, tears burning in her eyes.

The driver waited for them. He was kind enough to ask where they needed to get off, offering to alert them when they arrived. Linda was grateful. She knew the stop but hadn't ridden this route in the dark. With a child and bags and her mind racing—it was overwhelming.

The next morning, Kamila and her husband drove them to the airport—but dropped them at the wrong terminal. They didn't have time to go back for the car. So all of them—Linda, Alex, Kamila, and her husband—ran almost half a mile, dragging suitcases, from Terminal 1 to Terminal 4.

They reached the check-in counter just as it was about to close.

The agent glanced at the scale.

"This suitcase is two pounds over the limit. You'll need to move some items to your backpack," he said flatly.

Linda opened the suitcase with shaking hands, pulling out books and random items. The backpack was already full. Her nerves were on fire.

"Come on! Put it back! Just come quick!" the agent urged. "We're closing the counter."

Linda tossed the things back inside. She barely zipped up the case. They said a rushed goodbye to Kamila and her husband and darted toward security.

Linda had one hand gripping Alex's and the other dragging two suitcases. She struggled to scan the QR code on the printed ticket while a security woman barked at them to move faster.

At the scanner, her luggage flagged an alert. A security officer asked her to open it.

"You can't take that on board," the officer said sharply. "It's pointy."

It was just a small ceramic flag holder with an American flag. Nothing dangerous. But they weren't having it.

She broke off the ceramic base, leaving only the thin wooden stick.

"You have to leave that too," the officer said coldly. "You could stab someone with it."

Linda stared, dumbfounded. She wanted to scream. The stick would've snapped in two with barely any pressure. But she peeled off the flag and left the rest behind.

She thought they were free to run to the gate—but no. Her suitcases were pulled aside for an explosives check.

Seriously? She looked like a terrorist? Or maybe it was Alex, the four-year-old. Linda was too exhausted to even argue.

By the time they reached the gate, only one agent remained. He scanned their tickets, and they ran down the bridge—only to find it locked.

"Noooooo!" Linda cried out, nearly collapsing.

But then she saw it—a bus parked below, waiting to take them to the plane, bound for Budapest.

Relief washed over her like a wave. They had made it. Just barely.

*

The original plan was simple: Linda would move to Austria to work as a cook, and Alex would stay with her mother in Budapest during the week. They'd reunite on weekends, making the best of a hard choice. It wasn't ideal, but it was supposed to give them both a future.

But then she spoke with Emilio, who was living in Spain at that time. Something about that conversation stirred a different direction in her. He suggested looking locally, and that's when

she came across a job posting in Budapest—an opening at Avis for a Spanish-speaking operations position. The role didn't even exist until now. They were building the team from scratch.

She got the job.

Linda joined a small Spanish team: a Catalan guy and a Cuban guy. They were all flown to Spain for a week of training. Later, a Venezuelan girl and a Mexican guy also joined their group.

They didn't have a team leader. No one was guiding them. They had to figure out the whole workflow themselves. They were the guinea pigs, really—alongside a five-member English team. They were testing if this setup would even work.

One day at lunch, the Catalan guy turned to the Mexican. "I've been watching this TV show about the cartels in Mexico. Are the border guards really that cruel? They're killing people in cold blood."

The Mexican guy nodded, his expression serious. "The police in Mexico can be very violent. It's not just a show."

The Venezuelan girl chimed in, laughing bitterly. "In Venezuela, if someone steals your bag and you go to a cop? They just laugh at you. Also, I can't walk around safely. People try to cut off ponytails to sell them." She flicked at her thick, curly hair.

Linda liked them. They were real. Raw. Survivors in their own right.

But not everything in the office felt so easy.

There was a guy—one of the team leaders from another group—who sat across the open-plan office, separated by a windowpane. He started staring at Linda through the glass. At first, she didn't think much of it.

But then she noticed the girl sitting behind her, leading the English team, watching the same guy. She was clearly infatuated. Maybe she thought the guy was looking at her.

He wasn't.

When he finally came over to Linda's side of the room, it became obvious. His eyes weren't on the girl behind Linda—they were on Linda. But then, just when things got even more confusing, she found out the man was gay.

It didn't matter. Because office politics are never about attraction. They're about power. And someone was clearly feeling threatened.

One morning, Linda arrived early. Only the English team lead—the same girl—was there. As Linda sat down, she noticed a nail had cracked. She quietly grabbed her nail clipper and snipped the edge clean.

Later that day, her manager called her in.

“I heard you were cutting your nails at your desk,” he said sharply.

“I just had a cracked nail. No one else was here yet. I clipped it quickly,” Linda replied, calm but tired.

“I don’t care. You can’t do that here,” he snapped.

She left the meeting knowing exactly who had said something. That girl. The only one who saw her. And, of course, she and the manager were friends.

A few days later, she was called in again.

“You can’t wear anything that shows your shoulders,” her manager said coldly.

Linda blinked. “But we don’t deal with customers. Why does it matter what I’m wearing?”

“There aren’t external visits,” he said, “but we still have to avoid distractions for other employees. We have a dress code policy.”

“Okay,” Linda said quietly.

“This is your second strike,” he warned. “The third, and you’re out.”

The Venezuelan girl gave Linda a shawl to cover her shoulders. Kindness still existed, even in places that felt like they were built to break you.

Linda sat at her desk, trying to process what had just happened. Fired—for a cracked nail and an open shoulder?

No. This wasn’t about dress codes.

This was about being watched. About jealousy. About power.

And even though it stung, Linda had lived through far worse.

Just a week later, the manager called Linda in again.

“Where were you yesterday between 2 and 3 p.m.? I heard you left your desk for 45 minutes.”

“I wasn’t away for more than 15 to 20 minutes,” she said, already feeling the walls close in.

“Are you sure?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

“Yes.” Her voice was firm, though doubt lingered inside her.

“Okay. We’ll check with security. If you were gone more than 20 minutes, I’ll fire you. That’ll be your third strike. Come back at 1 p.m. and I’ll show you the records.”

Linda walked out in disbelief. Her breath felt tight in her chest. She had just been recognized for her work. Was this really happening?

In the kitchen, her eyes welled up. Some girls from the Italian team noticed.

"What happened?" one of them asked worried.

"He's checking my badge scans. Wants to know how long I was gone from my desk," Linda whispered, voice breaking.

"What?!" they said, shocked. At that moment, her manager walked by. Linda quickly left.

At 1 p.m., she returned to the meeting room.

"You were right," the manager said flatly. "You were gone only 18 minutes."

Relief barely had time to settle in before he added, "But I heard you told people about this. You can't talk about things like this to anyone. If I hear even one more word about it, I'll fire you. Immediately. Remember—one word, and you're out."

Linda didn't answer. She didn't have to. She could see now how scared he was. Scared of being exposed. Scared of her.

That weekend, she returned to the office. She needed to print out documents for her landscape gardener course—her backup plan to go to Australia. And she wrote her resignation letter.

She knew he'd fire her on Monday. She wasn't going to give him the pleasure.

The company required a two-month notice period. Linda would stay on payroll but had time to prepare for her next step.

On Monday, she was off. She ran into one of the Italian girls, who told her, "Our manager gathered everyone and told us not to talk to you. Not a single word."

It was insane. But it made sense. Executives were firing managers who didn't support the new policies—managers like his friend from the German customer service team who refused to enforce six-minute calls with no breaks.

Linda knew half the people in that building—at least 200 employees. Her manager was terrified that if word got out about what he was doing to her, he'd be next.

On Tuesday, Linda returned and got a message from HR. In the meeting room, her Catalan teammate—now the new team leader—was there too.

They made her sign a paper. She didn't have to work anymore, but she'd still be paid for two months.

Afterward, the Catalan guy walked her down to the building's front door.

It was over.

She was free.

She still had to come in twice more, just to pick up her monthly transit pass.

The next time she visited, she sat quietly in the interior garden before her appointment. She saw her former manager staring at her through a glass door. He picked up his phone, his expression dark.

Linda met with HR and told them everything. About the harassment. The intimidation. The silence.

"I think I heard my colleague talking to him earlier," the HR rep said. "It was about you."

Linda walked out, feeling the weight finally lift.

It hurt to leave. She had loved that work environment, the diversity of her coworkers, the vibrant energy. It always felt like she was in another country.

But Linda had learned something stronger than loyalty:

She had learned how to walk away.

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Emilio was back from Spain. Linda met him with Alex. She didn't want to. But fear was louder than reason. Emilio knew where Alex's daycare was, and the thought of him showing up unannounced, taking Alex without a word, kept her up some nights. So she kept meeting him with Alex. She wasn't even sure if Alex needed them—or if they were only happening because she was afraid of what Emilio might do.

They sat outside at a bar on a warm afternoon, sunlight streaking through the trees, trying to keep the conversation civil. Linda sat tense, her guard up. Alex, restless and full of energy, nudged the edge of the table with his foot. It barely moved. The drinks didn't even spill.

"Alex! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Emilio snapped, his voice cutting through the air so loud and sharp, Linda jumped.

Then, without even lowering his voice, he said, "Hit him in the bum!"

Linda stared at him, her voice tight with disbelief. "Why would I hit him? He didn't do anything."

Emilio's face curled into frustration. "Then what do you do when he behaves badly?"

"I sit him down in a quiet place so he can think about what he has done. Linda said, her tone calm but growing colder. "But he didn't do anything wrong. He's just bored."

Her voice wavered slightly as she added, “Didn’t you say you’d never hit your kids because your dad used to hit you?”

Emilio had told her before. Told her about how his father used to beat him, how he once hit Emilio’s nine-year-old sister so hard she wet herself. How Emilio, just a kid himself, stood between them and yelled, “If you keep hitting her, I’ll kill you.” That was the moment his father walked out—for good—and moved in with the mistress he’d been seeing for years.

But now Emilio just shrugged. “Yeah, but my dad hit me when I misbehaved, and that made me stop.”

Linda’s heart slammed in her chest. Her voice came out firm, a quiet fury behind every word. “You will never touch Alex. You hear me? I will never allow it.”

Emilio’s eyes narrowed, his tone dropping into something colder. “Don’t threaten me, or I’ll hit you too.”

And that was it. Her fear evaporated. What replaced it wasn’t panic—it was something colder. Clearer.

“Okay. That’s it. We don’t want to see you anymore. This ends here. Now.”

She stood up, grabbed Alex’s small hand, and walked away. Her body moved with urgency, but her mind was calm—like steel.

Emilio followed. “I just want to tell him something,” he said in a childish tone that didn’t match the threat from a moment ago.

He knelt to Alex’s level. “Alex, I’m moving back to Argentina. We won’t see each other for a long time.”

He only said it because Linda had once told him that when he left for Argentina while Alex was still just three, he should’ve explained to his son that he wouldn’t be coming back.

Now he was doing it—too little, too late.

Emilio walked away.

Alex looked up at Linda, his eyes clear and fierce. “Dad is an idiot,” he said plainly. Then he ran off to climb the slide.

She watched him, her heart aching and proud all at once. He was growing strong—just like she was.

Chapter 24

Linda had just been hired by IBM as a bid manager. The job involved working in Spanish, and that's what landed her the position. These kinds of multinational companies often didn't care about your background—they just needed someone who could speak a specific language fluently. They'd train you for the rest.

Her team was a strange mix, each person supporting different countries with their language skills. But Linda couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Most of the team kept their distance. Anna was the only one who made an effort. She invited Linda for coffee breaks, though Linda didn't even drink coffee.

A few weeks in, Linda was called into a meeting room. The manager was there, and so was her team leader. Her stomach sank. She hadn't been told what it was about.

The team leader looked at her with disappointment written all over her face. "We're very disappointed in you," he said.

Linda blinked, confused.

"We've been told you've said inappropriate things. Like when you talked about rentals and said there were grody gypsies in the 8th district. You also said, when people invited you for lunch, that you had better things to do. And when Bea was training you, you took a phone call and didn't say you'd call back. That kind of behavior isn't acceptable here."

Linda's stomach dropped.

"Sorry, can I respond to that?" she asked cautiously.

"Sure," the team leader said flatly.

"I don't think any of that is true. I've never even used the word 'grody'—I don't even know what it means. And no one ever invited me to lunch, so I couldn't have said I had better things to do. As for the phone call, I didn't answer it while Bea was talking to me. I took it after she gave me a task and I was working on it." She paused. "I honestly don't know where these accusations are coming from."

There was a moment of silence after seeing Linda's confused expression. Then the team leader said, "We're giving you one month to improve your behavior. After that, we'll meet again and see what happens."

Linda walked out of that room stunned. Something wasn't right. She had a feeling Anna was behind it. Maybe it was jealousy—maybe she didn't like that Linda had picked things up quickly. Whatever it was, Linda knew she had to be careful.

Later, when Anna asked casually about Linda's visit to the server room, Linda kept her tone light.

"Cool," she said with a smile.

"Really? I thought it was boring," Anna replied, sounding surprised.

It was boring. The man giving the tour spoke English with such a heavy Hungarian accent, Linda could barely follow. But she didn't say that. She was afraid anything she said could be twisted again.

One day, Linda brought lunch and realized her fries had no salt. She asked around. Olivia, one of the girls who was supporting Germany, helped her out. She was the first person who'd been genuinely nice to Linda there. Olivia smiled like she meant it. That small kindness meant a lot.

As the team grew, a new colleague joined who also handled Spanish clients. Linda warned her gently to be mindful of what she said—it was meant to be friendly advice. But the girl laughed and called her a freak. Another colleague laughed along. Linda just stood there, feeling like a wall had gone up around her again.

Why does this always happen to me?

She tried to shake it off. Life had taught her to stand tall, no matter how many times people tried to knock her down.

Later, she started needing to leave work early on Tuesdays and Thursdays to take Alex to swim class. The manager approved it—she could finish her hours from home after. But one of the girls didn't like that Linda was leaving before her. Soon after, complaints started. Nothing came of it officially, but Ella—the one who complained—started acting like Linda's personal monitor, watching her every move, slowly turning others against her.

Still, Linda found peace with a small circle. She and Olivia became close friends. They sat next to each other, shared little things about life. Others, like Eva and Wanthana from Thailand supporting Asia, were kind to her too. But most of the team ignored her, and it was clear Ella's gossip had spread.

Linda began looking for jobs in Spain. She dreamed of moving there, to start fresh. No one even answered her applications. After a year and a half, she expanded her search across Western Europe. She got some interviews, even a few offers, but none paid enough to support both herself and Alex.

One afternoon, Linda and Olivia had lunch with a Spanish guy. Linda noticed right away—he only had eyes for Olivia.

"Oh, he seems to like you," Linda said playfully.

Olivia laughed. "He just wanted to connect with Spanish speakers."

Linda shook her head with a grin. “That guy wants more than a language buddy. Trust me.”

They both laughed. The warmth of that moment with her friend helped dull the ache from the rest.

*

Linda had finally moved into a small rental with Alex. Living with her mother had become almost unbearable. Every conversation seemed to spark a fight. The tension never eased. Her mother had been planning to sell the old apartment, and just when Linda finally found a place to rent, her mom found a buyer.

Her mom had another apartment where she moved into. It was mostly empty—just a few things inside. Objects inherited from Linda’s grandparents and her dad.

“If you move to a rental that isn’t in this area, I won’t help you with Alex,” her mother warned coldly.

Linda hadn’t been able to find anything affordable nearby. The only place within her budget was farther out, but her mother had a car, and she still occasionally agreed to watch Alex. But more often than not, Linda had to bring Alex over when she needed help—not the other way around.

A few days later, Linda had to stay late at work and called her mom to pick up Alex from daycare.

“I’ll wait for you at the playground next to the daycare,” her mom said.

Only a few days remained before summer break. Linda could finally exhale knowing Emilio wouldn’t know where to find Alex anymore. But he did know the address of their rental, and that made her nervous.

Later that day, Linda hurried to meet her mom and Alex. As she walked toward the playground, her mother approached her with a strange look on her face.

“Did you know HE would be here?” she asked tightly.

“Who?” Linda asked, caught off guard.

“Emilio.”

“He’s here?!” Her voice tightened.

“Yes. He’s over there. With Alex.”

Linda’s heart dropped. She rushed toward them, trying to keep her voice calm. “What are you doing here?” she asked Emilio, barely masking the edge in her tone.

“I just wanted to see him,” he said. “I went to the daycare to pick him up, but they wouldn’t let me.”

While Emilio was talking to her mother, Alex came running up to Linda.

“Why do I have to meet Emilio when he’s not my dad?” he asked, his voice small but steady.

She knew exactly what he meant. Alex had seen other kids’ dads at the daycare—dads who played with their kids, helped them get dressed, smiled and laughed with them, carried backpacks, fixed their shoes. Emilio had never been that. He had never even brought Alex a single gift.

“You don’t want to see him?” Linda asked gently.

“No, I don’t want to,” Alex said, his voice firm.

Emilio walked over again. “Tell Alex to meet with me,” he said sharply.

“Sorry, Emilio,” Linda said, keeping her voice calm. “He just told me he doesn’t want to. Maybe when he’s older, he’ll change his mind. But I won’t force him.”

They turned to walk toward Linda’s mother’s car. Alex held a chocolate bar his grandmother had given him. Emilio followed.

“Give me a bite of that,” Emilio said, trying to sound playful. Then, without waiting for an answer, bent down and took a big bite, leaving Alex with barely a corner.

“Nooooo!” Alex cried, furious. His face turned red as he gripped with his tiny hands what little was left.

He climbed into the car, his small body rigid with anger. Emilio leaned down by the open car door.

“Don’t you want to see me anymore?” he asked in a whiny voice.

“No,” Alex replied coldly.

Linda met Emilio’s eyes. “Maybe in a few years he’ll want to meet you again,” she said, her voice like steel.

And with that, she closed the door and they drove away, leaving behind yet another broken promise in the rearview mirror.

Chapter 25

Alex had turned seven and was starting primary school. He spoke Hungarian, but not nearly as fluently as his classmates. Since the day he was born, Linda had spoken to him only in Spanish. She never imagined she would remain in Hungary so long. To her, the Hungarian mindset felt limited, negative, often deeply jealous. It was a place she didn't want her son to settle into, but life hadn't given her much choice.

The rigidity Linda feared soon emerged in Alex's school. The gentle world he'd enjoyed in daycare under the caring eyes of Miss Andy—full of songs, crayons, laughter—vanished overnight. In its place rose cold classrooms and stern faces, expecting seven-year-olds to sit still, silent and disciplined.

It was a sports school, competitive and strict. The abrupt change left the children bewildered and anxious. Frustration boiled over daily, turning the playground into a battleground. Alex, along with the others, returned home bearing scrapes, bruises, and eyes wide with confusion and fear.

One evening, Alex came to Linda, eyes clouded with worry. "Mom?" His voice trembled, small and uncertain. "There are two boys always behind me during breaks. They're bullying me."

Linda's heart twisted, memories flashing like painful echoes. Kneeling down, she held Alex's small hand, gentle yet firm. "Show them you're strong. Don't let them see you're afraid. Just laugh with them," she advised warmly.

Alex's forehead wrinkled with confusion. "But how, Mom? They'll think I'm stupid—that I don't understand what they're saying."

Linda gave a soft, understanding smile, her voice calm but tinged with quiet sorrow. "The only way they'll stop is if you don't show it bothers you. If you laugh with them like they're just joking, they'll see you don't care. I was bullied too. Laughing helped me. Try it, sweetheart."

The next day, Alex bravely took his mother's advice, laughing when the bullies approached him. Surprised by Alex's reaction, the boys soon lost interest, fading back into the crowd.

But school remained harsh. Another teammate, more aggressive and relentless, began kicking and pushing Alex, leaving him bewildered and hurt. Linda watched Alex's pain helplessly, her voice bitter with knowing. "Oh, poor boy," she murmured to herself, a shadow crossing her face. "His parents must hit him at home. He's passing the pain onto kids he thinks are weaker."

*

A few weeks later, Linda's phone rang, and her stomach twisted as she recognized the school's number. Miss Violet's calm voice cut straight through her worries. "Hi. Could you please come to the school to talk about Alex?"

Sitting across from Miss Violet, Linda felt dread coiling in her chest, bracing for the worst. Miss Violet's eyes were gentle but firm. "Alex needs a child psychologist. He has sudden outbursts—shaking his desk, hitting things. I think it's because you speak Spanish at home. He's struggling to express himself in Hungarian. Could you please start speaking Hungarian with him and also see a psychologist about these episodes?"

Linda fought to keep her voice steady, protective anger simmering beneath the surface. "Alex had some bad experiences with female childcare workers. It's left him anxious around women teachers."

Miss Violet's eyes widened slightly, concern deepening her voice. "But he's also hitting another boy without any reason."

Linda's heart surged defensively. "Alex would never hit someone for no reason. That boy must've hurt him first. Alex feels he has to hit back; that's how he copes when he's distressed."

Though it made her life harder, Linda agreed to weekly psychologist visits. Anything for Alex.

At home, Linda gently approached Alex about it. "Miss Violet says you pushed another boy today."

"He pushed me first!" Alex shot back immediately, eyes flashing with indignation. "We were just standing in a circle, and he shoved me! I only did the same."

Linda exhaled deeply, torn between understanding and reality. "Okay, I'm not telling you not to defend yourself. But you have to be smarter. He pushes you when the teachers aren't looking. You have to do the same, Alex. Don't let the teachers see you." Her heart twisted at advising violence, but at Alex's age, she knew gentle talks wouldn't fix the playground dynamics.

Schoolwork became yet another struggle. Linda tried helping Alex learn Hungarian at home, but each word felt foreign, unnatural. Eventually, they abandoned spoken practice altogether. Instead, Linda plastered colorful papers on their apartment walls, displaying Hungarian sentences, math problems—additions, subtractions, multiplications—hoping they'd sink into Alex's memory effortlessly.

Homework felt relentless. Teachers even expected parents to help memorize poems, adding hours of work to exhausted evenings. The demands of the strict school wore heavily on Linda's shoulders, the stress lingering like a persistent shadow.

By year's end, the teachers called Linda in again, this time with a new threat. "We want Alex to repeat the first grade," the teacher said coldly. "His Hungarian isn't strong enough. The second grade will be even harder."

Linda stared at her defiantly, fire igniting behind tired eyes. "He doesn't need to repeat a year. He'll catch up."

"We make foreign children repeat years often," the teacher said dismissively. "One year isn't enough for them to master the language."

Linda held her ground, voice steely with determination. "You can't hold Alex back without my consent. And I refuse." Inside, her chest burned at their unfairness, imagining the humiliation Alex would feel, isolated from friends who'd move ahead. Her son was smart, kind, capable. She would never let them convince him otherwise.

She walked out feeling both exhausted and empowered, knowing her battles were far from over but certain she'd face each one fiercely—for Alex, and for herself.

*

Linda felt numb each day she sat in front of her computer. The job drained her, a lifeless monotony broken only by occasional emails—one a week, if she was lucky. At first, the easy paycheck felt like a blessing, but soon, the emptiness weighed heavily on her spirit. The two days a week she spent working from home only highlighted how meaningless her tasks had become.

Slowly, people started leaving, seeking new beginnings in companies that promised more life, more purpose. Yet Linda stayed, determined to provide stability for Alex. She found herself taking on extra responsibilities, eager to fill her days with tasks, anything to push away the creeping emptiness. Olivia, her colleague, felt the same, and together they became known for their dedication.

Soon Linda took on supporting the CEE countries, and eventually, when Anna moved to Ireland, the Nordic countries fell under her care as well. One day, a grateful colleague from the Eastern European team approached her, eyes sincere and relieved.

"Oh, thank you so much, Linda!" the girl said warmly. "You are the only one who really cares about answering my emails well. Anyone else backing me up doesn't do shit. Thank you!"

Linda offered a faint smile, grateful yet cautious. This girl was friends with Ella—the one who had turned the entire office against Linda, leaving her isolated and wary. But from that moment, things changed. People began speaking to her again, acknowledging her presence, inviting her back into their circle. When Linda finally decided to resign for a slightly better-paying position elsewhere, they threw her a farewell party, a stark contrast to the cold isolation she'd once endured.

Her manager tried to change her mind, dangling the idea of leading the Asian team in front of her, yet refusing to increase her pay. Linda knew staying would trap her again in the same empty cycle.

Walking away from that job felt like stepping out of the shadows and back into life.

*

Linda was walking with Alex, enjoying a rare moment of calm, when her phone buzzed insistently. She glanced down, and her heart lurched painfully. Emilio. Just seeing his name felt like an icy grip tightening around her throat.

She forced her voice steady. “It’s Emilio. Do you want to talk to him?”

“No,” Alex replied firmly, his voice sharp and final.

Linda hesitated. “Are you sure? I think he's calling about your birthday.”

Alex sighed. “Okay, give me the phone.”

He took the phone reluctantly, speaking without emotion. “Hello?”

Emilio’s voice crackled cheerfully through the line. “Hey Alex! What do you want for your birthday?”

“A Lego,” Alex said flatly, refusing any excitement.

After hanging up, Alex handed back the phone, his voice thick with bitterness. “He won’t bring me Lego. He never brings what I ask for. He never keeps his promises.”

Days passed, Alex’s birthday came and went, predictably without Emilio appearing or calling. When Emilio finally did call again, Linda answered with dread.

“Can I talk to Alex?” Emilio demanded casually.

Linda glanced at Alex. “Do you want to talk to Emilio?”

“No.” Alex’s voice was firm and unwavering.

“Sorry, but he doesn’t want to talk to you,” Linda relayed, trying to hide her anxiety.

“Tell him I got him a smartphone for his birthday. Let’s see what he says,” Emilio responded arrogantly.

Linda’s anger flared. “You can’t make him want to see you. You can’t buy love. He asked for Lego, not a smartphone.”

“I know,” Emilio persisted. “Just tell him.”

“No, I won’t tell him. He doesn’t want to meet you,” Linda replied, her voice tight with finality.

“You never have money. How much do you want to let me see him?” Emilio offered calmly, his words slicing through her dignity.

“You can’t buy me either,” Linda snapped. “Alex doesn’t want to see you. Maybe in a few years, but right now, he doesn’t.”

Emilio’s voice hardened. “Fine. A lawyer friend will call you. I told him about you, and he said I can go to court.” The line went dead.

Linda spent that night staring at the ceiling, fear gnawing at her. Visions of losing Alex haunted her. Yet, as dawn broke, clarity returned. Emilio had never been there, and she had proof. Friends could attest to his absence. Emilio’s threats felt hollow, and indeed, no lawyer ever called.

Still, Emilio showed up occasionally, pressing the doorbell relentlessly. Linda never opened the door, her pulse racing with each insistent ring.

Alex would ask curiously, “Who’s that?”

“No one,” Linda lied gently. “Just someone delivering flyers. Ignore it.”

Eventually, Emilio stopped coming, and Alex’s mood settled. Relief flooded Linda; Alex was finally safe, at least for now.

Chapter 26

Linda was determined. Every dollar she earned working at Diageo was saved carefully for their move to Spain. Barcelona was out of reach, but Torremolinos in the south promised warmth, affordability, and hope.

Yet the school's pressure returned, Miss Violet's voice relentless, insisting Alex repeat a year. This time, Linda had no choice but to prove them wrong. Every night, she and Alex studied together, pushing hard. Linda had Alex write a diary in Hungarian, documenting their days, providing undeniable proof of his progress.

At home, the situation worsened. Their landlord had grown aggressive, demanding payments without transparency, bills Linda never saw. Anxiety tightened around her whenever his footsteps approached their door. One day he cornered her, his voice dripping menace.

"The rentals in this area are much higher than what you're paying now," he sneered.

Linda's voice trembled with suppressed anger. "The value of this rental isn't even close to what you're asking. It's a dump. It doesn't even have a kitchen, just a little hole with a wobbly portable stove."

He threatened eviction, squeezing Linda's heart with panic. The cramped apartment, its loft barely fitting a mattress, the filthy bathroom, and the joke of a kitchen suddenly felt unbearable.

Linda decided enough was enough. She would stay with her mother over the summer to save enough for Spain.

But when she mentioned it to her younger sister, Nora's response was sharp and furious. "I don't allow you to move in here!"

Linda stared back, stunned and hurt. "This is just as much my home as yours."

Nora, living comfortably in her own apartment with her baby, glared defiantly, terrified Linda might stay permanently—which she didn't understand. And maybe she never would. Linda felt the painful sting of family betrayal yet again, but her resolve hardened. She'd faced worse; she would survive this too.

She straightened her shoulders, ready for the next battle ahead.

*

Linda never mentioned to the landlord that she planned to leave. The next month's rent approached swiftly, but she had no intention of paying it. Quietly, nervously, she packed their things, hoping to slip away unnoticed. One of her friends arrived to help, casting a worried glance at the boxes piled high.

"We can't fit all this in the car. We need to do two trips. I can't do it right now—I have a meeting at 3 p.m. But after, I can come back and take the rest of the stuff," her friend said anxiously.

Linda felt her chest tighten, her heartbeat quickening as she watched the clock. Each passing minute increased her fear that the landlord—living just a street away—might notice and confront her. She had always been punctual with rent, keeping flowers in the window, maintaining appearances. But she owed him nothing now, not after his demands and shady dealings over bills. She left behind her sofa bed, the electric oven from her mother, and the deposit, hoping it was enough to satisfy him. Finally, her friend returned, and with one last nervous glance, Linda closed the door on that chapter of her life.

*

One evening, Alex approached Linda, his eyes wide with distress and confusion.

"Mom? My friend told me everything about sex. It is disgusting. I don't want to be a dad anymore."

He used to say he wanted to be a dad when he grew up.

Linda couldn't help but laugh softly. "Hahaha, you will change your mind later."

Alex hesitated, his expression turning serious. "Is Emilio my father?"

"He is your biological father. But he was never your dad."

Alex's voice trembled with disbelief. "But then, did you have sex with him?"

"Yes," Linda replied softly, her heart aching at the painful memory.

"He never took you under his name, he never acted like a dad. That's why I said he is only your biological father," Linda explained gently.

*

A few days later at grandma's, Alex stormed into the room, visibly upset. "Mom! Grandma is always kissing me in my ear! I don't like it. It is very loud!"

Linda sighed softly, pulling Alex into a comforting embrace. “You can be happy that she is even giving you a kiss. She never kissed me when I was a child.”

Alex, thoughtful, left the room. Moments later, Linda’s mother appeared, her eyes glistening with tears. “Why are you telling Alex I never kissed you?”

Linda met her mother's gaze, sadness clouding her own eyes. “Did you kiss me? I don’t remember you kissing me at all.”

“I did. There was just a time when you didn’t let me anymore,” her mother replied, voice shaking.

“Sorry, I didn’t know that,” Linda whispered, heart heavy.

“I was giving you all the love that I never got from my parents. I was trying to be the best mother I could,” her mother confessed, voice thick with emotion.

Linda felt a deep ache in her chest as she finally understood her mother's intentions, imperfect as they were. From that moment, their relationship began to heal, slowly stitching together old wounds.

*

Linda moved with Alex to Torremolinos in Malaga, Spain. Initially, they stayed with a Mexican guy and a Russian woman who had a three-year-old daughter. Alex was now nine. The Mexican guy, whom Linda met through couchsurfing, suggested she look for rentals and jobs in Malaga rather than Torremolinos. Trusting his advice, Linda enrolled Alex in a Malaga school, unaware of the financial strain it would cause.

The daily train rides quickly drained her finances, and finding an affordable rental in Malaga proved impossible. She preferred Torremolinos anyway, its seaside charm calling to her. Yet, the tension in the shared home grew thick and uncomfortable.

“When are you moving out?” the Mexican guy demanded one day, his tone cold and sharp.

“I am still looking for rentals. I couldn’t find anything in Malaga. They are too expensive,” Linda explained, anxious and apologetic.

“I prefer to give you money to go back to Hungary if that makes you move out from here,” he snapped rudely.

Linda stared at him, shocked and hurt. “I don’t want to go back to Hungary. I will find a rental; the daily trips to Malaga and back to pick up Alex from school are taking a lot of time from me.”

They had barely stayed a week and a half at the family’s place before Linda finally found a place right near the beach in Torremolinos. She immediately transferred Alex to a closer school, located high on a hill.

Later, Linda discovered that bus tickets were significantly cheaper than the trains, a lesson learned the hard way. She shook her head bitterly, realizing the importance of seeking advice only from those truly familiar with a place. Every euro mattered, every choice crucial. Linda felt exhausted but resolute—this was her fresh start, and she was determined to make it work.

*

September was ending quietly, marking the end of the bustling summer season in Torremolinos. With fewer tourists, jobs became scarce, and Linda's anxiety deepened. Desperate, she widened her search to Malaga and landed an interview with a UK company.

"This is Juan; you will be sitting with him to listen to his phone conversations so you can understand your tasks," the Spanish manager explained in English, despite Juan and Linda both being fluent in Spanish. Linda found this odd but kept silent.

Linda discovered quickly that she was one of four candidates. Even though hired, their positions depended entirely on meeting certain targets. Linda watched Juan carefully, uncomfortable as he smoothly tried to sell credit cards and reclaim bank charges for customers who seemed pressured.

"I will call back a customer, and you just take this headset and listen to what I'm saying. Here's the playbook I will follow," Juan instructed. Again, Linda felt uneasy.

When Linda switched to Spanish to ask Juan about the details, he warned her quietly, "Be careful—they record everything we say." Linda felt trapped, a sinking realization settling in her chest. This job wasn't for her. She knew she wouldn't hit their targets and would be fired soon enough anyway. Quietly, she decided not to return but instead sent a polite resignation by email. Still, it wasn't a total loss. She now had her social security number, essential for any future employment in Spain.

*

Two months passed, each day heavier than the last. Jobs remained elusive in Torremolinos. The small rental she shared with Alex, mere steps from the sea, became a daily reminder of her dwindling savings. She spent hours on the beach, crocheting baskets from old clothes decorated with seashells, hoping to sell them. The empty sands mocked her efforts.

One afternoon, Linda and Alex sat near the street, trying to sell their handmade baskets. Nearby, a legless man and a young beggar sat, eyes pleading. The discomfort became overwhelming, prompting Linda and Alex to retreat home, hearts heavy.

No income. No food.

Her mother and Olivia—her best friend from IBM—sent what they could.

Afia, the older sister of Alex's classmate, became Linda's guide through her struggles. She introduced Linda to Caritas, a charity run by the local church, which provided food, clothing, and small sums of money. It was humbling and painful for Linda to rely on charity, yet she walked an hour along the beach each week to accept help.

Afia also advised Linda to get a bus card to cut transportation costs and introduced her to the local library for free internet. Linda couldn't afford internet service in her apartment; the residency card needed for it came too late, and by then she was broke.

Christmas loomed, amplifying Linda's dread. Alex still believed in Santa Claus, and his innocent excitement shattered Linda's heart.

"I was thinking even though we don't have money, Santa Claus can bring me the Nintendo Switch," Alex said eagerly.

Linda felt tears sting her eyes, helpless to fulfill her son's dreams.

Mirta, Emilio's mother, arrived from Argentina to visit Alex while touring Spain to meet her new granddaughter in Madrid. Linda had hoped for support, but Mirta proved cold and indifferent, refusing Alex a simple $7 toy.

Later that same day, she dragged Linda across town looking for a suit for her cousin in Bilbao. An eighty-dollar suit. Linda followed her through store after store, her feet aching, her stomach empty, trying not to scream.

"I'm not sure if I should buy this for my son because then I'd have to get one for 'the mother' that says 'Best Mother Ever,' and I don't want to," Mirta remarked thoughtlessly.

"You also have a grandson," Linda said, hurt.

Mirta ignored her completely, later buying only a magnet for her granddaughter. And Linda knew. The way Mirta had talked about her daughter-in-law—like she'd never be more than just 'the mother.' That was all Linda would ever be to her too.

She left without offering Linda even the smallest financial help. Or even hand Alex a single coin. Alex's bitterness matched Linda's own hurt.

One morning, hope sparked when Linda saw a handwritten sign in English at a local shop: "Looking for Sales Assistant." She raced home for her CV and returned breathless but eager. She was hired immediately. The job was at a Fish Foot Spa—a place where tourists dipped their feet into tanks and tiny fish cleaned their skin. It wasn't glamorous, but Linda felt joy for the first time in months. Finally, she had work.

Chapter 27

Christmas approached quickly. Linda felt it in the lights starting to twinkle in the windows, the soft music in the stores, but Linda's joy soon darkened. The way Alex clung to the hope that Santa would show up—still believing, still dreaming. But magic costs money.

Money remained scarce, and she paid rent in small amounts, angering her landlord. His threatening message made Linda's stomach knot: "If you don't pay the full rent, I will come down from Sevilla and kick you out."

Problems multiplied at the Fish Foot Spa. The owner was an English woman who was hiding in London, dodging people she owed money to. Everyone in Torremolinos had a story about her. Even the tattoo artist who shared the space hadn't been paid. The bank kept calling the spa, demanding answers. The owner had promised free internet to the customers, but hadn't paid for it, so they started offering the neighbor bar's Wi-Fi.

Then one day, the electricity was cut off.

Clare, her English co-worker, called in a panic. "We can't open—the electric's out. She didn't pay the bill."

Linda's first thought was the fish. The Garra rufa fish needed oxygen—without the air pumps, they'd suffocate.

Clare tried to figure something out while Linda walked up to the spa to feed them, checking if they were still alive. The place stayed closed for three days.

It didn't stop there. Clare's personal life was equally chaotic. She called her again days later.

"Can you open up for me? My dog ate some pills we left on the table. There was weed too. Thank God it was just the dog and not one of the kids."

Linda sighed. It was always something.

*

One quiet evening, Linda stepped briefly next door, leaving Alex watching TV alone. Suddenly, Alex heard a sharp crack. His heart jumped, adrenaline flooding him. It wasn't his mother returning.

"Someone else is trying to enter the apartment!"

Panicked, Alex darted into his room, feet thudding softly across the tiled floor, and slid under the bed. Heart hammering in his chest, watched through the cracked bedroom door as a stout older man with thinning grey hair slowly entered. The intruder, dressed formally in a

wrinkled gray shirt and oversized trousers. Black leather shoes echoed softly on the floor. He seemed disoriented as he approached the dining table, silently taking a seat.

Alex froze, terror gripping him, unable to breathe or move. Seconds dragged by like hours until finally, the man glanced around like he didn't know where he was, rose unsteadily, and left the apartment.

Another sound at the door sent Alex's heart racing again, but relief flooded him as Linda entered, holding cookies.

"Alex! I'm back! Where are you?" she called out cheerfully.

He climbed out from under the bed and rushed to her, voice shaking. "Mom! Mom! A man was here while you were out! He sat at the table, then left! I hid under the bed," Alex blurted out, shaking.

Linda froze, the plate trembling slightly in her hands. "What? Are you okay?" her voice cracked with fear and concern.

"Yes," Alex nodded. "It was scary at first, but... he didn't seem dangerous."

Linda immediately called their landlord, Juan, who explained a former tenant suffering from dementia had mistakenly entered. He promised to change the locks. Shaken yet relieved, Linda held Alex tightly, determined to protect him at all costs.

Juan—true to his word—came that same day to change the lock.

*

A week before Christmas, Alex went to see Santa Claus with one of his friends while Linda was working at the Fish Foot Spa. Linda smiled softly as Alex approached her excitedly later that day.

"Do you want to know what I asked from Santa?" Alex asked cheerfully, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Yes, what did you write in your letter?" Linda responded gently, bracing herself for what might come.

"I asked Santa to bring me a Nintendo Switch," Alex declared, his voice full of hopeful innocence.

Linda felt her heart tighten painfully. The Nintendo Switch had just come out, priced at an impossible $360. She couldn't afford it—not even close. She had secretly purchased a Nintendo 2DS XL instead, a cheaper option, but knew it wasn't the same.

She wrapped it and placed it carefully under the tree.

On Christmas morning, Linda watched nervously as Alex tore into his gift. His face quickly fell into disappointment. “This isn’t a Switch! Santa must have misunderstood what I was asking,” he said bitterly.

Linda felt a pang of guilt. Alex was already planning to ask the Three Kings to bring the Switch on January 6th. Linda took a deep breath, trying to steady her voice. “Alex, you're big enough to know this...” She hesitated, choking on the words she never wanted to say.

“That Santa Claus doesn’t exist?” Alex interrupted, his voice soft but certain.

“Yes,” Linda said, her voice cracking. “I’m sorry.”

Before, whenever Alex had questioned Santa's existence, Linda always told him, “If you believe in it, then it exists.” And she meant it. It was like her brother Peter's world—a world Linda accepted because it was real to him.

Peter’s schizophrenia often created scenarios Linda couldn’t see but never doubted were real to him. One time, he’d been stung by a bee, and the wound hadn’t healed for two years. Doctors said it was a rare fungus picked up from the communal shower in his care home. Two others had died from it. Peter almost lost his foot. But when he talked about it, he swore it was something else.

“The spider was huge, and it told me it was going to bite me. Do you know how painful that was?” Peter had once recounted to Linda, his voice filled with genuine distress.

Peter also believed aliens had dropped him off on a beach in Cancun.

“They dropped me right where Nora was living. They left me there, and Mom and Dad found me and took me home,” he’d say with pride.

Linda always listened, never doubting him, because to Peter, it was real.

*

Alex lay silently on his bed. Linda sat beside him, brushing her fingers across his hair. Comforting him quietly. It had been an hour since his belief in Santa had shattered. Alex turned suddenly, eyes wide with realization.

“So, all the presents I received all these years from Santa and the Reyes were from you?” Alex asked in amazement.

“Yes, it was me,” Linda admitted softly.

Alex's expression softened with understanding. He reached over, hugging Linda tightly. “Thank you so much!” he said sincerely.

Linda held him close, relief washing over her as she realized he had already accepted and moved past the loss of his childhood belief.

*

The peace didn't last long. Soon after, Linda received a troubling call from Alex's teacher, her voice stern and judgmental. Linda braced herself, anxiety twisting sharply in her chest.

"Alex is not doing his homework. Please make sure he completes it. Also, he needs to learn the poem I gave him and memorize all the rivers and lakes of Spain. Work with him at home," the teacher instructed.

Linda immediately set to work, writing the poem out on brightly colored papers and pinning them up over the TV where Alex would constantly see them. She also drew a detailed map of Spain, carefully marking all the rivers and lakes, placing it prominently on the wall.

Then came another blow.

Alex approached her one night, frustration evident in his voice. "Mom, one of the boys won't leave me alone. He keeps pushing my pencil case off my desk onto the floor. Today, he even threw it in the trash."

Linda felt anger rise, but she kept her tone calm and soothing. "And what did you do? It's better if you don't react. Eventually, he'll leave you alone."

"That's exactly what I'm doing! I just quietly went and took it out of the trash," Alex insisted.

Linda sighed softly, concern etched into her face. "Maybe even though you don't react outwardly, your face shows him it bothers you. Did you tell Miss Nines about this?"

"No," Alex replied defensively. "If I tell her, he'll only do it more."

Linda's heart broke quietly for her son, knowing exactly how trapped and helpless he felt. Yet, she took comfort knowing Alex had made some good friends who were looking out for him, shielding him from further torment. And even when things got tough, Alex held his head up a little higher because of them.

Chapter 28

The Fish Foot Spa was barely hanging on. Customers had stopped coming, leaving Linda jobless once again. The tattoo artist remained busy, but the owner hired someone else who could handle piercings—something Linda couldn't do.

It was March. Anxiety gripped her as summer approached. The days were getting warmer, the first tourists were starting to return, and summer season was close.

Soon she found a new job embroidering baby names on personalized gifts using a computer-guided embroidery machine at a little stall by the bustling harbor of Benalmadena. A nearby town by the coast, just a walk away from Torremolinos. It wasn't glamorous, but the team welcomed her warmly, providing a sense of belonging she hadn't felt in a long time. They had a few nearby stalls and a main shop across the promenade.

Linda instantly fell in love with Benalmadena's picturesque streets and vibrant harbor, dreaming of making it their permanent home. Life finally seemed to brighten when her phone rang with unexpected news from Hungary.

"We sold your dad's house," Linda's mom said calmly over the phone, almost as if she didn't quite believe it herself.

The family had struggled for eighteen years to sell the property, plagued with permit issues and legal complications. Linda felt a mix of relief and disbelief as she absorbed the news. The sale brought a substantial amount of money to Linda, her mother, Nora, and Peter. Finally, she had breathing space.

With her share, Linda swiftly rented a beautiful apartment in Benalmadena. From the balcony, they could see the sea, the lush park filled with chickens and roosters, and the inviting blue of the community pool. It felt like paradise. Alex quickly adapted, settling into a nearby school where Linda finally didn't dread phone calls from worried teachers.

For Alex's birthday, Linda invited his friends from Torremolinos and one new classmate. Excitement filled their apartment until an unexpected rainstorm dampened their plans. Rain was a rare event in Torremolinos, and most of his old friends didn't dare venture out. Only one boy showed up, yet Alex seemed happy enough, finding joy in this small gesture of friendship.

Linda, meanwhile, wrestled with how best to invest the remaining money. Thoughts of starting her own business crossed her mind, but her boss warned her about the stress of entrepreneurship. Eventually, dreams of Australia filled her thoughts.

She started planning. She longed for a fresh start, far away. She imagined enrolling in an English course—though she already spoke fluently—and, while there, hoping to work in landscape gardening and turn her student visa into a permanent stay.

But the reality was harsh— Alex's primary school tuition in Australia alone would drain their resources too quickly. Heartbroken, Linda abandoned her Australian dream and turned her sights toward Cork, Ireland, drawn by the joyful Irish tourists she met in Benalmadena. They were always smiling, kind, and proud of their country. Linda needed to understand why.

*

She and Alex flew to Cork for a week to look for a rental where Linda faced unexpected difficulties. Listings were scarce, and scammers lurked behind fake ads. One girl tried to get her to send money for rent and deposit without even seeing the place. Eventually, she narrowly secured a legitimate rental, pushing through her anxiety. They would move after the holidays.

Packing their lives into eight suitcases, three times the amount they'd brought to Spain, was exhausting. Linda had to rehome the buggies from their aviary in the balcony, return the internet modem, and ship boxes to Ireland with what they couldn't carry.

At the Málaga airport, panic struck.

They'd gone through check-in and security. Used the bathroom. Then Linda realized—her boarding pass was gone.

They retraced their steps, panicked. The check-in counter was hundreds of feet behind. The gate would open in twenty minutes.

"Go to the airline's counter and ask for a new ticket," the airport staff said.

But that meant going back through security, unpacking bags again.

Her stomach churned with panic as Alex nearly burst into tears.

"What will we do if they don't let us board? Our bags are already on the plane! We have nothing!" Alex pleaded, eyes wide with fear.

"Don't worry," Linda reassured him, hiding her own fear. "They'll let us on." Her voice shook, betraying uncertainty.

They raced back through the terminal, fighting tears of frustration until, finally, an understanding gate agent printed a new pass for Linda. Relief flooded through her, but the stress overwhelmed her, and nausea gripped her violently on the flight. She rushed to the bathroom and threw up.

Arriving at their new home in Cork, Linda barely made it to the bathroom before becoming violently ill, the stress finally breaking through her carefully maintained composure.

*

Their new life began in a shared house, renting a room in a worn-down old house in a wealthy part of Cork alongside a Colombian guy named Pedro, a Spanish woman named Lucia, and their two young daughters.

Linda found the neighborhood charming—tree-lined streets, well-kept gardens, and kind, polite Irish neighbors who smiled as they passed. However, living with Pedro soon became a silent battle. Every time Linda tried to turn on the heating to ward off the biting chill, Pedro promptly shut it off.

“Yesterday, I turned on the heating because I was freezing, but someone turned it off,” Linda said softly in Spanish, addressing Lucia the next day.

“Oh, Pedro turned it off. It gets too hot upstairs, and we were heading to bed,” Lucia responded casually.

“But isn’t heating included in our rent?” Linda asked, confused.

“Yes, it is,” Lucia confirmed.

Still, each time Linda tried to warm herself, Pedro would quickly counter her, leaving her shivering and frustrated.

It wasn’t just about the heat—it was about control.

Linda and Alex started spending most of their time inside their room. Lucia was always in the kitchen, watching and commenting on everything Linda did. Friendly conversations turned into subtle interrogations.

"Why did you buy this? You can find the same in Aldi much cheaper," Lucia would ask, eyes scanning her groceries.

Other times, Lucia questioned Linda’s cooking habits or why she wasn’t taking Alex somewhere, her eyes scrutinizing every decision.

Showering became another source of stress. With their downstairs shower broken, they were forced upstairs, navigating Lucia’s strict and unpredictable rules.

“You can’t shower now,” Lucia warned as Linda approached the bathroom, exhaustion heavy in her eyes. “The girls are sleeping.”

Other times, the excuses shifted—Pedro was showering, dishes were being washed, or laundry was in progress. The water pressure was weak, and every bath felt like a carefully negotiated privilege.

Meals became an ordeal, too. Watching the little girls struggle through hour-long sessions, forced to finish every bite despite their distress, broke Linda's heart. It became easier for Linda and Alex to remain confined to their room, away from the tensions and struggles of their shared spaces.

Each day, Linda reminded herself of her strength, pushing down the anxiety that constantly threatened to overwhelm her. This wasn't paradise, but it was a step forward, and she vowed silently, as she always did, to create a better life for herself and Alex.

*

Linda tirelessly searched for jobs while diligently completing cybersecurity courses. She anxiously awaited a certificate by mail. The house was owned by an Irish man who also owned the grocery shop next door, left stacks of newspapers by the door at night. Someone would pick them up early in the morning. Linda worried her certificate might get lost in the mess.

It was late at night. Everything was quiet. Everyone had already gone upstairs, Linda tiptoed toward the main door, her heart racing slightly with worry. She was silently checking the stack of papers when a loud, angry voice shattered the silence.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!" Pedro's voice ripped through the dark hallway.

Linda jumped, startled. "I'm just looking for my mail," she replied cautiously, her pulse quickening.

"You can't come here! Your mail isn't here," Pedro snapped, his eyes cold and mistrustful.

Linda retreated quickly to her room, her heart thudding heavily. Something about his intensity unsettled her deeply.

The following morning, Lucia approached Linda quietly, explaining softly, "Pedro heard a noise last night. He got scared someone had entered the house. That's why he was so upset." Despite Lucia's reassurance, Linda felt uneasy. Why wasn't she allowed to check the entrance of the house freely?

"You can't go to the entrance," Pedro reiterated sharply when he saw Linda again.

"You told me that already. I explained I was waiting for important mail. What else do you want me to do?" Linda replied, frustration simmering beneath her calm demeanor.

"Just don't do it again!" Pedro commanded firmly.

The tension grew heavier each day. Another afternoon, Alex came home from school visibly upset. The school was just around the corner.

“Pedro yelled at me because I forgot to close the back gate,” he told Linda, tears filling his eyes.

Their neighborhood was safe, peaceful even, yet Pedro acted as if danger lurked around every corner. He made them lock the back door even in broad daylight. If they forgot, he would shout.

Linda tried to ignore the mounting anxiety. One evening in the kitchen, Linda affectionately stroked one of the little girls' hair. The child smiled warmly at her.

Pedro abruptly interrupted, his voice sharp and possessive. “Don’t touch her hair! She doesn’t like it, and I'm the only one who can touch it.”

Linda froze, her blood running cold. The girl didn't seem to mind at all, which made Pedro’s intensity feel even stranger and more unsettling.

Creepy, Linda thought.

*

Finally, Linda found employment at an Irish-American company as a sales analyst. Finally, a job with a decent income that gave her a sense of stability.

But the road there had worn her down.

It had taken her four months to get here. She’d been focused almost entirely on Apple, hoping to land a position there because Anne, who she’d worked with back at IBM, was already on the inside. But the roles Apple offered were all customer-facing, and Linda knew herself well enough to recognize that dealing with customers drained her. Every interview was like a long hallway with no doors—dragging on for weeks, only to lead nowhere.

Still, she kept going. Quietly. Stubbornly. And now, finally, she had a place to go every morning.

One morning at home, preparing for a team-building event, Linda was chatting casually in the kitchen with Lucia and the girls. Instead of the usual path through the back door—which always had to be locked with a key—they used the front.

She and Alex walked confidently through the main door, only to find Pedro outside staring back at them, shocked and displeased.

He didn’t say a word. He just looked… surprised. Not angry, not yet. Just like he’d caught something he didn’t like but hadn’t figured out what to do with it.

Linda walked Alex to school and returned just in time to meet her colleague, who was picking her up for the team event. As she came in through the back door, Pedro was waiting.

“You can’t use the main entrance,” Pedro confronted Linda angrily.

She froze for a second, not sure if she’d heard him right. “Why not?” she asked, feeling humiliated and bewildered.

“Because you bring dirt onto the carpet,” Pedro answered, his tone dismissive and cold.

She stared at him, dumbfounded. “Are you serious?”

Pedro didn’t blink. “Yes, your door is the one in the back. That’s why we gave you the back door keys,” he asserted, his voice final.

There it was again—that quiet way of putting people in their place. Like she didn’t belong. Like they were doing her a favor letting her and her son live there at all.

Linda didn’t argue. Not this time. She had too much on her plate, too many things she was trying to hold together. She just nodded, turned around, and walked to her room.

But inside, she made a quiet promise to herself:

She was done talking to Pedro. From now on, she’d ignore him. She'd had enough of Pedro's irrational rules and controlling behavior. She resolved to avoid him entirely and protect herself from further conflict.

Chapter 29

A familiar dread filled Linda's chest when Alex's teacher called her to the school. Again. Another issue, another conflict. Linda tried to steady herself, preparing for the worst.

"Alex gets very frustrated when something doesn't work or when I'm trying to help him." Miss Jillian explained, her voice careful, like she was tiptoeing around something deeper. "Maybe because he doesn't understand me. Can you speak to him?"

Linda sighed softly, her heart aching for Alex. "He didn't have good experiences with female teachers before. I'll talk to him," she replied gently.

At home, Alex confided more troubles. "Mom, Jake is always pushing me. Yesterday, he shoved me so hard I fell. He pushes others too," Alex confessed, his voice trembling.

Linda's heart twisted painfully. "Poor boy, he must need attention he's not getting from his parents," she said sympathetically. She handed Alex some cupcakes. "Here. Take these tomorrow. Give one to Jake," she said trying to be reassuring.

Alex stared at her, confused. "Why would I give him cupcakes if I don't even like him?"

"Because kindness might stop him from bothering you. He just wants attention," Linda explained gently.

Alex initially refused the cupcakes but eventually found his own way to handle things. Later, while selling lollipops with a friend at school, he gave Jake one for free. Surprisingly, it worked, and Jake soon became one of Alex's friends. Linda smiled, proud of her son's resilience and growing maturity.

*

At first, Linda enjoyed her new job. She felt like she'd finally caught a break. The company even sent her to the Netherlands for training, where she and Alex shared a few carefree moments pedaling through Amsterdam's peaceful canals, their laughter echoing through the narrow waterways. But soon, her comfort began to fray, especially when a new colleague, a Chinese guy named Qian, joined the team

Linda noticed quickly that Qian felt more comfortable approaching her rather than Chloe, their teammate, for guidance. It seemed harmless, but Chloe couldn't hide her irritation.

"It shouldn't be you who explains to him what he has to do. That should be me," Chloe said one day, sharp and cold.

“Okay. Next time Qian comes to me, I'll tell him to ask you,” Linda responded softly, hoping to defuse the growing tension.

But Chloe was already resentful. From that moment, Chloe seemed determined to undermine Linda, making her feel foolish and incompetent at every turn. Whenever mistakes were made, Chloe pointed fingers directly at Linda.

One day, Linda's manager approached her, disappointment evident in her voice. “Chloe told me that you’re not updating the hierarchy spreadsheet correctly. That’s your responsibility, and you should keep it accurate.”

“But I didn’t touch that part Chloe mentioned. It was already there when I inherited it from her,” Linda protested anxiously.

“It doesn’t matter. Your job was to keep it updated,” the manager responded coldly.

Linda felt helpless. Chloe had never warned her about hidden macros that could sabotage changes across files, and most times Chloe’s explanations made little sense. Each unfair accusation chipped away at Linda's confidence, leaving her feeling exposed and vulnerable.

Linda's struggles didn’t stop with Chloe. Grace, another coworker, intensified Linda’s discomfort. “Could you please turn your phone’s volume down?” Grace hissed nervously.

“Oh, sorry, was it loud?” Linda asked, genuinely surprised.

“Yes, very loud,” Grace replied sharply.

Grace was hypersensitive to noise, snapping at colleagues for the smallest disturbances. She also had a problem with their Italian colleague absent-mindedly tapping his feet to music. “Could you not kick the desk?” she told him flatly.

Even small things got under her skin. Linda noticed Grace’s annoyance when she ate chocolate at her desk. Every bite of chocolate was met with a glare. It seemed Linda couldn’t make a move without irritating her.

And when Linda once brought French fries to her desk during lunch, thinking everyone was out—Chloe appeared.

“You can’t eat that here.” Chloe barked, catching her mid-bite.

“But no one’s here. I’m alone,” Linda replied, confused and embarrassed.

“Still, you can't eat that at the desk,” Chloe insisted sharply.

Linda quietly took her fries, retreating to the secluded stairwell. Sitting alone, tears spilled over as she tried to understand why Chloe and Grace singled her out, making her feel unwanted.

There were hints that Grace was jealous too. Tom, another teammate, sometimes walked home with Linda. Other times, with Grace.

One afternoon, when Tom stopped by their desks, Grace said, "Are you here for work or just to chat?"

"I need to ask Chloe about an email she sent," Tom replied.

"Okay. I'm fine with you talking to Chloe. I like Chloe," Grace said, her voice syrupy.

Tom, clearly surprised, said nothing but his expression spoke volumes. Linda caught it—and held onto it.

Eventually, Linda moved her desk to sit with the guys. They didn't care if she ate at her desk. They didn't nitpick her every move.

Still, a deeper frustration lay with her manager, who often arrived late or skipped their one-on-ones without explanation. No apology.

And when she came into the office, she barely said hello. She only ever spoke to Chloe, like the rest of them didn't exist. Chloe had become her favorite. The one who could do no wrong. The one who could twist things behind the scenes—and always came out clean.

Linda knew she deserved better, and her growing interest in cybersecurity became her quiet escape.

*

Whispers about a strange virus spreading rapidly overseas soon reached their office. "Have you heard about the virus killing people in China?" someone mentioned nervously.

Within weeks, the situation escalated dramatically. Linda's manager suggested working from home if they felt unsafe. Soon after, the office closed entirely. The employees were starting to pack their laptops, monitors, keyboards, and even the expensive office chairs for remote work. People panicked like the walls might cave in.

Linda wasn't shaken. She adjusted easily to working from home, having done so at IBM and Diageo before. What she couldn't stand was the boredom. Repetitive, automated tasks with no creativity. So she threw herself deeper into cybersecurity courses, grateful they had moved to Cork instead of Australia like she'd planned. If they had, they might've ended up back in Benalmadena— knowing the COVID lockdown could have left them stranded and starving.

*

One afternoon, Linda received a message from Nora that shook her entire world—her brother Peter had died. Her hands trembled as she called her mother, tears streaming down her face. Her heart thudded loud in her chest, a drum of dread.

"How did Peter die?" Linda choked out.

"He had pneumonia. They took him to the hospital... then he caught COVID too." Her mom's voice was soft, tired. "I couldn't visit him because of the lockdown," her mother explained, her voice cracking with grief.

"I can't believe he's gone...I…" Linda's voice trailed off into sobs.

Her mother hesitated. Then she continued quietly, "The night before, I dreamt Peter came to me, asking what he should do. It's what he always asked. I told him, 'You must decide if you want to stay or go. Choose if you want the suffering to continue or if you want it all to end.' Then, in the morning, they called me from the home and said he passed away."

Linda sat in stunned silence, tears falling freely. "At least he's not suffering anymore," she whispered, feeling a deep ache of loss and an unexpected relief. "But it doesn't feel real."

"I just keep thinking," her mother said, voice shaking, "how scared he must have been in that hospital… alone."

Peter had always wondered what would happen to him when their mother died. He never had the life he dreamed of—a normal life, wife and kids, but fate cruelly denied him those simple dreams. He just got loneliness and fear. And the care home never gave him the care he needed. The other residents stole from him—his money, his phone, even his socks. Their mother fought for him until the end.

Linda cried for hours.

Linda believed deeply that when we die, we choose. Her mother had returned after dying twice. Her father had wanted death long before it came. Her grandmother waited for it like a train she knew would arrive. Even her beloved Irish Setter, Dante, had seemed to choose when it was time. Maybe Peter had finally made his choice too, ending the pain and uncertainty that haunted him.

Linda clung to this thought, desperately hoping that Peter, wherever he was now, had finally found peace.

Chapter 30

Alex's school issues seemed to fade once he moved up a grade and started getting male teachers. It was like a switch flipped. Linda had a feeling that his struggles might not have been just about the subjects themselves, but the people behind the desks. In secondary school, things were different. There wasn't just one teacher anymore—there was one or even two for every subject. And Linda, being who she was, sat her son down and laid it out plain.

"Don't link the subject to the teacher," she told him. "Focus on the subject itself. Teachers come and go. The subject stays."

The advice seemed simple, but it worked perfectly.

Alex listened. He adapted well to his new environment, performing well academically, and earning praise for his behaviour. Every teacher said the same thing about him—polite, engaged, a pleasure to teach. He was doing his homework without Linda having to plead or nag. Linda could finally breathe, relieved that Alex was thriving without her constant intervention.

But one evening, Alex returned home visibly upset, darkness in his eyes. He dropped his bag, looked at her, and said flatly, his voice shaking as he spoke bitterly. "Mom, I don't like school. I'd rather die than go."

Linda's heart tightened with dread. That kind of sentence—it hits hard when it comes from your child.

"What happened? You were happy there. What changed?"

Alex looked down, his fingers fidgeting with his sleeves. "There's this guy. He sits behind me. He's huge, Mom. And he's bullying me. He keeps pushing his desk into mine, saying stuff like, 'Are you dumb?' He doesn't stop. He scares me. He's way taller than me."

Linda felt the tightness in her chest again—the one she knew all too well. That helpless rage when someone hurts your kid and you can't fix it with just a hug.

She didn't waste a day. She contacted the school immediately. And to their credit, the staff didn't brush it off. They moved fast—moved Alex to a new desk, had a conversation with the bully and his parents. They didn't pretend like it wasn't happening. They acted.

And just like that, the boy stopped.

No more desk pushing, no more mocking.

And then something unexpected happened. Alex became friends with his new desk mate. The kind of friend who made school feel less like a place you had to survive and more like somewhere you belonged.

Linda watched him leave each morning a little taller, a little more sure of himself. It reminded her that sometimes survival isn't about the big moments—it's about the small victories. The quiet ones.

The ones that say: You're going to be okay.

*

Linda had always pushed herself harder than anyone ever asked her to. After everything she'd been through, failure wasn't something she allowed herself—not even in silence. She achieved several cybersecurity certifications, steadily building her confidence. She needed to build something solid—something that couldn't fall apart. Cybersecurity made sense. Like locked doors and passwords and systems that couldn't be hacked—not like the life she'd had before.

It was Diego, her Spanish friend in cybersecurity, who told her that everyone on his team had quit. That one piece of information lit something in her. She reached out to his manager, took a chance, and it worked—she was hired.

Cybersecurity had first captured her imagination years earlier at IBM when her manager had once asked about her future plans. When she said "cybersecurity," he nearly choked. "That's not in our scope," he told her. "But I can get you in touch with someone."

Didn't matter. She was already planning her move to Spain. Hungary was a dead-end for tech careers unless you liked answering phones.

Now, here she was—finally stepping into her dream career she had envisioned.

Her team quickly grew to five, and Tyler, one of her colleagues from Belfast, took Linda under his wing. Started mentoring her. "We really need to meet sometime," Tyler said warmly.

He got approval to visit Cork, meet the team—Diego, another colleague, and Linda.

Since their other colleagues couldn't join, Linda met him alone after work.

They ate. He had a beer in the hotel bar. They talked. Seemed fine. Friendly. Normal.

But then, at 2 a.m., a message lit up her phone. "Did you get home okay?" He'd sent it an hour earlier. Linda was too tired to reply until morning.

Linda found herself wondering if there was more behind his thoughtfulness, despite Tyler's clear devotion to his wife and family.

The next day, however, she felt awful. Sick. Head pounding, stomach aching. She slumped in her chair, barely holding it together.

She didn't drink. And hadn't eaten anything strange either—except the grilled chicken from dinner. That was probably it.

Tyler was genuinely concerned, gently nudging her shoulder as he asked softly, "How are you doing?"

"Not well with this headache," Linda replied weakly.

"Linda, you should go home," Tyler said softly. "Diego and I can handle this. You're clearly not well."

They accompanied her home, making sure she arrived safely.

After Tyler and Diego was gone, Linda passed out.

That night, another caring message from Tyler: "Great meeting you. Hope you're feeling better." She didn't see it till morning. She replied. He never answered.

And that was it.

Afterward, it was like someone flipped a switch. He stopped talking to her. No more casual check-ins. No more calls while walking his dog. Just silence.

He became distant and cold, ignoring Linda's messages and even undermining her professionally. Linda was bewildered and hurt by his sudden coldness. In meetings, he spoke like she didn't exist. Act like they weren't even on the same team.

She saw it clearly, but no one else seemed to.

Determined, she found her own lane, focusing on solo projects. Despite Tyler's erratic behavior—switching between kindness and hostility—Linda excelled. She discovered vulnerabilities in a development tool—something no one else was looking at, and impressed management by implementing secure processes.

But Tyler wasn't done. When their team's scope shifted to building a platform for encryption and certificates, Tyler briefly talked to her again. Assigned her work. Acted like things were okay. Then suddenly—he ghosted again. Handed her tasks to Diego behind her back.

It was clear now. Tyler didn't like people he couldn't control. He micromanaged the rest of the team. But Linda? She had her own mind, didn't need managing. And that made her a problem.

Linda sensed hidden trauma behind his erratic mood swings, perhaps echoes from being kicked out by his mother as a teenager. He never forgave her. She'd moved to Australia. Linda wondered if she reminded him of her. Strong-willed. Direct. Not afraid to push back.

She tried to empathize, but Tyler's hostility made it impossible.

Another team merged with theirs. They handled encryption credentials. Linda started working with them, but wasn't really interested in this area. Her passion was studying how

AI could be used to break into systems. But the new team members from the US were kind-hearted people, making Linda feel valued and safe. They brought changes to her life, shifting her work environment profoundly. They were supportive and gentle, creating a positive atmosphere she'd never experienced before. Linda felt genuinely happy.

Her manager protected their remote-work arrangement, resisting pressures to return to the office. Linda felt deeply grateful.

*

Linda's expertise in identifying AI-related security risks soon caught management's attention, and they offered her an exciting new role—AI penetration testing. Thrilled, she dove into ethical hacking, something she'd always dreamed of. With successful results, Linda became the company's first dedicated AI pentester, joining a team she genuinely admired.

Meanwhile, Alex flourished in Ireland, mastering an Irish accent, making friends, and genuinely feeling at home. Linda was amazed by the resilience and strength she had discovered within herself. From fear and uncertainty to stability and pride. She felt immense gratitude and pride that she'd fought through life's darkest chapters, finally providing Alex the peaceful future he deserved. Ireland was truly their home, and both Linda and Alex proudly claimed it as their own.

Author Bio

Lemon J. Myers has lived a life shrouded in shadows, carrying secrets too heavy for any one person to bear alone. In the pages of this gripping memoir, she bravely unveils the harrowing truths behind her anonymous facade—revealing a childhood marred by abuse, an adolescence scarred by sexual abuse, violence, and bullying, and an adulthood spent navigating the treacherous waters of single motherhood. With raw honesty and unflinching courage, Lemon takes readers through her darkest moments and fiercest battles, illuminating a journey of resilience and survival. Though her name is a shield, her voice echoes powerfully, giving hope to those still fighting their own hidden wars. This is a story of strength in anonymity, of speaking truth from the shadows, and of the unbreakable spirit of a woman determined to reclaim her life.

*

Hey, thank you so much for sticking with me till the very end. Writing this book was personal, and knowing someone out there read it means more than I can say. If it touched you, made you feel something, or even just kept you up a little too late, I'd love if you could leave a quick review. It really helps—more than you know.

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