

THE MAY DEPARTURE

*Every departure carries a story
This one carries a lifetime .*

NEHAPREET



BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7310-622-9

Cover design: Aafiya Saifi
Typesetting: Manisha Rawat

First Edition: January 2026

Dedication

To My beloved family --

my Father, S. Swaranjit Singh; my Mother, Sardarni Paramjit Kaur;

my Brothers, KaranRaj and Uday Paul — for being my first home and my forever strength.

To Megha and Vishu,

for their constant motivation, laughter, and support.

To my faithful companions— Jordan, Roman, and Vodka,

whose unconditional love has been my calm and quiet strength.

To Anirudh,

for being there when it mattered the most— my calm in the chaos and my strength behind the scenes.

And to the special ones who stood by me —

Aditi, Babli Didi, Manpreet, Sandeep Sir, Angrej Paji,

Pardeep Cheema, Manvi & Family, Richa & Family, and Umesh Kant Sir.

With love and gratitude,

— Nehapreet

“To the stray dogs — thank you for loving humans even when we didn’t always deserve it; for continuing to trust, forgive, and love us with hearts far purer than our own. May you always find shelter and hands that feed.”

The May Departure

Every departure carries a story,
this one carries a lifetime.

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Chapter 1: The Departure



There she was—15-year-old Nina Varkov. An ordinary-looking girl with a fair complexion, though not quite as pale as most Russian girls, wearing skinny, slightly old-fashioned jeans and a loose blue top. Her long black hair was braided simply, yet neatly. It looked as if her mother had done it.

She stood there, eyes filled with tears, staring at someone on the other side of the glass, waving silently. She kept waving, then turning back to look, then waving again and turning back once more. This cycle went on for nearly 15–20 minutes.

Sitting quietly behind a pillar was 12-year-old Kazimir Varkov—Nina’s younger brother—who couldn’t muster the courage to get up and join his sister in that farewell ritual.

“Kazimir, come here and say a sweet goodbye,” Nina called out.

“You do it. I’m not coming,” Kazimir replied softly.

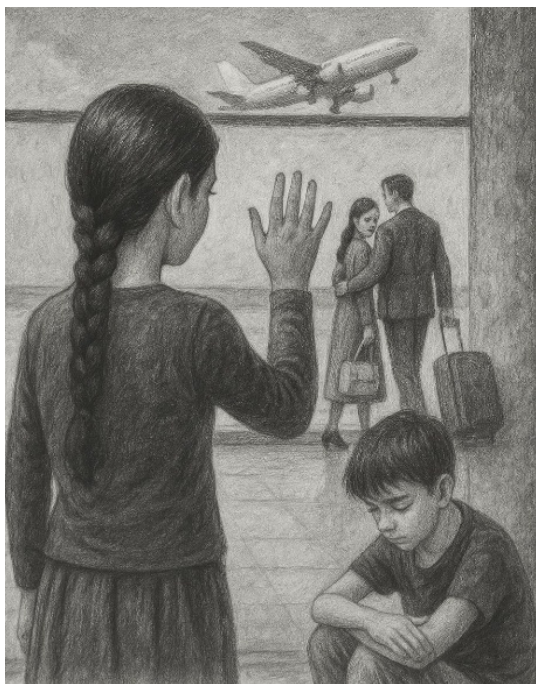
Kazimir, dressed in rugged blue jeans and a perfectly wrinkle-free blue T-shirt, was a very decent-looking boy. He was thin, with a sharp, parrot-like nose and a small mole at the inner corner of his left eye. His thick, black curly hair added to his distinct charm.

He sat with his eyes lowered, staring blankly at the ground—as if watching an ant crawl by. But no, it wasn’t an ant. The truth was, he didn’t dare to lift his eyes and look in the same direction Nina was looking. Maybe he was scared... scared

that if he looked, he might cry. And if he started crying, he might not be able to stop.

On the other side of the glass stood a couple in their thirties and forties.

The woman, with tears in her eyes, couldn't stop looking at Nina. Her eyes, full of pain, searched for Kazimir, hoping to see him one more time. Beside her, the man gently held her hand and



slowly walked her away with quiet love, as if helping her carry a heavy heart. As they moved forward, she kept turning back, pausing again and again, unable to let go.

They were Mr. and Mrs. Varkov — Nina and Kazimir's parents: Svyomir and Polina.

Mr. Svyomir—a 5'9" man—was well-groomed and good-looking, with a calm and confident presence, like someone who quietly knows more than he says. He wore mud-colored trousers and a blue-and-black checked shirt, neatly tucked in, a pen in the front pocket—simple, sharp, and classic.

And now it was clear where Kazimir got that sharp nose

His wife, Mrs. Polina, stood beside him—a 5'7" graceful woman in traditional attire, her outfit detailed with little mirror beads that caught the light. She clearly knew how to carry herself with elegance.

Oh, sweet niblets! Those long, thick black hair again—no doubt about it, beautiful hair runs in this family.

The whole moment felt heavy and quiet, filled with unspoken words. Only two things were certain: the parents were going far away, and this was the first time the family had ever parted.

A goodbye that wasn't loud but settled like a lump in the throat—the kind you feel more than you can say.

Nina's parents were moving to another country. The only thing that gave the family a little strength was a promise—one simple hope—that Mr. Svyomir had shared with Nina and Kazimir before leaving:

“Just one year. We'll call both of you there within a year.”

It was that one line they all held onto like a thread in the wind.

But who knew that one year would stretch into seventeen long years—seventeen years in which they wouldn't be able to meet each other at all?

And just like that, holding on to the hope of meeting again in one year, Mr. and Mrs. Varkov slowly disappeared from Nina's sight. With a heavy heart, Nina turned around, took Kazimir's hand, and began the quiet journey back home from the airport.

None of the four knew, as they walked away on their separate paths, that their lives were about to change completely—and in ways they could never have imagined.

Chapter 2. In Parallel: Nina & Kazimir



Nina:

Nina Varkov was born on September 25, 1993, in St. Petersburg, Russia—her mother’s hometown. She was the first grandchild on her mother’s side and the sixth on her father’s, so she was naturally quite famous in her maternal house.

Nina was the shortest in the family. While her mother’s side was tall, she clearly inherited her height from her father’s side, where most were shorter.

A quiet and shy little girl from the start, Nina was easily frightened and very reserved.

Just kidding! She was actually a complete chatterbox. There were times when her parents had to say, “Nina, please be quiet for a bit, take a breath, bud! Your throat must be sore from all that talking.” Nina would reply dramatically, “I won’t talk to anyone ever again!”

Kazimir, ever the playful one, would chuckle and say, “Very good, stay mad for a while.” But not even five minutes would pass before something came up that Nina just had to tell her mother. The “angry” little girl would return to the conversation, no persuasion needed—ending with Kazimir giving her a disappointed look.

Nina was an incredibly fast talker, so much so that she often stumbled over her words. It was as if her mind raced a

hundred miles an hour and she felt the need to tell everything at once to whoever was in front of her.

She was very playful and irritable as well, struggling with her studies. In fact, she was the underachiever in the family. But she had a great talent for painting and art—something most people didn't know. Back then, academics were considered the most important, so Nina never really got the chance to showcase her talent.

There was a time when Nina, in her usual playful way, tried to use her artistic talent to impress a boy in her class. Her first crush, Havril, was a fair-skinned boy with captivating, cat-like eyes. Nina had once overheard him complimenting the class monitor's painting, and from that moment she was determined to get him to notice her work.

She made several paintings and tried to present them to the teacher in front of him. But, as always, being stuck at the back of the class, her efforts fell short. After all, the class monitor wasn't just good at painting—she was an all-rounder.

But what was Nina really trying to do at that age? Did she want him to be her boyfriend? What was going through her mind? Even if she had impressed him, what would have happened next? Well, as they say, who can ever understand what girls are thinking? No one knows what their next move will be! Anyway, Nina's crush remained just that—a crush.

Over time, Nina's struggle with her studies worsened. She was no longer just falling behind—she was suffering. The daily cycle of insults from teachers, the beatings—sometimes with sticks, sometimes with slaps—the punishments of holding a duster between her fingers while they hit from above or

standing for hours in the corridor with raised hands... and all of it, right in front of Havril!

It's hard to say what troubled Nina more—the fear of punishment or the humiliation of facing it all in front of Havril.

In examinations, Nina often had to perform before her teachers, for knowledge there was little but performance she could manage. One day, however, her playacting betrayed her and left her embarrassed.

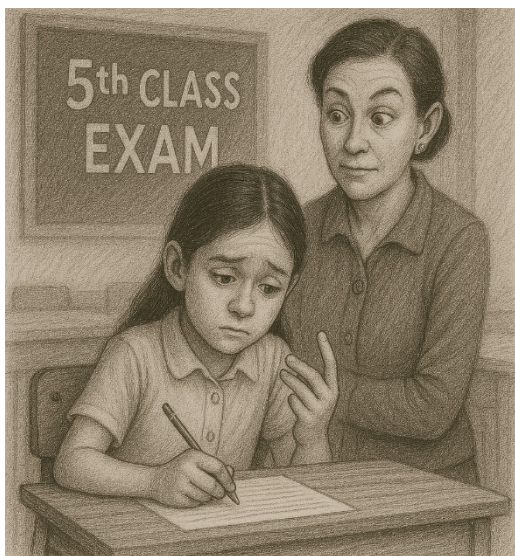


It was the English exam. Nina had no idea what to write. Yet when she noticed the teacher watching her closely, she straightened, lifted her pen, and began counting on her fingers—as though solving some great problem. Then she scribbled a line or two, paused, and returned to her mysterious counting, as if she alone in the room had mastered the whole paper.

But as she raised her fingers once again, the teacher approached quietly, bent down, and whispered: *"Nina, this is the English exam, not mathematics."*

Nina could only sit frozen, her act broken, with not a word left to defend herself.

Whatever it was, the pressure finally took its toll. Nina experienced the first anxiety attack of her life. She couldn't breathe. She was rushed from school straight to the hospital, where doctors immediately placed an oxygen mask on her.



As she slowly began to relax, her eyelids growing heavier, she faintly heard her father's trembling voice ask the doctor,

"Doctor, why is my daughter closing her eyes?"

That day, Nina might not have been old enough to grasp the full depth of the situation – but she understood one thing very clearly: her father was terrified.

Some people even said that Nina had simply forgotten her homework and was putting on an act.

Seriously? Are you kidding me?

Well, the truth was known only to God – or to Nina. And, of course, God wasn't about to come down and explain, and Nina wasn't going to spill either. So, let's just move on.

She was so timid she wouldn't even go to fill gas in her two-wheeler – afraid someone at the station might notice her. If she

ever saw boys standing on the street near her house, she'd take a longer, roundabout route just to avoid crossing their path.

But Nina was a total lioness in front of her dad. She knew she could mess up all she wanted—Papa would always have her back.

Like once, her dad gave her a two-wheeler to go to school. Svyomir suggested, "Let her ride it to school, I'll be in the backseat, then bring the scooter back." Smart plan. But halfway through the ride, things took a wild turn.

So Nina was riding confidently, Svyomir relaxing on the backseat. Suddenly, he spotted a man on a bicycle approaching from the right. Something in his bones told him—Uh-oh... trouble's coming.

He calmly said, "Nina, slow down."

No reaction.

A little louder now: "Nina, slow down."

Still nothing.



Then full panic: "NINAAA, BRAAAKE!"

But by then it was too late. The poor uncle was on one side, his cycle on the other.

Now, any normal person would say sorry, right? Not Nina. She was so embarrassed she started scolding him instead!

And what she said next was even more unexpected.

“Uncle! I gave the right indicator, didn’t you see?”

Svyomir: “Umm... Nina, we were going straight. No one gave any indicator.”

Classic Nina – bold confidence, zero logic.

Honestly, Nina said all that nonsense only because her dad was right there beside her.

So yes—on one side Nina was off to school in public transport...

and on the other side, Svyomir and their poor two-wheeler were heading home – also in public transport. Why? Because the scooter’s front tyre had gone full “I quit” after the crash. Basically, it wasn’t even road-worthy anymore.

But she was the apple of her father’s eye. Her father would often tell her stories where Nina was always the main character. Two in particular she must have heard over a thousand times in her life, especially on her birthdays. Yet each time he began, her face would light up with the same joy as the first.

Svyomir would say:

“When I got the call from St. Petersburg that a daughter had been born to me, I ran to the terrace. I spread my arms wide toward the sky and stood there. It felt like my entire world had changed in that moment.”

Nina, giggling, would often say, “Papa, how many times will you tell this story?”

But her eyes would still sparkle, waiting for the next line.

He would chuckle and go on:

“It’s true, Nina. I went around the neighborhood handing out sweets. One nosy neighbor said, ‘You’re distributing sweets for a daughter?’ And I told her, ‘If you want to eat, take it—otherwise, hand it right back!’”

They’d both burst into laughter every time.

Nina’s second favorite was the tale of a king whose life was hidden inside a parrot. The parrot, wise and kind-hearted, gently guided the king toward the right path. People who wished to harm the king began to search for the parrot—knowing that ending the



bird’s life would bring down the ruler. But the king, despite his flaws, did everything to protect it.

Every time the story reached its end, her father would smile and say,

“I’m the king, Nina... and you are my parrot—my life lives within you.”

Of course, what Nina didn't know was that her beloved Papa could never actually tell her the real ending of the story. Because — spoiler alert — at the end, the king himself ends up killing the parrot. Yep. Just like that.

The same parrot who was his conscience, his guide, his soul... gone.

And honestly, telling that to a 12 or 13-year-old daughter? That would've been emotional carnage. A full-blown teenage tragedy. Trauma with a capital T

And she, blissfully unaware of the tragic ending, would grin every time.

Everyone wins.

Except maybe the parrot.



Polina, Nina's mother, also loved to tell her own favorite memory:

"When you were born, it was raining heavily. The entire maternal side of the family was at the hospital, waiting eagerly for their turn to hold you. One of your uncles, just a few years older than you, couldn't stop staring at your tiny little feet sticking out from under the blanket. He kept trying to tuck

them back in, covering them as if protecting you from the world.”

The same Nina, who grew up wrapped in love and care—so protected that even if a teacher or her own mother called her a failure—would always have her father step in, furious.

“Don’t you dare call her a failure,” he would say. “Words like that stay in a child’s mind forever.”



From the beginning she was the kind of girl who relied on her family for everything. She had no idea what it was like to make decisions on her own. There was only one thing Nina truly feared—abandonment. Perhaps that is why she clung so deeply to her family.

And yet, that same Nina stood at the airport calmly waving goodbye to her parents. She didn’t cry as she might have. She didn’t panic.

Was she numb, unable to process how serious the situation really was?

Or maybe she was holding on to one comforting thought:

“It’s just a year... it’ll pass before I even know it.”

Or maybe another thought was sneaking in:

“It’s just a year... and now it’s gonna be a full-on Home Alone scene.”

No one to stop her from eating cake for dinner, no one asking where she was going or why she was still in pajamas at 3 p.m.

“I’m a free bird now,” she might’ve thought, already planning her solo kingdom. And of course the added bonus:

“Wait till I drop this line casually... ‘My parents? Oh, they’re in Canada.’”

Style points: unlocked.

Behind that calm face, Nina’s mind might already have been imagining life as an independent woman—even though she was still the same girl who hadn’t stepped outside the house without a family member and still had to pass ninth grade.

But hey, independence first, grades later, right?

Sure, she was still living in a joint family. But let’s be honest—when it comes to rules and fear, it’s the parents who truly run the show. This girl trying so hard to act cool didn’t yet realize that no one in the world would ever love her the way her own family did.

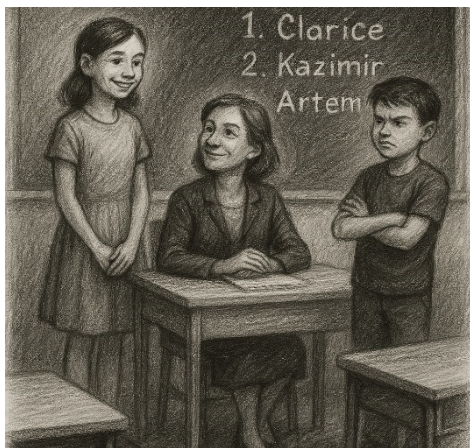
And it hadn’t even crossed her mind that from now on, she might no longer be the main character in anyone’s story.

What she also didn’t know was that one day she would grow to become one of the strongest and bravest members of the family. And when the time came, making decisions on her own would no longer be a choice—it would be the only option she had, and that too without preparation.

Kazimir

While Nina's world spun with chatter and mishaps, Kazimir's path unfolded in a strikingly different way. Kazimir was the complete opposite of Nina—reserved, with a sharp way of speaking, always seeming the picture of decorum.

Born on August 31, 1997, in Samara, Russia—his father's hometown—Kazimir was exceptionally bright. With a slightly fair complexion and a sharp mind, he stood out not just for his looks but for his remarkable



intelligence, particularly in academics. In fact, he was the kind of brilliant student who, upon seeing his name in second place on the board, would burst into tears—while angrily cursing the girl who came first. That kind of genius.

Kazimir was, without a doubt, a mama's boy—his mother's absolute favorite. Always trying to impress her, never straying far from her side—he seemed to orbit around her like a loyal little moon. And Polina adored him just as much, showing her affection in the most delicious way possible: by cooking all his favorite dishes.

Even as a child, he had a habit of negotiating with his father before exams, making serious little deals as if signing a contract.

“If I get a position,” he would say earnestly, “will you buy me a computer?”

His father would raise an eyebrow and ask, “And if you don’t?”

Kazimir’s reply was always the same:

“Then I’ll never ask for anything again.”

The same boy who used to hear his mother call, “Kazi, food is ready, come and eat,” would answer, “I’ll eat only when I finish this chapter.” Hard work was second nature to him. He was willing to upset his sister if it meant staying focused. After all, Nina would always hear, “If Kazi is studying so much, you should study just as long. You both can eat together later.”

And that quiet confidence said it all—he knew, without a shred of doubt, that he would earn that position. At the end of every semester, something new would be making its way into their house—courtesy of Kazimir’s report card.

Kazimir was extremely high-maintenance. He might have been the first child in the family to start getting branded clothes, shoes, and all that jazz at such a young age. It was almost as if he came with a built-in VIP pass to the world of luxury!

Like most kids he got hurt while playing, but Kazimir made an art of it. One day he’d trip over carpet wool and tear the skin off his knee. Another day he’d be running through the house, only to get his foot stuck in a drain and earn a deep cut. At school, he once fractured his elbow—which still hasn’t healed properly.

Then there was the infamous temple incident, where he got his foot stuck so badly in a drain that even today he crosses to the other side of the path to avoid it.

But there was one time when Kazimir's health took a serious turn. First came an appendix attack that landed him in the hospital, and before he could fully recover, a high fever followed. They say once a fever crosses 108 degrees, survival becomes a battle—and Kazimir was already fighting through 105. It was the first time the family truly felt deep, horrifying fear, especially when they overheard the doctors murmuring that if the fever didn't break soon, saving the child would be nearly impossible.

But it seemed God had different plans—plans to make him stronger. After that day, the bond between Kazimir and his mother grew even deeper. He became the golden child of the family—cherished a little more, loved a little harder.

Now it made sense why, on that day at the airport, Kazimir couldn't bring himself to lift his eyes and meet his mother's



gaze. For the first time in his life, he was facing the overwhelming feeling of being apart from the first love of his

life — his mother. The weight of that separation, even if only for a short while, was simply too much to bear.

Kazimir had no idea that from now on he would have to step into the role of the man of the house — carrying the weight of responsibility and looking after his elder sister with care and maturity far beyond his years.

Chapter 3. The Varkovs



Long before that airport goodbye, the roots of the Varkov family were quietly shaping the strength that Nina and Kazimir would one day carry.

This is where their story began.

The Varkov family lived in Samara, Russia.

They were a nuclear family—or perhaps a joint one. In some ways, they were a bit of both.

The confusion arose because Mr. Svyomir was a remarkably composed man. Though they lived in a joint family, he knew how to maintain his own boundaries—and just as effortlessly, he ensured others respected theirs.

Svyomir and his elder brother Vladimir shared a company-allotted house with their father, who had been a foreman at a well-known textile mill. It was a modest home for such a large household: two brothers, their wives, two children each, and their parents.

The space was painfully small—just two bedrooms, one drawing room, a kitchen, and a single bathroom used only for bathing.

For everything else, including nature's more urgent calls, the family relied on the shared toilets outside. The two bedrooms were divided between the brothers and their families, while the drawing room doubled as a common space and the parents' sleeping area.

As for privacy – well, let's just say it had packed its bags and left long ago.

Only a month and a half after Kazimir was born, the family moved to Moscow.

Svyomir's sister, Gordana, lived there with her husband, Nestor. Interestingly, both Nestor and Svyomir were in the carpet business. Yet, to this day, no one quite knows who brought whom into it – or whether their shared profession was simply coincidence.

What was clear was the reason behind the move: with both men in the same trade, joining forces seemed sensible.

Well... sometimes even grown-ups take their sweet time to learn the obvious rule of life:

never do business with relatives – especially not with your sister's husband.



It always starts with warm smiles, a firm handshake, and the classic, *"We're family – what could possibly go wrong?"* And before you know it, conversations turn stiff, eye contact becomes optional, and even the syrniki on the table starts tasting like cardboard.

The same thing happened with Svyomir.

Nestor's business was far more successful and, with success, came wealth – and with wealth, a certain arrogance. On top of

that, Nestor carried the pride of being the eldest son-in-law of the family, a role he wore like a crown.

Doing business together was one thing—manageable, even sensible.

But living under the same roof?

That was slow poison for relationships, a recipe for tension disguised as togetherness.

Nestor's business may have held the upper hand in size, but in raw acumen Svyomir was in a league of his own. His friendly nature, quiet charm, and remarkable ability to convince without pressure worked like subtle magic. Before long, his business began to rise—silently but surely.

Nestor could never stand seeing anyone rise above him—especially not his younger brother-in-law.

And so, what no one wanted—or perhaps what some secretly did—finally happened: the bond between them broke.

But instead of cutting ties with his sister's family, Svyomir made a different choice. He decided to return to Samara.

One thought kept eating at him—Nina's studies. All the tension and drama were beginning to affect her. She was in fifth grade at Moscow International School, and this wasn't the environment she deserved.

He knew her education could recover in Samara with time. But if his presence was the reason his sister's home fell apart, the guilt would stay with him forever.

So, after five years in Moscow, the Varkov family quietly moved back—to live with Vladimir again.

Back in Samara, Svyomir built his own weaving sheds where carpets were crafted and personal washing yards where they were cleaned with care.

Guess whose name the Varkov family chose for their business?

Their daughter's – **Nina Carpets**.

I told you, she was always her daddy's favorite!

But a few years later things took a twist. Suddenly there were two business cards: one said *Nina Carpets* and the other said *Kazimir Carpets*.

Why the change? Svyomir's business buddies had advised him, *"It's better to name a company after a boy!"*

Can you imagine?

Anyone visiting the Varkovs' home could tell at once what their business was.

Wall carpets, telephone-table carpets, lobby carpets – there were carpets where carpets had no business being. Even the paintings had been replaced by



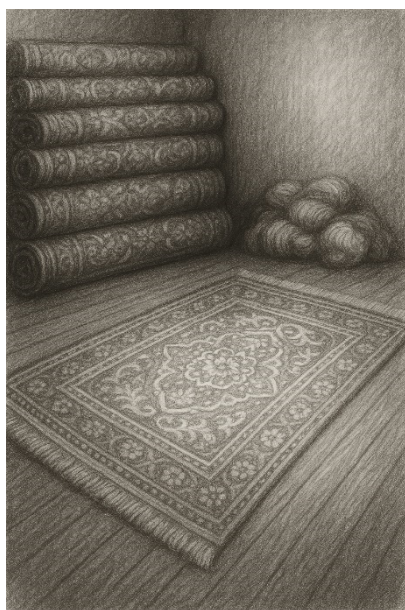
intricately woven Arabian-style rugs. Guests often found themselves squinting at the walls, unsure whether to admire the art or lie down on it.

Their home had an extra room – quiet, tucked away – where freshly woven carpets lay stacked beside heaps of soft, colorful wool. The scent that lingered there was something else

entirely. It wrapped around you like memory — earthy, warm, and strangely comforting. Almost like the smell of rain-soaked earth after a long summer... subtle, nostalgic, and a little addictive.

And so, by the time the family faced that unforgettable airport farewell, these years in Samara had already written the hidden prologue to Nina and Kazimir's courage.

Before their departure, Samara had been the final nest for the Varkov couple.



Chapter 4. She nurtured. He guarded



Long before Nina and Kazimir faced that heartbreaking parting, their parents had built the strong, steady world that would hold the family together.

Svyomir and Polina – the two unwavering pillars of the Varkov home.

Theirs was an arranged marriage, one brought together by quiet conversations and distant family ties—Polina had once been connected to Svyomir’s sister-in-law, and it was she who first saw the match.



From the beginning, they moved in contrast—not in conflict, but in perfect counterbalance.

Where Polina carried grace, Svyomir held gravity.

She was gentle, he was firm.

One spoke with patience, the other stood with pride.

And yet the most powerful thread that held their bond was their devotion to family. It wasn’t loud or showy, but deep, pure, and enduring.

Their love lived in small, quiet moments—like when Polina folded his scarf before he left, or when Svyomir always poured her tea first, without asking. Polina’s calm softened Svyomir’s strong nature; his steady presence made her feel safe.

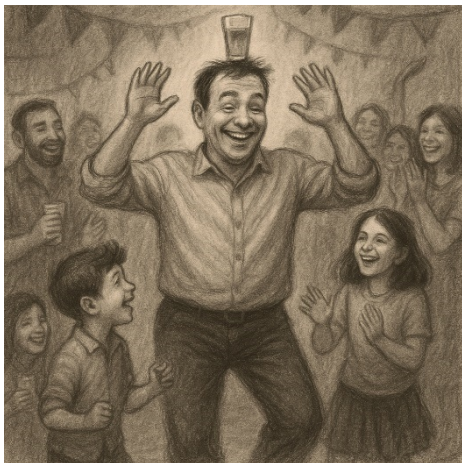
They didn’t need to say *I love you* out loud. They showed it in care, respect, and quiet loyalty—a love that spoke in silence but was strong and lasting.

Svyomir

Svyomir was the youngest of four siblings — two brothers and two sisters. All were married, each with families of their own.

If Polina was the heart of the home, Svyomir was the wind that never stayed still. Always on the move for business, he was rarely in one place for too long.

People often joked that he traveled more than he lived at home. A serious businessman on paper, yes - but within the family, he was the funniest man in the room. The one who lit up every gathering. People waited for his arrival at parties - not just to see him, but to feel the shift in energy the moment he walked in.



The same guests who usually worried about someone drinking too much and starting a fight? They'd secretly hope Svyomir would pour himself a glass because when he did, things only got better. He didn't drink to escape. He drank to include.

And the kids? They adored him. One sip into his drink, and he'd clap his hands, calling out, "Alright kids, get ready!" And just like that, they'd pile into the car, off to get ice cream - their laughter trailing behind like music.

Svyomir had been hardworking from the very beginning, and his business now stood in a sound position. The children often caught sight of the bag of money he carried and would at once begin to make their little demands.

Hearing them, Svyomir would usually laugh and say, *"One should never count money before one's children. Tomorrow we shall go to the market – whatever you want, we shall buy*

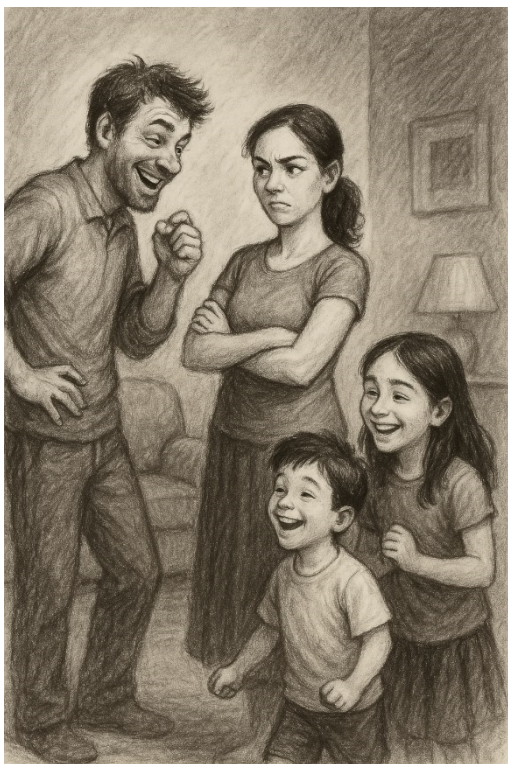
Svyomir had a habit – a mischievous one – that always came alive after a drink or two. That's when he'd lean toward his kids, lower his voice like he was sharing a state secret, and whisper,



"Should I tease your mother?"

Without missing a beat, Nina and Kazimir would exchange a look, then wink back at him like soldiers on standby. That was it— the cue. And the performance began.

He'd start humming some old romantic tune or pretend to forget Polina's name, calling her "Madam Serious" with an exaggerated bow. He'd dance around her, poke harmless fun, crack jokes only half the room understood - all while Polina stood with arms crossed, giving him the look.



At first, she'd pretend not to react. But when Svyomir really pushed it - maybe by dragging her into an awkward twirl or reciting some ridiculous fake poetry - her patience would snap.

"That's enough, Svyomir!" she'd say, half-glaring, half-smiling, while the kids burst into laughter.

Even when she seemed angry, the children could see it— the tiniest tug at the corner of her lips. Like part of her was still trying not to laugh.

Of course, not every scene ended in giggles.

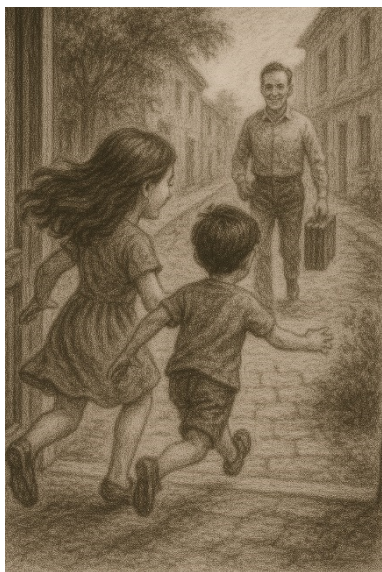
Sometimes, Polina's patience truly ran out. Her voice would sharpen, her eyes would narrow, and even the kids knew: Show's over.

That's when Svyomir, the same man who'd just been spinning in circles quoting fake poetry, would go completely quiet. He'd sigh theatrically, look around like a victim, and declare with absolute seriousness:

"If I say anything now, she'll just say I'm drunk and talking nonsense. So, I'll speak in the morning." And just like that, he'd fold his arms and sit back as if he were preserving world peace by staying silent.

Polina would still be fuming. The kids would be biting their lips not to laugh — because they'd heard that line before. And they knew that by morning... he'd forget what he wanted to say anyway.

It wasn't just Nina and Kazimir. Even Vladimir's kids counted down the days until Svyomir returned from his tours. The moment word spread that he'd entered the city, the house shifted into alert mode.



Nina and Kazimir would race to the gate like junior security officers, eyes locked on the lane. They'd stand there like statues... until suddenly they weren't - transforming into tiny versions of Usain Bolt the second they spotted him.

And then - the challenge began.

"Whoever touches Papa first wins!" one would shout, already halfway down the driveway. The other would bolt after, both flying toward him with wild grins and open arms.

It was never about the win.

It was never just about winning.

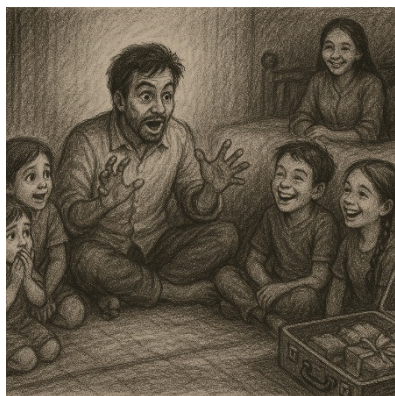
It was about being the first to reach the man who always brought home a special kind of magic - the kind that came wrapped in Ghost stories, hugs, and crinkly gift bags, not just for His kids but for Vladimir's kids as well.

To them, Svyomir wasn't simply returning from work. He was returning from an adventure. And in their eyes, no one arrived quite like him.

Svyomir was deeply connected to his hometown of Samara. The red-bricked streets, the scent of freshly baked rye bread from the local bakeries, the icy banks of the Volga - it was all part of his blood.

And nothing infuriated him more than watching young people leave, chasing degrees and dreams in far-off countries like the U.S. or Canada.

"Why leave?" he'd scoff. "You can get a good education right here. This land gave us everything — why turn your back on it?"



He was certain - absolutely certain — that Nina and Kazimir would never leave Russia. They wouldn't need to. They would

build their futures here, on home soil, without the struggles so many others endured in foreign lands.

One thing about Svyomir that could never be overlooked was his pride. He wore it like a second skin - warm, generous, and full of life. But that same pride could turn sharp in an instant. Especially when it came to his family. The moment someone questioned or hurt them, a darker, more formidable side of him would emerge - no warnings, no softness. Just fire.

He tried to raise his children strong - not just brave, but balanced. "Take responsibility for your mistakes," he'd say. "But where you are not at fault, never bow to anyone. Walk away with respect - but never accept injustice. I am here to stand by you."

What Svyomir didn't know was that a time was drawing near — a time when the words "I'm here for you" would no longer be enough. A time when he'd look into his children's eyes and, for the first time, have to say something that went against every instinct in his body:

"Don't get into any trouble... I won't be able to come."

Polina

Svyomir wasn't guarding just any family; he was protecting a home shaped by someone like Polina — a woman whose care and strength held the family together, the soul of the Varkov family, who came from St. Petersburg as a bride.

She wasn't highly educated, yet she knew every secret there was to running a home. And when I say she was an excellent

cook, trust me — she truly was. There wasn't a single dish she couldn't master.

With children, she was fiercely protective, though otherwise she remained shy and reserved.

One could say her shyness had its roots in the home she grew up in, where she was often underestimated. Her younger sister was better educated and had explored the world beyond their small circle, while Polina — the second among four siblings — had neither been pushed forward academically nor had she fought for it herself.

It was perhaps this quiet, yielding nature that made her agree to marry Svyomir after seeing only a photograph, trusting her parents' wishes without protest.

But in the matter of marriage, she turned out to be the luckiest among her siblings. The girl who had never once stepped outside her childhood home found herself, after marriage, dining at the finest restaurants in Samara, watching films in grand theatres, and traveling on splendid vacations.

She loved Svyomir with all her heart.

Despite the comforts and luxuries of their home, Polina still yearned to assist him in every way she could. For this, she possessed a rare and invaluable skill — the kind of craftsmanship that, in today's world, would be considered one of the finest and most refined.

She knew how to sew, not just any clothes, but designer, sophisticated pieces.

Her beloved husband supported her wholeheartedly, even encouraging her with these words: "Polina, work for your

passion, hone your skills, and as for running the home — that’s my job.”

Soon enough, Polina opened a boutique right in their home, and the name of it, dear reader, is something worth noting.

The boutique was called once again “Nina Boutique” — yes, you heard it right. Despite Kazimir’s obvious fondness for her, Nina still managed to snag the name, taking the spotlight for herself.

So, where were we?

Ah yes, the boutique.

Before long, Polina’s boutique became one of the most well-known in the society. She quickly gained a steady stream of loyal customers. Now, Polina was not just a wife, but an independent woman — managing her home and its expenses without ever needing to be told, doing it all quietly, with grace, and with an impressive sense of autonomy.



Polina was especially excited about one thing — the moment her daughter would start college, she would design all sorts of dresses for her! She would often tell everyone with a smile, “Nina will never run short of dresses now.”

Polina was a deeply domestic woman — someone who valued relationships and family ties above all else. Beyond her own

work, she rarely felt confident venturing into other matters. She seldom stepped outside, except for visiting the church in the evenings or occasionally going for walks with Vladimir's eldest daughter. At that time, she managed the boutique entirely on her own.

Sometimes, when orders weren't completed on time, customers would leave with a few words of complaint — something Nina and Kazimir found hard to tolerate. But Polina would always calmly say,

"My dear, when you run a business, such things are bound to happen. If you take every small thing to heart, you'll never be able to move forward."

But yes, there was one thing that could really test Polina's patience — the endless squabbles between Nina and Kazimir.

All the pent-up frustration of the day would spill out on each other. But Polina, she never raised her hand to the children in front of Svyomir. Because Svyomir had strictly forbidden it. So, the only time Polina could truly vent was when Svyomir was away on one of his trips.



Day by day, Polina's business continued to grow, until she found herself so busy that she often had to turn customers away with a polite smile, saying,

"I'm sorry, I can't take any more orders right now — there are already too many dresses lined up to be made!"

Little did Polina know that the boutique she had once started out of passion would one day become her necessity — the only source of income for the household. No matter how weary she grew, she would have no choice but to keep working, stitching through her exhaustion, carrying on because she must

By the time the family stood together at the airport years later, these two lives—his guarding, hers nurturing—had already given Nina and Kazimir the strength to face the unimaginable distance ahead.

Chapter 5: The last Normal



Life—the kind one might call a good life—was moving along smoothly.

The Varkov joint family was happy. Festivals were celebrated together with warmth and laughter. Gifts were exchanged with neighbors and friends, and colorful kites danced in the terrace sky.

During school holidays, Polina took the children to St. Petersburg. Svyomir's business tours had become more frequent, and sometimes he even took Polina and the children along. He had bought a new car for his growing business.

But amidst all the giggles and cheerful chaos, change began to quietly creep in.

When Svyomir returned from his tours, he still smiled as he greeted the children—but something in that smile seemed tired. Polina watched him closely, as if she already knew the reason behind the joy slowly fading from his face.

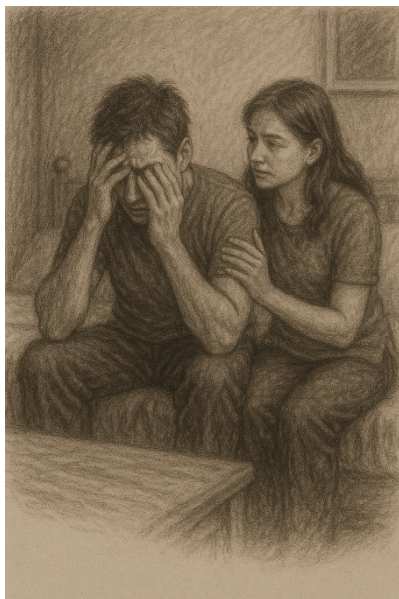
The Svyomir who once went to bed on time now spent nights sitting up, a hand pressed to his forehead. Polina would sit beside him, silently offering comfort, as if trying to ease a burden he could no longer hide.

Svyomir was still strong, but something was happening—something that made it seem as if, for a time, he would almost give up, then gather himself and bounce back, only to falter again.

It was a constant cycle: a tug-of-war between surrender and strength.

And perhaps it was this endless struggle that was slowly wearing him down.

Even the children had begun to notice that something wasn't quite right. But no one really knew the reason—yet.



One afternoon a man appeared at the door, asking about Svyomir.

Polina went to speak with him, while little Nina stood silently by the stairs, watching everything unfold.

“Where’s Svyomir?” the man called, a little impatient.

“He’s not at home. He’s away on a business trip. He should be back in two or three days,” Polina said with a polite smile.

“Don’t lie. I saw him just two, three days ago,” the man pressed.

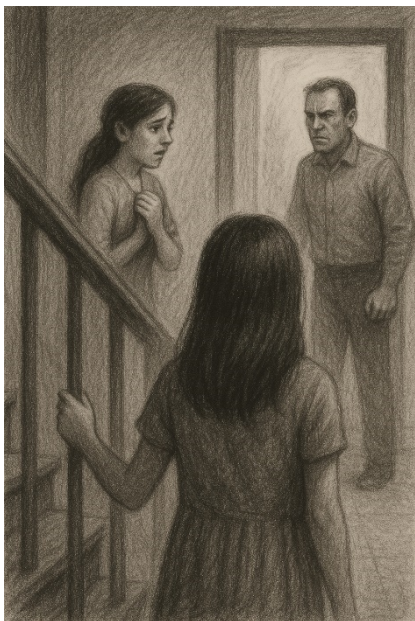
“I’m telling you the truth. He left the day before yesterday. It’s a short trip—he’ll be back soon.”

“He’s not even answering his phone. Sometimes it says it’s switched off.”

“I haven’t been able to reach him either. But don’t worry — once I speak to him, I’ll pass along your message. He’ll call you.”

“Make sure he calls. Otherwise, I’ll be back.”

Without waiting for a response, the man turned and walked away, leaving a heavy silence behind.



Nina gripped the railing tighter, a strange unease settling in her heart.

For the first time, she saw her mother lie — because she knew her father hadn’t gone anywhere.

He was hiding in the bathroom.

What frightened Nina most was the thought circling in her mind:

Why was Papa hiding in the bathroom? Could that man have forced his way inside and searched the whole house?

The idea alone sent a chill down her spine.

Polina — once shy and quiet — had stepped forward to protect her family.

And Svyomir — the strong one, the provider, the shield — had been forced to stay hidden, sending his wife out to lie on his behalf.

Something had quietly broken that day.

Svyomir, once the kind of man who rose with the sun, bathed without fail, and dressed immaculately even with nothing to do, had stopped caring for himself. Now he seemed to wrestle with the smallest of tasks.

A man once defined by pride now walked with a quiet bend in his spine, as if the weight of something unseen had settled there.

And the man at the gate was not the last.

Soon, each time the phone rang, a strange stillness took over the room. The color would drain from both Polina and Svyomir's faces, as if the sound carried truths they were trying hard not to face.

It had come to such a point that once Nina desperately wanted a Barbie doll. It cost only one hundred and fifty rubles, yet for a family like theirs, even such a small sum was a burden.

She clung to her father's sleeve, pleading, her voice trembling with stubborn longing.

"Papa, I want that doll... please. Look, she has sandals, and a little comb too."

Svyomir tried to reason with her, his voice calm but heavy.

"Kid, please understand — there is no money."

But Nina was still a child, and children know only one truth: desire. She stamped her little foot, her eyes glistening, her cheeks flushed with persistence.

At last, unable to watch his girl's heart break over such a small dream, Svyomir quietly borrowed fifty rubles from his younger cousin. He added the rest from his own meagre pocket, and placed the doll into Nina's hands.

Her eyes lit up like two stars, small and bright against the vast dark sky of their poverty. For her, it was not just a toy. It was love, it was triumph, it was her father's silent promise—that even in scarcity, he would fight to give her a piece of happiness.



The reason finally surfaced.

Svyomir had a business partner. Together they had secured a massive carpet order—large enough to change Svyomir's life. He had money, but not nearly enough to fulfill it alone.

The partner had said, "I don't have the funds either, so you keep seventy percent of the profit."

It sounded too good.

Trusting that promise, Svyomir took on a burden of eighty lakhs—without contracts, without paperwork, without safeguards. Just faith. Blind, hopeful, and ruinous faith.

He poured everything into the carpets—his time, his money, his pride. Each piece was made with the finest wool, rich in texture and unmatched in quality. This deal wasn't just business; it was his redemption.

Then came the call that undid everything.

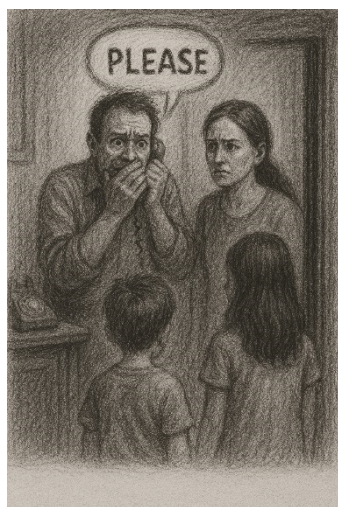
The client cancelled the entire order.

Nina and Kazimir were there when the phone rang.

They watched their father's face lose all color.

"Sir, I've taken loans... everything I have will be lost in the dust. Please, don't do this. I trusted you—that's why I never asked for documentation..."

His words, hurried and trembling, were met with cold silence. He spoke faster, trying to wedge his desperation into a crack of conscience. But the line went dead—and with it, everything Svyomir had.



The eighty lakhs had not come from a bank. Svyomir had borrowed from friends, acquaintances, even strangers who trusted his name. He knocked on every door for help. Relief came in bits, but never a rescue.

Then someone suggested, *"Move to Canada. You can earn well there. Clear your debts. Start fresh."*

Canada—a word that once irritated him—now became a duty.

It wasn't an escape. It was the only chance to repay every ruble and every promise.

But the agent brought hard news: only two visas could be arranged for now. The children would have to stay behind.

Polina was torn. She couldn't bear the thought of Svyomir struggling alone, yet leaving Nina and Kazimir behind felt unbearable. In the end, she chose to go with her husband, holding to the agent's assurance: *"You'll be able to call for the children in a year."*

They packed courage more than clothes—the strength it takes to walk away from your children, not out of choice but necessity.

To fund the move, the family home was sold. Vladimir took his share to buy his own place; Svyomir used his share for the journey. His mother chose to live with Vladimir. Svyomir already sensed that even if he returned, some truths would not change.



In those last days, Svyomir gave each child a simple phone for essential calls.

He held small family meetings, his voice steady but his eyes searching theirs.

“Nina, you’re a big girl now. Drive slow, always. And never, ever cross a red light in life – promise me that. Swear it on me.”

“Kazimir – your sister is your responsibility now. You have to protect her, no matter what.”

“It’s just one year,” he said with a brave smile. “Until then, keep loving each other. The moment we settle, we’ll call for you. That’s a promise.”

But behind those promises lay the kind of ache only distance can deepen.

On **1st May 2008**, the Varkov family broke in two.

Svyomir and Polina left for Canada, carrying dreams heavy with sacrifice.

Behind them, Nina and little Kazimir stood still, watching the only world they knew walk away.

No goodbye felt complete.

No hug was long enough.

They didn’t know that the next time they would meet, Nina would be a grown woman and Kazimir a quiet young man – and that Svyomir and Polina would also have changed, their smiles carrying more gray and more silence.



High above, beneath the serene blue sky, fate had already pressed ink to paper—writing a chapter none of them were prepared to read.

Chapter 6. The Whispers of Change



The winds had shifted in every direction.

In a foreign land, Svyomir and Polina poured every ounce of themselves into earning a living through sheer hard work, while back home Nina and Kazimir channelled that same relentless energy into savoring the fruits of newfound freedom.

The first change, even before the ordinary rhythm of *life goes on* could set in, was this: that morning, all of them woke up in different places.

Gone was the familiar voice of Polina calling,

“Nina, Kazimir, wake up—it’s morning. Say your prayers, then you can sleep again if you want!”

Gone too was Svyomir’s groggy call from the other room,

“Polina, make me a cup of tea.”

And equally missing was the soft whine of sleepy children begging,

“Mummy, just five more minutes.”

That silence hit all four of them in its own way.

The difference was—at that moment—they didn’t fully grasp the weight of it. Not yet.

Among the many changes, a few stood out.

Once neatly tied in a braid, Nina's hair—once loosened only on rare, impulsive evenings—now flowed freely every day, as if she were trying to follow a trend—perhaps discovering that beauty could lie in letting it loose.

And on the other side was Kazimir—once the brightest in his class—now beginning to fail his subjects. So much so that Nina had to go to his school herself, folding her hands before his teachers, begging them not to expel him.

Can you imagine?

This was the same Kazimir who once refused to eat until he'd finished an entire chapter.

Well, that was only the opening act. In the days ahead these kids were set to raise some serious ruckus—trouble had only just begun to knock.



There was another quiet shift. For the first time, people from outside the family began to step in. Some would grow impossibly close to the heart, while others would break it in ways they never saw coming. Whether gentle or cruel, each would leave a mark that never quite faded.

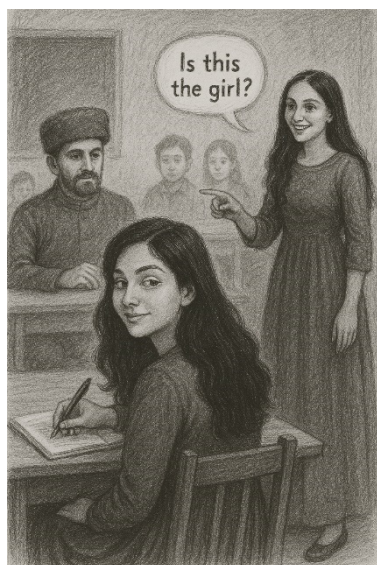
This, more than anything, was bound to weigh on Polina and Svyomir—still in a foreign land, without money or support, depending on distant phone calls and trust.

After passing ninth grade, and with her parents already settled in Canada, Nina started taking tuitions right there in Samara. And for the very first time, she earned herself a style point when her tutor's sister Masha walked in, glanced at Nina, and asked with a knowing smile,

"Hey, was it her parents who called from Canada?"

No doubt, Nina straightened her posture ever so slightly, as if her mind whispered a quiet, triumphant, *Oh yeah*.

Masha wasn't just another face in the crowd. She would go on to play a long and quiet yet powerful role in the Varkov family—especially in Nina's life. Remember the name; her presence was no fleeting detail.



Meanwhile, Kazimir's focus drifted further from his studies.

He was now so deeply caught up in roaming with friends that a school transfer was seriously considered. And his idea of *swag* had started sliding down a darker path—straight to the edge of alcohol.

As it so often does, it began with beer: a casual sip in the laughter of friends, a small thrill of rebellion. But that first sip was only the beginning.

Both siblings, Nina and Kazimir, were now living with Vladimir and his family: his wife Silviya, their eighteen-year-old son Mandrik, and twenty-one-year-old daughter Sevtlana.

Every month Svyomir sent money from Canada to Vladimir to cover the children's expenses – rent, groceries, and necessities.

Svyomir and Polina had left on a tourist visa, nothing more. Yet fate had worked in their favor. Just two days before their flight, the event on which their visa was based came to an end. But as if guided by something greater, they seized a new chance the moment they arrived, applying immediately for a work permit.

Big changes had quietly crept in.

Back in Samara, no one really pressed Nina and Kazimir to get up and go to school each morning. For the kids, it felt like freedom – fun, even. But in the long run, it was a quiet seed of trouble, already beginning to sprout.

Meanwhile in Canada, the man who once came home to the sound of children's laughter – Svyomir, who once sat cross-legged on the floor telling stories over warm meals – now returned each day to an empty house. The silence echoed louder than any words, chipping away at him slowly, quietly.

And Polina – the same Polina who once cooked with joy, carefully asking the children what they'd like to eat – now moved through the kitchen without that spark. Her hands still worked, but her heart wasn't in it.

Yet even then, she never forgot to look after Svyomir.

Some habits of love are harder to break than sorrow.

IN BETWEEN

A Message from Svyomir

My dearest Nina and Kazi,

I hope when you read this, the sun is rising over Samara and you both are still asleep, unaware that the world can be cruel. I imagine your faces — Nina's endless chatter filling the kitchen, and Kazi's quiet gaze pretending not to care but noticing everything.

Here, the mornings are different. No voices, no footsteps, only silence and the smell of unfamiliar air. When I step out for work, I carry that silence like a stone in my chest. Canada is not the land of fairies they promised — it is a land where your hands become rough, your back bends, and your pride must be folded away like an old coat. But I wear it anyway, because every coin I earn here is for you.

Do you remember the last story I told you, about the king and his parrot? Nina, I never told you the ending. I couldn't. Because the king loses his parrot in the end — and without it, he loses himself too. That parrot was his soul. You are mine. Even now, every night, I pray I will never lose you.

Kazi, you are the man of the house now. I know it is unfair — you are still a boy — but strength does not wait for age. Look after your sister as if she were me. You will stumble, you will cry, but each time you rise, remember: you carry my name, my blood, my pride.

I promised you both I would call within a year. God knows, I will break myself piece by piece to keep that promise. But

if time betrays me, remember this — your father did not leave you; he carried you across oceans inside his chest.

One day, when I return, I want to walk through the door and hear only one thing:

“Papa, you kept your word.”

Until then, stay strong. Stay together.

With every beat of my heart,

Papa

Chapter 7. Echoes from Montreal



The Varkov couple—who had weathered every kind of hardship back in Russia—knew better than to expect that a change of continent would suddenly change their fate.

Destiny wasn't the kind to turn kind overnight.

So, true to form, the moment they landed in Calgary and boarded their domestic flight to Surrey, life greeted them with another test.

Somewhere between airports, all their luggage vanished—misplaced in transit. For two whole days, they waited, weary and unsettled, with nothing but their hand baggage.

It almost felt poetic.

New country, same old luck.

Their belongings finally found their way back—but not before giving them a sharp reminder: Canada might be new, but struggle had travelled with them.

In Canada, Polina and Svyomir stayed first with her uncle's son and his wife in Surrey. Finding a home and a job right after arrival was nearly impossible, so they accepted the temporary shelter with humble gratitude, knowing it wasn't permanent but grateful for a start.

Reality, however, does not wait long to knock.

Among the belongings delayed and later returned from the airport was a small bag—nothing flashy, just a modest pouch holding travel documents, tickets, and most importantly, their passports. Svyomir had carried it himself. The bag made it from the airport to the cousin's home.



But it never made it down to their basement.

Gone.

And in a foreign land, losing your passport isn't merely inconvenient—it's a nightmare. Without identification, there would be no patient hearings or sympathetic nods. Just swift, cold deportation.

It wasn't lost on them that this wasn't an accident.

But Svyomir, ever cautious and maddeningly careful with important things, had thankfully kept the passports in his coat pocket that day—a habit born of long experience. That one small precaution saved their future.

So when the bag disappeared, the thief walked away with only a few boarding passes and personal items. The passports—thank God—were safe.

The real sting came later, when it became painfully clear who had taken the bag.

It wasn't a stranger.

It was Polina's cousin's wife—the same woman who had smiled at them as she poured their tea.

Svyomir chose his words carefully when he finally told Polina's cousin what had happened. He didn't raise his voice or accuse blindly. He simply laid out the facts, calmly but firmly. And the facts, unfortunately, were too sharp to ignore.

There was no room left for doubt: the way the bag had disappeared, the timing, the access—it could only have been her. Polina's cousin didn't argue. He didn't even try. He just stood there, stunned and silent. Somehow, that silence spoke louder than any defense. Because even though he didn't say it aloud, something in his eyes betrayed him.

Deep down, he already knew.

Svyomir, ever composed, chose grace over confrontation.

"Please," he said gently, "don't let this create conflict in your home. We were guests. I only felt it was important to tell you — because if our passports had been in that bag, the consequences could have been serious."

His cousin's face fell, guilt tightening every word.

"I'm sorry, brother. Truly. That you had to go through this under my roof. I'm ashamed."

Svyomir placed a hand on his shoulder with quiet finality.

"Don't be. Take care. And... thank you again."

And just like that, he closed the chapter—no bitterness, no revenge. He saw the incident not as betrayal but as a lesson. A rite of passage. Another face of *family* in a foreign land. Another mask revealed.

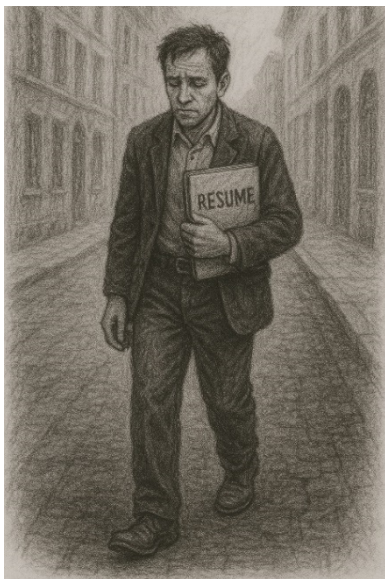
He filed it under:

Stage One: How Loved Ones Morph Abroad.

With that behind them, he redirected his energy to what really mattered—finding work.

Back home, Svyomir had been a man of stature, running his own business with pride. But here in Canada, he walked unfamiliar streets, résumé in hand, humility in his step.

Polina put her skills to the test, designing dresses on trial for one boutique after another, hoping someone would see her worth.



From self-made to starting over—it was a quiet battle neither had imagined but both now fought with all they had.

Because they were on a tourist visa and the work permit was still a year away, their choices were few.

Until then, they both worked under the table for meagre pay—Svyomir at a local factory, Polina at a boutique. It wasn't glamorous, nor entirely legal, but it was survival. And they clung to it with quiet determination.

Someone had once said that in Canada, if you seize the right opportunity and work hard, you will eventually earn well. Svyomir and Polina chose to believe it.

Svyomir grew especially content when he found steady work at a factory. There was a quiet pride in the way he left each morning, lunch packed and shirt neatly tucked. It wasn't the job itself—it was the dignity of earning again, the satisfaction of being needed, of building something from scratch in a land that didn't yet know his name.

The factory owner, Robik, and his brother Nikolai soon became close friends. Sometimes Svyomir joined them after work to unwind or explore. Once, they even took him on a cruise.

Noticing his silence on board, Robik asked, "What's on your mind, my friend?"



Svyomir replied with a faint smile, "I'd heard people call Canada the land of fairies... now I think I understand why. I feel like I'm sitting among them."

Robik laughed. "But there are fairies in Russia too, aren't there?"

"Yeah," Svyomir smirked, "but the ones back home never let me sit near them."

Classic Svyomir — never letting a moment stay dull for long.

Svyomir and Polina spent three months working in Surrey, and Polina earned a surprising amount during that time. She was, without a doubt, the leading lady of the family – and her story was only just beginning.

As a good friend, Robik advised the Varkovs to move to Montreal, Quebec, believing their chances of securing permanent residency would be much higher there.

Now you might be wondering why permanent residency was even on their minds.

The Varkovs understood one thing clearly: a work permit, once granted, would eventually expire. At most, they could expect three years. But within three years how could they repay loans, cover the children's expenses and school fees, pay immigration lawyers, and still save enough to restart life back home? It felt impossible.

Permanent residency itself wasn't their original goal. Instead, they planned to **pursue** it as a way to **buy time**—stretching their stay in Canada long enough to meet every obligation before deciding their next step.

For them, it wasn't about settling down.

It was about making sure every sacrifice—every mile of distance from Nina and Kazimir—would someday count.

Chapter 8. In la la land



In this whimsical La La Land, Nina could be seen gliding down the road on her brand-new two-wheeler—not the old, battered kind, but a sleek, shining vehicle gifted by her father.

Once a regular commuter on public transport, she now rode to school in style, turning heads as she passed. Whenever she descended beneath a flyover, she imagined herself moving in slow motion, like a heroine straight out of a film. In her mind, the world paused, and everyone's eyes were on her.

Not even the blazing heat of March and April could keep Nina indoors. While other girls on the street walked by covered head to toe in full-sleeve gloves and face scarves, she trusted her sunscreen alone, as if it were an invisible armor.



She moved as though she were starring in a fairness-cream commercial—one of those dramatic ads where a girl's complexion darkens from too much sun, only to be miraculously restored with a single magical cream. But in Nina's case, there was only a "before" and a "worse before."

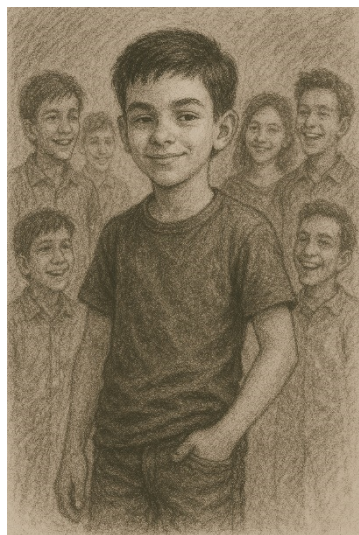
The promised “after” never came. Her complexion deepened with tan, yet nothing could stop her. Not the sun, not the stares – nothing at all.

With her own two-wheeler and a personal phone, Nina felt she had become an independent young woman. She moved through the world with a newfound sense of freedom and self-reliance. All that remained was for someone to show her what true independence really meant.

Meanwhile, Kazimir – our young hero – was busy living in a world of his own.

Among his friends, he carried a different kind of swagger now. The unspoken assumption hung in the air: *His parents are in Canada – he must be getting dollars already.*

Whoa, Kazimir, hold your thoughts. They had only just left. Money doesn’t start raining overnight. Yet, in truth, support from Canada was steady and decent. Vladimir received a separate allowance from Svyomir and Polina for the children’s upkeep, and the children themselves received a generous sum each month as pocket money.



But the way it was being spent told its own story.

Both siblings spent less on themselves and more on friends – clothes, gadgets, weekend hangouts. It wasn’t self-indulgence;

it was social currency, a quiet attempt to fit in and be seen as equals. The money wasn't just being used; it was being performed.

The moment Nina and Kazimir stepped into the world of unfamiliar liberty, they breathed in a breeze laced with an unspoken rule: impress others. And people, more often than not, try to impress just two kinds of individuals—superiors and bosses for work, or, as they grow young, members of the opposite sex.



In the dreamy world Nina and Kazimir were beginning to inhabit, this phase had quietly begun.

Kazimir, for now, remained largely untouched by this wave. But Nina—Nina was already drifting with the current. The influence was subtle but steady, taking root beneath the surface.

Nina was someone who led with her heart far more than with her head. Not that she lacked intelligence, but when it came to matters like these, logic rarely had a seat at her table.

She never quite realized when her innocent shyness around boys slowly morphed into something else—something more

self-conscious, more aware. She still felt the familiar flutter of nervousness when they were around, but now it was different.

This age — this new chapter of stepping outside her home — felt thrilling and liberating. She wasn't just nervous anymore; she was fascinated. The unfamiliarity of it all, the excitement of discovering herself beyond the walls of home, made everything feel fresh and, in a way, empowering.

And so, the journey of building Nina's confidence began at the very home where she attended her tuition classes. It was there, amidst books and whispered secrets, that something quietly transformative took root.

Now you must be wondering—what kept Nina out on the streets all the time? Neither the scorching heat nor sudden rains could drive her back indoors.

What was she doing out there, day after day?

Take a guess.

To Masha's house.

Yes—Masha. I told you to remember the name.

Chapter 9: Nina and Masha



Masha was three years older than Nina—a lively, fair-skinned girl standing five feet four, with a spirited charm that made people want to befriend her the moment she spoke.

She lived with her older brother and their mother, having lost her father to cancer in childhood. An elder sister was already married and living elsewhere.

Nina was fortunate indeed; the moment she stepped out of the house, she crossed paths with Masha—a chatterbox just like herself. It was as if fate had conspired to bring together two kindred spirits.

Masha was like a bird in flight—free-spirited, untamed, and impossible to hold down. She wasn't afraid of boys the way Nina once had been; in fact, she wasn't afraid of much at all. Like Nina, academics were never her strength—though Masha struggled even more.

Nina quickly became a fan of Masha. There was something magnetic about her—perhaps her sharp sense of humor, the way she made people laugh without trying. Whatever it was, it made Masha seem undeniably cool in Nina's eyes.

Wanting to be just as cool, Nina began to indulge in small follies—though, of course, she had no idea they were follies at the time.

On her way to college and again on the way back, she found herself at Masha's house. Sometimes, school was skipped

altogether. What began as a harmless detour soon became a daily habit, woven into her routine without permission.

Masha often tried to reason with her.

“Nina, this really isn’t right. You shouldn’t be skipping school. Come by after class – stay as long as you want, I don’t mind – but don’t miss school.”

Nina always had the same breezy reply:

“Okay, I won’t do it again. Now tell me – what’s for lunch?”

And just like that, the lecture dissolved into laughter and clinking plates.

Masha’s hand may not have been the most skilled in the kitchen, but her heart knew no such limitation. She still prepared warm, comforting meals and served them to Nina with genuine care.

Meanwhile, Nina carried on, unaware that her actions – like skipping school – would soon cast Masha in an unfair light in the eyes of her distant parents.

Masha’s brother was an excellent tutor, and under his guidance Nina began to show remarkable improvement in her studies. Boys also attended the tuition classes, and slowly her awkwardness around them began to fade.



She was starting to feel more confident — not just as a student, but as a young woman finding her own voice.

And remember that “money spending part”?

It was Masha on whom Nina longed to spend a share of her pocket money.

Masha, often troubled by the atmosphere at home, carried a quiet sorrow that didn't go unnoticed. More than once, Nina had seen faint bruises on her friend's face — unmistakable marks of violence. Masha confided that her mother had hit her during arguments.

The thought weighed heavily on Nina's heart.

Perhaps that's why she took it upon herself to keep Masha out of the house as much as possible. They spent long afternoons and evenings wandering the city — sometimes grabbing a bite to eat,



other times simply riding around, chasing freedom in motion.

Masha's home became an open sanctuary for Nina, a place where she was always welcomed at any hour. She often shared meals there, and over the course of time it began to feel more like her own home than even Vladimir's house.

Life at home wasn't easy for Masha either. Her family stretched what little they had with quiet resilience. But none of

it dulled her spark. She laughed loudly, lived boldly, and carried her struggles with a grace that made them almost invisible.

Her confidence had roots. Because her home doubled as a tuition center, she met new people every day. Exposure to different faces had given her the art of carrying herself in society.

But Nina had only just begun to taste the flavor of freedom, and for her, that environment could sometimes feel a bit too bold.

There was one more difference between them: an obsession with earning money.

Nina had never known real financial struggle, so money never thrilled her the way it did Masha. Masha, having seen scarcity, was determined to earn—not just some money, but a lot of it. Where Nina led with her heart, Masha had the rare ability to think with both heart and mind. That balance often gave Masha an edge—she could feel deeply, yet still choose wisely.

Masha had always been fascinated by tales of ghosts, spirits, and fairies. Her entire family firmly believed in tarot card readings and astrology. This became the first real influence Masha had on Nina.

Soon enough, Nina began looking for divine signs in everything—from a flickering streetlight to the timing of a simple message.

Chapter 10. Almost and Maybes



At Masha's house, the air felt different now — as if it carried the faint scent of love, drifting softly through every corner. And in that very breeze, Nina seemed to float along, her presence blending into the warmth of it all.

Of course, it wasn't really love. Just infatuation dressed up in soft-focus emotions. But for Nina, the dictionary of anything boy-related barely had another word.

If someone smiled kindly and called her over, that was it — her heart had a favorite new person. That's how things were starting to work in Nina's world.

But beginnings are rarely perfect. The first boy Nina ever talked to — hardly worth mentioning — proved that. Their phone conversations fizzled out within a week: short, secretive, and filled with the nervous energy of whispering under blankets and hoping no one walked in.

Yet what he did next is a story in itself.

The boy wasn't a close friend of Masha's special friend — more like a distant echo in that chain of connections.

From the first few harmless chats where Nina did most of the blushing and he did most of the complimenting, things seemed sweet. Until one day, he called and said:

"Oh, and listen... my phone's out of balance. Mind recharging it for me?"

Blush gone. Nina hesitated, then stammered,

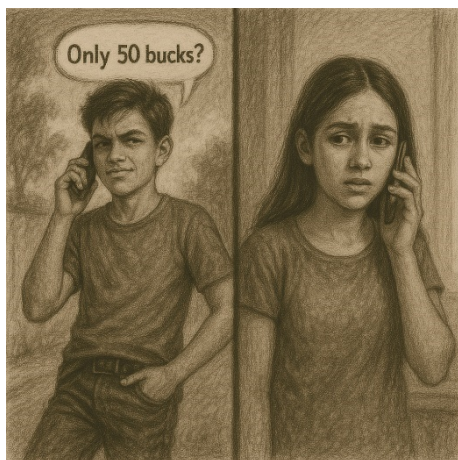
“Uh... okay.”

She sent a 50-ruble recharge. Moments later a call arrived:

“Hey Nina... just 50 bucks?”

And then the real twist: the recharge she’d paid for was being used to talk to another girl.

Our Nina had unknowingly funded someone else’s late-night love story. Tragic? Yes. Hilarious? Also, yes. If there were an award for *Most*



Unintentional Wingwoman via *Mobile Balance*, Nina would have won hands down.

Something clicked in her then. This boy wasn’t into Nina – he was into the foreign currency quietly arriving in her parents’ Canadian account. End of story. No heartbreak, just a hard pass on gold diggers.

These days Nina dressed for tuition as if dressing for fate itself. Who knew when, where, or how a real love story might begin? A little mascara, a hopeful heart, and just the right outfit – just in case destiny decided to show up.

There was another boy – one of Masha’s close friends Lyubuslav – whom Masha genuinely hoped would suit Nina. For a short while it seemed promising: a few phone calls, shy

exchanges. But soon he showed a side that was anything but charming. Possessive. Controlling.

The butterflies fled.

Then came the final straw.

In a surge of rage, he smashed Nina's brand-new phone and struck her face.



A man's touch, even in jest, can sting. This was no jest. It was anger, sharp and unforgettable.

Masha, who was right there, didn't let it continue. She stepped in, stood firmly by Nina's side, and ended that chapter immediately and permanently.

Some stories don't need happy endings—they just need good exits.

So one ordinary afternoon, Nina was over at Masha's place. The two of them were in the kitchen—Masha scrubbing dishes like a woman on a mission, while Nina stood nearby, offering absolutely no help, just emotional support and commentary.

Suddenly, a phone rang from the other room.

Masha: "Nina, can you check who it is? If it's Baldwin, just pick up and tell him I'll call back once I'm done washing these. Thanks!"

Nina nodded and began the long, dramatic journey from the kitchen to the room—her mind already racing through possible plots.

Could he be her boyfriend?

No wait, she already has a boyfriend... Kevin. Whom she was very serious about. Must be a friend, then. Whatever.

She reached the phone and picked it up.

The name on the screen blinked: Baldwin.

And just like that, a new chapter was about to begin.

Nina: "Hello?"

Baldwin: "Masha?"

His voice was deep—surprisingly deep. The kind that didn't just speak, it echoed.

For a second, Nina felt like she was on the phone with a retired gangster or the voiceover artist for a mafia documentary.

Still, keeping her tone polite and sugary-sweet, she replied:

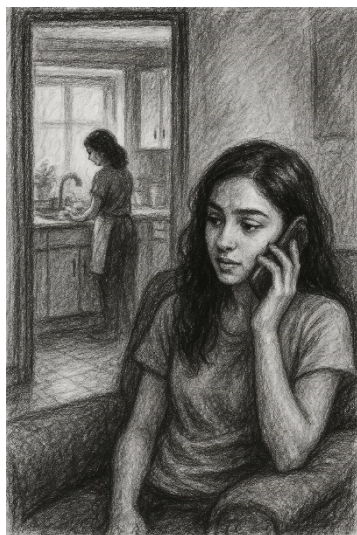
Nina: "Oh no, it's Nina. Masha's doing the dishes—she'll call you right back!"

Baldwin: "Alright. Okay."

That day, something about Nina's soft, sweet voice must have left an impression.

Because the moment Masha called Baldwin back, his very first question wasn't about the usual stuff.

Baldwin: "Hey... who was that girl who answered your phone?"



Masha, casually scrubbing the last of the plates, replied without much thought,

“Oh, that’s Nina. She takes tuition from my brother.”

There was a small pause on the other end. Then Baldwin said, almost thoughtfully,

“Her voice... it was really nice.”

And just like that, something had shifted.

A single sentence, a single voice, had sparked a new curiosity.

After that one phone call, Baldwin’s curiosity turned into a quiet obsession.

Every time he called Masha, there was a Nina-question waiting in line.

“Nina didn’t come for tuition today?”

“Oh, she did? Where does she live?”

“What does she do?”

At first, Masha laughed it off.

But eventually, it started getting on her nerves.

Baldwin had clearly shifted from casual interest to full-blown Nina-tracking.

Then one day, he happened to see a photo of Nina with Masha—a simple picture.

Nina in a traditional black attire, her hair tied back in a neat ponytail.

That was it.

The image sealed the deal.

From that moment on, Baldwin relentlessly started asking Masha for Nina's number.

Pleading, pestering, practically campaigning for it.

Finally, one day—more out of irritation than agreement—Masha gave in.

She sent Baldwin the number, but deleted it immediately after, hoping to keep things under control.

But Baldwin?

Baldwin was no ordinary suitor.

He had the memory of a spy and the speed of a quiz show contestant.

He'd already memorized the digits before Masha even hit delete.

After all, chances like these don't come twice—and Baldwin wasn't the type to let one.

Baldwin didn't waste a single moment.

The number was fresh in his memory, and so, without overthinking, he dialed.

Nina was at Vladimir's house when her phone rang—an unknown number flashing on the screen.

She hesitated for a second, then picked up.

Nina: "Hello?"

Baldwin: "Nina?"

The voice on the other end tugged at her memory.

She was trying to place it – because that voice wasn't the kind you forget easily.

Deep, deliberate, almost cinematic.

Still, the last thing she expected was for Baldwin, Masha's friend, to be on the line.

Nina: "Who's this?"

Baldwin: "It's me – Baldwin. How are you?"

Nina: "Oh... hi! I'm good. How are you?"

Baldwin: "I'm good too. I came across your number and thought I'd give you a call. Hope that's alright?"

Nina: "Yes, but... I'm at home. Not at Masha's. Is she not picking up your calls?"

Baldwin: "No, no – I actually called to talk to you."

Nina: "Oh! Okay..."

There was a brief pause.

Then, in that deep, composed voice of his, Baldwin said something that landed straight in Nina's chest.

Baldwin: "Nina, your voice... it's really beautiful."

Boom.

Heart explosion.

Nina's heart did a full cartwheel.

Not the cute butterflies kind – this was more like a full-on jungle stampede charging through her stomach.

She smiled – a big, goofy, blushy smile – totally forgetting he couldn't actually see her through the phone. But still, somehow, she smiled like he could.

Baldwin: “Nina? You still there?”

Nina: “Y-Yes! Yes, I’m here. Thank you...”

And just like that, something moved in the air again. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just... quietly electric.

The very next day, Nina couldn’t hold it in—she told Masha everything.

The call, the compliment, the smile she had tried to hide from her own phone screen.

But for the first time, Masha didn’t seem as excited as Nina had expected.

In fact... she seemed a little irritated. Not angry, exactly.

Just off, like she didn’t love the idea of Baldwin calling Nina out of the blue.

She brushed it off as concern. Maybe she was just being protective. Maybe she didn’t want Nina getting involved with someone too quickly. But if it was truly about concern— Then why was Masha still talking to Baldwin herself?

And more importantly, why did she seem... bothered?

Baldwin wasn’t even Masha’s boyfriend. That title clearly belonged to Kevin—the same Kevin Masha would take detours for, circling his street, dragging Nina along like a willing accomplice, all for a single glimpse.

So what exactly was the problem with Baldwin and Nina talking?

Nina couldn’t quite put her finger on it—but something about it didn’t sit right.

Love had finally cast its first real spell on Nina.

The late-night conversations with Baldwin became her new favorite ritual —

hours slipping by like seconds, whispers turning into laughter, and laughter turning into quiet silences that said more than words ever could.

Somewhere deep down, Nina knew she was crossing a line — going against Masha in a way she never had before. But surprisingly, Masha didn't protest. Maybe she had already come to terms with the fact that Nina and Baldwin were no longer just "talking." They were something more now. Something that didn't need labels but was definitely real.

Baldwin lived in a small village near St. Petersburg. The two of them had never met in person. All they had was a single picture of each other — one blurry snapshot to hold on to, to imagine, to daydream around.

And yet, somehow, it was enough.

Each day, they were growing into each other's routines. Each night, they were becoming a little more addicted to each other's voices.

They hadn't met.

They hadn't touched.

But they were slowly, sweetly... falling.

And then, finally — they decided to meet.

Chapter 11. A seat at our table

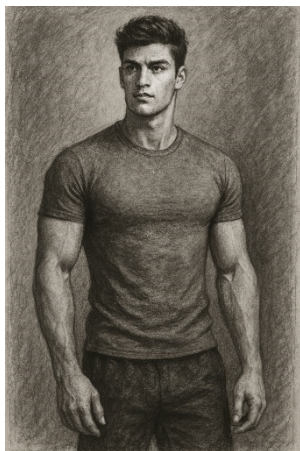


Life in Samara flowed like a lazy summer river. The air carried a gentle spark; hearts were lighter, and no one asked too many questions. No overbearing parents, no strict rules—just enough freedom for love to bloom quietly in coffee shops, college corridors, and under sunlit skies.

Couples were forming like puzzle pieces. But no, this isn't yet about Nina and Baldwin. They were still cities apart. The decision to meet was only a plan scribbled in hope, not yet lived. Their story was still warming up.

Remember Polina's uncle's son—the one who, when Nina was born, kept tucking the blanket around her tiny feet? His name was **Shaul**—tall, charming, six-foot-two, with the easy presence of a movie hero.

He and his younger sister **Juliana** often visited Samara during festivals, treating Vladimir's home as their second house.



Shaul and Juliana had weathered their own storms early. Their mother died of cancer when they were young, and their father slowly faded into emotional distance. They grew up fast,

carrying responsibilities without letting the world see the weight.

Samara was their breath of air—a place to laugh, talk, and simply be. Among the shared stories and laughter, a quiet spark grew between **Shaul** and **Sevtlana** (Vladimir’s elder daughter). Casual conversations turned into lingering glances until affection deepened into something more.

Shaul admired Sevtlana’s balance of warmth and willpower—her traditional soul paired with modern ambition. She was serious about her MBA, commuting daily to another city for classes, and her calm strength drew him in.

Back in St. Petersburg, Shaul told Juliana everything. Together they approached their father, who—despite a distant relationship with his children—approved the match without hesitation.

“A good girl,” he said with quiet satisfaction. “Someone who knows how to manage a home.”

The proposal reached Vladimir, who thoughtfully phoned Svyomir in Canada. Svyomir hesitated, concerned that Shaul’s income was modest, but he didn’t refuse. Meanwhile, Sevtlana herself had already chosen. For a daughter so dutiful and reserved, that quiet certainty



spoke louder than any argument. Her parents understood. The match was set.

The house bloomed with joy. Phone calls between Shaul and Sevtlana turned from small talk to wedding colors and plans for a shared life.

While love was pouring down in one corner of the family, another space held drought. **Masha's relationship with Kevin** was crumbling. Where she gave her all, he offered only crumbs. Watching Masha dim day by day hurt Nina deeply.

When the breakup finally came, it wasn't dramatic—just a heavy silence. Through it all Nina stayed close, joking, planning small outings, doing anything to keep Masha from sinking. Because sometimes you don't need a solution, only someone who stays.

Yet Nina sensed something unsettled behind Masha's quick smiles. The laughter came a little too easily, the brightness never quite reached her eyes. To lift her spirits, Nina filled their conversations with stories of St. Petersburg—about Shaul and Juliana—sprinkling cheerful gossip like confetti.

Then a thought lit up Nina's mind: **take Masha there for real.** Juliana's birthday was coming; it was perfect—a change of scenery, a break from Samara's heaviness.

Masha's family hesitated but finally agreed. Nina's relatives were harder to convince—sending an unmarried girl to her soon-to-be brother-in-law's home felt improper. But Nina's excitement was unstoppable. Soon she and Masha were on their way.

Shaul and Juliana welcomed them warmly. Four days in St. Petersburg passed in laughter and late-night talks. Nina returned sun-kissed and full of memories, their friendship tighter than ever.

Back home, the three girls—Nina, Masha, and Juliana—kept up their bond through long group calls, with Shaul occasionally dropping in with his trademark humor. All felt light and easy until, a month later, Juliana phoned with news: she had fallen from her two-wheeler and injured her arm.

Masha reacted instantly.

“Nina, I think we should go. Juliana might need help.”

Nina asked Juliana directly and heard only reassurance. School had reopened, and she doubted her father would permit another trip.

“She’ll manage,” Nina said gently.

Masha hesitated, then let it drop.

The next day Masha didn’t appear before class. Worried, Nina asked Masha’s brother where she was.

“She left for St. Petersburg this morning,” he said. “Juliana called for help.”

The words stunned Nina. Questions crowded her mind—Why hadn’t Juliana asked her? Why hadn’t Masha told her? But Nina, true to nature, stayed silent. Confrontation wasn’t in her. When Masha returned, she simply said it had been an emergency. Nina only nodded.

“Okay,” she replied softly.

One ordinary afternoon Nina came home from tuition to an unexpected scene. The private drawing room was filled: Vladimir stood tense, Sevtlana wept on the couch, and Silviya's eyes blazed.

"Well, are you happy now? You've ruined my daughter's home!" Silviya burst out.

Nina froze.

"Aunty? Why is Sevtlana crying?"

Silviya's voice cut sharply.

"Shaul called. He wants to end the engagement."

Nina stared in disbelief.

"But what happened?"

"Ask your Masha," Silviya shot back. "She's been to St. Petersburg three or four times behind your back."

The room spun. Masha hadn't told her. Not once. Nina tried to call—ring after ring—but Masha didn't answer. The silence felt like confirmation.



Silviya's final words burned in the air:

"Let your father call—I'll tell him everything."

Nina barely heard. She looked at Sevtlana, whose sobs seemed endless, and felt something inside her crack. Whether Masha

meant to or not, something had shifted, and Nina's trust along with it. The thought echoed, heavy and relentless:

Not even once did Masha think what this would do to me – how they would see me now.

Chapter 12. No sanctuary left



It all began at Vladimir's house.

Vladimir, a doctor by profession, was a man of practical habits. He knew how to earn money—but spent it with a grimace. Over time, that trait began to weigh heavily on the household atmosphere.

Tensions were already simmering. Many relatives still hadn't forgiven Svyomir for leaving for Canada without a word. They whispered behind his back, *"He could've at least told us. It's not like we'd have dragged him off the plane."*

Perhaps they wouldn't have dragged him—but their bitter eyes might have stolen his luck before he ever took flight.

Now came Vladimir's constant complaints about money—petty squabbles over every expense. All of it reached Svyomir across the ocean and wore him down. Should he focus on earning, argue with his elder brother about costs, or worry about how his children were being raised back home?

Earlier, when news of Nina missing classes reached him, Nina would reassure her father, *"Papa, trust me—nothing is going on, not the way people are saying about Masha."*

But after Sevtlana's engagement collapsed, every rumour grew sharper. Nina couldn't find the words to answer her father's questions. Her tuitions were stopped.

The phones fell silent. Shaul and Juliana no longer called.

The echoes of those days refused to fade.

A few days later, a call came from one of Nina's aunts on her mother's side.

"Hi Nina! Congratulations!" the woman chirped.

"Congratulations? For what?" Nina asked, puzzled.

"Your uncle just got married!"

"Which uncle?"

"Shaul."

"Shaul? Uncle Shaul?" Nina's heart skipped. "To whom?"

"For heaven's sake – your friend Masha!" the aunt said with a laugh.

No one had told Nina. Not a single call. Not a single word. Yet – God knows why – she had expected they might.

The mood at home had already grown heavy, and this news only deepened the silence. No one said much, but their eyes said everything.

That night, long after everyone had gone to bed, Nina stirred and noticed something unusual – Svetlana wasn't in bed. Quietly, she checked the bathroom. Empty. She tiptoed through the house. Still no sign.

Panic rose. Svetlana was already fragile, and if someone else woke and found her missing, things would explode. Nina grabbed her phone and whispered, *Pick up... where are you?*

On the second ring, a broken voice answered. “On the top terrace... the highest one...”



Nina raced upstairs. The sight froze her.

Sevtlana stood under the moonlight, crying uncontrollably—and hitting her own head with a brick.

Nina rushed forward. “Stop it, Sevtlana! Please stop!”

“I told you not to take Masha there. I warned you!” Sevtlana shouted through tears.

“I know I was wrong! But

drop the brick first!”

When pleading failed, Nina did the unthinkable—she slapped her. The sound cracked through the night. Sevtlana froze, and the madness ebbed. Nina pulled her into a tight embrace. Both wept.

A month passed. Outward calm returned, but tension lurked.

One quiet afternoon, Nina was on the living room floor watching TV. Silviya sewed nearby. The door clicked open—Sevtlana returned from college, tossed her bag, and without a word snatched the remote.

“What are you doing?” Nina asked.

“I want to watch TV,” she shot back.

"I didn't say no. Just wait—this Hannah Montana scene is almost over."

"I don't care. You're home all day — why didn't you watch it then?"



What began as a small squabble turned into a tug-of-war. Sevtlana shoved Nina; Nina shoved back. Sevtlana stumbled and fell against Silviya's sewing machine.

No one was hurt. But it was enough. Both mother and daughter erupted.

"You should've just given her the remote!" Silviya snapped. "You have no sense at all!"

When Nina tried to explain, Silviya's next words cut like ice:

"You should be ashamed. And to think we've let you live in this house, cared for you like our own! This is how you repay us?"

For the first time, Nina felt it fully — this was never her home. Tears blurred her eyes as she stepped away.

That evening she waited for Vladimir, hoping he would listen and make things fair. But when he arrived and gently asked what was wrong, Sevtlana's sharp voice rang out, "Look, she's running to Papa with her sob story!"

Silviya added coldly, "Let her. Say whatever she wants."

The words dissolved on Nina's tongue. The hope of being defended quietly died.

That night she made a decision: she would leave.

She told her father everything. For the first time, Svyomir felt truly helpless. From thousands of miles away, he could do nothing. So he quietly arranged for Nina to move in with his sister Harita, a short distance away.



No drama. No confrontation. Just a silent act of care.

But Harita's small home had only two bedrooms. Nina's new "room" was a faded floral sofa in the drawing room—a sofa that once belonged to her own family, passed down when Svyomir sold the house.

Strangely, Nina settled in without complaint. Maybe because the furniture still carried the scent of home.

Around this time, Mandrik—Svetlana's brother, working as a chef in Dubai—heard that Nina had moved out. Furious, he ordered his mother and sister to bring Nina back. They came, but Nina refused. Mandrik had clearly taken her side, and she wouldn't let that cause further rifts.

Nina began visiting the temple morning and evening. For a few days, life grew calm.

But calm never lasts.

A small conversation between Harita and Svyomir soon spiralled, and by the end of it Nina had left that house too.

There was no home left for her in Samara.

With no other option, Svyomir and Polina decided to send Nina to her younger uncle's home in St. Petersburg. Kazimir refused to leave; his life of friends and freedom kept him rooted.

And so Nina departed Samara alone—sixteen years old, carrying more memories than belongings, and more silence than certainty. She had no idea that the city awaiting her would shape her into the woman she would one day become.

Meanwhile, a different thread pulled at her heart.

Nina and Baldwin were still in love, still waiting for the day they would finally meet. And now she was headed to **St. Petersburg**—the very city where Baldwin lived.

Chapter 13. First light in St. Petersburg



St. Petersburg.

A city that wears the elegance of a former empire—grand palaces, golden spires, and poets carved into its stone. But by night, it sheds that aristocratic grace and pulses with life. Neon spills across Dumskaya Street where music thumps from basements and bars stack like Tetris blocks. Rooftops hum with laughter under the midnight sun, and the White Nights blur the line between evening and dawn.

It's a city where artists, dreamers, and night owls meet—dancing in abandoned factories turned clubs, sipping cocktails in secret speakeasies, or drifting along the canals with a bottle of wine and nowhere to be. A city where love stories can collide out of nowhere.

Nina, sixteen and a half, left Samara quietly and tearfully—without telling Baldwin. She wanted to surprise him, to just appear in front of him and watch his world light up. What she didn't realize was that Samara, with all its heartbreak, had been a strange kind of blessing. Every twist and fracture had steered her exactly here. Straight to him.

As the train sped toward St. Petersburg, excitement outpaced her nerves. She whispered to herself, over and over: *How will I look at him? What do I say? Hi? Hello? Oh, this is crazy...* The rush of new love drowned out every other worry.

When she arrived, she called Baldwin immediately. No answer. *Maybe he's busy*, she thought, still smiling. She took a cab to her uncle's house, where her uncle, his wife, and their daughter welcomed her warmly. It felt safe—at least for the first night.

While she was unpacking, Baldwin's name finally lit up her screen. She grabbed the phone.

"Guess what, Baldwin?" she began, beaming.

But it wasn't Baldwin.

"Hi Nina," a gentle voice said. It was his brother, Saulja.

Startled, Nina asked, "Why are you calling from Baldwin's phone? Where is he?"

"I called to tell you," Saulja said softly, "we don't know when Baldwin will be able to call you again."

Her heart dropped. "What do you mean?"

"Baldwin got into serious trouble," Saulja explained. "The opposition party was preparing to file a case against him. Things got dangerous. We had no choice but to send him to the UK."

Nina's voice trembled. "He left... and didn't even tell me?"

"I'm sorry," Saulja said. "I'll be joining him in a week and will make sure he calls you. But I can't share his number right now. Before I leave, if you want to give him a letter or something personal, I can carry it."

Shock and confusion swirled through Nina. The boy she'd planned to meet was suddenly gone.

What Saulja didn't say outright was what Nina eventually pieced together: Baldwin's father—a police officer once

respected and feared—had shot a man during a heated argument. The act, though in self-defense, was caught on video and went viral. The dead man belonged to a powerful opposition group, and the old feud had now turned toward Baldwin. Leaving Russia had been the only safe choice.

The Baldwins had a mixed family history—an old foreign surname tucked into a very Russian life. Days passed in a haze of new-school admissions, migration papers, and long commutes. Through it all, Nina carried a quiet hope: that Baldwin would somehow call. Instead of complaint, she chose patience.

Determined to send him a small piece of herself, she wrote a brief note and bought a key ring:

I've left Samara, Baldwin. I'm in St. Petersburg now. I miss your voice. Please call me.

Love, Nina.



When Saulja called again to say he was flying out the next morning, Nina asked him to take the letter and key ring. They met in a crowded market. She'd only seen a photo—Baldwin and his brother didn't look alike, though their voices felt strangely similar.

Saulja greeted her warmly, his manner full of quiet respect—as if, in that single look, he acknowledged why his brother had cared for her. He promised to deliver her message and hugged her briefly, a silent pledge that Baldwin would call.

But as Saulja's car disappeared into the evening, Nina felt the weight of distance all over again. The only thread that connected her to Baldwin had just driven away.

Life settled into a new rhythm—school to home, home to school—each day carrying the same silent hope that her phone would ring.

Then came a surprise call from Juliana.

"I heard you've moved to St. Petersburg," she said warmly. "Come visit sometime. Oh—here, talk to Masha!"

Hearing Masha's voice brought back flashes of happier times. Neither of them mentioned the painful fallout in Samara, as if the past had been quietly sealed away.

Later, when Nina told her parents about the call, Polina began to think aloud. Perhaps Nina could live with Juliana and Shaul. It would solve the long school commute and give her steadier surroundings.

Svyomir hesitated. "Masha is living with them. You know what happened."

Polina answered gently, "This is about Nina's safety and schooling. Let's not get personal."

After careful discussion with Shaul—and with Masha helping arrange practical details—the plan was set.

Nina packed her things once again and moved in with Juliana, Shaul... and Masha.

Chapter 14. Dark Joke



If there was one thing that gave Nina a sliver of comfort amid Baldwin's sudden departure to the UK—and her own reluctant move into Shaul and Masha's house—it was the news that Kazimir too was shifting to St. Petersburg.

And truth be told, there was nothing wrong with Shaul and Masha asking for their share.

In times like these, with rising costs and growing responsibilities, no one expected them to feed and house two growing teenagers for free. The rent and monthly contributions from Nina and Kazimir helped ease household expenses, which made practical sense.

Within a week the siblings were settled under the same roof again.

On the surface, everything looked ordinary—young cousins laughing, teasing, and trading old jokes. Nina, outwardly at least, had made peace with Masha. But two quiet burdens still pressed on her.

First, the house itself. Shaul and Juliana's home no longer felt like the carefree place she had visited during school holidays. Now the whole rhythm of life seemed to move to Masha's beat, and the lightness Nina remembered had dimmed.

Second, Baldwin still hadn't called.

Nina kept her days steady—school, chores, quiet evenings—until one afternoon her phone lit with an unfamiliar UK number.

She didn't freeze; she flinched. Not from surprise, but from a dangerous flicker of hope.

What if it's Saulja? And what if he's calling only to end something I'm not ready to lose?

Her thumb hovered, heart racing. Then she answered.

"Hello?"

A beat. Then a voice she knew by heart: "Hi Nina! How are you?"

The warmth, the slight rise on her name—it was him. Baldwin.

Relief flooded her, spilling out as quiet, shaking sobs.

"Baldwin... where were you? Why didn't you tell me? I waited..."

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I had no choice. Things at home were dangerous. I had to go."

They spoke until her tears eased. "You'll call every day now?" she asked, half-plea, half-hope.

"Yes," he promised, then teased, "Saulja told me you look even more beautiful than your photos."

Nina blushed in spite of everything. Yet beneath the warmth she sensed a hesitation she couldn't name.

When she suggested a video call, Baldwin gave a rueful laugh. "You know I've never done that. I'll just keep calling, I promise."

And for a while he did. With Kazimir close again and Baldwin's voice steady in her evenings, Nina felt life beginning to flow more easily.

Then, one quiet night, his voice changed.

"Nina," he said, "I love you... and I want to marry you."

Her heart lit up. This was the love she had dreamed of since childhood—pure and forever.

"I love you too," she whispered.

But Baldwin's next words tightened the air.

"Before we go further, promise you'll listen to everything. Please."

"I promise," she said quickly.

"When we first talked," he began, "I wasn't serious. It felt like timepass. But somewhere along the way I fell in love. I never meant to hide, but..."

He hesitated. "The picture you've seen of me—that isn't me. And my name isn't Baldwin."

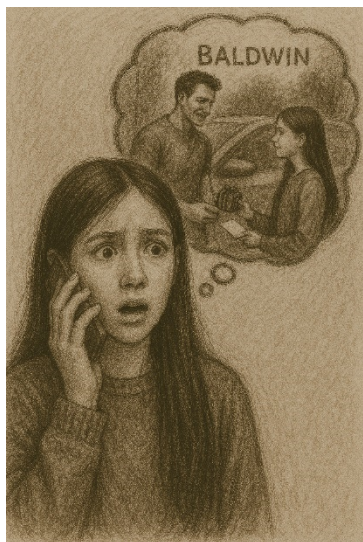
Silence roared in Nina's ears. "What...?"

"My surname is Baldwin. My real name is Saulja Baldwin," he said, voice low.

In a flash the puzzle fit together—the familiar voice at the market, the single meeting that never quite matched the photo. There had never been two brothers. From the very beginning it had always been one man, one voice, one long lie.

"The man I met in the market... was that you?" she asked, each word a tremor.

"Yes," he whispered.



Her breath caught. "It's over, Baldwin... or Saulja... or whatever your name is."

"Nina, please," he pleaded. "I told you the truth because I want to marry you. Let me prove my love. I was afraid to undo the lie."

But trust had already cracked. "I don't even know what name to call you anymore," she said.

"Then call me Saulja—and meet my father. I've told him everything. If I were still lying, I'd never let you meet him."

Despite herself, Nina agreed to meet this father, who was in central jail. She went with Kazimir and Saulja's real brother, Markian. All through the visit she wondered why she had come, and how furious her own father would be if he knew.

With Markian's police contacts, the visiting pass came through by afternoon

Inside, the man who greeted them hardly looked like a prisoner. Crisp shirt, polished shoes, a gentle smile. He welcomed them with such courtesy that Nina almost forgot the iron gates around them. Before they left, he handed her an envelope marked **Blessings**—a silent, unconditional acceptance.

But she kept the truth to herself.

Back home, she confided everything to Saulja over chat: every small slight, every hidden pain from life in Masha's house. Those private words became her only safe space—until Masha took her phone, read every message, and turned their private jokes into poison.

One teasing line—*What if my family doesn't agree? I'll fight them for you*—was repeated as proof of danger.

The story raced across oceans, stripped of context.

By the time it reached Svyomir in Montreal it sounded like open rebellion. Rage overtook him.

Nina tried to explain, "Papa, I'm sorry... it isn't what you think—"

But his anger broke through:

"Now I understand why people are disappointed when a daughter is born."

The words hit harder than any slap. In an instant she remembered every time he'd called her his pride, every evening he'd waited for her stories. The contrast cut deep, leaving a wound beyond apology.



That day her heart broke twice — once for her father's sentence, and again for the trust Saulja had betrayed. She ended the relationship. No meeting, no final talk — just silence.

All of it—the Samara storms, the unraveling with Saulja, the bitter household tensions—happened inside **six relentless months**.

Half a year had carried enough upheaval for a lifetime, and it left Nina changed: quieter, older, carrying lessons she had never asked to learn.

Life under Masha's roof went on, outwardly calm but inwardly cautious. She and Juliana spoke less, each unsure who might unknowingly carry their words back to Masha. And somewhere in that uneasy stillness, Nina's childhood finally slipped away.

Chapter 15: Behind the Red Curtains



Through all the struggles of love, life, and endless family squabbles, After the storms of love and family tensions in St. Petersburg, Nina found herself reaching for something steadier—a place where the stage, not the past, could hold her heart. The day finally arrived that everyone had feared—**1 May 2011.**

Three full years had passed since the family split in two, yet there wasn't the faintest sign of reconciliation.

Still, the Varkovs consoled themselves with the same line: *It's okay... maybe next year for sure.*

Then everyone quietly resumed driving the vehicle of life forward, as if nothing had changed.

But time does not stand still.

Everyone needed something to hold on to—something to do, even if it meant choosing paths a little off-beat.

For Svyomir and Polina in Canada, there was only one constant task: to earn. That was their rhythm, their routine, their survival.

The children, though, had time on their side. And with time came choices. They had the luxury—if not of stability, then at least of curiosity.

Each of them reached for something that might make the days move faster.

Nina had always loved stories, but no one expected how far that love would carry her.

She first joined the school's theatre club, winning third place in the annual festival.

Still, she wanted more – a stage larger than school could give.

One evening she picked up the phone, heart pounding.

Nina: "Hello... greetings, Papa!"

Svyomir: "Greetings, Nina. How are you, love?"

Nina: "I'm fine, Papa. I actually have a request. Do you remember the annual fest? Our team came third!"

Svyomir: "Oh wow, that's great!"

Nina: "Thank you, Papa. So... our theatre teacher says I should join her professional group. May I?"

There was a pause. When Svyomir spoke again, his voice carried exhaustion more than anger.

Svyomir: "Nina, don't do this, please. Don't test my limits right now. The more I ask you to stay away from trouble, the more drawn you seem to be towards it."

Nina: "Please, Papa. I only want to do it for passion. Just as a hobby. I promise I won't ask for anything else."

Svyomir: "Nina, I know you. You won't stop once you begin."

Nina: "I swear I will, Papa. 101 %."

Another pause.

Svyomir: "Hmm... okay. But be home before 7 p.m. No staying out late. And do not tell anyone your parents are in Canada."

Nina: “Okay, okay, Papa. Done! Thank you so much!”

With that call and a promise, Nina stepped into a world she had only dreamed about.



Her public debut came with **The Proposal** by Anton Chekhov.

Backstage, just before the curtain rose, she felt as though every word of the script had evaporated—even the play’s name.

The smell of old paint and warm lights, the rustle of costumes, the muffled buzz of the waiting audience—all swirled around her.

During one crucial crying scene, she had to dab glycerine into her eyes, but in the rush she poured too much.

On stage her eyelid refused to open, and it looked as if her character was winking through the entire speech.

The audience laughed in delight, thinking it was clever acting.

After the show, people even came backstage for selfies—everyone wanted a picture with the *“girl who cried and winked at the same time.”*

The nervous start, the unexpected comedy, the roar of applause—

that night sealed Nina’s bond with the theatre.

Life soon took on a new rhythm.

She would enter the rehearsal hall at **8 a.m.** and emerge only around **7 p.m.**, her textbooks mostly untouched.

To focus, she invented her own ritual: an hour before each show she put away her phone and refused to speak, letting her chosen character slowly take over.

It was as if several personalities lived inside her, ready to step on stage the moment the curtain lifted.

Her troupe loved her energy but teased her mercilessly for speaking too fast.

Sometimes audiences missed entire lines, and the the director fined her for every muddled dialogue—a playful ‘penalty’ common in Russian student troupes.

By evening, those collected fines turned into a communal tea fund —

a running joke that made the long days lighter.

Nina played everything: a dutiful daughter, a sharp-tongued servant, a rich old man’s young wife, a disfigured woman, a narrator who stitched the story together — even three different characters in a single play.

Each role sharpened her confidence until she could carry a solo performance alone.

When her troupe staged **Mother** by Maxim Gorky, they needed more actors and invited students from the M.A. Theatre Department.

Among the newcomers was **Maksim**—5 foot 4, neat beard, quick smile.

He wasn’t a love interest; he would become the best friend she hadn’t known she needed.

Their very first scene together required improvised worker chatter while waiting for the judge:

Maksim: “Hello, I’m Maksim.”

Nina: “I’m Nina.”

Maksim: “So, how’s everything going?”

Nina: “Good! And how’s the family? When’s your birthday?”

The entire conversation, complete with hand gestures and whispered tones, made it look like the workers were seriously discussing the heavy tax burdens.

But what no one knew was that here, right then, a strong and special friendship was quietly beginning.

Maksim: “27 July.”

Nina: “That’s coming up! Party time!”

Maksim: “Yeah, definitely!”

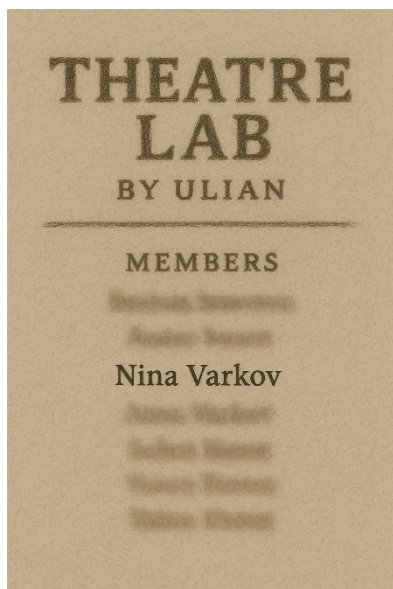


Suddenly, they both realized what they were saying, lowered their heads, and struggled to hold back their laughter – while the audience thought they were deep in discussion about taxes.

From then on, rehearsals and snack breaks were rarely without each other.

Her first guides were **Sofia and Levina**, the formidable women who led the group and championed bold, woman-centric plays.

But they were possessive of their students, reluctant to let anyone work outside their circle.



Nina, ever the free spirit, eventually joined **Theatre Lab**, led by **Ulian Sir**, who heard a single audition line and immediately trusted her with a lead role.

Under him, she discovered a deeper discipline and an even stronger love for the craft.

Svyomir's early warning—*"you won't stop once you begin"*—proved prophetic.

Soon Nina was acting in short films and cameo roles in local

films, eager to learn everything.

Then came a bizarre twist:

during a high-profile robbery in the U.S., newspapers accidentally printed her photograph instead of the actual suspect, because the culprit happened to resemble her.

For the first time Nina found herself in a courtroom, filing a defamation case—only to discover her lawyer had secretly sided with the other party.

And in another incident, she endured harassment from a well-known artist.

The stage had opened doors, but it had also exposed her to the world's rough edges.

Yet nothing could erase what theatre gave her:

a soaring confidence, the ability to improvise when a scene faltered, and friendships that felt like family.

Applause was sweet, but even sweeter was the heartbeat of creation itself—

the quiet just before lights rose, the collective breath of actors about to leap into a story that would exist only once.

Behind the red curtains, Nina's life moved at full pace.

Every play, every late rehearsal, every curtain call became proof that she was no longer just a girl finding her voice.

She **was** her voice—strong, unafraid, and impossible to silence.

And though no one knew it yet, this theatre journey was only beginning.

What started in 2010 would continue, on and off, well into the next decade—shaping Nina's art, her friendships, and encounters she could not yet imagine.

Somewhere in those future years, beyond the lights and scripts, life was quietly preparing another kind of stage.

Chapter 16. In the Garden of Friendship



Friendship – the most beautiful bond in the world.

That year, both Nina and Kazimir made some truly wonderful friends –

the kind that didn't just fill time, but added meaning to it.

Like Maverick and Goose, Timon and Pumbaa, Marlin and Dory, Shrek and Donkey... and now, Nina and Maksim.

What began as a quiet friendship onstage slowly made its way offstage – into homes, into hearts.

Their bond grew so naturally that before anyone realised, both their families knew: there was someone named Nina in Maksim's life, and someone named Maksim in Nina's.

A friend – yet clearly, something more than just that.

They were inseparable. Everyone knew – wherever there was Nina, Maksim wouldn't be far behind. And if Maksim was around, you could be sure Nina would appear somewhere close, like a constant shadow of comfort.

Their presence in each other's lives had become so natural, it was hard to imagine one without the other. The two of them were just one call away.

Nina had introduced Maksim to everyone at home – Masha, Juliana, and Shaul.

And so, it became a quiet routine: Maksim's evenings belonged to Nina's house, where tea was always brewing and his presence was no longer that of a guest, but of someone expected.

Someone who belonged.

These years—roughly 2012 to 2014—were a season of widening circles.

By now, Nina's contact list on her old phone kept growing like a small city: theatre mates, new actors she met at rehearsals, friends of friends who soon became friends themselves. Every few weeks a new name blinked on the screen, and every name seemed to carry a little story.

For Svyomir and Polina in Canada, life was different. Still shifting between Surrey and Montreal, they met new people but avoided deep attachments. Each hello was warm, but brief; they knew a second move was coming and didn't wish to weave ties they'd have to untie.

Kazimir, meanwhile, was building his own crew in St. Petersburg.

Miran, Pavel and Yegor—school friends who would later become his college mates—were now fixtures of his everyday life. They explored the city's food stalls, shared headphones on late-night buses, and swapped more jokes than homework.

Inside Nina's theatre life, the friendships were as lively as a garden after rain.

There was **Kerina**, passionate about acting and already sure she'd make it her career.

Valeria, from a scholarly family, was polished and witty; she once even played Nina's father-in-law in a comedy that left everyone in stitches.

Glafira, a classmate with unforgettable curly hair, balanced brilliance in academics with warmth in friendship.

And **Lidiya**, the senior whose admission to school had been secured mostly because she could win theatre competitions.

The four of them—with Nina as their spark—were inseparable, a down-to-earth circle that refused to fade. They even had their own WhatsApp group, *Happy Friends*, where birthday plans and rehearsal gossip flowed late into the night. Every September 24 and 25, Kerina and Nina celebrated their back-to-back birthdays together, cutting one big cake for two big days.

Through Maksim, Nina's circle widened further.

She met **Arseny** and **Mark**, his childhood friends who soon began dropping by like family. (Secret aside: for a brief spell, Mark and Masha had a quiet fling, the kind people only whisper about years later.)

There was also **Patricia**, an actor from another theatre group, who admired Maksim perhaps more than she let on.

Evenings often stretched into long, laughter-filled hangouts. Some nights they rehearsed till late; other nights they strolled the Neva embankment, warming their hands on paper cups of tea and sharing stories no audience would ever hear.

Maksim lived with his mother and father just a few streets from Nina.

His mother was a homemaker; his father worked as a clerk in a government bank. Two elder sisters, both married, adored their cheerful youngest brother.

If humour were a superpower, Maksim owned it.

He could turn the dullest rehearsal into a comedy sketch, mimicking everyone – from stern directors to the neighbour’s grumpy cat – with perfect timing. He loved clean clothes, good food, and the quiet of evening prayers. And he had one pet peeve that made everyone laugh: *never cut his phone call mid-sentence*. Either let it ring or pick up and say you’re busy – but do not cut. That tiny beep drove him crazy.

Graduation was beginning for him, but he made time for every rehearsal, every late-night tea plan.

Dogs adored him. Parents of friends trusted him. He was the kind of person who somehow became everyone’s favourite without trying.

And to Nina, he was the most natural part of daily life. Not a single day passed without at least one long phone call between them. If a call ever went unanswered, it felt as though the day itself was incomplete.

Yet even gardens hold their secrets.

Sometimes, after a long rehearsal, Maksim grew unexpectedly quiet, lost in thoughts he never explained. Once or twice, he skipped their nightly call, sending only a brief *Busy today*.

They joked about it, but the memory lingered like a faint shadow on a bright lawn.

Nina hardly noticed. For her, this friendship was a given, as steady as sunrise.

To everyone around them, their banter and tiny quarrels were like wildflowers—blooming through every season, untouched by frost.



Those were years when friendship itself felt like a warm, walled garden.

Every laugh and late-night walk planted roots that Nina believed nothing could shake.

She and Maksim teased, argued, and laughed until tears came—but no matter what,

everyone knew the truth: Nina and Maksim's bond would last forever.

Or so it seemed.

For now, the garden of friendship bloomed in full colour—each friend a different shade, each memory a petal waiting to be pressed into time.

Chapter 17. The Price of Starting over



From the very start of 2012, while Nina's life in St. Petersburg was blooming with friendships and theatre lights, her parents were carving out a very different journey across the ocean. The Varkov couple packed up their modest life in Surrey and moved east to Montreal—a city of stone churches, cobbled streets, and winters that felt like a challenge issued straight from nature itself.

The first months were pure grind. Svyomir and Polina filed their work-permit applications and then worked as though the permits had already arrived. Anything that earned an honest dollar, they took.



Polina stitched together long days like a quilt: food-packaging shifts one week, sales shifts the next—sometimes so far from home that she needed two buses, two trains, and a long snowy walk just to reach the shop door.



When she finally returned at night, she would sit at her little sewing machine—bought from her own savings—and hem neighbours' clothes until midnight.

Svyomir was no less relentless. One month he was folding pizza boxes in

a factory, the next he was hauling and hammering for a fencing company, sweating in the humid summers and freezing through the minus-thirty nights.

There was no glamour in it. Just quiet, stubborn work—done with a steadiness that needed no applause.

Despite oceans of distance, the family knot never loosened. Nina would sometimes call between rehearsals just to say, "Papa, I made it home



before seven, promise!" Kazimir sent quick notes about school matches and new friends—Miran, Pavel, and Yegor—little updates that travelled like postcards of everyday life.

Svyomir listened, smiling into the phone even when his hands ached. "Study well," he would say, "and take care of your sister," as if those words could cross continents and wrap the children in a coat of protection.

By late 2013 the long wait ended. Their work permits were approved.

The effect was immediate. Imagine two people who had already been earning decently without papers suddenly able to work freely. Svyomir wasted no time: he passed his driver's test on the first attempt and began long-haul trucking trips across Canada's endless highways. With legal pay and overtime, the family's old Russian debts started melting away. Tuition money for Nina and Kazimir was sent on time.

For the first time since leaving Samara, life didn't feel like a desperate sprint. It felt — strangely — like balance.

But peace, too, carries a hidden cost.

Polina had always brushed aside her thyroid issues, and when her weight began creeping up she blamed it on hormones and long winter nights. She was sure menopause had begun early. Doctor visits in Canada were expensive, so she postponed and endured — until her knees throbbed and exhaustion made each shift feel twice as long.

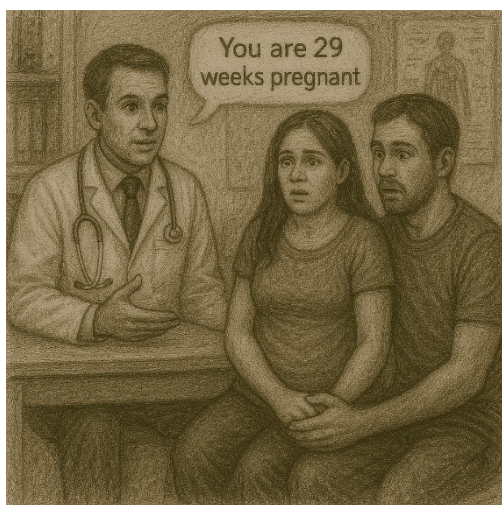
At last she went to the hospital.

The doctor returned with a look that made the room tilt.

"It isn't thyroid trouble," he said gently. "And it isn't menopause."

Polina gripped Svyomir's hand, bracing for anything but what came next.

"You are twenty-nine weeks pregnant."



For a heartbeat the world stopped. Twenty-nine weeks. Almost seven months.

They stared at each other—speechless. In their forties, thousands of miles from their grown children, after years of nothing but

work... a baby?

The doctor's words kept echoing, as if the room itself was repeating them.

Polina let out a trembling breath. "How... how did we not know?"

Svyomir could only shake his head, half in shock, half in awe.

They left the hospital in silence. Outside, Montreal's winter air felt sharper, the snow whiter, as though the world itself had shifted a little.

Polina finally whispered, "We crossed an ocean to pay debts, not to start over."

Svyomir's hand tightened around hers. "Maybe life decided otherwise."

Neither spoke after that. The night around them was calm, but inside, a hundred new questions stirred—how to tell Nina and Kazimir, how to begin again when they had only just found balance.

Above the quiet streets, the sky hung low and full of unspoken promises.

Something entirely new had already begun.

Chapter 18 Love and Lullabies



2014 and 2015 — years that felt like a roller-coaster for the Varkov family.

For some, it was an emotional whirlwind. For others, a fluttery, butterflies-in-the-stomach kind of chapter. And for a few, downright awkward.

But don't trouble your mind, dear reader — I'll tell you exactly who felt what.

This wild ride began with one unexpected loop: **the news of Polina's pregnancy.**

The news landed like a wave of embarrassment between the couple.

Polina sat still, eyes heavy with worry.

Polina: "Svyomir... we've made a huge mistake."

Svyomir: "Poli, it's alright. We'll get through this — together."

She shook her head, voice barely a whisper.

Polina: "It's not just about us anymore. What are we going to tell the children? How will we even begin to explain?"

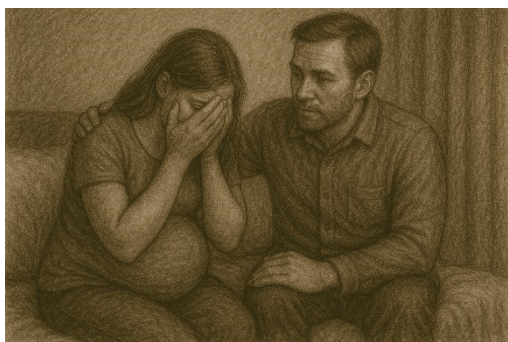
Svyomir's gaze dropped to the floor.

Svyomir: "I don't know, Poli... I truly don't. But one thing I do know — whether they understand or not — I'm with you. Every step of the way."

Even his steady reassurance couldn't quiet the storm inside her.

What would Nina and Kazimir think? Would they be disappointed, even resentful?

No matter how tightly she clung to Svyomir's words, the fear refused to leave.



Polina felt as if she were betraying her own children — those for whom she had once left everything behind.

Would this baby stretch their already fragile love too thin?

After countless sleepless nights and silent tears, she made a decision that demanded everything from her.

She told Svyomir — gently but firmly.

And, in time, he understood. He stood beside her. No matter how hard it was.

Abortion.

At seven months.

A choice no parent ever dreams of making — and a risk every doctor dreads.

The very next day they went to the doctor.

But in a country like Canada, where even a simple prescription requires strict checks, how could a seven-month pregnancy possibly be terminated?

Polina began to panic more. Her fear wasn't just for herself — it was for what people would say.

What would relatives think? Would the children feel abandoned?

Svyomir took her hands.

Svyomir: “Poli... I'm happy about this pregnancy. I only hesitated for their sake — and for yours. But now forget everything. Let's have this baby.”

Polina: “No, Svyomir... what are you saying? Just... no.”

A darker thought flickered: Mexico.

She could go there quietly and end the pregnancy.

Svyomir turned pale.

Svyomir: “Poli, no! Have you lost your mind? This can't happen. I won't let it.”

Polina's voice cracked.

Polina: “Do it for me. If the kids start hating us... I won't survive that. I can't live with it.”

He held her shoulders, steadying her trembling thoughts.

Svyomir: “Poli, we haven't even spoken to them yet. And we're already assuming the worst. They're our kids. They'll understand. Talk to Nina. She will understand.”

Polina sat still, the storm inside her slowly quieting.

She took a deep breath, picked up her phone, and called Nina.

With every ring her heartbeat raced — a part of her hoping Nina wouldn't answer.

But she did.

Nina: "Hey Mum, greetings! How are you?"

The sound of her daughter's voice made Polina break. Tears spilled before she could speak.

Nina: "Mum? What happened? Is everything okay? Why are you crying?"

Polina: "Nina... I'm sorry. We're sorry."

Nina: "Mum, what's going on?"

Polina: "I made a mistake... a terrible mistake."

Nina: "Please don't scare me. Just tell me what happened."

Polina drew a deep, trembling breath.

Polina: "Nina... I'm pregnant."

A pause — long enough for every fear to rush back.

Nina: "What???"

Polina heard only alarm, but she missed the warmth behind it.

Nina was not horrified — she was happily surprised.

Polina: "Before you say anything, please hear me out. I know this was a blunder, but baby, I'm going to fix it..."

Nina: "Mum, Mum — there is nothing to fix!"

Polina: "...What?"

Nina: "For the first time in so many years, I've felt real happiness. I'm happy, Mum."

Polina blinked, stunned.



Polina: “But no, Nina — love will be divided. I can’t do this. I’m going to Mexico in a few days.”

Nina: “Mexico? What for?”

Polina: “For an abortion. It’s not possible here in Canada.”

Nina’s voice sharpened.

Nina: “Mum! No... What are you saying? You don’t want the baby? That’s okay — just give birth and send the child to me in Russia. I’ll raise the kid. But please, please don’t even think of doing something so wrong.”

Polina: “What will Kazi say? What will the relatives think?”

Nina: “I don’t care. I’ll answer them all. You don’t have to explain anything to anyone. From now on, if anyone questions you, just tell them—‘Talk to Nina.’ And Kazi—he’s your son. He will understand. If not today, then someday.”

Her voice softened.

Nina: “But please, Mum... I’m so happy. Let me handle Kazi. You just focus entirely on yourself now. How long until the delivery?”

Polina’s mind echoed with Svyomir’s words: *They’re our kids, Poli. They will understand.*

And in that quiet moment, she finally believed it.

Polina: “Nina... thank you so much. I love you.”

Nina: “I love you too, Mom. Now tell me—how much time is left?”

Polina: “Two more months... Are you sure about this?”

Nina: “I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.”

Then, like a burst of sunlight, she squealed,

Nina: “Just two months?! Ahhhh!”

Her excitement wrapped Polina in a warm, steady promise.

Hearing Nina’s sudden cry, Masha and Shaul rushed in.

Masha: “What happened? Is everything okay?”

Nina: “Yes! I’m going to be a sister again!”

That day, Masha and Shaul were genuinely happy for Nina — not out of politeness, but with true, heartfelt joy.

For the first time in weeks, Polina exhaled a breath that felt like peace.

Polina’s fear, however, proved partly true — at least with Kazimir.

He couldn’t accept the news. He stayed silent, but his unease was obvious.

Given his age, it wasn’t hard to understand.

In the warmth of anticipation, two months passed — and then some.

But joy soon gave way to worry. The time had come, yet there was no sign of labor.

Doctors admitted Polina and induced artificial pains.

Then, without warning, her thyroid flared badly. Her body, once glowing with life, trembled under pressure.

What was supposed to be a moment of arrival turned into a storm.

For Svyomir it was torment: watching the love of his life slipping away.

Then — Polina's heartbeat faltered and stopped.

Time fractured.

He stood frozen, his worst nightmare playing out wide awake.

Doctors pressed on her chest, calling her back. He couldn't move; he just stared at the terrifying stillness.

And then — a flicker. A beat. Her heart stirred again.

In those breathless seconds, Svyomir had already followed her in his mind, willing to go wherever she went.

Finally, on **28 January 2015**, the sun broke through.

From behind the long-standing clouds of fear came a sound that changed everything —

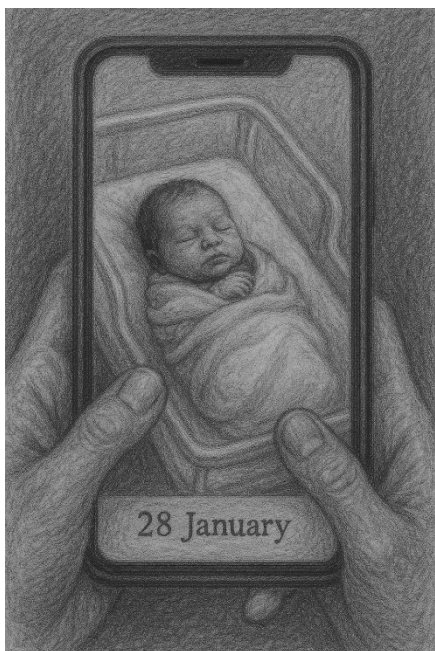
a soft, trembling cry.

A boy.

In that single, tear-soaked moment, the weight on their hearts began to lift.

The storm hadn't vanished, but for the first time in months, there was light — a quiet miracle wrapped in soft cries and tiny fingers.

The news sped to Russia. Nina received the first photo — her baby brother, eyes barely open, snug in hospital blankets.



A message followed: *Feel proud — you're now the sister of not one, but two brothers!*

Nina's smile wouldn't stop. Distance dissolved.

Yet gossip arrived almost as quickly.

People questioned motives — PR? Pills? A late-in-life whim?

When Polina shared these stings with Nina, Nina simply said,

"So what? Whether it was for PR or with the help of medicine — the child is still yours and Papa's."

And there was the twist: Polina's divorced sister, already a mother of two, rushed to an orphanage to adopt a baby boy — proof that in their society, a son still felt like an upgrade.

Svyomir answered the whispers with dry wit.

Svyomir: "If you people aren't romantic, how is that my fault?"

Boom. End of discussion.

Polina and Svyomir told Kazimir gently.

He listened but sent no excitement back — no questions, not even a curious emoji.

To his friends he simply said, *“It’s my cousin... my parents adopted him.”*

Not the whole truth, but the only way his young heart knew how.

Somewhere deep down, it stung his parents. Yet they knew: he wasn’t rejecting the baby. He just needed time.

Meanwhile Nina planned her own little celebration.

She showed up at rehearsal with a box of sweets.

Nina: “Have some sweets, everyone! I’ve become a sister — my little brother is born!”

The cheerful ones cheered. Others whispered, puzzled by her openness. Nina ignored them.

Her celebration lasted two days — first with her theatre group, then with Juliana, Shaul, and Masha.

Kazi, unsurprisingly, wasn’t on the guest list.

As the four of them were on their way, Shaul mentioned he needed to stop by and meet a friend — someone who owned a coffee shop nearby. He also fancied grabbing a quick cup of coffee. So, they took a brief halt. Shaul led everyone inside the café, saying it might take a little while. His friend, it turned out, was still tied up in a meeting.

Nina (checking the time): “Uncle, how long will it take? We’re getting late.”

Shaul, already at the counter: “I’ve placed the coffee order. Just need a quick word with my friend, and then we’re off.”

Nina: “Alright.” With nothing much to do, Nina wandered over to a shelf and began examining the neatly arranged coffee jars. Just then, a voice called out from behind — warm, casual.

“So, my friend, tell me — what can I do for you today?”

It was someone speaking to Shaul, in a tone far too friendly to ignore.

And there he was — A Guy Named Amos.

Chapter 19 Him

A five-foot-eleven man with a long, perfectly sculpted face and a neatly trimmed beard framing his sharp jawline stepped forward —

as if entering the scene in slow motion, like an actor making his mark.

It was the kind of entrance that starstruck everyone.

He stood with quiet confidence, hands gently clasped in front of him — not trying to be noticed, yet impossible to ignore.

There was a stillness about him, the kind that drew you in, like the hush just before rain. With the utmost politeness, he asked Shaul his question — his voice smooth, deep, and measured.



It wasn't loud or commanding, yet it carried a certain weight, if every word was carefully placed, meant to be remembered.

There was grace in his tone, a kind of unspoken warmth that left echoes long after he'd fallen silent.

And that was it.

For Nina, time seemed to hold its breath. The clinking of cups, the low hum of the café, even Masha's voice faded into the

background. It wasn't anything dramatic — no soaring music or sudden gusts of wind. Just the soft certainty that something had shifted within her. Love, unexpected and unmistakable, had arrived.

Perhaps that halt on the way to the party was written in the stars — destined by fate itself.

It was as if life had quietly decided to gift Nina a chapter of shy glances and secret smiles.

A time when her heart would flutter without reason, and her solitude would be filled with the soft echo of his memory.

Just when Nina's life was settling into a rhythm where lullabies played softly over phone calls, the season of love began to bloom once more — this time, with a quiet grace, love started to turn its gaze kindly toward her again.

As if the universe, in its gentle wisdom, was ready to let her heart feel full once more.

Amos. Amos. Amos.

There was something undeniably captivating about that name.

Each syllable seemed to linger, settling somewhere deep in her without her even realizing it. Amos carried a kind of presence that was difficult to ignore — he didn't just draw attention; he seemed to slow the air around him.

Tall, self-possessed, and effortlessly composed, he gave the impression of someone who never had to try too hard. His navy shirt fit neatly against his frame, his trousers sharp and deliberate, and the trimmed beard only added to the quiet confidence he wore so naturally. Even the way he stood —

steady, measured, almost calm to a fault—made it difficult to look away.

But it wasn't just appearance. It was the way he spoke, the warmth behind his eyes, and the rare gentleness in his tone. There was no arrogance, no performance, only a respectful ease that lingered in memory long after the moment passed.

Perhaps Amos hadn't even noticed her that day—not really. But for Nina, something had shifted. Her heart, without hesitation or reason, had chosen him.

When she left the house that evening for the party, she was simply herself—unaware, expectant in the ordinary way. The girl who returned later, however, was not the same. Something inside her had shifted quietly, irreversibly. And the reason had a name: Amos.

Even at the party, Amos's name kept coming up — casually, in the middle of conversations — but every mention seemed to mean something. Masha and Shaul spoke about his work with quiet respect, and each time someone brought him up, Nina felt a little pull toward him.

It wasn't dramatic, just a growing sense that she was meant to pay attention. She listened more closely than she realized, smiled more than she meant to, and with every word about Amos, it felt like the universe was giving her a quiet nudge — telling her it was okay to feel what she was feeling.

And before she knew it, February had passed.

The days melted into each other,
filled with soft thoughts and quiet moments.

Nina found herself thinking about Amos often, a mix of curiosity and something more. At the same time, little Kazimir was dealing with his own kind of excitement — and confusion.

“Should I tell my friends I have a new baby brother? And if I do... how do I explain it?”

So the days moved on, filled with silent thoughts and small questions — nothing too loud, but meaningful just the same — until the month came to a quiet end.

During the month of February, Nina accompanied Shaul to Amos’s office a couple of times — two, maybe three — but one visit stood out more than the rest. It was the day Amos brought home a dog.

That shaggy little creature had completely stolen the spotlight, and Nina, utterly charmed, decided she would sketch a picture of Amos and his new four-legged companion.

Ah, love — doesn’t it make artists out of us all? And our Nina has already been the one. Nina poured her heart into that drawing. What she didn’t know, however, was that her innocent little masterpiece would, through mysterious and mischievous means, somehow land in Amos’s hands.

And history, as it tends to do, would record the moment quite differently —

marking it as the day Nina unofficially, unwittingly, and unintentionally proposed. After all, if a man discovers that a girl likes him enough to draw his portrait —

sketching him with such quiet admiration — how could he possibly not respond with a spark of warmth?

Amos didn’t wait long. In his usual quiet way, he extended an invitation for coffee. Officially, it was for all of them — Shaul,

Masha, Juliana, and Nina. On paper, just a casual outing. But everyone knew, in the unspoken way friends often do, that the invitation was really meant for one person: Nina.

No one teased her. No one said anything at all. Just quiet smiles and knowing looks. The universe, and perhaps Nina's racing heart, were the only ones who understood what the day truly meant to her.

As the hour approached, she stood in front of the mirror, nerves humming beneath her skin. Her palms were cool, her breath quick with anticipation. She wanted—needed—to look her best. Not for compliments, not for attention, but for him. So that when Amos looked at her, really looked, he would see her.

She chose a soft floral blouse paired with her best-fitted jeans, her hair left open with a loose clip to one side. A touch of makeup—light, understated—and her favorite low-heeled shoes completed the look. That day, she didn't just want to be beautiful. She wanted to be beautiful in his eyes.

The café was a cozy spot called Coffee Room Street. On the surface, three friends—Nina, Juliana, and Masha—were heading out for a simple coffee. But for Nina, the walk there carried the weight of something more.

The short journey felt strangely uneven—long, because she had been waiting for this moment for weeks, rehearsing conversations in her head, picturing how it might go. And short, because each step left her less time to check her hair, adjust her blouse, or smooth out the delicate makeup she'd already perfected twice. She caught her reflection in every passing window, running her fingers through her hair, silently

hoping the moment would hold still just long enough for her to feel ready.

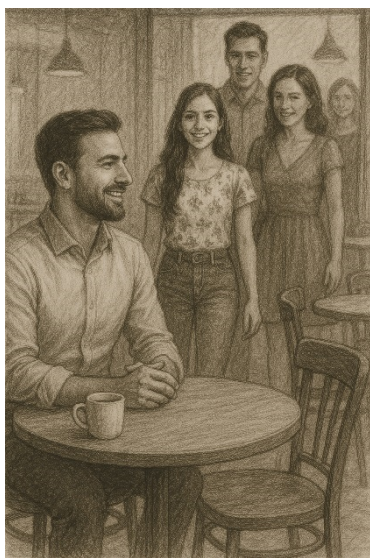
To anyone else, it was only a walk to a café. To Nina, it felt like the start of something she had been waiting for without even realizing it.

Shaul reached the café first and pushed open the door. The small bell above gave a soft chime. In the far corner sat Amos. He wore a striped hoodie in blue and black, paired with black jeans—effortless, casual, yet striking. He had claimed the corner booth like it belonged to him, sitting with a quiet confidence, clearly waiting.

It was obvious he was there for her. And as Nina stepped inside, the room seemed to shift around that one truth. For a moment, nothing else mattered.

As soon as Amos saw them walk in, he rose from his seat—calm, polite, composed. But his eyes went straight to Nina and didn't leave her.

The café wasn't large, yet the short walk from the door to his table felt stretched under that steady gaze. Each step seemed slower, her heartbeat quicker. Her heels clicked softly against the floor, but it was the nervous rhythm inside her chest she noticed most. She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. There was something in the way he looked at her that unsettled her thoughts.



Amos, for his part, never looked away—steady, focused, as if the rest of the room didn’t matter. In those few seconds, between entering and sitting down, something passed between them. Quiet, warm, impossible to put into words. It wasn’t dramatic, but it left its trace.

Once they were seated, Nina slowly found her balance again. Her breathing eased, the color in her cheeks softened. Thankfully, she wasn’t alone with him. If it had been just the two of them, she wasn’t sure she could have handled it. Shaul and Masha carried the conversation forward, lightening the mood.

And Masha—whether she meant to or not—did something remarkable. She slipped little compliments about Nina into the conversation. Nothing exaggerated, just genuine things—how thoughtful she could be, how graceful she seemed, how creative she was. Nina absorbed every word quietly, her smile carrying more gratitude than she could say. By the end of it, her heart had forgiven Masha completely.

Orders were placed. Everyone picked their favorites. Amos ordered a double-shot black coffee. Strong, direct, uncomplicated. It suited him perfectly, Nina thought. She herself wasn’t much of a coffee drinker, but watching him choose so easily, she found herself thinking, *Maybe I should learn to like it.*

The evening unfolded gently—stories shared, laughter rising, mugs clinking on the table. Amos and Nina didn’t talk to each other directly, not once. And yet, their presence moved around one another in a way that didn’t need words. Subtle but unmistakable, as though they already belonged to the same story.

By the time they left the café, the sky had turned violet, wrapping the night in a kind of quiet closure. Goodnights were exchanged, everyone heading toward their cars. Shaul's car hadn't even left the parking lot when Nina, chin resting against the window, let her mind wander back inside.

The sound of laughter, the glimpses she'd stolen, the depth of Amos's voice—already her memory was pressing replay, again and again.

That's when Shaul's phone rang.

AMOS — the name lit up the screen like a plot twist.

Masha picked it up with a cheerful, "Yes, Amos?"

On the other end, his voice was soft, unheard—but whatever he said had Masha responding in hushed, excited little nods and "yes... yes... okay."

Covering the speaker with one hand, she leaned over to Shaul, eyes gleaming, and whispered just enough for both of them to hear,

"He's asking... if he can drop Nina home."

At that exact moment, Nina's head whipped around with cartoon-worthy speed—**What?**

Amos asked that? Himself?

Her brain froze for a second.

Me? Alone? With Amos?

Shaul, bless his calmly amused soul, simply smiled and said,

"Ask Nina. If she's okay with it, I've got no problem."

Nina, despite the full-blown thunderstorm swirling inside her—heart racing, nerves tingling, butterflies staging a

parade— somehow managed to answer with all the calm in the universe:

“Okay.”

And just like that,

Masha turned back to the call and said, with a smile curving in her voice:

“Okay, she’s coming.”

And the stars above might’ve twinkled just a little brighter that night.

In her head, Nina was already spiraling.

Oh dear God, she thought, are we replacing butterflies with a full-blown stampede tonight? Is that what we’re doing now?

Trying her best to swallow down the waves of shyness rising in her throat, she quietly stepped out of Shaul’s car and began walking toward Amos’s.

Each step was stitched with a hundred thoughts—

Is my makeup still okay?

Can he still smell the perfume I wore?

What will he say? What will he ask?

What on earth will I talk about?

Her heart was doing somersaults, her mind whispering rehearsed lines and backup plans, but her feet kept moving, almost on their own.

She reached the car, took a soft breath, and gently opened the door.

The moment she slipped into the passenger seat, it hit her.

Ah, she thought, so this... this is what Amos smells like.

It was warm and clean, with the faintest trace of coffee and something unmistakably him—a scent so familiar and new at the same time, it wrapped around her like a quiet song. His back seat was full with large coffee jars.

And in that small, enclosed space—shared between two racing hearts—Nina realized something.

She wasn't nervous because she was afraid.

She was nervous because... this mattered.

As the drive continued, conversation flowed as effortlessly as the passing streetlights.

They spoke of little things and big things—

Nina told him about her parents, their lives in another country, and her quiet love for theatre, the stage that always felt like home.

Amos shared glimpses of his business world, the long hours, the risks, the quiet victories.

And then, in the middle of it all, they stumbled upon something unexpected—something that felt more personal than anything they'd shared so far:

A shared, deep love for animals, especially dogs.

Their voices softened as they spoke of animals—rescued strays, childhood pets. It was simple, ordinary conversation, yet it felt like something more. As if, without either of them noticing, a thread had been tied quietly between them.

The minutes slipped by easily. So easily that when the car passed the familiar turn for Nina's street, she only realized it once they were well beyond it.

"Amos... my house was back there," she said, glancing sideways at him.

He didn't startle or slow. He only smiled, eyes steady on the road.

"I know."

The warmth rushed to her face immediately. A blush that started low in her chest and spread all the way to her ears.

Amos kept driving, unhurried, winding through the quiet neighborhood streets as if neither of them was in a hurry to let the evening end.

At last, he pulled over near the corner they had passed earlier, choosing a quiet spot away from everything else. Then, with a shift that seemed almost natural—like it was always meant to happen—he turned toward her. Leaning back in his seat, relaxed now, he faced her fully.

The air between them felt different. Calmer, heavier somehow. A closeness that said more than words could.

What happened next made Nina's heart skip—not just a beat, but an entire rhythm.

"Do you know," Amos began, his voice low,

"what I find most beautiful about you?"

Nina, caught off guard, blinked.

Wait—what? He... he likes me? He notices things like that?

She tried to play it cool.

“Umm... like in nature? Or... what do you mean?”

Amos smiled, a knowing glint in his eyes.

“I mean in appearance.”

Nina bit her lip.

“My... hair?”

“Your hair’s lovely,” he said gently, “but no.”

“My eyes?” she tried again, almost whispering now.

“Pretty, yes. But there’s something else—something I find incredibly attractive.”

Nina could barely hold his gaze now. Her cheeks were burning, and her fingers nervously played with the hem of her sleeve.

“I don’t know...” she murmured.

Amos leaned just a little closer, and in a voice deep with sincerity, he answered:

“Your skin tone.”

Nina’s gaze instantly dropped, overwhelmed by the raw honesty of his words.

And then—softly, slowly—Amos reached out, his fingers gently tipping her chin up. He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, his touch featherlight, reverent.

Their eyes met in the stillness, and in the most tender voice she’d ever heard, he said:

“You are a beautiful female, Nina.”

Nina blushed in a way she never had before. It wasn't just color in her cheeks; it was in her eyes, in the way her breath caught, in the quiet nervousness that comes only when the heart lets its guard slip. Under the glow of the streetlights and the hush of the late hour, her world leaned—just slightly, but unmistakably—toward him.



“There’s something I want to tell you, Nina,” Amos said, his voice even and gentle, fitting easily into the quiet moment. “If we ever decide to be... us—truly—there’s something you should know first.”

He didn’t rush the words. He let them settle.

“I won’t always be able to give you my time. If you ask me to meet you in the middle of the day, I may have to say no. But when the day ends, when the work is done, I’ll come to you. We’ll go for dinner, maybe a drive. But I won’t walk away from my responsibilities. Not even for love. There’s too much depending on me. I need you to understand that.”

For Nina, it only deepened the pull she already felt. A man who carried weight on his shoulders and didn’t shy away from it—that kind of strength made her heart race.

“I don’t mind,” she said softly. Her words were calm, certain. “Come when you can. That will be enough.”

There was no demand in her voice, only understanding. And in that quiet exchange, something between them shifted. It

wasn't spoken, not officially defined, but they both felt it—they had moved past casual conversation into something more.

Amos started the car again, the hum of the engine filling the silence that didn't need words. When he pulled up outside Nina's house and she reached for the door handle, his voice stopped her. Low, steady, almost boyish.

"We'll go on our first date soon," he said.

Simple as it was, it lit a spark inside her. As she stepped out and closed the door behind her, Nina already knew—she would be counting the days.

A few days later, Amos made the call.

It came on an ordinary evening.

Nina, Juliana, Masha, and Shaul were all gathered in the living room, casually watching television.

The atmosphere was relaxed, filled with the soft murmur of dialogue and the occasional laughter from the screen — until Shaul's phone lit up.

"Hi Amos," he said, picking up the call with familiar ease.

The name alone was enough to shift something in Nina.

Though her eyes remained fixed on the screen, her senses snapped to attention.

She wasn't eavesdropping — not exactly — but every word Shaul uttered now carried a new weight.

She couldn't hear Amos, of course, but based on the rhythm of Shaul's responses, she could almost reconstruct the conversation herself.

Perhaps it went something like this:

Amos:

"Hey Shaul, how's everything? All good?"

Shaul:

"Yeah, all fine. We're just sitting here watching TV together. What's up?"

Amos:

"I'm good too. Actually, I needed to talk to you about something — kind of important. Do you have a minute?"

Shaul (*sensing the shift*):

"Sure, go ahead."

Amos:

"It's about Nina... and me."

Shaul:

"All right... what about it?"

Amos:

"I'm sure by now you've picked up on what's going on between us. I'd like to ask her out properly. But before I do, I just wanted to make sure — I don't want this to come between our friendship. So I wanted to ask... would that be okay with you?"

There was a brief pause, one of those rare silences where trust is weighed and offered without hesitation.

Shaul:

“Amos, Nina isn’t a child. She’s a grown woman — capable of making her own choices. If there’s something genuine between you two, and she feels comfortable with it, then why would I have a problem? It’s perfectly fine by me.”

Amos (*with quiet relief*):

“Okay then. Perfect.”

And just like that, a line had been crossed — not of boundaries, but of clarity. The unspoken had been acknowledged, and with Shaul’s blessing, the next chapter had quietly taken its place in the room — even if only one person truly noticed.

Nina didn’t say a word, but the corners of her mouth lifted ever so slightly, betraying a small, secret smile.

It all began on Facebook — a few exchanged comments, a casual like here and there, and then, naturally, the numbers followed. What started as light conversation soon began to take the familiar shape of something tender, something quietly blooming.

Their chats were the kind that trace the soft outline of a new connection:

“What are you up to?”

“What time do you usually sleep?”

“What’s your routine like?”

Good mornings and good nights were exchanged like small, cherished rituals — not extravagant, but sincere.

The only difference — if one could call it that — was in Amos's replies. They didn't arrive instantly. He often saw the messages and responded a little while later, sometimes after a stretch of silence. But Nina never minded. She understood — right from the start — that his work came first, and he had made that clear in the most respectful way. There was no pretending, no false urgency.

And perhaps that's what made it all the more real. The fact that expectations were grounded from the beginning allowed Nina to let go of impatience. What mattered wasn't how quickly he replied — it was that he always did.

And with every reply, even if delayed, came the warmth of someone who wasn't just passing time... but choosing her, in his own steady way.

The date was set: **March 2nd.**

A day Nina would remember — or so Amos hoped. In full earnestness, he decided to do things right. He picked up the phone and called Juliana and Masha, Nina's closest allies, his trusted informants for *Operation First Date*.

"Tell me," he asked, "what's her favorite food? I want to plan something she'll love."

Without missing a beat, the girls chimed in cheerfully,

"Oh that's easy — chicken and mutton!"

After hearing what they said, Nina's soul froze. Somewhere in the universe —

Chicken and mutton?

Are you kidding me?

Because here's the thing — yes, she liked them. Loved, even.

But was she going to sit across from a man she barely just started dating and... gnaw on bones?

Smear gravy across her fingers?

Play tug-of-war with a stubborn mutton piece in her teeth while trying to look mysterious and poetic?

Absolutely not.

I mean, come on — who does that?

No girl wants to spend her first romantic evening cracking bones like she's starring in a medieval banquet.

Chicken might be comfort food, but there is nothing elegant about licking your fingers while trying to flirt.

So while Amos, bless him, thought he was planning a thoughtful, heartwarming menu... Nina was mentally rewriting the script:

“Table for two — yes, with pasta, salad, and zero chances of accidental burps, please.”

Because on a first date, dignity must survive.

Chicken legs? They could wait.

Well, if the whole “chicken-and-mutton-on-the-first-date” situation wasn't enough to make Nina want to file a formal complaint with the universe, the day had barely begun.

And about the embarrassment — as it often does — it had already RSVP'd to the date.

It walked in ahead of her, pulled out a chair, and said, “Let's make this more interesting, shall we?”

A meeting point had been decided — a quiet spot halfway between nervous excitement and barely-contained chaos.

Juliana would drop Nina there, and from that point, Amos would take over.

Simple plan. Smooth execution.

At least on paper.

But in all the fuss and frantic coordination, everyone seemed to forget one very important thing:

This was the day.

Nina was going on a date.

With Amos.

Not just any outing.

Not a casual coffee.

A date.

And for Nina, it wasn't just her first date with Amos — it was the first real date of her life.

That little detail?

A very big deal.

And she felt it, in every breath, every heartbeat that seemed to echo louder than usual. The kind of anticipation that flutters in your stomach and tiptoes across your skin like a breeze too shy to stay.

She was floating — grounded in her steps but soaring somewhere in the clouds.

That evening, she dressed not just with care, but with something softer.

Something hopeful. She wore a simple black sarafan, its elegance resting lightly on her like a secret.

Her look? Effortless — the kind that takes real effort to look like none at all.

No heavy makeup, just her — glowing, honest.

A touch of light pink on her cheeks.

No one could tell whether it was blush from her palette... or the kind that came from within — the kind only Amos could bring out.

Her reflection in the mirror didn't stare back with confidence, but with a kind of trembling wonder.

This was new.

This was unknown.

After securing full approval from everyone at home — accompanied by the repeated, breathless question, "How do I look? Do I look okay?" — Nina climbed onto the back of Juliana's two-wheeler.

Butterflies danced wildly in her stomach, and a quiet happiness settled deep in her chest — the kind that hums like a secret only the heart understands.

The ride toward Amos felt both too short and impossibly long.

As the city blurred around her, Nina's mind was a whirlwind.

Thoughts tumbled over each other like children in a playground — wild, unstoppable, and far too many at once.

She couldn't hold onto a single one.

What would he say?

What would she say?
Would it be awkward?
Would it be magic?
And then, just like that — they arrived.
The world didn't pause.
The sky didn't shimmer.
But Nina's breath did catch.
Because there he was.
Standing by his car.
Amos.
White shirt, blue jeans, formal shoes — he looked like the calm
in a storm.
Impossibly handsome, with a softness in his posture that made
her heart stutter.
He clearly came straight from work, and yet, he looked so
fresh, so effortless, it felt entirely possible that he'd just
stepped out of a dream instead.
Stop it, Nina, she told herself.
Get out of your head.
Off with the questions.
Live this.
Juliana parked the scooter, and together they walked toward
him — though together might be generous, because Nina
found herself a few steps ahead.



As if drawn by an invisible thread, Amos's eyes found her and held her there.

The kind of gaze that didn't just notice — it invited.

He turned to Juliana with a small, grateful smile.

"Thank you... for bringing Nina to me."

Juliana grinned.

"No worries. Enjoy the evening."

Then, turning to Nina, Amos offered his hand and a gentle nod.

"Shall we?"

And just like that, the night began.

Amos walked ahead and, like a perfect gentleman from a scene Nina might've once imagined but never lived, opened the car door for her. She slid in carefully — careful with her steps, her posture, even her breath.

Everything about her felt delicately placed, as if one sudden move might shatter the magic of this unfolding evening.

The car pulled away, and for the first few minutes, silence wrapped around them — not uncomfortable, but quietly tentative. The kind of silence where two people are still tuning into each other's frequency.

Then Amos spoke, his tone casual, eyes on the road.

"Do you drink?"

In that exact moment, Nina's heart tripped over itself.

Oh no...

Her mind launched into chaos. What do I say?

If she said no, would he think she was old-fashioned? Too serious?

If she said yes, would he assume she was the partying type?

Why was there no script for this?

A full internal committee meeting happened in three seconds.

Finally, with a calm she definitely didn't feel, she replied:

"I've never had a drink before... but I think I could try tonight."

A small victory echoed inside her. She'd said it just right — honest, open, without sounding like she'd been rehearsing lines in front of a mirror.

She looked out the window, cheeks warm, trying to steady her racing thoughts while the city lights blurred gently past them.

Amos: "Well, okay then. So this is your first time — let's keep it light, shall we?"

There was a teasing glint in his eyes as he turned the wheel and pulled the car to a slow stop outside a dimly lit liquor store, the kind that usually blended into the background but now stood like a checkpoint on Nina's path to trying something entirely new.

He stepped out, disappearing for a moment into the neon glow of the shop.

Nina waited, her fingers nervously drumming against her lap, wondering what exactly counted as “light” in the world of alcohol.

Moments later, Amos returned — a bottle of Bacardi Breezer in one hand, a beer in the other. He opened the car door and casually handed her the breezer, its cap already popped open, ready for her first sip.

They clinked bottles gently — an understated, private kind of cheer — and Nina brought the drink to her lips.

Jamaican flavor.

Tropical, a little fizzy, unexpectedly smooth.

To her surprise... she liked it.

It wasn't sharp or burning, no harsh bitterness — just a soft, sweet blend that sat lightly on her tongue.

It felt like something between fruit juice and rebellion.

And deep down, she knew — Amos had thought this through.

He knew exactly what kind of drink would suit someone trying for the very first time.

Something that wouldn't overwhelm, something that would ease her in.

The kind of choice that quietly said: *I've got you.*

Amos glanced sideways, a soft smile on his lips.

“You're looking nice.”

Nina turned toward him, caught off guard, her cheeks warming almost instantly.

“Thank you so much,” she replied, a shy smile playing on her lips, and yes — she was blushing.

That one compliment opened the door to more — a string of easy, curious questions.

They began to talk, *really* talk, about their likes and dislikes, odd little habits, the kind of foods they craved at midnight, and which side of the bed they preferred.

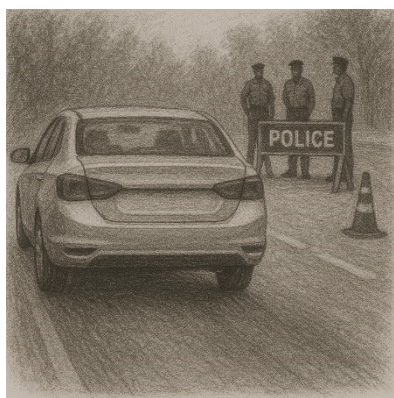
It was the kind of conversation that made you feel like you were unfolding pieces of a gift — one layer at a time.

But hey — dear lovebirds, while your first date is charming and filled with fluttering heartbeats, there’s one tiny little thing you might have overlooked.

Especially you, Amos.

Because while the talk was sweet and the drinks were light... someone had, in fact, been drinking while driving.

And fate, as always, was listening.



Barely a few minutes into their drive, a flicker of red and blue lights appeared ahead — a police checkpoint set up quietly in the distance.

Amos spotted it, cursed under his breath, and sat up straighter.

“Damn.”

He capped the bottle and didn’t touch it again, making sure he stayed well within the legal limit.

Nina’s heart leapt to her throat.

Her mind ran faster than her heartbeat — wild, panicked, and dramatic.

Oh God, first date and I'm going to get caught?

With a guy?

Drinking?

Will they call my family?

Will this be on record?

Will I be disowned?

Am I going to jail in a black sarafan?

Amos stayed perfectly calm.

He turned to her, voice low but firm:

"Listen. Just stay calm. Place my beer bottles under your feet, quickly. Don't worry — I've got this."

Nina nodded silently, her hands shaky, her mind in chaos.

But when she looked at him — really looked — there was something unshakable in his presence.

Something grounded. Assured.

He didn't panic.

He didn't overreact.

In fact, he looked like someone who could make the world slow down just by asking it to.

And in that moment, despite the sirens and her spiraling thoughts, Nina felt safe.

With him — she truly did.

The alcohol hadn't quite hit Nina yet — not enough to blur her senses.

In fact, her mind was sharper than ever,

the kind of clarity one feels after a sudden jolt of black coffee.

Her heart thudded loudly beneath her ribs as Amos stepped out of the car to take the test.

The breathalyzer reading hovered right at the legal limit — perhaps just a whisper above.

The officer frowned, then motioned Amos to step out of the vehicle.

Before closing the door, Amos turned to her with that same calm that somehow anchored her in storms.

“Don't worry. I'll be right back.”

Nina nodded, watching silently as he walked toward the checkpoint.

But then — two officers became three.

She saw them speaking to Amos, their postures stern, their voices low.

From inside the car, it looked worse than it probably was...

but for Nina, it felt like the world had taken a pause..

Her mind spiraled again, running loops she couldn't stop.

She didn't cry — but her heart was pacing faster than her thoughts could keep up.

And then came the question.

The kind that only occurs to a girl slightly tipsy, highly anxious,

and just a little too enchanted by the boy standing a few feet away: “Oh god... will Amos be embarrassed? What will he say when he gets back?”

Ten, maybe fifteen minutes passed — an eternity dressed as a quarter hour.

And then, finally, he returned. Amos slid into the driver’s seat, turned the key,

and in that moment that gentle purr of the engine was the sweetest sound Nina had ever heard. It wasn’t just a car starting — it was the world turning again.

He glanced at her with a small, apologetic smile.

“All sorted. But... I’ll have to drop you home now. I had a plan —

wanted to take you somewhere far, somewhere quiet.

But, well... this happened.

Don’t worry though — I’ll plan something better, very soon.”

Nina felt a pang of disappointment, yes — but it was quickly swallowed by relief.

They were safe. They were still them.

And somehow, even in this messy, imperfect evening... she couldn’t stop smiling.

Yes, yes — I know. Everyone had high expectations for that evening. Nina did too.

And while the night may not have unfolded like a scene from a love story —

no candlelit dinner, no perfect ending —

at least everything passed in peace. Calm. Untangled. And Amos?

He wasn't the kind of man to let one spoiled plan slow him down. Just days later, he sent a message that made Nina's heart leap a little, breath catch a little, cheeks flush a little: "Can you take a night out?"

Just seven words. That's all it took. Nina's fingers typed the reply before her overthinking mind could interfere: "Yes. It's fine by me." And just like that, the next date was set — **March 6th**. A night away. Not just a few hours. Not a stolen moment. But a full night, somewhere far, somewhere quiet. He'd pick her up in the evening, and they'd return the next day. For Nina, this wasn't just another outing.

This was a first. And with firsts come butterflies, and with butterflies come questions. What should I take?

How many clothes?

What should I wear in the car?

What if I forget something?

Should I pack a second outfit? A perfume?

Pajamas that don't look like pajamas?

She stood in front of her wardrobe like it held the answers to life itself. Luckily, she had Masha. Together, they built a master plan — one that included backup excuses, call-time strategies, and word-perfect responses in case someone from home happened to call. Every risk was accounted for. Every loophole, tied with a pretty bow. And when the moment came, Nina slipped into a bottle green sarafan — not flashy, not loud, just effortlessly her.

A little mascara.

A little hope.

A heart that wouldn't stop beating too fast.

At around 7:30 PM, Amos arrived. He didn't need to say anything — his presence alone said enough. That quiet confidence. That steadiness. That look in his eyes when he saw her — like she was the only person in the world worth waiting for. They drove out, leaving the city lights behind them. The road ahead stretched into dusky silence, a soft hour of music and murmured conversation.

And Nina? She sat beside him, eyes on the road, but mind on everything else. Because excitement was there, yes... but underneath it, something else pulsed gently. Nerves. Not because she didn't trust him. But because her heart, somewhere deep down, knew — Tonight, they would be alone. In one room. And what was going to happen!

But here's the thing — The question was never spoken aloud, yet it lingered like soft perfume in the air between two beating hearts: Was she ready? This would be her first time. Not just a night away. Not just a new city or a shared room. But the kind of closeness that shifts the air,

changes something within you forever.

Nina was a virgin. And no matter how romantic the setting or gentle the man beside her — this mattered. It wasn't about morality, nor pressure, nor some sweeping idea of love wrapped in rose petals and music.

It was about timing. Trust. Truth. And here they were — on just their second date. Was that too soon? Perhaps for some.

But love, or the feeling that dances just before it, doesn't always follow calendars.

Sometimes it arrives early, barefoot and unannounced, asking you to leap before you've finished packing your fears. She hadn't known Amos for long.

But she had begun to feel him — in the way he looked at her like she was both mystery and answer, in the way he never rushed her, never tried to fill silence with noise.

So... was she ready?

Well — Readiness doesn't always come with certainty. Sometimes it comes with quiet understanding, a shared glance, a soft inhale before two stories gently touch at their fragile edges.

And if it were to happen that night... it wouldn't be about losing something. It would be about crossing into something more — with someone who, at least in this moment, felt worth the crossing. They reached their destination around 9 PM.

Nothing was booked in advance — no hotel confirmation emails, no fancy check-ins — just the two of them, going with the flow, watching the road for something that looked decent enough to stop.

As they passed a few roadside inns and motels, one caught their eye — simple, clean, nothing too flashy, but quiet and inviting. Amos pulled in and parked. He got out first, went inside to check the rooms.

A few minutes later, he called Nina in too, wanting her to see them for herself and decide what felt right. They walked past two rooms before Nina spotted one with a balcony that

overlooked the city. The view was wide and full of light — calm, but alive. She pointed at it. “This one looks nice.”

While Amos stayed back at the reception to handle the formalities, Nina entered the room. The bellboy followed her with their bags, placing everything carefully by the wall.

She quietly took in the space — the bed, the lighting, the soft hum of the AC — but her feet naturally carried her to the balcony.

She stood there for a while, hands resting lightly on the railing, looking out at the city glowing below. From behind, she could hear small sounds — the suitcase wheels rolling, the bellboy stepping out, the door closing gently.

And then, the unmistakable click of the lock.

Amos had come in.

The bellboy had left.

And now, it was just the two of them.

Nina didn’t have to turn around to know — she could feel Amos walking toward her.

The sound of his footsteps on the wooden floor grew clearer, closer. With each step, her heartbeat picked up pace, thudding a little louder in her chest.

She kept her eyes on the city lights, but her body had already begun to react — a quiet stillness, a rush of awareness, a sense that something was shifting.

A moment later, she felt his arms wrap around her from behind — slow, certain.

He pulled her into him gently, his arms circling her waist, his hands resting just above her stomach.

As his palms moved, Nina instinctively placed her hands over his — not to stop him, but to feel him, to hold that closeness.

He was standing so near, she could feel his breath against the side of her face, warm against her ear. It made her skin tingle, made her lean back just a little more into him.

Then, in a voice lower and deeper than usual — almost a whisper, but full of weight — he asked,

“Do you like the room?”

Nina smiled softly, still facing the city.

“Yes... This room has such a beautiful view of the city. I really like it.”

Amos, still close behind, nodded.



“I’m glad. Let’s change, then maybe watch a movie, have dinner... and a drink to start the night?”

She turned toward him, gave a small nod, and followed him back inside the room.

Amos made himself comfortable on the bed, leaning back, already looking relaxed. Meanwhile, Nina walked toward her bag with a mix of focus and nervous energy.

She started pulling out her clothes — simple, soft pieces she’d packed after hours of overthinking. Nothing fancy, nothing deliberately seductive. Just regular clothes that still somehow made her feel like herself.

She could feel Amos glance at her every now and then — not staring, but noticing. It made her hands fumble just a little, her heart flutter unevenly.

Truth was, Nina had never been this physically close to someone she was dating. She didn't have experience with sleepovers, with changing just a few feet away from the person who made her feel butterflies on a regular Tuesday.

Still, she handled it.

Clothes in hand, she stepped into the washroom and took a moment before coming out. She had changed into a red cotton top — snug enough to shape her softly, not too tight, not too loose. It sat perfectly on her, the kind of fit that looked effortless but made her feel quietly confident.

She paired it with black lowers — simple, neat, comfortable.

When she stepped out, Amos looked up. And though he didn't say anything right away, the look in his eyes said enough. Amos, still focused on his laptop screen, asked casually,

"So... what would you like to watch?" Then without waiting for a response, he added, "But first — let me make you a drink."

He got up from the bed, moving toward his backpack — a small, no-fuss bag that looked like it barely carried more than a change of shirt.

Of course. Ugh... boys are so simple.

Meanwhile, Nina had packed half her wardrobe into a full duffel bag — just in case. Amos unzipped his backpack and pulled out a bottle of red wine, like he knew exactly what he was doing.

He reached for the room's landline and dialed the reception, "Hi, could you please send two wine glasses to Room 101?"

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

Two clean wine glasses arrived on a tray — and Amos poured them both a generous drink.

He handed one to Nina with a quiet smile, lifting his glass for a soft clink.

She mirrored him — and took her first sip of red wine, ever.

And guess what?

One sip in... and she was hooked.

It was smooth, rich, a little sweet — and somehow, just right for that night.

With their wine glasses in hand, they both settled onto the sofa — the kind of casual, no-rush comfort that only comes when the tension has finally left the room.

The nerves that Nina had walked in with were now softening, fading into the background, thanks to the gentle buzz of the wine that had started to work its quiet magic.

She wasn't overthinking anymore.

She wasn't watching every move.

She was just there — present, relaxed, a little tipsy, and fully in the moment.

The movie was playing on Amos's laptop, resting on the coffee table.

Neither of them was deeply invested in the plot.

They were half watching, half laughing, occasionally throwing comments at the screen or reacting to random scenes.

And then it happened.

One of those casual moments — a pause in conversation — where both of them turned to say something, and their eyes met.

Just like that.

No warning.

No build-up.

Their eyes locked.

It wasn't planned, but it lingered — longer than it should have.

Nina held the gaze for a few seconds, her breath catching just a little, before she looked away with a small smile and turned back toward the screen, pretending to focus.

But Amos didn't look away.

His eyes were still on her — quietly watching, admiring.

And Nina?

She could feel it.

Every second of it.

Amos reached out and gently tucked a loose strand of hair behind Nina's ear — the touch soft, careful, and far more intentional than it seemed.

Without a word, he set his wine glass down beside the laptop and turned fully toward her.

With that same hand, he pulled Nina a little closer. Then, he kissed her.

It began as a soft peck—brief, careful, almost testing the moment. But as soon as their lips met, something shifted. The space between them didn't return. The pause never came. Amos leaned in again, deeper this time, warm and certain.

Nina's fingers tightened around her wine glass; without breaking the rhythm, Amos gently took it from her and set it aside. For someone usually so composed, it felt deliciously reckless—like the only thing he wanted in his hands, just now, was her.

The kiss gathered courage. He slid his arms around her and lifted her with ease; before she could fully process it, she was in his lap, her arms around his neck, the world outside the room falling quiet. There was heat, yes—but no hurry. They moved as if they had time, as if time itself was willing to wait.

Though it was Nina's first kiss, nothing about her felt unsure. Maybe it was the moment. Maybe it was him. Either way, Amos felt her match him with a quiet confidence that made the room feel safer, smaller, more theirs.

He stood, still holding her, and crossed to the bed, laying her down with a gentle steadiness. Not rough, not hesitant—just sure. Their lips found each other again, and again, until words seemed unnecessary.

He drew back a little—only enough to look at her properly.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded, breath soft. "I am."

He smiled, then paused once more. "Nina... if we go any further, I want to be certain. Are you sure?"

Her answer came as a whisper, but it carried no doubt. “Yes.”

He reached for protection—unhurried, respectful—then returned to her side. The room dimmed at her request, the bedside lamp leaving a warm, golden hush between them. In that quiet half-light, they simply looked at each other for a few long seconds—no rush, no showing off, just two people letting their guards down with care.

“You’re so beautiful, Nina,” he said. It wasn’t a line; it landed like truth.

What followed belonged to them alone—careful, patient, and kind. He checked in with his eyes; she answered with a small, steady nod. When uncertainty brushed the edge of the moment, he slowed; when she relaxed, they moved together again, finding a rhythm that felt both new and right. It wasn’t about perfection. It was about trust.

Much later, the city lights beyond the balcony winked like distant stars. They lay side by side, listening to their own breaths, saying little. The room held that after-quiet that follows something true.

In the morning, they shared a simple breakfast and easy smiles—the kind you carry home. Whatever else the world might call it, Nina knew this: the night hadn’t taken anything from her. It had given her something—softness, certainty, and the beginning of a story she was glad to be inside.

The kind of special that doesn’t fade. Not from the heart. Not from the mind. After those moments, nothing felt ordinary—not dinner, not the movie, not even lying next to each other, tangled in silence. Not even waking up side by side in the morning. They had breakfast together, exchanged quiet glances, and soon set off for the journey back. Nina had left

home the night before as just a girl — nervous, excited, unsure. But she returned carrying the scent of Amos on her skin and something deeper in her soul. She had become a woman. Because he had made her feel like one. After that night, such dates became frequent — almost routine.

But for Nina, every single one still felt special. With every meeting, her love for Amos deepened. Intensified. Became something she could no longer contain.

Her world slowly began to orbit around him. One simple text from Amos — “Nina, I’m waiting outside” — and she would rush out like a leaf swept away by the wind. And Amos... he was that wind. And Nina? The leaf — moving in whichever direction he blew, without question, without hesitation. Their meetings turned physical more often now. Sometimes checking into quiet hotels, sometimes slipping into the guest room of his father’s closed office, borrowing space from silence. Sometimes late-night drives ending in ice cream, sometimes just coffee, or a bowl of soup before parting ways. And somehow, all of St. Petersburg looked more beautiful now. The streets glowed a little brighter, the sky seemed a little softer, and the air... it felt like it carried whispers of love.

By now, Amos had his own special place in Nina’s life — and even in her phone. His messages carried a different tone, one she could recognize instantly, and just like her parents, his calls were allowed through her Sleep Mode.

Once, after teasing her about one of her traditional outfits and calling her *aunty* in jest, Nina quietly resolved to never repeat the same mistake. She began collecting new dresses, promising herself that every date with Amos would be in something fresh, something that would make his eyes linger. With him, St. Petersburg itself seemed to transform — its nights no longer

ordinary, its streets no longer familiar. Amos led her to hidden restaurants, to new cuisines, to places she had never thought to explore. Through him, the city unfolded in ways she had never seen before, and every corner of it began to feel like their own private discovery.

But while the winds in St. Petersburg danced with the sweetness of young love, far away in Montreal — something far more sinister was stirring. The winds there weren't just colder. They were biting. Unforgiving. Laced with the scent of something dark, something dangerous. As if fate itself had exhaled a warning. A storm wasn't just brewing — It was lurking. Watching. Ready to strike with a force that would tear through the very bones of the Varkov family. And this wasn't the kind of storm that passed. It was the kind that shattered. That exposed every weakness. That left no soul untouched. Something was coming. Relentless. Merciless. And the Varkovs? They had no idea.

They were standing on the edge of something disastrous — blind to the ruin just one breath away. They weren't ready. Not even close.

Chapter 20 God wasn't watching



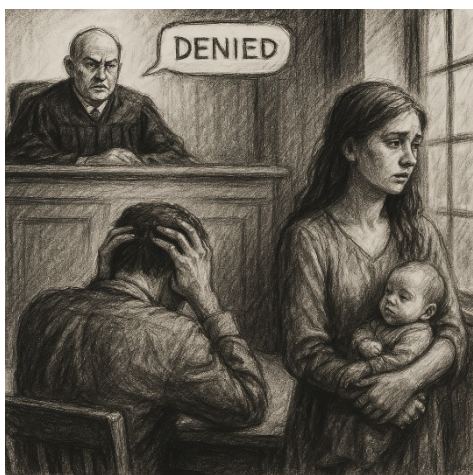
Montreal: The Shattering

While Nina was slowly drowning in the colors of Amos's love, far away in Montreal, her mother and father were about to be swallowed by something far darker. Svyomir and Polina had given everything they had—every ruble, every dollar—to stay afloat. All the money earned in those long, bone-tiring years went into their asylum appeal. Into lawyers. Into hope.

Now, that hope had shattered. The appeal had been denied. Final. No more chances. No more courtrooms.

That day in the courtroom was cloaked not in noise, but in a strange, suffocating silence—not the silence of the room, but the kind that echoes deep within a breaking heart. When the officer delivered the denial, Svyomir's tired eyes looked up—not with anger, but with a quiet plea for mercy. To the officer, the Varkovs were just another case among thousands.

Svyomir sank onto a bench, head in his hands. Across the room, by a small window, Polina stood holding their son tightly. She didn't cry. She stared through the glass at nothing. And in that fragile, breaking moment—watching her husband crumble and her baby sleep unaware in her arms—a terrifying thought passed through her mind. What if I just jump from this window... and take him with me? What if we just... end it here?



The asylum officer leaned forward, voice emotionless. “Mr. Varkov, would you like to book your return ticket to Russia yourself, or shall we do it for you?”

There was a long pause. Svyomir swallowed hard; hope

had already drained from his eyes. In a voice low with defeat, he said, “...You book it. Whatever little money I had... it’s all gone now.”

It wasn’t just an answer. It was the sound of a dream collapsing—not with a crash, but with a quiet, heart-wrenching thud.

Where would they go? There was nothing left for them in Russia. Everything—land, belongings, even memories—had been sold or left when they came to Canada. Canada had been their only chance. And now, even that was slipping away.

Where do you begin again when you’ve already started over once?

The Last Chance: Vancouver

But Svyomir wasn’t ready to give up. He decided to file a new appeal—this time in a Vancouver court. He would fight again. Because now they weren’t just fighting for a better life. They were fighting for survival.

It felt, however, as if God had turned His face away — distant, silent. In Vancouver, their plea was denied again. No doors opened. No second chances. Svyomir stared at the rejection letter with trembling hands while Polina — clutching the baby — broke quietly from the inside. They had run out of options, out of time... and out of hope.

That day, Svyomir's phone rang. The asylum office.

Officer (calm, curt): "Mr. Varkov, you need to come in the day after tomorrow."

Svyomir (hesitant): "Should I bring my wife and son with me?"

Officer: "No — just you. Come alone."

Svyomir (voice tightening): "Is everything okay, sir? What's this about?"

Officer (flatly): "Just a general meeting."

When the call ended, something tightened in his chest. His hands trembled. He wished the officer had told him the truth... because this didn't feel general at all.

He told an old friend about the "meeting." The friend didn't blink. "Svyomir... this is the end. When they call a man alone — without his wife and child — it's rarely a meeting. They'll handcuff you in the office. No goodbyes. No warning. Straight to the airport."

The words hit like a punch. "I've seen it before," the friend added softly. "Clean. Quick. Cold."

Only one thought echoed now: Polina's eyes. His son's tiny hands. Would he really not see them again? Not even once?

The Decision: Run

The friend leaned in, urgent. "Cross the border. Go to the U.S."

"What?"

"It's your only way out now. If they detain you here, they might keep your Canadian-born son in the system and separate you. If you make it across, you'll at least buy time—maybe a new shot at asylum. Here? It's over."

Svyomir looked away, heart pounding. Run again—not with hope, but with desperation?

"What do I have to do?"

"Get to Vancouver. A man will take you near the U.S. border. From there... you walk."

"My son is a year and a half. He has a 102-degree fever. My wife... Is this safe?"

"There's no safe left, Svyomir. Only this—or nothing. You have to leave tomorrow. Keep cash ready for the driver. After that, it's on you."

Sometimes, when a man has no choices left... even danger starts to look like hope.

By the next morning, he'd made up his mind. Polina didn't try to stop him. She was ready too—not because she wasn't afraid, but because fear had no use left. The only weight on their hearts was Ustin. Feverish. Fragile. But going with them—no matter what.

They moved quietly in the early morning. No drama. No goodbyes. Simple clothes. A tiny pack: Ustin's milk bottle, powdered formula, two outfits, fever medicine. That was it. House keys under the mat. Jobs, belongings, home, their car—

even the friends who had become family—left behind like fading footprints in the snow.

They flew west to Vancouver. After landing, a four-hour drive took them toward the border. And from there, the real journey began—on foot.

Crossing: Night Walk

Sometimes Svyomir carried Ustin; sometimes Polina did. Every few minutes they stopped—not because they had time, but because they had no choice. The baby's fever burned; his tiny body was too warm to put down.

Of their two children, they told only one about this desperate attempt—not Nina, but Kazi. Not because Nina didn't care, but because she was too tender-hearted to bear it. Kazimir had grown into the son who carried his parents' pain like a quiet shield—steady, aware. He knew everything. That was the burden of being the strong one this time.

Back in Russia, Nina remained blissfully unaware—caught up in college, friends, and Amos. Maybe Kazi had learned how to hide heavy truths behind calm eyes.

After walking for what felt like forever—with fear at their heels and hope clutched to their chest—the Varkovs crossed the U.S. border. They didn't stop. They kept walking—tired, trembling, lost.

Sirens

Then came the sound that froze their blood: a police siren, getting closer.

Polina clutched Ustin. "Svyomir... It's the police."

"Poli, keep walking. Don't look back."

"What if they take Ustin? I won't let anyone take him from me!"

"They won't. I'm here. As long as I'm breathing, no one's taking our boy."



The siren grew louder... then stopped. A patrol car pulled in front of them, blocking the way. A tall officer stepped out.

Officer: "Who are you?"

Instinctively, Svyomir moved in front of Polina and Ustin.

"My name is Svyomir. This is my wife, Polina. And my son, Ustin."

Officer: "Where are you coming from?"

A pause.

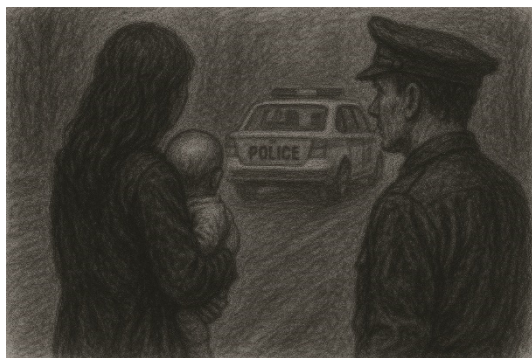
"We crossed the border... from Canada."

The officer's expression hardened. "You know that's illegal, right? A federal offense."

"I know, sir."

“You understand what happens next?”

“I do. But I have one request...” He stepped forward. “Please—show mercy to my wife and child. Take me. Let them go.”



No arguments. No excuses. Just a broken man surrendering with dignity—hands ready to be cuffed, heart wrapped around his family.

Officer (firm):

“That’s not how it works. We’ll have to take your wife and child too.”

They cuffed Svyomir. Cold metal bit into his wrists like the weight of his shattered fate.

“Anything you say can and will be used against you.”

He didn’t resist. He lowered his gaze—as if surrendering not just to the officers, but to destiny.

They led him to the vehicle—but did not touch Polina or Ustin. Even he froze, confused. An officer muttered into a radio; a nod followed. The car pulled away with Svyomir—alone.

“Polina! My wife—where are you taking me?!”

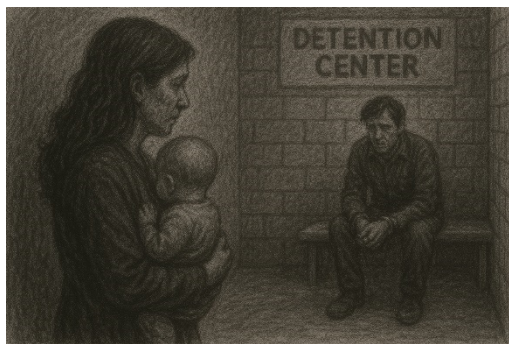
The siren drowned him out. Polina stood unmoving, Ustin curled in her arms like a small prayer. She wasn’t arrested. She wasn’t questioned. She was... left.

Intake

An officer approached and gave brief instructions, but her mind was spiraling. She didn't speak. Didn't cry. Her face said everything—the fear, the disbelief, the silent scream of a woman watching her world vanish in a government vehicle.

Somewhere down that road, Svyomir sat shackled, haunted. What now? Where are they? Will I ever see them again?

Not long after, another police vehicle pulled up—this one with a child seat. Gently, almost clinically, officers escorted Polina and Ustin in. Polina didn't protest. She had gone quiet, like someone surrendered not just to the system, but to fate. Ustin clutched his bottle, unaware, while Polina held him like a shield.



They arrived at a detention center—a cold, sterile building that smelled of processed fear. The doors opened. Polina stepped in, heart pounding... and saw him. In a far

corner under a flickering light—Svyomir. Eyes tired. Wrists red. Alive.

That single glance let her breathe again. They weren't alone. Not yet.

The officers asked the usual questions. Then, without emotion: "It's late. You'll be held in separate units for the night. Tomorrow, next steps."

Polina looked at him one last time. He gave a small nod. Stay strong. Take care of Ustin. I'm here. The doors shut. Cold. Metallic. Final.

Night swallowed them — each in their own small cell of fear.



What had Ustin done to deserve this? A child only a year and a half old. Yet fate had etched his first night in jail into his story — not a lullaby, not a bedtime tale, but cement walls and flickering lights. He didn't cry. He nestled into Polina's lap, clutching the bottle a guard had handed over — as if milk could soften the trauma of captivity. His lashes fluttered. He slept — not knowing where he was,

not knowing the fear hollowing out his parents' hearts.

Five hours earlier, Kazimir had received a single photo from his father's phone. In it, Polina sat beneath a tree, cradling Ustin. Her face was pale, her posture tired, but she held on. Since then — silence. No location. No update.

Kazi stared at the image, zooming, searching for clues. Nothing. The truth settled heavier than the night: he didn't know where his parents were. It would be the longest night of his life.

Before Nina could notice the quiet panic in his eyes, Kazi left for Samara—to a friend’s place where no one would ask questions. A place to let the worry show.

Separation Logistics

The next morning, a police officer sat across from Svyomir. “Do you have anyone here in the U.S.?”

“No... we don’t know anyone here.”

“Where should we take your wife and son?”



He looked down, helpless. “Where can I say now? Please... drop them at a church. Make sure she can get food and a place to stay.”

The officer nodded. No comfort. Just a box to tick.

Without letting him see them again, they took

Polina and Ustin away—dropped them at a small church on the edge of the city. Polina stood at the entrance, empty-handed—no money, no phone, no documents. Only Ustin in her arms.

Sanctuary

Inside, she sat across from the priest, voice trembling—not for language, but for everything she had held in. She told him everything—from Russia to the U.S. border; from walking through woods to being separated from her husband. The priest listened, eyes reflecting the weight of her words. He asked little. He simply led her to a small room behind the church: a narrow bed, a blanket, a small window to the garden. Not much—but safety. He brought soup for her and warm milk for Ustin. She fed her son quietly, wiping tears between sips. She hadn't cried this much since the day they left home.

That evening, during a small gathering, the priest spoke gently. "A woman is staying with us. She has gone through more than most of us can imagine. She has a young child. If you can help—with clothes, food, anything—please do."

Polina—who once ran a boutique in Russia—now wore donated clothes. Mismatched, worn, sometimes a size too big. She accepted them with quiet gratitude, even as it stung.

Meanwhile, at the detention center, Svyomir received a plain white uniform. In another life, white might have meant celebration. Here, it meant silence. They had lost almost everything—yet the worst part was not knowing what tomorrow would take.

Threads of Help

Days passed in uncertain hope. The priest mentioned to the congregation that Polina could sew. A kind soul arranged a sewing machine for rent. In that small room, Polina stitched

for anyone who needed it—patching, altering, creating. Whatever little she earned, she divided carefully: some sent back to Russia for her children; the rest saved, quietly, patiently. Through it all, she tried to find a way to contact Svyomir again. Even a word. Even a whisper.

Back inside, Svyomir scanned the newspapers they were allowed,



circling numbers of lawyers. He didn't care about his own case as much as finding where Polina and Ustin had been left. Were they safe? Did they have food?

One afternoon, a group of lawyers arrived for free consultations. Among them: a Russian immigration lawyer named Daria Butrova. She had barely sat when he spoke—not about rights or bail. Just one thing: “Please... find my wife Polina. And my son. The police left them at a church. My son was sick. My wife had no phone. Please, find them.”

Butrova met his eyes and nodded—no promises, just action. She took every detail from the police got to work. She found Polina—tired, stitching in a back room while her son rested nearby.

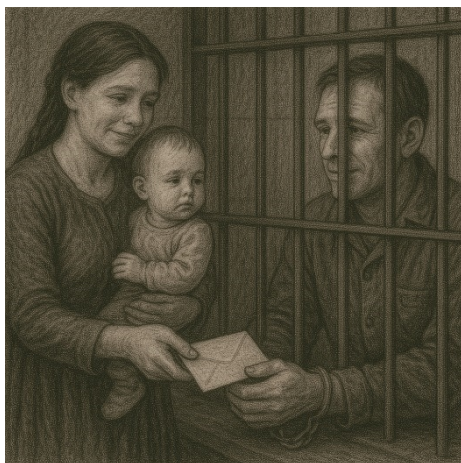
“He’s okay,” Daria said gently. “Your husband. He’s safe. I’ll take you to see him soon.”

It was the first real breath Polina had taken in weeks.

Within days, Daria arranged a special visitation. When Polina entered the visiting room, holding Ustin, time stilled. Svyomir

stood the moment he saw her—eyes wide, hands trembling. He didn't move at first, afraid the moment would vanish if he blinked. Polina didn't wait. She walked straight to him and placed their son in his arms. There, in a cold, silent room, the three of them held each other: no explanations, no apologies—just the shared understanding of what they had endured.

As the visit ended, Daria turned to Svyomir. "I've started working on your case," she said gently. "And I'll do everything I can to get you out as soon as possible."



Just before the guard signaled, Polina stepped closer, reached into her bag, and pressed a small white envelope into his hand. "If someday you feel like eating something different," she whispered with a soft smile, "maybe this will help."

He looked down. He didn't need to open it to feel the weight—not just money, but sacrifice. Inside were a hundred carefully saved dollars—the money she had earned one stitch at a time, from a borrowed machine, in a foreign land.

He clutched the envelope to his chest like a lifeline.

The Cover Cracks

A month had passed. Polina kept in touch with Kazimir—sharing what little she could. He asked difficult questions, but knew when not to push.

Nina, meanwhile, was living in her own world. Busy with college, friends, and the whirlwind of a new life. She spoke to her mother on and off. When she asked, “Where’s Papa?” Polina always gave the same soft lie: “He’s away with the truck. Long haul. Back soon.”

But it no longer sat right with Nina. Not a single call from Papa for weeks? One evening, restless, she phoned Kazimir who was at a friend’s house in samara to hide his emotions from nina.

“Kazi, what’s going on? Is everything okay?”

He paused. “Yeah—why?”

“I keep asking Mama where Papa is. She says the same thing every time. But he’s never gone this long without calling. When is he coming back?”

Kazi felt a chill. “Papa’s doing back-to-back runs,” he said carefully. “Long hauls. You know—fuel, deliveries, schedules.”

“Hmm... okay,” she said, unconvinced.

The call ended, but not for Kazi. He knew the cover wouldn’t hold. Nina would dig until it hurt her. He booked a ticket back to St. Petersburg—to step into the fire before it reached Nina.

The very day he arrived, the truth came knocking anyway. Nina received a Facebook message from Sabrina V.—a family friend in Canada.

“Don’t worry, Nina. Everything will be fine. Just stay strong, okay?”

Stay strong? Why?



Her heart raced. Something was wrong. She showed the laptop to Kazi.

“Kazi, what does this mean?”

He took the laptop, tapped quickly—and before she could protest, the chat thread was gone. Deleted. He handed the phone back.

“Kazi... what was that? What is she talking about? What Happened?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Kazi, please. Tell me the truth.”

“I said nothing. Don’t irritate me—I have work.”

“Then I’ll ask Mom.”

“Go ahead. Ask her.” He walked off.

Nina didn’t wait. She dialed Polina. No answer. She stared at the phone, waiting.

The Reveal

Two hours later, the phone rang. “Mummy—what’s going on? Where’s Papa?”

Polina's tone was calm—too calm. "Nothing has happened, Nina. Why are you so worked up?"

"Mummy, don't lie. Sabrina Auntie messaged me, and Kazi deleted it. Please—tell me. What's going on?"

Polina tried to sound normal. "Nothing has happened, really."

"Mummy, please. Tell me the truth."

Silence. Then Polina's voice softened. "Nina... we're not in Canada anymore."

"What do you mean? Then where are you?"

"We're in the United States."

"What? How? Since when?"

"We crossed the border," Polina said quietly.

"Mummy, are you all okay? Where's Papa? Where are you staying?"

"Yes, yes, we're safe. Papa is at the church... speaking with the priest," she said, keeping her voice steady. In truth, she couldn't bring herself to say "detention center."

"This country is very good, Nina," she added. "Under Obama's government, no one can send us away. We're safe."

Nina frowned. "But how did this happen so suddenly?"

"It's a long story. I'm too tired now. I'll tell you everything later."

"Okay. But when Papa comes back, please make him talk to me."

Polina's throat tightened. "Okay."

Days passed. Nina's restlessness grew. The excuses—"he's busy with church work," "he'll call soon"—rang thinner each time.

"Mummy, where is Papa?"

"He's volunteering at the church."

"Mummy, please. Stop lying. Where is Papa? Tell me the truth!"

"Nina, everything is fine. Why would I lie?"

"Mummy... something will happen to me. This tension alone will kill me. Just tell me where Papa is!"

Polina's courage gave in. Tears finally broke through. "Nina... your Papa is in a U.S. jail."

Silence heavier than any scream. "Mummy... what are you saying?! Is Papa okay? Please tell me he's okay."

"He's okay," Polina said quickly. "We've hired a lawyer. We'll get him out very soon."

"Since when is he in jail?"

"Since the day we crossed."

Nina broke. "Mummyyyy!"

"I was waiting for the right time," Polina whispered. "Day after tomorrow, I'm going to see Papa. I'll make sure you talk to him."



Father's Voice

Nina spent the day rehearsing: I won't cry. I'll be strong for Papa. But every rehearsal ended in tears.

Then the moment came. Her phone buzzed—Polina's name. She answered. A different voice spoke.

"Nina... it's me."

It was her father. The sound of him unraveled her. Still, she tried. "Papa... how are you?"

He wouldn't let the moment turn heavy. "Oh, why are you crying, silly girl?" he said with a lightness that hid his pain. "I'm doing great! Your Mama never let me eat chicken, but here I get chicken every day!" He chuckled.

Nina had imagined giving him strength. Instead, from behind bars, he was giving it to her.

"Papa... you're okay in there, right?"

"We get fresh clothes. We even play football to pass the time. Don't worry, sweetheart—I'll be out soon. Your mother is fighting harder than anyone. I didn't know how strong she is."

"I should pass the phone back to Mama," he said gently. "Visiting hours are ending, and I need to meet the lawyer."

"Papa, wait! One last thing... did Kazi know everything? From the beginning?"

A pause. "Yes, Nina. Kazi knew. You should be proud of your brother. If I don't make it out... he'll take care of you all."

"I'm handing the phone to Mama now. We'll meet soon. Very soon."

As the line went quiet, Nina sat still, phone in hand. She had promised herself she wouldn't cry. But nothing had prepared her for his voice—the calm, the quiet wall of strength he had built around them all.

Hours later, Polina called from the church. "Nina, are you okay?"

"No, Mama... I'm not. Papa... he tried to sound strong."

"If your Papa can sit in a cell and still be strong for his children, then why can't we?" Polina said softly. "We spoke to the lawyer today."

"What did she say?"

"To get Papa out, we'll need to pay bond money."

"How much?"

"Eighty thousand dollars," Polina said. "It's an immigration bond set by the officer."

Silence. "Mama... that's too much. Where will we get that?"

"If we can't... your Papa won't come out. Not for a long time."

"I've told Kazi. He'll speak to Vladimir Uncle and others. You can help too. Go through Papa's contacts. Look for Uncle Khamid from Kazan—his old business friend. Call him. Ask for help. Tell him we'll repay every penny."

"Okay, Mama. I'll find the number."

"I'll ask around here too. Someone will help. They have to."

The Bond

From that moment, the family had one mission—getting Svyomir out. Polina knocked on every door at the church. Kazi

reached out to relatives and old contacts. Nina dove into her father's numbers, heart pounding with every unfamiliar name she dialed.

Inside, Svyomir sat with a different pain—not the floor or the cuffs, but the thought of his family begging for him. He had worked all his life, never asking for help. Now, the idea of Polina and the children pleading door to door was unbearable.

Nina finally found Khamid's number and called.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Khamid Uncle? It's Nina... Svyomir's daughter."

"Oh! Nina, kid, how are you?"

"I'm okay, Uncle... but Papa is not." She explained, voice trembling. "He crossed out of desperation. To get him out, we need \$80,000."

A sigh. "That's terrible news."

"Please, Uncle. Can you help, even a little? We will repay it all."

His tone cooled. "I told your father not to leave. He didn't listen. Now look where he is."

"Uncle, he had no other way."

"I don't care what the reason was. A father doesn't run into trouble. Your father made his bed."

"Please... just a little help. We're running out of options."

"I'm sorry. I can only pray for him. Take care of yourself."

He hung up.

Kazi hit the same dead ends. The very relatives who once filled their house at festivals vanished like ghosts. Even Vladimir, his father's own brother, backed away with excuses about "tough times."

Kazi remembered the day Nina, swallowing her pride, called Vladimir. Her voice was calm, but trembling underneath. "Uncle, if you can't manage much," she said quietly, "at least help with groceries. Everything's finished... even bread. We only need 2,000 rubles."

A long pause. Vladimir's reply was flat. "Nina, we're already spending so much on my daughter's wedding. It's not possible right now. Try to manage."

That sentence cut deeper than a knife. It wasn't about money anymore. It was about who turned away when you needed them most.

In the end, it was Polina's turn. With no more doors to knock on, she stood outside the church, hands folded, eyes tired yet pleading—in a foreign land where she knew no one.

Sometimes, grace comes from where you least expect it. The church that sheltered her stepped forward. Priests, volunteers, the small community gathered every penny they could. Small bills. Quiet envelopes. Bit by bit, they raised the bond.

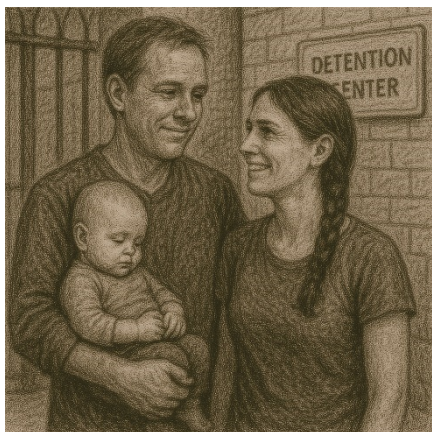
The payment was made.

Release

Days later, Nina's phone rang. "Hello, Mama?"

A different voice answered. "No, not Mama. It's Papa."

A breath. “I’m out, Nina. I’m free. I’m walking with your mother now. Headed to the church.” His voice cracked. “Your Mama did it, Nina. She really did.”



For a moment, Nina couldn’t speak. “Papa... thank God. You’re free.”

“I’ll call once we reach the church,” he said. “We’ll video call. Kazi knows too.”

The storm hadn’t passed, but for now, they had found each other again.

After: What Strength Means

Fate had tested their love; now it would test their endurance. Everything had to begin again—life, work, home—but this time, it would be different. The children were no longer children. And Polina and Svyomir were no longer young. Their hearts still carried strength, but their bodies were tired. The world wouldn’t give them the luxury of a fresh start; it would demand they rebuild from wreckage. Yet this was not their first battle. And it wouldn’t be their last.

After the detention center, something shifted in the Varkov family—something no words could fully capture. Stripped of distance and pride, they were left with the raw truth of their bonds.

Kazi, the silent protector, learned that bravery wasn’t only about facing the world; it was carrying the family’s pain

without credit. Nina understood that love wasn't just late-night calls and promises; it was patience, endurance, and becoming a pillar when others are breaking. She saw her mother not just as "Mama," but as a woman who kept a sinking ship afloat with her own hands. And Svyomir—who had always been the foundation—understood that strength didn't mean doing it alone. Sometimes, it meant letting those you love carry you.

The detention center had tried to break them, but it made them see each other clearer.

Rebuilding

Another quiet battle began. The church had limits; they couldn't support the family forever. The day Svyomir left the shelter, he was no longer a man looking for hope. He was a man looking for work.

He found a job in a restaurant—hard work, but work. The salary was just enough to cover a rented room. Polina stitched clothes with careful hands and quiet focus. When that wasn't enough, she stepped into orchards—plucking berries and apples under an aching sun. It wasn't graceful. It wasn't easy. But it was honest. And it paid just enough to keep hope from fading. When orchards had no shifts, she babysat—cooking in kitchens that weren't hers and washing dishes in sinks that didn't belong to her. She had no pride left for herself—only for her family. That was enough.

The children began to breathe a little easier. Kazi went back to his studies, older than his years. Nina tried to bring life back to normal with classes and... Amos.

It had barely been a few months since Svyomir walked out after five long months inside. The wounds hadn't healed when the children received a picture on their phones: their father standing in the back of a restaurant, mopping the floor. No caption. No explanation. Just that image.



For Nina and Kazi, something shattered. The man who once walked with pride, who built his own business from scratch, now wiped tables and mopped floors in a foreign land.

But, as always, Svyomir didn't flinch. When they called—heartbroken and silent—he spoke first.

“Children,” he said with familiar strength, “when you restart your life, you start from the bottom.

That’s how it works. Don’t worry—your father will do anything to rebuild what we’ve lost.”

He said it with such calm that it made them ashamed of their tears.

It felt like after the jail incident, God had turned His back on the Varkovs, punishing them for a mistake He never explained. But Svyomir didn't question God. He wiped the sweat from his brow and went back to work.

Chapter 21. Two Prisons



Invisible Bars

While Svyomir was serving time behind cold steel bars in a U.S. detention center, far away in Russia there was another kind of prisoner. A girl with no chains, no handcuffs, no prison walls. And yet, she was trapped. That girl was Nina.

Her prison was invisible, but its walls were suffocating.

Her captors? Shaul, the weight of her family's struggles... and Amos.

Now, you might wonder — Shaul makes sense, family burdens too — but how could Amos, the boy Nina loved, be part of her prison? That's the tragic twist. Love can set you free, but it can also bind you tighter than iron.

Nina and Amos loved each other — or at least, Nina loved Amos. But somewhere along the way, that love turned into something else. A quiet captivity. The kind where you're not held back by anyone else's force, but by your own heartstrings, tied and tangled until you can't move.

Amos didn't chain Nina with cruelty or harsh words.

He did it with silence.

With neglect.

With half-hearted promises that never arrived.

And Nina, in all her innocence, accepted her role as a willing prisoner. Because in her mind, being near him—even in fragments—was better than being without him at all.

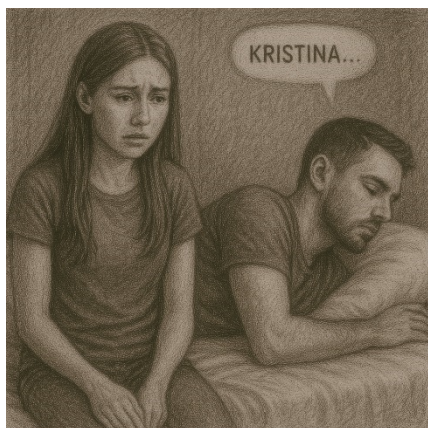
That’s how love can turn into a cage.

A cage that looks like freedom from the outside.

But only the one trapped inside knows how it feels.

Name that Fell Like a Stone

The situation had reached a point where even the quiet of night carried unspoken tension. One evening, Nina lay beside Amos, their breaths blending in the half-lit quiet. He was speaking softly, half-murmuring some late-night counsel, a string of gentle do’s and don’ts. And then, without warning, a name slipped through his voice—Kristina.



For a heartbeat, everything inside Nina stopped. The room seemed to shrink.

“What... what did you say, Amos?” she asked, barely above a breath.

“I said do’s and don’ts,” he replied.

“And after that?”

“Nothing.”

Silence swelled between them. Nina’s chest ached with the weight of unspoken fears.

Amos touched her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"You know what," she said quietly.

He hesitated, then his voice softened. "Kristina?"

At that, Nina turned her gaze on him—one sharp, searching look.

"She's in the office staff," Amos explained quickly. "Handles sales. I spend the whole day with the team... the name just slipped out."

Nina listened, letting his explanation settle. She chose to believe him—at least outwardly. But a thin, cold thread had entered the weave of the night. The darkness between them carried a quiet unease that no words could dissolve.

Home on Edge

Where Nina's love life was beginning to crack, it wasn't just her heart losing ground—her nights too had started filling with quiet dread. Yet love wasn't the only storm. There was another—one she didn't face alone. Juliana was in it too.

Both Nina and Juliana had unknowingly become the punching bags for Masha's unravelling frustration. Day after day, Masha's pain morphed into sharp words and cold stares, and more often than not, it was the two girls who ended up standing in the line of fire.

And everyone knew why.

Shaul.

From the early days, Masha had lived with Shaul, and she disturbed his rhythm of life. Out of love—or perhaps obsession—she wouldn't let him go to work. At that time,

Shaul worked as a bouncer, and money at home was already scarce. Juliana disliked this from the beginning. But Masha seemed intent on keeping Shaul by her side every waking moment.

The result was predictable: the burden of earning fell heavily on Juliana. It was as if Shaul had turned into Masha's puppet. Household responsibilities were tilted unfairly. If Masha was unwell, Nina and Juliana managed everything. If either Nina or Juliana were sick, they were still expected to do their part.

Small frictions multiplied—late-night demands to fetch food, scoldings for laughing during tense moods, accusations about missing yogurt or cake. Days felt like walking on eggshells.

Masha, in her restless urge to appear the “modern wife,” even told Shaul with a bravado that hid insecurity: “Go out, meet girls, have coffee—I don't mind.” Shaul was never a womanizer, but repeated teasing slowly turned into temptation. Eventually, he began an affair—boldly, almost as if he wanted it known.

Street of Silence

The betrayal came to a head one evening when Masha, Nina, and Juliana went to confront the girl Shaul was seeing. Fate twisted cruelly: Shaul himself appeared, and his anger turned on Nina.

“What are you doing here, Nina?” he demanded.

“I just—” she began.

“Go home. I'll tell your family everything about Amos—how you sneak out at night to meet him.”

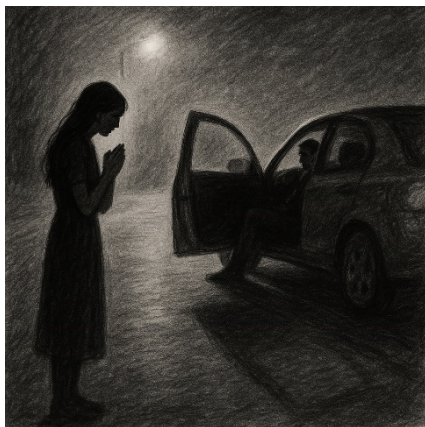
Masha tried to reason with him. Juliana pleaded. But Shaul's words grew harsher: "I don't want Masha. I want to be with her," he said, pointing to the other woman. Humiliated, Masha ran out, Juliana following.

Nina stayed frozen. Panic surged. "Uncle, I'm sorry. Please don't tell my parents. I beg you."

Shaul opened his car door. "Begging won't help, Nina."

"I'll touch your feet," she blurted, desperation cracking her voice.

"Alright then. Do it."



Time seemed to stop. With her father in jail abroad, Amos drifting away, and her mother struggling far away, Nina felt everything collapsing. And then, without another thought, she bent and touched Shaul's feet—right there on the open street.

Shaul leaned back, satisfied, and drove off.

Nina stood motionless, humiliated, but she didn't cry. Just ahead, Juliana was leading Masha home, arms wrapped around her like a shield.

That day, a part of Nina's self-respect died quietly on that street. And the worst part was—she didn't even fight for it.

Wounds Without Words

What was meant to be just a year had quietly stretched into eight. The Varkov family had endured detention centers, borrowed homes, stitched-up dignity, and a life rebuilt from scraps. Yet some wounds never made it into conversation. Nina, now 23, carried one such wound.

She never told anyone—not Kazimir, not her mother—about the night she knelt in the street, begging Shaul. She never described how it felt, because how could she?

What would she even say?

That she humiliated herself to keep someone close... someone who was already gone?

Because Amos had left long before that evening—not physically, but in every way that mattered. The texts slowed, the meetings stopped, the excuses grew longer. By the time Nina knelt before Shaul, Amos wasn't even hers to save.

So what was she protecting?

Not love. Not even Amos.

Just the illusion of not being abandoned again.

And that illusion cracked silently as Amos drifted away—not with a loud goodbye, but with an absence that didn't need words.

That's why Nina never told anyone.

Some humiliations aren't meant for sympathy.

They're just meant to be buried.

Chapter 22. The Fractured Night



(Content note: This chapter depicts sexual assault and may be distressing for some readers.)

Dear Nina,

If you believe that the humiliation Shaul inflicted will leave a permanent scar on your heart, I'm sorry, little girl—but what lies ahead will make that insult feel like nothing at all.

The Varkovs had endured so much that even small joys felt like gifts. Nina was no different—except that she had grown so desperate for those rare sparks of happiness that she was willing to find them even in the wrong company.

— — —

One day, she had gone to Samara on an errand. Masha suggested she spend the night at her parents' home, where Masha's brother lived with his wife and their young daughter.

After finishing her work, Nina went there, and soon a plan for drinks began to take shape.

Then—joining them came Lyuboslav and a friend of his.

You might remember Lyuboslav—he was the one who had once slapped Nina. Now he was married and visiting Russia from New Zealand to celebrate the birth of his son.

The moment Nina saw he would be part of the gathering, she refused to join.

Everyone urged her to stay, but she stood firm. Still, after much coaxing, she called Masha in St. Petersburg.

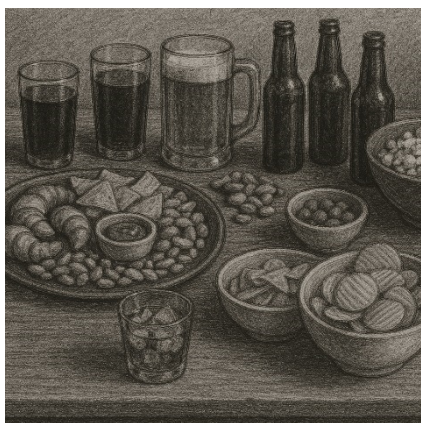
“Hello, Masha... they’re asking me to drink. Should I?”

“Yes, yes – this is our own home. Relax and have it.”

“...Okay,” Nina said.

The party began – laughter, teasing, snacks passed around, glasses clinking.

Lyuboslav’s friend had quite the talent for mixing drinks, and he offered to take over.



He prepared one particular concoction that wasn’t meant to be sipped from a glass but poured straight into the mouth – like an injection without a needle. One by one, he served it to everyone. Nina included.

The effect on her was instant. The alcohol hit

harder than she’d expected – too hard.

Everything blurred. Her head grew heavy; sounds muffled into nothing. All she could recall was somehow standing at the door, saying goodbye to Lyuboslav... and then stumbling into the bathroom, where she collapsed over the sink, vomiting.

— — —

The next morning, Nina had to wake early – there was no choice.

A friend's wedding awaited her back in St. Petersburg, and no pounding headache could excuse her absence.

Somehow, with her skull splitting and her body aching in a way she couldn't name, she made it back to the city. She pulled out the dress she'd planned for the wedding and headed for the shower.

As hot water roared, she sat for a moment, waiting for her head to stop spinning. That's when she felt it—a strange, dull ache deep inside. Her hand instinctively went to her waist. There, mottled against her skin, were bruises. The pain sharpened. Lower now. A burning.

She didn't understand. Until her phone rang.

It was Lyuboslav.

"Hello?"

"Hi," his voice was easy, casual. "You made it back to St. Petersburg?"

"Yes," she said flatly.

"Headache?"

"Yes. But I need to get ready, I'm late—bye—"

"Wait, listen."

"What?"

"So... how was it?"

She frowned. "How was what?"

"Last night. The experience."

"Oh... yes. I shouldn't have had so much to drink."

"I'm not talking about the drinks."

A pause. "Then... what?"

"What happened between us."

The world seemed to still. "What do you mean?"

"We had sex last night."

Her heart stopped. "Don't joke like that. That's a disgusting joke."

"It's not a joke. It's the truth."

Her voice cracked. "Please, Lyuboslav. Don't lie. Please tell me nothing happened."

"I'm surprised you don't remember."

"You're talking nonsense. Nothing happened."

"I can prove it."

Her stomach turned cold. "What proof?"

"You were on your period."

— — —

The words sliced through her.

"No..."

Fragments of memory flashed—pajama bottoms gone, underwear pushed aside, the pad still in place, his weight pressing down. The bruises. The pain. The burning. It all made sense now.

On the other end of the line, he laughed. "Wow, you really don't remember anything, do you? Anyway, I had a great time."

The line went dead.



She was silent. Utterly silent.

Why would he do that?

Where was everyone when he led her away?

Why didn't anyone stop him?

She had been drinking like she was safe — like she was home. But now, every question funneled down to the only answer she didn't want to face.

It wasn't a misunderstanding.

It wasn't a mistake.

It was rape — a violent betrayal by someone she trusted, witnessed in silence by others who did nothing.

That truth carved into her soul, branding it with the memory of that one fractured night

Chapter 23. An Aunt in Sister's Skin



A mother's sister — an aunt — what a tender bond that usually is. And yes, I am speaking of Juliana, Shaul's sister. By relation, she was Nina's aunt, yet being only two years younger, the two had grown up not as aunt and niece but as sisters, bound by childhood more than blood. She is indeed one of the strongest characters of the story.

So now, amidst all the turmoil within the household, it was only natural to ask: through what storms was Juliana passing? She was the only one who earned, the sole support of the house. And in the endless quarrels of Masha and Shaul, it was Juliana who was crushed most of all. Nina, at least, had been given a rented room with a neighbour to escape the chaos. But Juliana remained—alone, enduring everything in silence, carrying the weight of a home that seemed determined to break her spirit.

At first, Masha and Juliana shared a bond, fragile yet genuine. But slowly, day by day, it began to fray. To put it bluntly, Juliana no longer liked Masha as she once had. The moment Masha entered their lives, she pushed Shaul away from work, claiming him entirely for herself.

The confidences Juliana had once shared with Masha—as a friend, before Masha became her sister-in-law—were no longer secrets. Every word, every intimate detail, now lay bare before Shaul's eyes. Juliana's relationships, her personal struggles, even the smallest of private matters... nothing

remained hidden. In that household, transparency had become a weapon, and Juliana felt its sting with every passing day.

— — —

There was one thing that turned Juliana's dislike of Masha into pure, burning hatred: the deal Masha struck after drawing Shaul to her side—an act involving none other than her own brother, Ruslan. Yes, the same Ruslan from whom Nina took her tuition lessons.

Ruslan was struggling to recover from a financial crisis. His tutoring business was failing, and he turned to Masha for help. But Masha and Shaul were already penniless. The only thing they truly possessed was their home in St. Petersburg—the house where Juliana had been born, grown up, and where her own mother's memories lingered in every corner, the very home they were living in.

And, of course, what you all are already imagining happened. Masha, in her cold pragmatism, put Juliana and Shaul's house up as collateral, pawning the home that was Juliana's sanctuary for the sake of her brother.

Masha had already sold Juliana's mother's jewellery solely to cover the household bills. Yet, when the loan arrived, more than half of it went straight to Ruslan, while Masha and Shaul squandered the rest on their clothes, coffee, and luxuries they didn't need.



Witnessing all this broke Juliana further. She couldn't understand how her own brother could let it all happen.

— — —

Masha herself had endured much in life: the early death of her mother, toxic relationships, and now this endless chaos. Amid all this darkness, there was one small solace in Juliana's life — Robin. Her team leader at work, who also happened to be her current boyfriend, spared no effort in keeping her happy. Yet even he could not be with her all the time. At home, Juliana was left alone to suffer the storm.

Years passed this way — three or four of them. The first few loan installments were paid, but after that, Ruslan withdrew. The money he had promised never arrived, and now there was nothing left to give.

Fear had begun to seep into everyone's hearts. The bank notices were coming, and the family's home — a property in a prime location that anyone would have killed to own — was on the line.

It was then that Masha and Shaul made a decision: Juliana would be sent to Australia after a court marriage, where she could work and send money back to repay the loan. Juliana, upon hearing the plan, agreed without hesitation. She had longed to leave that house, and this opportunity seemed perfect.

Robin, Juliana's boyfriend, raised no objections. He understood her situation too well to interfere. Still, the two of them decided that once Juliana's Australian visa was approved, they would formalize their relationship with a small, private ceremony, making their bond official before she left.

In that quiet resolve, Juliana felt a strange mixture of relief and sorrow—relief for the chance to escape, and sorrow for the home and family she had to leave behind, tangled in debts, betrayals, and memories.

— — —

The plan for Juliana's court marriage involved Masha's brother-in-law's cousin—a man already married, though the marriage had never been officially registered. The deal was simple: Juliana would study, and based on her spouse, the man would be taken to Australia. He would bear all the expenses. The paperwork began.

But fate was not done testing her. A new blow struck: Juliana's degree had gone missing. Panic set in. She knew this opportunity could not slip through her fingers. In that moment, Nina stood by her side. Together, they stormed the university, visiting office after office, kneeling before the management, pleading, sometimes crying, even begging, demanding that her degree be retrieved. The stakes were enormous—everything hinged on it.

By sheer fortune, the university finally released the degree. Throughout her final exams, Nina remained Juliana's shadow, helping her manage every step for the court marriage—the photos, the formalities, the endless preparations.

And all the while, Masha and Shaul were nowhere to be seen. They lounged in comfort at home, leaving the entire whirlwind of running around, pleading, and organizing to Juliana and Nina alone. In the quiet of exhaustion, Juliana realized just how much she owed to her sister in spirit, her steadfast companion through every storm.

Here came the twist: after all the chaos, Juliana's original degree also surfaced. Any guesses where it had been hiding? The answer was almost unbelievable—it was in Nina's wardrobe.

The discovery was shocking, a revelation that could have changed everything. Yet, there was a small story behind it, one Juliana would revisit later. For now, she said nothing to Nina. She wanted no questions, no explanations, only the quiet certainty of her escape. Australia awaited, and with it, a chance to leave the tangled mess of the past behind.

— — —

At last, Juliana began to pack. From the money she had carefully saved, she bought herself a laptop and a few small things she would need in her new life. Amidst this quiet preparation, as planned, she and Robin held a small ceremony—simple, almost modest—yet enough to give their bond an official name: engaged.

When the day of departure came, Shaul, Masha, Robin, and Nina accompanied her to the airport. And so Juliana stepped out of that house at last. The relief she felt in leaving was so immense that, for a fleeting moment, she forgot the true reason for her journey—that Australia was not freedom, but exile under the burden of another's debts.

Upon her arrival, she stayed with Masha's sister and brother-in-law, beginning her studies while taking up part-time work. The work was humbling, even humiliating to some—she cleaned toilets, scrubbing away the stains of strangers. Yet, in the quiet rhythm of that labor, Juliana found a strange dignity. For the first time, the effort was her own, and every coin she earned carried the weight not of shame, but of survival.

Only a few days had passed when the calls from Samara began. At first, they were wrapped in softness—questions about her health, her studies, her new life in Australia. But Juliana quickly heard what lay beneath those gentle words. The concern was only a mask. What they truly wanted to know was simple: When will you send the money?

She had barely begun wiring her first earnings when Masha's news arrived like a stone hurled through glass: she and Shaul were divorcing. No longer the endless quarrels, no longer the pretense of a marriage. By now, Shaul had grown into the very thing he once despised—a man chasing women in the shadows, though never truly satisfied by any of them. And the reason for the divorce was absurd, almost vulgar in its calculation: Shaul had begun a romance on Tinder with a government employee. She had a good salary, a respectable family, and most importantly, a Canadian PR soon to arrive. She was a little overweight, but that was irrelevant. For Shaul and Masha, she was less a woman than a ticket—a chance to climb into a new life, financed not by love, but by opportunity.

Juliana saw it clearly now: for them, feelings had become meaningless. People were only ladders, and ladders could be stepped on.

— — —

And then there was Shaul's cruelty, the kind of cruelty that does not bruise the skin but carves into the soul. He was a man who thrived on body-shaming, and Masha stood beside him, laughing, amplifying his words. Juliana knew this cruelty well. She had been its target, and she had seen Nina suffer from it too.

Masha's way of mocking was wrapped in the disguise of half-praise, half-jest. She would say, before others: "Look at Nina—so short, such a small forehead, her upper lip almost invisible, her complexion ordinary, her nose crooked... but her eyes and hair—ah, they are beautiful." What was that—praise, or humiliation? Juliana knew the answer.

With Juliana it was no different. "Don't wear short dresses," Masha would say with a sweet smile that stung like venom, "they don't suit you—your little stomach sticks out."

Such words were not thrown idly; they remained, echoing, nesting themselves deep in memory. It was in these small humiliations that Juliana understood: some wounds are inflicted not with knives, but with laughter.

Masha, of course, almost forgot—or perhaps chose to forget—that she herself was unnaturally thin, thinner even than the most ordinary girls. A frail silhouette, sharp shoulders under cheap fabrics, her body a fragile outline of hunger disguised as elegance. And perhaps it was precisely this—her own secret insecurity—that drove her to point her finger at others.

It is an old trick of the wounded: to cover one's own weakness by turning it into a weapon against the world. Masha mocked Nina's face, Juliana's figure, and anyone who happened to stand near her. Not because she believed her words, but because it distracted her from her own reflection in the mirror.

And let me tell you, dear reader, this is not something I am inventing. These were Masha's own words—her own confessions, dripping with a strange mixture of pride and despair. She would laugh bitterly and admit: "Shaul goes to other women because of me... because I am too thin. No

breasts, no hips.” Imagine that—her insecurities worn like cheap jewelry, displayed before anyone who cared to listen.

But by then, Juliana had ceased to care. The venom no longer pierced her. She had left that suffocating house, escaped its walls of endless quarrels and petty cruelties. From Australia she sent money faithfully, carrying the burden they had pressed onto her shoulders. And yet, even across oceans, she could not escape their voices. On the telephone came the questions—disguised as inquiries about her well-being but sharpened into demands: When will you send more? Why has it not arrived yet? And when she faltered, when money was delayed, the reproaches followed, bitter and merciless.

Meanwhile, back in Samara, the theater of absurdity continued. The divorce between Shaul and Masha was final, and soon after, Shaul remarried—a practical match, nothing more, with a woman of steady government salary, a “respectable” family, and a Canadian PR on the horizon. But here is the strangest part: Shaul and Masha still lived together. The new wife existed only on paper, barred from his home by Shaul himself. She remained in her parents’ house, sending ten thousand rubles each week as if paying rent for a life she could not occupy.

And Masha? She too found her way forward. At last she secured work as a counselor in an immigration office, where her new story began—with a man named Amin.

— — —

But for Juliana, all of this was background noise to a tragedy far greater. Despite every sacrifice, every remittance, every coin she scraped together in a foreign land, the inevitable came to pass: the house in St. Petersburg, her house, was sold.



The house of her birth, the house that carried her mother's memory, was lost. She had believed, foolishly, that money and endurance might save it. Instead, she

learned the cruelest lesson of all: sometimes, no matter how much you give, the ground is stolen from beneath your feet.

And with that sale, one truth struck like ice—Juliana would never again return to the home that had shaped her.

IN BETWEEN

Juliana had already spent several years in Australia, a land both strange and familiar, where silence often felt heavier than words. Juliana also got the Australian PR. In Nina she had found a companion for her sorrows and her joys, someone who, without asking, understood the unspoken pauses of her heart. The shadows that Masha had once cast between them – the doubts, the trust undone – had long since dissolved, like smoke carried away by the wind.

Now Juliana lived her life as a nurse, tending to strangers with a gentleness she no longer reserved for her own family. Her brother, Shaul, was no longer her brother but a name from a life abandoned. The thread between them had snapped, and in its place, in her chest, grew an undying hatred for Masha – a fire that neither time nor distance could extinguish.

Yet Nina remained. Every day, they spoke for hours, as though clinging to each other across oceans. Juliana would send her a message from the quiet suburbs of Australia: “Be free in two hours. I want to take you to the market.” She wrote as if Nina were there beside her, in the same streets, under the same sky. And when Juliana walked between the market stalls, touching the fabrics, smelling the fruit, she held her phone before her so that Nina’s face could follow her every step.

They had become inseparable now – two souls tied together not by geography, but by the stubborn will of their own longing.

Chapter 24. His Truth. Her Ruin



Content note: this chapter includes depictions of emotional abuse, infidelity, and depression.

Years passed, slow and heavy, carrying with them trials that had reshaped the Varkov family. Grief, betrayals, debts, and silent endurance—each left its mark, carving wisdom where once there had only been innocence.

Nina was twenty-eight now, Kazimir twenty-four. Childhood was long behind them; the siblings had built lives of their own, though their closeness remained unbroken.

Svyomir had tied his fate to a trucking company, long roads and restless journeys shaping his days. Kazimir, sharper in mind and quicker in numbers, worked from Russia yet managed logistics for American firms—bridging continents from the quiet of his room. Nina, once fragile and lost, had found her ground in words. She had become a content writer, and somewhere during the long isolation of the pandemic, books had claimed her. Reading was no longer a pastime but refuge—pages becoming both shield and mirror for her restless heart.

And then there was the gentlest change of all—the one that colored their days with new brightness. Kazimir was no longer alone. In his life had stepped a young woman named Mavra.

Mavra was beautiful—not with the cold perfection of models, but with a warmth that made beauty feel alive. She carried

both worlds within her: modern confidence and traditional grace. A civil engineer by profession, yet at heart a woman of family, loyalty, and laughter. For Kazimir, she was not just a companion but a choice made by the heart, steady and unquestioning.

And for Mavra — Kazimir was already enough.

— — —

Mavra was a mountain girl, graceful and radiant, her height a modest five foot four, yet she carried herself with the quiet strength of the peaks she had grown among. It seemed, at times, as though she had been created for Kazimir alone. In her, innocence and maturity existed in perfect balance, like two strings of the same instrument producing a single, harmonious note.

Her father owned gas stations, vast orchards heavy with fruit; she had been born into comfort, a silver spoon in her hand. Yet unlike many who inherit abundance, Mavra understood the worth of every coin, every harvest. The same blood ran through her brother, Viktor — a boy educated in one of Russia's most distinguished schools, and yet as simple, grounded, and unpretentious as the soil of their orchards. To see the two of them together was to see an unspoken dignity, a kind of beauty money could not buy.

Viktor was one of the kindest men Nina had ever met — not because he was Mavra's brother, but because his heart was so clean. He loved cars but no show offs, and he was an endlessly supportive brother. Between Mavra and Viktor there was a silent pact: they never revealed each other's secrets.



And Nina—watching from afar—found her heart finally at rest. Somewhere deep within, she knew Kazimir was safe now, sheltered in hands strong enough to hold him and gentle enough to love him. But fate, impartial and relentless, had other designs for her.

While Mavra stepped into Kazimir's life as its new beginning, Nina's destiny was carving out its final

chapter—one written with the name Amos.

Amos. Amos. Amos.

There was a time when the mere sound of his name made Nina's heart leap with joy. Now, that same name sank heavily in her chest. He could never truly be hers—yet she couldn't bring herself to erase him from her life. She often wondered: If not Amos, then who else?

One truth had settled deep inside her—no matter how fiercely you love someone, it cannot force them to love you back. And yet, Nina couldn't fathom how she was supposed to survive without him. So she wasn't able to leave him, no matter what.

Once, she had thought she couldn't endure even a single year apart from him. And yet, somehow, she had endured ten—ten long years scattered with two breakups. Breakups that shattered her from the inside, but also, in some strange, painful way, made her immune to sorrow.

Of the two, the first breakup was the worst.

By then, Nina's obsession with Amos had reached its peak. She was ready to do anything — everything — for him.

It was 2017. Amos had a side business selling steroids — illegal, dangerous, and eventually costly. The fallout came quickly. He was forced to disappear from St. Petersburg for a while. Officially, he told everyone he was in Zhukovsky. In reality, he had slipped away to Gatchina.

One evening, he called Nina. His voice was low, almost cautious, as he told her to come meet him there. Until then, her travels were simple — back and forth between Samara and St. Petersburg. But for Amos, she was suddenly ready to go anywhere.

Before hanging up, he gave her one strict instruction: over the phone, she must always speak as if he were in Zhukovsky. No exceptions.

Nina had never traveled alone anywhere beyond the route between Samara and St. Petersburg. Yet now, for Amos, she was on her way to Gatchina. In her bag were a few clothes — carefully chosen after two whole days of planning. After all, this wasn't just any trip. She was going to meet Amos.

By the time she reached Gatchina, it was already night. Over the phone, Amos gave her instructions on how to reach his place. He had arranged a cab, but because of the wrong location, the driver ended up taking her somewhere else.

Panic set in. Nina's eyes filled with tears, and she began to cry. The cab driver glanced at her nervously and said, "Ma'am, please don't cry. If someone sees, they'll think I've done something to you. I'll get into trouble."

All the while, Nina kept talking to Amos on the phone. On the other end, his voice grew sharper, more impatient with every word. That only made Nina more anxious. Finally, Amos snapped and told her to hand the phone over to the driver so he could give the directions himself.

Amos gave the driver the exact location. The man nodded and, before hanging up, said politely, “Tell her not to cry.”

When Amos spoke again, his tone was sharp. “Nina, stop making a scene.”

That only frightened her more. Why was she so afraid of him? Amos had never yelled at her, never scolded, never abused her. And yet, something about him held a weight that made her tremble at the thought of his disappointment.

Somehow, through the chaos, Nina finally reached him. Amos was staying on the fourteenth floor of a tall building. The place had everything—space, luxury, a breathtaking view. On the surface, it seemed like the perfect hideout, almost comforting in its elegance.

But not for Amos. Not then. He was far from his city, cut off from familiar ground. And on his face sat a strange shadow of fear—one that made him restless, irritable, almost impossible to please.

And then, of course, what Amos had really called her there for happened. By now, we can see it clearly—but Nina couldn’t, not then. She still believed he had missed her, that he wanted her near. The truth was simpler, harsher: Amos didn’t love her. He had asked her to go to Gatchina because sex relieved stress.

Nina stood by the window when Amos walked up behind her. His first question came out of nowhere.

“Anyone else in your life?”

It was an abrupt thing to ask a girlfriend. But Nina, blinded by love, didn’t question it. She leaned in and kissed him instead. Amos took her hand, led her to the room, and that night they had sex.

For Nina, it was an uneasy night. Even something as simple as holding him felt complicated. Before daring to hug Amos from behind, she lay there on the bed thinking—should I, should I not? When she finally gathered the courage, Amos smirked and asked,



“How many times did you think before hugging me, Nina?”

What were those comments supposed to mean? She was his girlfriend. Couldn’t he just let her be close without making her feel small?

The next morning began like any other. Amos and Nina made breakfast together in the kitchen. The day passed quietly—too quietly, with barely any

conversation between them.

By evening, Amos went in to take a shower. Fifteen... twenty minutes slipped by, but he still didn’t come out. A trace of worry started to creep into Nina’s chest. She called out from outside the bathroom door, her voice soft but anxious:

“Amos? You okay?”

“I’m fine. Why? What could happen to me?”
came his quick reply.

Nina frowned. Something in his tone felt heavy. She thought he must be lost in tension again. Wanting to comfort him somehow, she picked up her phone and decided a message might make him feel better. After all, his phone was with him inside.

She typed: Amos, don’t worry. Everything will be alright. No matter what happens, I’ll always be with you.

The reply came almost instantly.

What?

Her heart jumped. Fingers trembling, she typed back quickly: Nothing. Forget it.

After nearly forty-five minutes, Amos finally stepped out of the bathroom. His expression was strange, his voice sharp.

“What was that text about?” he asked.

Nina looked up nervously. “I just wanted to tell you... If you’re feeling tense, I’m with you.”

“Really? Then, when I asked what, why did you say nothing?”
His tone cut deeper.

“Sorry... why are you getting angry?”

“I’m just talking, Nina,” he snapped, though his voice kept rising with each word.

Nina sat silently on the bed, her hands pressed together in her lap, while Amos stood over her, still throwing words at her.

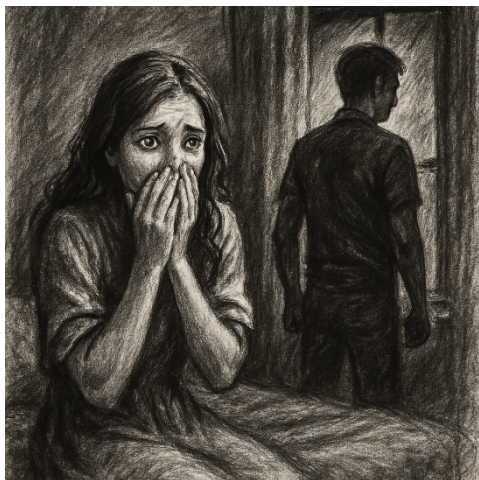
Finally, she broke the silence. “Amos, I don’t want to fight with you. We’ve been together for two years now — there shouldn’t be this fighting between us.”

“This?” His laugh was bitter. “You think this is a relationship, Nina? This isn’t one.”

Her voice trembled. “Amos... why are you saying that?”

“Go. Fuck. Off.” His words landed like blows. “It’s my helplessness—I’m stuck in another city. If I had my car, I’d have driven away already. I don’t even want to see your face.”

Amos’s anger flared again.



“You don’t care at all, do you? I was in the bathroom for so long, and yesterday—at the time of my medicine—you didn’t even bring me a glass of water.”

Nina had an answer in her heart, but it never made it to her lips.

Amos, you yourself said you take long baths, sitting in the tub for ages. And yesterday—I did call you, I did ask. You were the one who never replied.

But those words stayed locked inside her, unspoken.

Nina couldn’t even focus on why he was saying all this anymore. Her mind was filled with only one desperate wish—that somehow, Kazimir would appear and take her away from there. But she was trapped. No one knew she was with Amos.

To everyone else—Masha, Juliana—Nina was simply out for her theatre play.

After throwing those words at her, Amos walked out of the room.

By then, Nina was completely shaken. She was so afraid that even her tears refused to come.

A little while later, Amos returned, his tone suddenly calm.

“Come on, let’s have dinner,” he said, as if nothing had happened.

Nina didn’t argue. Quietly, she followed him. Out in the living room, he flipped through the TV, searching for a movie.

“Tell me, Nina,” he asked casually, “which one should we watch?”

He was talking as though the fight, the anger, the sharp words—none of it had ever happened.

Nina just nodded and went along with whatever he said. At that point, she wasn’t thinking of movies or dinner. She only wanted the night to end quickly. She only wanted to go home.

It was important to note—Nina wanted to go back home, but she didn’t want to leave Amos.

In the kitchen, everything she did was with careful thought, every move weighed in her mind. She was so nervous around him now. When she picked up a steel spoon to stir the food in a non-stick pan, Amos’s voice cut in—unfamiliar, almost cold.

“Nina, that pan needs a wooden spoon.”

“Yes,” she replied quickly, her tone quiet, obedient.

They ate together. For Nina, the night already felt unbearably long. And yet, the hardest part was still to come—the bedroom.

When she lay down on the bed, Amos began touching her again. Nina knew exactly what was about to happen. She didn't ask questions, didn't resist. She let it happen.

And so it began. For a brief moment, Nina thought maybe things were back to normal, maybe this closeness meant the fight was behind them. But during the act, Amos never once looked at her. When it was over, he turned his face away and went straight to sleep.

The next morning, Amos's behavior felt different—like he had already made up his mind about something.

Over breakfast, he looked at Nina and said, "Nina, do you see that switchboard with the multiplug in it?"

"Yes," she answered cautiously.

"Take it out."

She unplugged it and turned back to him, waiting for the next instruction, still confused about what he was trying to do.

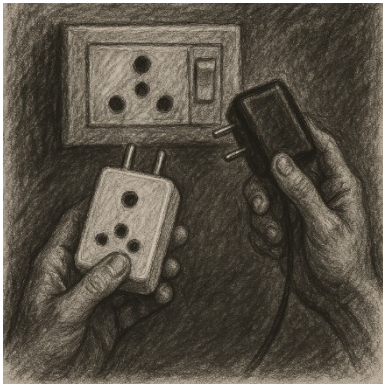
"Now remove the charger from the multiplug," he said. She did.

"Good. Now plug the charger directly into the switchboard."

Nina hesitated. "That won't work, Amos."

"Try it," he pressed.

"It just won't fit."



“Why not?”

“Because... It’s not made for that. It doesn’t belong there.”

Amos leaned back slightly, his voice steady. “Exactly. That switchboard and that charger—that’s us. We don’t fit together either.”

For a moment, Nina’s heart seemed to skip a beat. She knew exactly where this conversation was heading.

“Amos, please... I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You’re always afraid I’ll leave you, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” her voice cracked.

“Well,” he said coldly, “let’s end that fear today. Go. I’m leaving you. No more fear, and no more relationship.”

Nina couldn’t make sense of any of it. Her mind raced, searching for words—anything she could say to make Amos change his mind, to stop him from leaving her. But his decision was final, carved in stone.

“Do you want to say something?” Amos asked, his tone unreadable.

She forced out the only words she could find. “Now you’ll be free... free to go wherever you want.”

“Did I ever ask your permission before?” he shot back.

Her voice broke. “I think... I should leave.”

“That’s all you had to say?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

And with that, everything ended.

— — —

Nina packed her backpack in silence and called for a cab. Amos said he would come downstairs with her. In the elevator, her heart still clung to a tiny, fragile hope—that maybe he would stop her, maybe he would change his mind and pull her close again. But nothing happened.



He walked her to the cab, opened the door, and helped her in. When Nina turned back for one last look, she saw Amos already walking away. He didn't even wait for her car to leave.

He hadn't asked her a single thing—not whether she had enough money for the journey back, not how she would manage in an unfamiliar city. Nothing.

Nina sat in the cab, hollow. She was shattered beyond words, yet no tears came. Maybe that was the worst part—not crying, because she still couldn't understand what had just happened.

Nina reached the bus station, bought her ticket, and sat waiting. Her eyes kept flicking to her phone, her heart clinging to one last hope—that Amos would call, that his voice would say, “Nina, come back. Let's sit and talk.”

But no call came. No text. Nothing.

The bus finally arrived, and Nina climbed aboard. As it pulled out of Gatchina, reality began to close in on her. Every mile between her and Amos felt like another crack in her chest. And then, at last, the tears came.

Hands trembling, she sent him a message:

Please, Amos. I'm sorry. Don't break up with me like this.

The reply was short, cold.

Don't do this, Nina.

Desperate, she typed again:

Amos, please don't leave me all of a sudden. Listen – just keep me with you for now. And when your engagement is fixed somewhere else, then leave me. I'll be prepared. Just please, don't do this now.

His answer came back, sharper than before:

Nina, if you text me again, I'll block you.

Her tears blurred the screen. Fingers shaking, she typed back quickly:

Okay, okay. I won't.

And then there was only silence. The hum of the bus. The darkness outside the window. And a love that had just ended.

— — —

The whole ride, Nina's mind circled the same question over and over—how will I survive without him?

A part of her wanted to get off the bus midway, to disappear somewhere, anywhere, and never return to St. Petersburg again. The thought of going back to that city without Amos felt unbearable—like walking into a life that had already been emptied of its meaning.

And so, with a heavy heart, Nina returned to St. Petersburg. Those days were dark, but her brother Kazimir and his girlfriend held her up when she couldn't stand on her own. They were her shelter, her quiet strength.

But Nina—foolish, tender-hearted Nina—five months later, when the storm inside her had only just begun to settle, received a message from Amos. One apology. That was all it took. And she forgot everything. She ran back to him as if nothing had ever broken.

That was her mistake—the moment she traded her self-respect for the illusion of love, disguising compromise as “adjustment.” But once you stop respecting yourself, others stop respecting you too. And that’s exactly what happened with Nina.

When she met Amos again, she climbed into his car with the same rush of excitement as before. For a brief moment, it almost felt like old times. Amos was on the phone with someone, his voice casual, half-laughing. On the other side, someone must have asked who he was with.

“Your sister-in-law,” Amos answered.

Nina’s heart flickered with happiness—so he does claim me, even after the breakup. For that small second, she felt warm, seen.

But the warmth didn’t last. Because then Amos opened his mouth again and laughed.

“Oh no, no. Why call her ‘sister-in-law’—just for sex?”

The words hit harder than the breakup ever had.

But it almost seemed as though something was wrong with Nina. She didn’t react. She didn’t flinch. She pretended she

hadn't even heard him, as if ignoring the words could make them vanish.

Maybe she was afraid—afraid of saying something back. Because with Amos, anger never looked like raised voices or slammed doors. His anger was colder, sharper. He never shouted; he didn't need to. His words alone cut deep enough. They didn't just wound, they sliced into the bone, leaving the other person doubting themselves, questioning if they had been wrong all along.

And Nina—already fragile, already desperate not to lose him again—chose silence.

There had been a time when Nina thought she could never last even a few months with someone like Amos—this high-flying, untouchable man who seemed far beyond her world. And yet, here she was, standing in the ninth year of their relationship. Nine long years.

But those years had been carried almost entirely by Nina alone. Still, she consoled herself with one small comfort: At least he isn't with anyone else either. If he doesn't give me his time, he isn't giving it to anyone else. And with that fragile belief, she kept walking beside him.

Month after month would pass without meeting. And when Nina finally gathered the courage to ask—

“Amos, is there someone else in your life? Is that why you avoid meeting me? Why even a simple ‘hello’ ends with you saying you're too busy?”

Amos would look at her with that calm, dismissive air and reply,

“You’re insecure, Nina. What can I do about that? I barely have time for one girlfriend — how could I possibly make room for another?”

And Nina, half-satisfied, half-silenced, would swallow her doubts.

But fate never waits too long before revealing its cruel hand.

What Nina had mistaken for busyness, for work consuming all of Amos’s hours, turned out to be something far more cutting. She had thought perhaps no other woman could endure his distance with the same patience she had. But Amos went further than even her darkest suspicions dared wander. He proved her wrong in ways that shattered the very illusion she had built her world.

Not long ago, Nina had moved into a new place—a three-bedroom apartment with Kazimir. Coincidentally, just a few months earlier, Masha and Shaul had also shifted nearby, after selling their old house. Masha’s flat was on the top floor, and from there, Amos’s penthouse was perfectly visible. Shaul, father returned from Dubai, had brought back a pair of binoculars. For Nina, it felt like a secret jackpot—an accidental blessing. At last, she thought, now I can see him whenever I want. One night she saw a girl in his room’s balcony, but then she remembered, Amos telling her about his friends being with their girlfriends in his flat. so yeah. That’s it.

And well Amos didn’t take long to summon her, as he always did—his messages carrying the same familiar undertone, as though some burning hunger inside him couldn’t wait.

That night, Nina dressed carefully, inventing a quick excuse for Kazimir: I’ll stay over at Masha’s tonight. From Masha’s

apartment she slipped away, ready and glowing, and went straight to Amos.

They had dinner, watched a movie, and then gave in to the desire that had become their ritual. Hours melted away until morning crept in. But in the soft light of the next day, something small—something utterly ordinary—threw Nina off balance.

Inside the bathroom, on the corner of the sink, lay a girl's rubber band.

Her chest tightened. When she asked Amos about it, he didn't even blink.

"Oh, this place? I told you, I don't always use the penthouse. Sometimes my friends come here, and they bring their girlfriends. Must be theirs."

The casualness in his tone was almost insulting—too easy, too practiced.

And Nina, torn between suspicion and her need to believe him, stood there with that little rubber band in her palm, not realizing yet that it wasn't just an accessory. It was a crack—small but sharp—splitting open the illusion she had lived in for years.

This wasn't the first time doubt had crept into Nina's heart. Months earlier, while Amos was buried in work, his househelp had been doing the laundry. Among his clothes, she had pulled out something unexpected—a girl's underwear. Holding it up with a laugh, she had teased,

"Panty... belongs to some girl. Someone comes here, right? Is she your sister?"

The words had stung like poison.

Nina's blood boiled at the casual mockery. In that instant of burning rage, she had thrown the househelp out of the house, ordering her never to return. And though Amos had managed to silence her suspicions then, the unease had never quite left.



So now, standing in his bathroom, staring at the delicate rubber band lying innocently on the counter, her chest tightened. It was nothing, just a trinket—yet it carried the weight of her worst fears. The memory of that househelp's laughter

echoed in her ears, making her doubt herself all over again.

This time, the fear ran deeper. What if she hadn't been wrong back then? What if Amos had been lying all along?

The answer to Nina's unspoken fears came sooner than she imagined.

That morning, she was in the kitchen, preparing breakfast, while Amos paced restlessly across the apartment. Phone pressed to his ear, his voice carried an edge of tension. He moved from door to balcony and back again, as though waiting for something to stop in case something happens.

Then, faint at first, Nina caught a sound outside. A scuffle. A door being pushed against, a muffled argument. Before she could make sense of it, the door burst open.

A young woman burst into the apartment, her steps hard, her eyes burning. She stopped at once when she saw Nina in the kitchen and asked, sharp, without hesitation:

“Who are you?”

Nina stood still. Her mind would not join the pieces together. For one short moment she told herself: this must be a cousin, some relative who comes without warning. Because the other thought—that Amos could betray her—was still too heavy, too impossible for her to let in.



“I’m... Amos’s friend,” Nina replied, her voice unsure.

But the girl turned, pointing straight at Nina as she fixed her gaze on Amos.

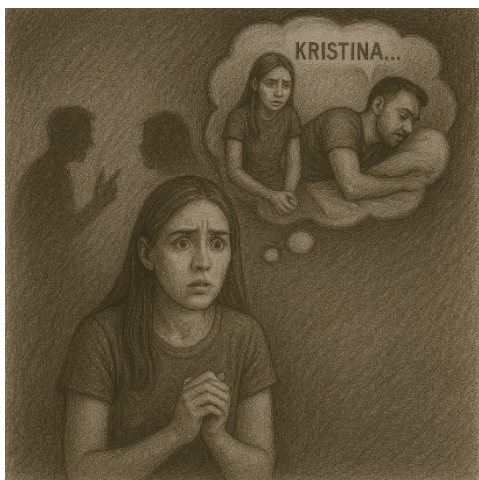
“Who is she?”

Amos’s jaw tightened. For a heartbeat, his mask slipped, and then he snapped, voice sharp and raised:

“Kristina, don’t make a scene.”

The air shifted instantly, heavy with a truth too long delayed. Nina’s fragile defense, the story she had told herself again and again, collapsed brick by brick.

Kristina. The name struck like an echo from the past. Amos had once mentioned her, almost casually, as nothing more than a staff girl.



A face without meaning, a shadow without weight. Yet here she was, standing in his home, her presence thick with history.

And in that moment Nina understood: this was no sudden storm, no passing weakness.

Whatever lay between Amos and Kristina had been growing, festering, for five years—right under the roof where Nina had built her illusions.

The shock was so immense that Nina could not even weep. Not a single tear rose to her eyes. She simply stood there, rooted to the floor, her body frozen as if carved from stone. The world around her dimmed, blurred, until all that remained was the muffled sound of voices—Kristina’s and Amos’s quarrel, reaching her ears as though someone had turned the volume low.

Kristina’s words came first, sharp and cruel in their intimacy:

“Only last week I took the pills from his hands.”

Then, turning to Amos, she demanded, her voice quivering with both fury and possession:

“Where are my clothes? Where have you hidden them? I will tell your mother everything.”

Amos exploded, his shout echoing like glass breaking:

“Don’t you dare! My mother is seventy-five years old!”

Kristina pressed on, undeterred, storming into the kitchen, her heels striking the tiles like drums of accusation. She whirled back on him, pointing to Nina with contempt:

“And who is this girl? Tell me, Amos, who is she?”

And Amos, cornered, words spilling from him like a man drowning:

“I like her. She has been with me for ten years.”

Kristina’s laughter was bitter, cutting through the air.

“Ten years? Amos, for eight of those years I was with you. Then what was I?”

With that, she advanced toward Nina, but Amos grabbed her arm, shoving her back. His voice trembled, fierce and protective, but it rang hollow to Nina’s ears:

“Stay away from her, Kristina.”

He pulled Nina into the bedroom and locked the door. Outside, the chaos raged—the crash of glass, the shatter of bottles, Kristina’s shrieks rising and breaking like waves against stone. Inside, the silence pressed on Nina, suffocating.

And yet, Amos’s protection meant nothing to her. How could it? No gesture could erase the filth she felt, the unbearable ugliness crawling beneath her skin after seeing him with another woman—after knowing that the man she trusted had lied, relentlessly, for years.

Her mind reeled back to that night on the balcony, when she had glimpsed a shadow, a girl's figure, lingering where Amos insisted there had been none. How easily she had been silenced then, forced to doubt herself. But now, the truth stood before her, undeniable. Her intuition had been right all along.

And that, perhaps, was the cruelest cut of all.

The bed where Nina now sat, drowning in thought, was the same bed where Amos had lain with another woman. The knowledge pressed into her chest like a blade. No man, no woman deserves to endure such humiliation.

From the instant Kristina had stepped into their home until now, Nina had not spoken a single word. Not when Kristina hurled her accusations, not when Amos tried to shield her, not even when the shouting filled every corner of the apartment. Silence had bound her, heavy and absolute.

Then suddenly – the door opened. The muffled chaos that had been faint behind the walls flooded in: Kristina's furious voice, high and cutting, the clash of glass against the floor.

Amos stood in the doorway, his face taut, his voice trembling with control he no longer possessed.

"Nina... go home. I will explain everything."

For the first time that morning, Nina's lips parted. Her voice was fragile, almost childlike.

"My phone... I can't find it."

Amos pressed the phone into her palm and led her to the door. Beyond the threshold, broken glass glittered like ice across the floor. Kristina surged forward again – not to strike, but to speak, as if some secret truth still clawed to be told. Amos

shoved her back, and with a final shove the door was slammed, shutting out the storm.

Nina stepped into the corridor. She walked slowly, her hand grazing the wall for balance, her body heavy as if made of stone. Behind her, voices raged on, muffled now by closed doors, reduced to a faraway echo.

She reached her car. Still in the same clothes, still bound in the same shock, she sat behind the wheel. The engine started, but her mind could not move forward.

She drove through the gates of the society, leaving the house behind. The night pressed in around her, and with it came the hollow, unanswerable question: Where should I go now? Home? To someone? Or nowhere at all?

The sky was paling, the first gray of morning pressing against the horizon as Nina drove in silence. Her body moved by instinct, her mind hollow. At last, she reached for her phone. There was only one person she could call—the one who had always been her anchor: her younger brother, Kazi.

“Hello, Kazi.” Her voice trembled, raw.

“Yes, Nina?” His tone was alert, though still heavy with sleep.

“Kazi... something terrible has happened. I feel as if my time of suffering is about to begin. I have to make a final decision. Will you hold me through it?”

Kazi did not ask for details. He did not need to. He knew well how deeply Amos shaped Nina’s life, how much weight her love carried. Everyone knew Amos had been at the center of Nina’s world; if her voice now was this broken, there could be no other reason. He also knew something she had never admitted aloud—that the night she told their parents she was

at Masha's, she had gone somewhere else entirely. He didn't confront her, but now, hearing his sister's hopeless, sobbing voice, he pieced it all together.

Still, he did not scold. Instead, his reply came calm, like the ground beneath her feet.

"Nina... our parents are alive, safe, and healthy. That alone is the greatest blessing. If that is right, everything else will be set right too. Come home. I will take care of you.



Dates can be fewer. Meetings can be rare. If you don't have time for me, I will understand. If you cannot always call, I will still stay. But don't cheat me. Don't make me a fool. I love you too much for that. Don't humiliate my love."

And yet—that was exactly what he had done.

The first time Nina had ever felt ugly was years ago, when Amos casually revealed that his ex-girlfriend had been a model. They were watching television together, and suddenly, in some music video, that girl appeared.

"That's my ex," Amos had said with careless pride. When Nina fell silent, he looked at her and added, almost amused:

"What happened? You're wondering how a man like me ever had a woman that beautiful?"

Nina had smiled faintly, but something had cracked inside her then.

And now—it cracked again. Only this time the break was deeper, final. Today was the second time she felt truly hideous, because betrayal had stripped her of all worth.

I gave him everything, she thought. Sex, good food, care, loyalty. What more does a man want? Then why did he still go to another woman? That question circled in her head endlessly, a blade that would not stop cutting.

— — —

Whatever that night had broken, the suffering it unleashed was only beginning. It would stretch long, like a winter with no promise of spring.

Nina returned home, yes—but she was no longer the same. Something inside her had shifted, cracked beyond repair.

The first time, years ago, after a breakup, Kazimir had been the one to hold her together. And now again, he was the only anchor in her storm.

But Nina herself was drifting. Nights turned sleepless; she lay awake, her eyes burning, her body exhausted but her mind refusing rest. Whenever she tried to close her eyes, dizziness would seize her—as though her thoughts themselves were punishing her.

Day after day she wrestled with her own mind, forcing her thoughts from darkness into light, from despair into some fragile hope. But the more she tried, the heavier it became. That endless switching between negative and positive wore her thin, like a rope fraying from too much strain.

Kazimir, worried, finally took her to a doctor. After listening, watching, and asking a few quiet questions, the doctor gave his verdict with a calm voice that sounded merciless in its finality:

“She is showing clear signs of depression.”

— — —

Nina had come to understand one thing clearly: until she heard the answers with her own ears, until Amos himself explained, the unrest inside her would not fade. She needed the truth—even if it broke her all over again.

So one evening, she called him. For the first time since everything had collapsed, she asked Amos to come to her home. Kazimir was away; the house was silent. Only Nina and Amos sat across from each other in the living room, shadows stretching on the walls between them.

Neither spoke at first. The silence was so thick it seemed to breathe. Finally, Amos broke it, his voice low, almost trembling:

“I’m sorry, Nina. It was my fault.”

Her eyes fixed on him, unblinking. “Why, Amos? Why did you do this?”

He lowered his head. “I became selfish, Nina.”

Her throat tightened; anger and sorrow tangled in her words. “I am not happy, Amos. You were supposed to love me. Instead—you made a fool out of me.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, a whisper now. “I’m not a good man.”



Nina's voice cut the air, sharp and wounded. "Is it her? The same girl you once mentioned to me—two years ago?"

Amos closed his eyes. "Yes. It began in 2015. I took the staff on a trip. Everyone was drunk... and it happened. A mistake." He swallowed

hard. "When we came back, I thought she would forget. But instead—she became serious. When I refused to meet her, she threatened suicide. I still have the chats as proof."

Nina's lips parted, her breath shallow. "But, Amos..." Her voice broke, almost childlike. "In 2015... we were already together. We were building our life. How could you?"

The room fell into a silence heavier than before. A silence where even the walls seemed to listen, where love and betrayal lay side by side like ashes and fire.

Nina's voice trembled, but she forced the words out.

"That means... she has been with you for the last seven years?"

Amos lifted his eyes only for a second, then looked away.

"Five," he corrected quietly. "For the first two, it was on and off. After that... it became full throttle. I tried, Nina, I tried to end it silently. I thought—if the staff ever knew, they'd say the boss had used one of his girls. I didn't want that shame. Then... then Papa fell ill. And after that, I could do nothing."

The mention of his father pierced Nina with a memory she had buried deep. His father, gone now. Kidney failure. She had been there—at the funeral, beside Amos, watching him break in a way she had never seen before.

She remembered how hard it had been, not only for him but for her. To comfort a man who had lost his father was to walk on a knife's edge—giving him space to grieve, yet never letting him feel abandoned in that grief. For days, for weeks, she had lived in that fragile balance: Should she sit in silence, or should she hold him? Should she let him cry, or distract him from the heaviness?

After his father's death, Amos had once called her to his penthouse. His voice on the phone had been hollow, almost foreign.

When Nina arrived, she could hardly believe this was his home. The air was heavy with stale smoke; empty bottles sprawled across the floor like defeated soldiers. Ashtrays overflowed. Curtains drawn. It did not look like Amos's place anymore—it looked like the inside of grief itself.

For a moment she just stood at the doorway, stunned, then her instincts took over. She moved through the mess like a storm.

"Get up, Amos," she told him sharply, her tone more command than comfort.

When he resisted, she scolded him again—half angry, half desperate—until, reluctantly, he obeyed.

Together they began to clean. She handed him a garbage bag, pushed bottles into his hands, wiped down tables while ordering him to pick up the shards of his broken life one by one.

It was absurd and tragic at once: her love disguised as discipline.

At some point he almost smiled, watching her fuss over the curtains, tugging them open to let in light. For a fleeting second, it felt like he might be pulled back from the darkness.

And Nina—sweat on her forehead, anger in her eyes—knew she wasn't just cleaning a penthouse that evening. She was trying to scrub grief itself from his soul.

She had given everything she could, every drop of strength, to keep Amos from collapsing completely. And now—now she sat here, realizing that even in those sacred days of mourning, even in his deepest sorrow, another woman had existed between them.

The weight of that truth pressed on her chest until it was hard to breathe.

Amos's voice was low, almost strangled.

"After you left that day... she tried to kill herself in my apartment. Bob (His driver) had to rush her to the hospital."

Nina's blood ran cold. She stared at him, not trusting her ears, until he pulled out his phone and, with a kind of grim finality, showed her the photo. A pale arm, cut deep, smeared with blood.

He did not look at her while she saw it.

"She's been doing this from the beginning," Amos continued, his words clipped, tired. "My friends know. Everyone knows. I was trapped, Nina. Do you understand? Trapped. In some twisted way... maybe it's good this came out now."

He exhaled, rubbing his face with both hands, as if confessing were a relief.

But Nina sat frozen, the image burning in her mind. It wasn't just betrayal she was facing—it was chaos, a darkness far bigger than her. And suddenly, she wasn't sure if Amos was explaining... or excusing.

Amos's eyes darted to his phone again, and his voice cracked as he read aloud:

"She's still threatening me. Look at this—she sent me a photo of her arm. Wrote: 'Will these scars ever fade?' Do you understand what that means, Nina? If she goes to the police, if she accuses me of rape... everything I've built, my whole life's work—it will drown in a single day."

He looked at her, desperate, expecting sympathy, perhaps even rescue.

But Nina said nothing. Her silence grew heavier than any words.

Whatever dangers Amos claimed, whatever traps he had fallen into—it did not erase the truth.

No matter the circumstances, this was still betrayal. This was still cheating.

It was the nightmare Nina had begged him never to bring into her life, and he had delivered it with both hands.

"Forgive me, Nina," Amos whispered before standing up. Then, without waiting for her reply, he left.

That was the end of everything.

— — —

Or so Nina thought.

A few weeks later, truth spilled like poison. Kristina had created chaos. She had even called Amos's mother, telling her that just last week she had taken an i-pill because of Amos. Soon, the whole circle knew. Even the office buzzed with the scandal.

And Kristina did not stop there. Now she was threatening him with worse—rape accusations, exposure of his illegal steroid business, a police raid on his factory.

Nina could not bear it anymore. Whatever Amos had done to her, however much he had broken her, this—this attack on the sweat and blood he had poured into his business—was something she could not watch silently.

She typed a message, her fingers trembling yet firm:

"Amos, whatever happened between us is another matter. But I cannot tolerate anyone trying to destroy the work you built day and night. Whether we are together or not comes later. First, we fight this mess. If you need me in court, at the police station—anywhere—just one call, and I will be there.

Sometimes, after those heavy conversations, Amos would send Nina fragments of his life—small updates, confessions that arrived uninvited, like stones thrown into still water. And Nina, though wounded, still found herself helping him. She could not stop.

At the same time, she forced her hands into work. She poured herself into her YouTube channel, into her paints and brushes. For once, life answered her back: a stranger commissioned a painting. Ten thousand rubles—her first real payment. A quiet recognition of her talent. She felt a flicker of happiness that evening, as if the world had whispered, *You are more than his betrayal.*

But by the next day, reality struck again.

Driving home, her phone lit up with Amos's message. A blurred screenshot of an email—Kristina threatening raids on his properties.

Then another message: not request, but command. *Find me a safe place, Nina. A flat, under your name. Police must never link it to me.*

Nina gripped the steering wheel tighter. She had no savings for such madness. Rent, deposit—where would the money come from?

And yet, when she returned to her street, fate mocked her with opportunity: a *To Let* sign across the road. She dialed the number instantly, asked the rent, asked the deposit, and her heart sank. Too much. Far too much.



But Nina was Nina. She opened her drawer, counted the rubles from the painting. Not enough. Then she unclasped the gold chain she had made from her first kitty savings years ago. A small thing, a woman's treasure. That very afternoon, she walked into a jeweler's shop and sold it.

Well—if one says Nina should have told Amos she had no money, think twice. Would a girl ask for help from the very man who had broken her heart?

By evening, the money was gathered. Agreement signed. The next day, the flat was cleaned, and the keys placed into Amos's palm.

He moved in his papers, his secrets, his precious evidence. He never noticed the absence around her neck. That chain he had once seen glinting against her skin again and again – gone. Not a question asked.

Later, Amos returned the rent money, but gold had grown costly. The chain and the rubles could never be reconciled. Something of Nina's life had slipped away forever, never to be returned.

And yet, Nina felt no regret. Not for the chain, not for the sacrifice. Amos was safe – that alone was enough.

Slowly, the storm quieted. The threats grew distant, the shadows thinned. And in that stillness, Nina's heart betrayed her again. She thought – perhaps now, perhaps after all this, Amos would see. Would remember. Would return.

Somehow, against all reason, they found themselves together again. But this time in whispers, in shadows, in stolen hours. Every meeting had to be hidden, for Kristina's fury still lingered on the edges of their lives. One wrong step, and she would strike.

So Nina met him like a thief meets light – with trembling hands and guilty joy.

But she knew the truth, too. *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice – shame on me.* Every humiliation she now bore was of her own making. It was not betrayal that crushed her this time, but her own choice to return.

And yet, she stayed. For Nina, the shame of crawling back was lighter than the terror of being alone. In her twenty-eight years, she had come to believe: without Amos, there would be no one. That thought wrapped around her neck tighter than any gold chain ever had.

After a fracture, love often feels newly polished—fresh, dazzling, almost unbroken. The heart convinces itself the wound has closed. But girls like Nina forget: no matter how well a crack is sealed, its scar remains. And scars have a way of splitting open again, without warning.

Still, for a while, their bond held. Astonishingly, it even seemed smoother than before, as though both were clinging harder to what had nearly been lost. Days passed in a fragile peace, fragile but sweet.

And then, like life always does, it shifted. Not long into this fragile harmony, Amos left—for a month in Australia, to visit his sister.

The timing felt cruelly symbolic. Just as Nina had begun to breathe in this delicate rebirth, he was gone again, far away.

Distance, in its own cruel way, had become a kind of mercy. From Australia, Amos called often, sent photographs, even made time for video calls. And then, for the very first time since the storm with Kristina, he asked a question that startled Nina:

“Do you think you will ever forgive me?”

Her reply was quiet, steady:

“If I had not already forgiven you, Amos, do you think I would still be here, speaking with you?”

By then, Nina was working as a social media manager in an immigration company, though her days felt weighed down by the discontent of her difficult boss. Seeing her struggle, Amos extended an unexpected hand.

“Come work with me,” he said. “I need someone to run the social media for the café. Someone I trust.”

And Nina agreed.

When Amos finally returned from Australia, the secret flat—rented in her name, the hidden refuge—was emptied, the key returned. Nina moved into a new chapter: now seated at a desk in Amos’s café, shaping his brand, weaving his story into the digital world.

Yet there was a condition: within those walls, no one could know. Not that they were friends. Certainly not that they were more. Their bond, whatever its name, had to exist only in the shadows, whispered in spaces no one else could enter.

Working in Amos’s office became Nina’s greatest mistake.

She often prayed for signs from God, begged Heaven to guide her path.

But what were betrayal, humiliation, and repeated disrespect, if not signs already? Did she truly expect God Himself to descend from the sky and whisper in her ear, “Leave him, Nina”?

Every act of Amos was a message written in fire: let go. Yet Nina kept holding on. She prayed, “Dear God, send me someone who will love me truly.”

And perhaps God had already answered. Through Amos’s very cruelty, He was crying out to her: *Leave this man. Only then will I give you someone worthy.*

But Nina threw herself into building Amos's brand, as if her own worth depended on it. But the deeper she went, the clearer it became—she had never truly mattered to him.

There was another girl. Nelli.

She worked in the Amos's coffee factory, sometimes appeared in the office, always orbiting close to Amos. Too close. Her gestures flaunted a kind of intimacy, a pride in being near him—as if proximity itself was a trophy. She even had a boyfriend, yet that did not stop her from basking in Amos's attention.

For Nina, it was torture. She could not speak, could not claim her place. Other staff, oblivious to her silent suffering, would dismiss her with casual certainty:

"You don't know him like we do. We know Sir very well."

And Nina would sit there, choking on her own silence, while the man she had defended, forgiven, even shielded from scandal, treated her as invisible.

Imagine—a woman who had stood by her cheating lover, who had swallowed betrayal like poison, who had carried his secrets as if they were her own wounds—yet in the end, she was not even allowed recognition. Not as his partner. Not even as his friend.

Just a ghost in the room, watching others boast about knowing him better than she ever could.

By now, humiliation was routine for Nina—woven into her days like dust into the air. As Amos's hidden lover and his employee, she lived a double defeat. Every careless taunt was delivered openly:

"Aren't you educated, Nina?"

Or some other dig that stripped her of confidence piece by piece.

Then came Amos's birthday. The office decided to prepare a video tribute. Each staff member would hold up photos, one by one. The task of stitching it together fell, of course, to Nina.

Joseph, a boy from the staff, approached her desk.

"Nina, you'll edit the video for Amos sir, right?"

"Yes," she said.

"What song should we use?" she asked. Then, with an easy shrug:

"Ask Nelli. She rides with him more often. She'll know what Sir likes in the car."

Nina swallowed hard. They had no idea how their words cut.

"Why don't you ask her yourselves?" she replied, forcing neutrality.

But Joseph wasn't done. Later, he returned with another request.

"There's an older clip we want included. Just crop someone out before adding it."

Nina opened the file. And froze.

On the sofa sat Amos's mother, dignified and weary. On one side, a young employee. Amos is in the center. And next to him – Kristina.

The very name was forbidden now in the office. Everyone knew about the affair, the scandals, the chaos. They all knew. Yet here she was in the frame, leaning into Amos as though she belonged there.

Nina stared at the screen. Her heart didn't break—it turned to stone. She had never once been offered that place. And yet Kristina...

Nina's hands trembled on the keyboard. She rose abruptly, clutching her forehead.

"My head hurts. I'm leaving," she whispered, barely audible.

No one stopped her.

She walked out of the office, shoulders stiff, fighting the tears that blurred her sight. To them it was just another video. To her, it was proof. Proof that she had always been the outsider.

Joseph, soft-hearted as always, phoned her later that evening.

"Nina, come to the party. Everyone is going. Don't stay alone."

His tone was kind, almost protective. She agreed.

When Nina stepped back into the office, Amos looked up in mock surprise.

"Where did this one appear from?" he said playfully, and the whole staff laughed.

"Sir, I invited her," Joseph explained quickly.

"Good," Amos nodded. "You did well."

Two cars stood waiting outside—the sleek one Amos always drove, and German sir's older sedan. Everyone spilled into the night air, chattering, choosing their seats.

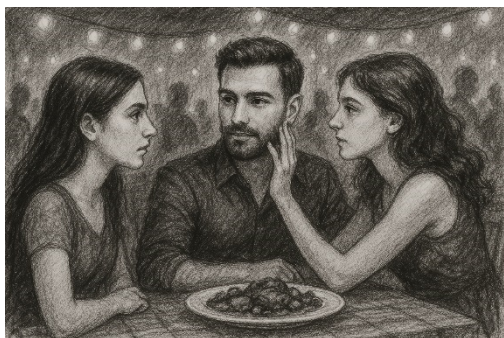
That was when Nina saw it. Nelli, without hesitation, slid into Amos's car, claiming her place beside him as if it were her right. No glance, no permission asked. Just possession.

Nina's chest tightened. She already knew how her evening would end—in silent self-destruction. She quietly refused Amos's car and went instead to Gurmeet's.

At the restaurant, laughter rose with the clinking of glasses. Orders were shouted, plates piled, bottles emptied. One by one, the staff grew hazy, blurred by intoxication.

And there—beside Amos—sat Nelli. Drunk, bold, leaning into him.

"Feed me," she laughed, pushing her plate toward him like a spoiled child. Her hand rose, cupping his chin, turning his face toward her.



The gesture was small, but for Nina it split open every wound at once.

Amos noticed. His eyes caught Nina's across the table. Subtly, with his lips

only, he shaped the words: *What's wrong?*

Nina turned her head away. She could not speak. Her silence was both her shield and her surrender.

The party ended as all such nights do—laughter spilled into the dark, and then silence. One by one, they disappeared into their own homes, leaving Nina with the weight of everything she had swallowed.

By morning she could not hold it anymore. She dialed Amos. Her voice shook, but her words were sharp.

"What was that last night?"

Amos sounded casual, almost tired.

“What happened?”

“Nelli,” Nina’s voice broke on the name. “How she behaved with you. How she sat beside you, in your car, before anyone else. Why? Why does she get that place?”

Amos sighed. “And how is that my fault?”

“Because you let her. You could have stopped her. You could have pushed her away.” Her words came like stones thrown at a wall. “But you didn’t. Why, Amos? Why did you give her so much space, so much confidence?”

For a moment, silence hummed on the line. Then his voice changed—stripped of charm, stripped of softness. His naked truth.

“She has that confidence. You don’t. Tell me, Nina—how is that my fault?”

Amos’s voice, low but firm, still echoed in her chest: “You could have said it then. You could have messaged me at the party—told me to move away. But no, Nina. In the moment, you never have the strength. You remember everything only later. What am I supposed to do with that?”

The words stayed between them, heavy, unhealed, replaying all day in fragments of chat, never finding resolution.

— — —

And yet—Nina had already prepared his birthday. A farmhouse, an hour from St. Petersburg, booked weeks before. Decorations arranged, small details chosen with trembling care. For her, Amos’s birthday was not a date on a calendar; it was a private festival. She planned them months ahead,

pouring into them all the love he never asked for but she could not hold back.

When she told him, Amos answered coolly: “Better if we don’t go.”

Her heart dropped, but then—perhaps he felt her silence, perhaps he remembered—he changed his mind. He agreed.

They drove out in the evening. The road stretched like a confession neither of them spoke. Nina stared out the window, trapped in one thought: he is only coming because he must, not because he wants to.

For her, this journey was meant to be joy. For him, she feared, it was only duty.

They arrived in the quiet hush of evening. The farmhouse breathed silence, as though the fields themselves had drawn a curtain against the world. It was only the two of them—and a chef, already waiting with the raw ingredients Nina had delivered the day before.

Nina’s heart had carried another vision for Amos’s birthday: a plan drenched in romance, almost ceremonial. Candles flickered like fragile prayers, wine shimmered in their glasses, a vanilla lotus biscoff cake waited untouched, and from the grill the chef brought steaming plates as though serving them to a private kingdom.

The scene followed the script she had written in her mind, yet the soul of it had changed. What once was love now felt more like obligation—hers to prove, his to endure. They smiled, they toasted, but the silence between words spoke louder.

And so the evening passed not in celebration, but in waiting. Waiting for the night to end. Waiting for what lay beyond the

candles, beyond the wine—for the moment when the forced tenderness would either dissolve into intimacy or collapse under its own weight.

Nina knew it in her bones: with the end of this night, their relationship, too, would meet its quiet death. After dinner, they withdrew to the bedroom. She tried to weave an atmosphere of tenderness, as if by giving the night a gentle ending she could soothe the years of wounds.

For a moment, it almost worked. That old flame—the memory of each other’s touch—flickered to life between them. They kissed, slow and searching, as though relearning the language of closeness.

But just as the moment deepened, Nina felt it: the sudden, unwelcome pulse of her period. She pulled back, whispering, “Stop... I think my period has started.”

It was awkward, unsettling—yet more than that, it felt like a sign. A cruel reminder from fate itself: some unions are not meant to be mended, no matter how much love still aches to survive.

The night had passed with difficulty—her skin breaking into an allergy, her body itself revolting. To Nina, it was the final proof: even God had grown weary of giving signs. He was shouting now, not whispering. *Enough.*

Morning came, pale and heavy. They drove back in silence. Nina had already made her decision. By the time she reached the office, her resignation letter was written in her mind, and soon after, lying on Amos’s desk.

He read it, then lifted his eyes.

“Why are you leaving?”

"I just... I can't do this anymore," Nina answered. "It's too hard."

"Give it one more try," Amos urged.

"No, Amos," she said quietly, but firmly. "I can't."

He leaned back, exhaling. "Then let's do this—soon I'm planning a trip with the office staff. Come with us. We'll spend some time together, you'll get a change of air."

Nina shook her head. "No, Amos."

His lips curved, almost a smirk. "It's final," he said, as though her refusal were no more than a child's protest.

Nina returned to her seat, heart tight in her chest. Minutes later, German walked through the office, collecting confirmations for the trip. When he reached Nina, she refused again, offering her own reason. But when he relayed her answer, Amos brushed it aside.

"She'll come," Amos declared, his tone possessive, like a man laying claim. "Yes, she's going."

And just like that, her decision was stolen from her hands.

Preparations began. A two-day trip was planned, the destination nine hours away. Yet even before departure, Nina's heart was restless. One question gnawed at her—would Nelli once again take her place beside Amos? She could not endure the sight. Better, she thought, to be in another car, away from that image, away from the quiet torture.

But choices were few; circumstances bound her. Three cars would set out—Amos's, Bob's, and German's.

That morning, everyone gathered early outside the office, chattering, luggage piled at their feet. Engines hummed, doors

slammed. And somehow, through chance or fate, Nina found herself seated beside Amos in the front.

The road stretched ahead. Music filled the car, voices rose and fell in laughter, and along the way they stopped, collecting staff members one by one. Outwardly it was a journey like any other — songs, conversations, the easy cheer of a company trip. But within Nina, every mile was heavy, her calm a mask over the storm she carried.

— — —

A few hours into the road, Nelli began insisting she wanted the front seat. Nina, cornered by the demand and the stares, forced a smile and said softly, “Okay, come.” Her heart, however, fell silent with anger.

From that moment on, Nina was no longer beside him — not in the car, not in spirit. Amos moved as if the trip belonged to Nelli: where they would stay, what they would eat, what the schedule would be. He followed her whims with the ease of a man traveling with his companion, not a boss among his staff. To the others, it must have looked like a couple leading a holiday.

Nina tried to bury her bitterness. She drank a little, laughed with the rest, even danced when the music grew loud. The staff welcomed her warmly; for a moment she almost let herself forget.

It was late — so late the restaurants had already closed, and Amos, as leader, was tense about where to find food. He walked toward the dancing group, and Nina, tipsy, smiling, lifted her hand toward him, an innocent invitation: Come, join us.

But Amos's face turned cold. His hand cut the air in a harsh gesture, sharp as a blade—*Shut up*.

The smile froze on her lips. In an instant the warmth drained out of her. Her intoxication vanished. The music went on, but inside Nina, only silence.

That night Nina returned to her room without eating, silent, hollow. A little later there was a knock at her door. She opened—and there stood Amos, and beside him, of all people, Nelli. They had come to “console” her.



The scene twisted Nina's mind.

Why did they look like a pair, arriving together as if it were their duty to soothe a sulking child? Amos had only just crawled out of the scandal with Kristina—its shadow still heavy over his name—and yet here he was, letting another woman from his staff attach herself to him so openly.

Nina realized then: it was not Amos humiliating her. It was she herself—humiliating her own dignity, again and again, by staying, by tolerating, by allowing.

She endured the rest of the trip as if through smoke, moving where she must, speaking when spoken to. When the return journey came, she tried to keep distance. Amos's car was already full, so she took a seat elsewhere, almost relieved. But halfway down the road Amos stopped, insisting she move into his car.

From the back seat, Nelli leaned forward, tapped Nina's arm, and whispered, "Check WhatsApp."

On the screen was a single line: "Shall I come sit in the front now?"

Nina felt her throat tighten. She couldn't say anything aloud, not with everyone else sitting in the car. So she typed back with a frozen smile: "No problem, come ahead."

The weight of it pressed down on her until, at their next stop for food, she could no longer contain herself. Her anger spilled over—not at Amos, not at Nelli, but in front of Joseph and two other staff members who happened to be standing nearby.

Of course, all of this didn't end in silence. Conversations followed. Accusations followed. What Nina received in return was not comfort, not understanding, but insults. She was accused of trying to turn Amos's own team against him, of deliberately provoking discord.

That cut deeper than anything else. After everything—after enduring humiliation after humiliation, after standing by Amos even when trust had long collapsed, after fighting

battles she never should have had to fight — this was what she got in return.

They had a fight that night,

Amos: Why are you upset? In fact, it was you who sat sulking through the whole trip.

All Nina wanted to say was:

"I was upset because of your actions, Amos.

You were upset only because of my reaction to them. That is not the same thing.

Stop twisting it to make it look as though I am the one creating negativity. Holding you accountable is not the same as attacking you.

And don't gaslight me by saying I just want to argue. I am telling you how your choices make me feel. That is not communication — it is manipulation.

This kind of behavior leaves me unseen, unheard.

You cannot wound me, dismiss my pain, and then act like the victim simply because I dared to call you out."

But Nina did not speak as always. Perhaps she was too tired now. Perhaps she no longer wished to fight for words.

She had grown so weary that she began to wonder from where she could summon the patience — patience so deep that even if he chose not to care, it would not wound her

Deep down she already knew. Everything had broken long ago — what came now was only the sound of it breaking.

For Nina, that accusation was the last wound. She could not understand: if after all this, after a lifetime of trust issues

unlocked and exposed, she had still chosen to stand beside Amos—yet he still could not respect her—then he never would.

So she made her decision. Final. Irreversible.

Nina left. She left the office. She left Amos's job. And she left Amos himself.

This time, it was permanent.

Some truths a person understands only when everything has already ended. So it was with Nina and Amos.

She came, at last, to see many things about him. Amos himself was not poisonous; it was the storms he stirred, the situations he wove, that carried the poison. Nina knew he was often wrong, yet she also knew he had never wished her harm. He had always wanted to see her move forward in her life.

She remembered how, when he met Juliana in Australia, he had said, *I may do nothing else for Nina, but if ever I have the chance, I will bring her here with me that meeting her family becomes easier.*

Whatever Amos did, perhaps it was born out of the shadows of his past. At an age when most young men were simply learning to enjoy life, he was already building his empire. But by then, he had been filled with too much restlessness—too many frustrations, too many wounds, both of health and of trust. Now, Amos no longer knew how to pause, yet he kept drifting away—from people, from love, from everything that asked him to stay. Among those he drifted from... was Nina.

In her heart, Nina was not defending Amos. Betrayal, after all, remains betrayal—no matter the reasons behind it.

But how could Nina call Amos wrong? He had never promised her marriage. It was she who, year after year, lived on a single thread of hope — that perhaps one day he would ask.

But life is hard. It was written that Nina would be wounded — and that the wounding would come through Amos's own hands.

Well, Dear reader always remember the law of life: whether everything is given to you or nothing at all, life hurts either way. Or perhaps, either way, it is you who end up hurting yourself.

In Between

With her love life unraveling, Nina and Juliana grew closer the way rivers learn one another by flowing — Nina and Juliana, pulled together by the same current. Nina told Juliana everything: the small betrayals, the loud emptiness, the nights when the room seemed to press closer. She would call and tell her life aloud — cry into the phone, shout at the hollow air — as if speaking could stitch the pieces back. Yet between them lay a country, a cold thin line of distance that would not be bridged by words alone.

Juliana listened with the steady, patient warmth of someone who understands suffering, but there was a limit to what patience can do from another shore. Nina wanted an arm at her side, a shoulder to press against when the world felt like an accusation. Amos had learned to wound with light hands: a belittling joke here, a callous comparison there, the small, precise cruelty of reminding someone they are less than. He told her he liked confident girls. Those words landed like a verdict — not merely criticism but a slow, efficient erasure. Confidence, once chipped away, does not return like a lost

scarf; it must be grown from soil that has been carefully tended. Amos tended nothing.

So Nina traveled on a journey that wore at her. She kept asking – to herself more than anyone else – why he could not stand with her, why he turned his allegiance toward other faces, why he treated her as if she had never been anything to him. The question hollowed her like winter hollows a tree.

One night the questions could no longer be held inside. She buried her face in the pillow and let the sound come – not the polite snuffle of a discreet sorrow, but something raw and animal, as if some part of her were suffering a wound you could hear. Her sobs were not mere sadness; they were the sound of someone remembering a physical pain and meeting it again, breath by breath. In that darkness she learned how heavy silence could be when it is the only thing left to keep you company.

She told herself it was a decision, neat and fatal as a closed book: she would end it. The thought moved through her like a cold wind, convincing at first by its simplicity. People muttered that those who take their lives are cowards; Nina knew better now – they were prisoners of circumstance, driven past the point where pleading could change anything. How must a person feel, she wondered, to bow before that weight and decide that silence would be kinder than noise?

That night she wrote a note with the clumsy honesty of someone who still loved in small, unfinished ways: Papa, I am sorry. I was not weak; the world made me. I am sorry. The words were a confession and a benediction. Then – as if some small, stubborn light had refused the dark – a single thought cut through the fog: her little brother. He will never know me, she thought, and in that image something like shame and tenderness and fierce

protectiveness mixed in a single pulse. The idea did not scare her away so much as stop her long enough to breathe.

She found that breath and reached for her phone like someone reaching for a rail. She typed the single word she had heard other people say in the hush between their sentences: suicide. At the top of the search results, the world offered the thing she expected – help numbers, helplines, the names of people who answered. For the first time that night, the answer was not a plan but a possibility: a voice at the other end of a line, a person who might sit with her for a while while the night thinned. It was not a cure – nothing so quick – but it was a small, solid resistance against the blackness. She did not yet know how to become whole again; she only knew she could not let herself be erased while someone else still needed her.

She dialed with hands that trembled like thin branches in a storm. The phone rang once, twice – and on the second ring a young voice answered. There was none of the practiced softness of an older operator; it was the clear, urgent calm of someone too young to have lost hope.

Him: “Hello?”

Nina (through a jagged breath): “Hello...”

Him: “What happened, ma’am?”

The syllables had barely left his mouth when Nina broke – not the polite, measured sob of a stranger, but the kind that spills all at once, like a glass shattered against the floor. He did not flinch. He did what you do with things that must not fall apart: he steadied them.

Him: “Ma’am, tell me what’s wrong.”

Nina couldn't stop. Her voice came in fragments, torn between apology and panic.

Nina: "I'm alone at home. I'm afraid I'll hurt myself... I don't want to, but I'm scared I will. Please help me."

There was a pause, and in that pause the young man arranged his words the way someone arranges a small, fragile thing into a box.



Him: "That was very brave — that you called and asked for help. I'm here with you. Talk to me. Can you sit down? Drink some water. Breathe with me once: in... out..."

His tone was spare, polite to the point of ceremony, and beneath the politeness a steady assurance — the kind that says, I will not let this be the last thing you do tonight. He spoke as if he were

closing a door against the dark. He asked small, practical questions – is anyone nearby, is there something you could use to hurt yourself, can you keep the phone with you. Each question was a stone placed across a fast stream: tiny, steady things that might make it possible to cross.

When she admitted she had nothing dangerous within reach, he let the relief sit between them like a small light.

Him: “Stay on the line with me.”

In the small room, with the phone’s small light and a voice that would not let the silence finish her, Nina felt, for the first time that night, a balance shift. It was not salvation and it was not final. It was only – for now – someone keeping watch until dawn.

He listened to her for two or three hours that night, until Nina finally quieted. He told her his name: Samuel. “Think of me as your friend, your brother. I’m here – call whenever you want to talk.” After that night Samuel became, in effect, Nina’s on-call therapist. Whenever she had an anxiety attack she called him.

Along with being her on-call therapist, Samuel had now become Nina’s friend.

Who would have thought that a call to a suicide helpline could turn a stranger into a true companion – a friend she had never met, whose city she didn’t even know, yet who was always ready to listen.

When they finally exchanged personal numbers, Samuel’s picture appeared for the first time. Nina was surprised – and impressed. The boy in the display photo looked very young, with a pleasant, intelligent face and a calm, bright smile. The way he had steadied a stranger with nothing but words showed a patience and kindness rare even in people twice his age.

Samuel was a handsome young man with an easy, thoughtful presence. He was working at the helpline only for a short while, waiting for his U.S. visa to be approved. But Nina couldn't help feeling that the timing had been arranged by something larger than chance — as if life, or God, had placed Samuel exactly where she needed him to be during those dark days.

Samuel—a stranger from the helpline—became the steady presence who kept her alive and slowly turned into a true companion.

Chapter 25th. The art of being left



Samuel's nightly calls still steadied her, but even his voice could not stop the slow departures around her.

Being left by someone special — by people once close — is also life's way of teaching in its own quiet art. It forces you to survive on your own, to discover who truly belongs to you, and sometimes to accept that you may never fully know.

That year Nina said goodbye to many. Some farewells carried warm wishes and quiet gratitude; others were heavy with sadness and regret.

It felt as if God Himself was giving her training in how to be left — and still carry it with grace.

The first farewell of that year was to Kazimir.

At last his visa had arrived — not for the United States, as they had once dreamed, but for the United Kingdom. A U.S. visa was never so easy.

For the brother and sister, this separation was far greater than they first understood. They thought they already knew life without family, having lived apart from their parents for so many years. But only after Kazi left for the UK did they begin to grasp what true distance meant.

Kazi's application had been in process for a long time, costing Svyomir and Polina thirty-two lakh rubles. And now Nina would learn, in the sharpest way, what solitude really was — and how important Kazi had been. Until then he had quietly

carried the duties of the household: paying bills, managing expenses, buying groceries, speaking to people outside when needed. With his departure, all those responsibilities would fall to Nina.

In those days Masha's engagement to Bohumir had also been fixed.

Just two weeks before the engagement date, Kazimir's work visa arrived. And there is a very common old belief: when something important is about to happen, you keep it quiet, or the good work may fall apart.

So the Varkov family made a promise — no one would tell a soul until Kazi had stepped out of the airport in the U.K. Nina's heart raced with a mixture of feelings. She was happy that her brother was finally moving to the next stage of his life. She was sad because the one person who had carried the roles of mother, father, and brother for her in her entire life was about to leave. And she was afraid of how Masha would react when she finally heard the news.

Every day Masha kept calling: "Are Kazi's engagement-party clothes ready? Is all the preparation done?" Whatever her moods, she loved Kazimir like a younger brother and even helped him and Nina financially few times as well. Yet the truth about the U.K. could not be told. After sixteen years, a few doors toward reuniting the family had finally opened, and no risk could be taken.

Within a week Svyomir arranged everything — the ticket, the shopping, the paperwork. One suitcase was enough. All the detailed packing fell to Mavra. From shopping to checking the ticket, she handled every step. But while her hands folded clothes, her heart was breaking. More than once she

whispered, “What will I do here without you, Kazi?” Poor Mavra — she packed his future while quietly weeping for her own empty days.

Nina was afraid of being alone, yet she knew she was not without good people in her life.

There were her closest friends — Maksim and Avin, Stepan Sir, her soul sister Juliana, and Samuel — and one more person whose presence mattered in her story.

He was not a lover or a friend in the usual sense, but a colleague from her very first job: Stepan, whom Nina always called Stepan Sir. A natural multitasker, he was the kind of man who never refused when someone needed help. He held deep respect for Nina and was ready to assist her at any turn. For Nina, and for anyone who ever needed him, Stepan Sir was simply impossible to say no to — because he was always there when he was needed most.

He had once proved how quietly dependable he could be. There was a night when Nina, struck by a sudden kidney infection, was admitted to the hospital. Kazimir was bound to his shift, and the doctors warned that a strong painkiller injection was needed — one that would leave her in a state of half-consciousness. Someone had to stay nearby.

Nina called around three, four people. No one answered. At last she dialed Stepan. Her voice was faint, edged with fever. “Stepan sir, could you... Could you come to the hospital?”

There was no questioning, no hesitation — only a calm yes. Within half an hour he had closed his office and reached her bedside.



That night, while the corridors smelled of antiseptic and sleep, Stepan simply sat there, a quiet, solid presence. No grand gestures, no unnecessary words — just the certainty that Nina was not alone.

At that time Nina knew she would need all these people more than ever, because she had always leaned on someone emotionally. After Kazi left for the U.K., they would become her only support.

On **21 January 2024**, Kazimir left St. Petersburg for the United Kingdom with his dreams packed into a single suitcase. The farewell felt heavy to Nina, but Svyomir had strictly instructed everyone: *No one will cry. It's a day of happiness — no negativity.* So they all smiled and saw Kazimir off without tears.

The last thing Nina said to Kazi was, *"Kazi, don't take as long to come back to me as our own family took."*



Back home, Nina felt an unfamiliar emptiness. Even though Kazi had grown quieter with age and spent long hours in his room, his presence had always filled the house — the small quarrels, the timely demands for meals, the advice to stay close to family and keep a gentle distance from Masha. All of it stopped at once.

Amos's memory also came back, sharp and unwelcome. She

remembered telling him that Kazi might leave for the U.K., and how he had said, *"Then you'll be alone — but don't worry, Nina, I'm here with you."* That memory broke in the same breath, because she knew that even if their relationship had survived, Amos would not have been there for her now. Because for by now, Nina had learned the difference between being busy and being simply uninterested.

Call it coincidence or something else, but after Kazi left, Nina's friends visited far less often.

The friendships didn't break; it was just that now Nina herself stayed out more. She laughed about it, but her world had shifted.

Her conversations with Juliana grew even longer — and for my dear female readers, those talks often slid into pure gossip.

And gossip, as everyone knows, can drown people just as surely as silence.

Neither Juliana nor Nina ever liked Masha, and Juliana disliked Nina going to Masha's house. She would sometimes show open annoyance and say, *"Sometimes I feel like telling your father how often you visit Masha."* Nina would only laugh and reply, *"Juliana, I'm alone here. At least I have her with me sometimes."* At that, Juliana would quiet down, understanding what those visits really meant for her friend.

The trust between Juliana and Nina ran so deep that Juliana would often say, half in jest and half in vow, *"Even if someday we quarrel – God forbid – our secrets will go with us to the grave."* With that bond, their conversations grew fearless, their hearts wide open.

Sometimes, in a flicker of irritation, Juliana would reveal what Masha said behind Nina's back. The first revelation struck like a cold blade.

Do you all remember the day Juliana's degree certificate turned up in Nina's wardrobe? Juliana finally confessed how it happened. *"Masha asked me to fetch a top from your closet,"* she said. *"When I opened it, I found my own degree lying there. Later, when I brought it back, Masha smirked and said, 'See? Relatives like her never really want you to leave. She doesn't want you to go to Australia.'"* I knew it was masha's doing.

For Nina, the words fell heavy, each one a quiet betrayal.



Juliana said quietly, *"I knew it wasn't you. If it had been, why would you spend whole days with me, running from college to college, sharing every struggle?"*

But what she told Nina next tore through every layer of restraint. From that moment, Nina's dislike for Masha hardened into something far sharper.

Juliana, reluctant yet firm, finally spoke of that fractured night—the darkest night of Nina's life. Masha, in some careless conversation, had told Juliana that everything was Nina's own fault.

For a moment, Nina could only stare, the air gone from her lungs. *Her fault?* The word sounded monstrous. Shock pressed past anger into something colder, deeper. The thought that someone could twist that night of violence into her own doing left her beyond outrage, standing at the far edge of grief and disbelief.

After that, Nina no longer stayed silent. If Masha felt no reverence for truth, why should she? She began to speak, telling Juliana of the things she had kept locked away—dark corners of Masha's life and of Shaul's reckless habits.

She told how once Masha came back to Nina's flat after being with her boyfriend Amin, and, on the way home, chatted on the phone with her New Zealand lover as if nothing had

happened. How Shaul and Masha, though divorced, still lived under one roof, while Shaul brought a new girl home nearly every week.

There was the night Shaul struck a poor man with his shoe over a scratch on his car, and Masha, instead of outrage, said calmly, *"It's all right. I've already asked God to forgive you."*

Nina told Juliana that Masha was leaving no effort undone in making herself disliked. When she began earning well, Maksim would sometimes tease her, laughing, *"Hey, spoiled child of a rich father."*

Rich? Her father? At such words Nina would fall silent, the reply freezing on her lips. *You are feeding three mouths, including your own, she longed to say, but my father is keeping three separate homes alive – in the United States, in Russia, and in the United Kingdom.*

Nina spoke of how, years later, Masha began flirting with the brother of one of her own students, all while still tied to the New Zealand boyfriend. And she described that almost surreal evening when everyone drank tea together – Masha's ex-husband on one corner of the bed, her current lover on another, and the man she hoped to marry next on the third.

As Nina's words unfolded, the room seemed to thicken with the raw truth of lives lived without anchor or shame.

Juliana matched Nina's candor with her own. Her voice tightened as she said, *"Sometimes my hatred for Masha runs so deep that I feel like calling her New Zealand boyfriend myself. I want to tell him everything – every lie, every betrayal – and warn him: don't marry her, or you will regret it."*

It was not a passing irritation but a slow-burning anger, the kind that builds when trust has been mocked too many times.

In that moment, their friendship felt like a sealed chamber where every hidden grievance could finally breathe.

Juliana went on, her words edged with disbelief. *"Do you remember how Masha once came from Samara and practically took root in our house? She refused to go back at all. It wasn't until her mother called and said, 'Masha, come home – people are asking if our daughter has run away,' and promised a little reception to save face, that she finally returned. Otherwise she had all but fled from home."*

The memory hung between them, another shard in the growing mosaic of truths they could share only with each other.

Juliana added yet another bitter detail, her tone sharp with remembered anger. *"Once, when Shaul's former girlfriend – the one preparing to leave for Canada – went shopping, she took Masha, Shaul, and you along. That girl even bought you a top as a small gift. But when they got home, Shaul and Masha actually quarreled with her for giving you anything at all. The same pettiness showed up again during the festival, when they quietly pulled chocolates out of the gift package meant for you and Kazimir, saying, 'Don't give them so much.'"*

Each story was like another crack in a wall already splintered, laying bare the small meanness that had so long hidden behind everyday smiles.

When Nina told Juliana what Masha and her fiancé had said, Juliana only asked, with quiet firmness, *"Then you decide who matters more to you."*

Nina did decide. She would keep Juliana with her, quietly, no matter the risk. Yet she also spoke with a note of gentle caution: *"Juliana, life is unpredictable. No one knows what*

tomorrow brings. At least meet your brother Shaul once before you leave."

Juliana shook her head. *"I don't know. If I meet him, it will be on the very last day. I don't trust Masha at all. She could file some false complaint and ruin my Australia plans. I can't take that risk."*

On 6 September 2024, Juliana arrived in Moscow, where Nina came to meet her. Those days Mavra was with them as well. The three of them laughed and wandered like sisters on borrowed time. Maksim and Arseny joined for a while, and together they all went on a two-day trip—a small escape stitched with late-summer light.

Through it all Juliana quietly covered every expense. She never let a single ruble become a weight on Nina, carrying the costs as lightly as she carried her joy at being together.

On 9 September it was Masha's birthday, and Nina, almost out of habit, had to go to Masha's flat. Juliana showed her clear displeasure at the plan. So Nina left Juliana with Mavra for the evening and went.

Those days were light-filled and full of laughter, yet one thing troubled Nina: Juliana had begun smoking heavily. Morning and evening it was cigarettes, vapes, sometimes a joint. When Nina scolded her, Juliana would shrug and say, *"I'm on holiday. I'll quit once I'm back."*

Then, without warning, came a call that cracked the calm. Kazimir's voice was tight. *"Nina, when did you last speak with Piniya?"* —Piniya, the ex he never liked to mention.

"I don't remember... why?" Nina asked.

"If you're hiding something, it will ruin us. Tell me the truth. With whom did you go to Ladoga Skerries National Park?"

Memory flared: that lone, desperate escape when she had gone to the park with Piniya, because no one else was free. She had told no one — no one but Juliana and Masha. They alone knew how she had returned to St. Petersburg with Piniya, dropping her at Masha's place because Mavra and Alina were waiting at Nina's flat. Later Masha and her fiancé had driven Piniya home, where her husband collected her.

And yet Kazimir now knew. The question hung like a shadow over every word: **who had told him?**

From that day on, things began to sour for Nina in quiet, invisible ways. Mavra's warmth cooled. She still spoke freely with Juliana, but with Nina, there was a new distance — one Nina could neither name nor bridge.

Perplexed, Nina confided in Juliana. *"Someone told Kazimir that I said Mavra makes him spend too much money. Now he listens to her and not to me. But I never said anything like that. Who would invent it?"*

Juliana answered without hesitation, a trace of weary certainty in her voice. *"That's the kind of casual poison Masha would drop. It sounds ordinary — something people might think about any couple. Easy to believe."*

Nina pressed on, still stunned. *"But I truly never said it, not even in passing."*

Juliana's look was steady. *"You know her. If she could reveal your trip with Piniya, she could plant this too"*

Nina's unease kept tightening like a knot. On one side was the fear that if Juliana met Shaul, Masha would discover Juliana had secretly stayed with her. On the other hand was the puzzle of who kept turning her brother and would-be sister-in-law against her. Maksim tried to steady her — *"Don't worry,*

everything will settle," he would say—but the questions only deepened.

As Juliana's departure drew near, new precautions followed. For the final nights, she shifted to Arseny's apartment, at Maksim's suggestion, so that Masha or Shaul—who lived in the same housing complex—would not catch sight of her. Nina went there that evening too.

Yet Juliana's temper flared. *"You're so terrified of Masha that you moved me out like contraband,"* she said sharply.

The quarrel might have grown harsher if Maksim had not stepped in, speaking calm until the tension thinned. Later, they all joined a small birthday gathering at the home of Arseny's friend Diana. Laughter and photographs filled the night.

But then came the careless slip: Diana, without a thought, posted one of those pictures to her Instagram story. Juliana's face was there, plain in the glow of a candlelit room. And Masha—watchful even at a distance—saw it. In that instant, all the careful hiding unraveled.

Nina was almost trembling now. Two full hours had passed since Masha had seen Diana's story, and still there was no call. The silence felt heavier than anger.

Desperation turned into strategy. She begged Juliana to help craft a set of messages that would look as if Juliana had only just informed her that she was in St. Petersburg. Then, acting on the plan, Nina invited Juliana—already in Arseny's apartment—to meet her there again, so that the timing would match the story they were building.

Only when every detail was ready did Nina place the call. *"Masha,"* she said, letting a breathless surprise color her voice,

"I just got a call from Juliana. She's in St. Petersburg. I've asked her to come here."

While she spoke she also forwarded screenshots of the carefully staged chat, proof for the fiction she hoped would hold. And she added, almost as if to soothe any lurking suspicion, *"She wants to see Shaul but won't come to the house."*

Masha, sounding almost casual, said only, *"Convince her to come home."*

"I'll try," Nina answered—and at last she exhaled, a long breath of relief. To keep every trace hidden, she quietly moved Juliana from Arseny's flat to an Airbnb, so that no shadow of blame could fall on Maksim or Arseny.

On the night before her flight to Australia, Juliana finally met Shaul outside. The meeting was a rush of long-buried feelings: they cried, spoke of family knots and old grievances, and let years of distance fall away. Gently, Shaul persuaded her to come home for a little while.

Inside, Juliana and Masha exchanged almost peaceful words, a brief stillness after weeks of secrecy. Then Juliana left again for the Airbnb, telling them she would return the next day for a longer visit. It was a necessary lie. Her plane was waiting.

The next day Nina drove Juliana herself alone to the airport. And on 22 September, Juliana flew back to Australia—carrying with her the weight of everything unsaid, and the hidden nights that had shaped their farewell.

The real storm in Nina's life broke only after Juliana left. It was a storm that would turn 2024 into one of the hardest years she had ever known.

Kazimir and Mavra suddenly stopped speaking to her. Mavra no longer came by at all. And Nina, looking back, could trace how the breach had opened.

She had an old flaw: words came too quickly, without the slow shield of caution. In stray moments of frustration she had shared small household grievances with Juliana and with Masha. She had spoken, half in jest, about how Mavra once claimed Kazimir's television as *her* right when he left for the UK—something ordinary for a woman deeply attached to him. She had mentioned how, more than once, Kazimir went to pick Mavra up from the office but refused when Nina asked for the same favor.

And once, when an iWatch and some Zara dresses vanished from her apartment, Nina—worried and bewildered—had told Juliana how only a few people had access: herself, Mavra, Alina, and the caretaker.

Somewhere along the way those words were carried forward, bent and sharpened. By the time they reached Kazimir and Mavra, the stories sounded cruel: that Nina had said Kazimir now lived under Mavra's command; that she accused Mavra of taking the television without asking; that she suspected Alina, Mavra's friend, in the theft.

When Nina finally heard these charges from Kazimir's own lips, she was stunned into silence. She tried to explain, but how could she? The things she had once spoken lightly, in passing, had traveled far and changed shape, until they no longer resembled the truth she had meant.

Then came the final unraveling.

Little by little, everything Nina had tried to hide from 6 September to 22 September surfaced in front of Masha—how

Juliana had stayed secretly with her, the staged chat messages, every lie about where Juliana was kept and for how long, every whisper Nina had ever spoken about Masha. Someone had told Masha everything, from A to Z.

The call Nina had feared finally arrived.

Masha's voice, sharp and rising, lashed through the line: *"You eat from the same plate and then spit in it. You've turned Shaul and Juliana against each other. You kept our girl in your house and made her spend her money. You talk filth about us and think prayers will save you? Nothing will work for a girl as rotten inside as you are!"*

Nina said, almost in a whisper, "Masha... I was afraid."

Masha's voice cut back, colder and sharper than glass: "Oh, shut the hell up! *Afraid? Afraid of what?*"

What Nina longed to answer was burning on her tongue — *that only those who still have their parents above their head know what fear can be*. But she did not speak. That day, fate was not standing on Nina's side.

This was exactly the storm Nina dreaded: Masha's words cut harsh and loud, laced with curses. Even Shaul had often scolded her — *"Masha, your tongue is too rough"* — but it never changed.

Shaken, Nina reached out to Maksim, crying. *"Did you... did you tell her? How could she know every detail?"*

"Are you crazy?" Maksim said. *"Why would I tell her anything?"*

The moment she hung up, Masha called again, as if watching from inside Nina's own mind: *"Don't start calling around. Don't you dare ask who told me."*

The thought was unbearable. Was Maksim somehow involved? Tears blurred every line of trust. At the same time

she was pleading with Kazimir for comfort, but Mavra had already said to him, *"I respect Nina, so I won't block her – but don't expect me to speak to her anymore."*

Everything was suddenly in ruins. Relationships she had built over years felt scorched in a single day. One fact stood out with cruel clarity: it was Masha who had told Kazimir about Piniya's visit. And the rest—the television quarrel, the theft suspicions, every small complaint twisted into poison—those had reached Kazimir through someone Nina had never doubted.

The one who carried those words was JULIANA.

The truth, when it finally surfaced, shook Nina to her core.

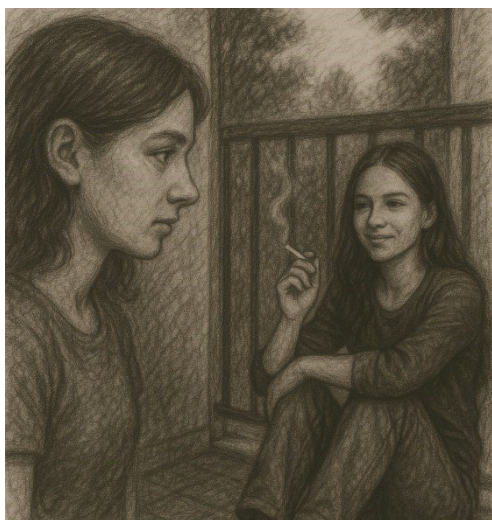
Why had Juliana done this? The answer came slowly, in pieces sharp enough to wound.

Before leaving St. Petersburg, A Man Juliana was engaged to later moved to Canada. But in Australia she had slipped from one entanglement to another—first with an ex-boyfriend, then with a colleague from her nursing home, later with someone she met at a party, then with a friend's relative, and finally with a man who happened to be Kazimir's old schoolmate.

Nina had never liked that last connection. During Juliana's visit she had watched her, in front of Mavra, criticize her own fiancé while praising that school friend. Quietly, Nina had signaled to Mavra not to encourage the talk: *"Don't support her on this. Her fiancé has stood by her through everything."* And, out of genuine concern, she had added, *"Also, don't let her smoke so much – she's picking up a bad habit."*

Later, when Nina wasn't home, Juliana and Mavra spoke at length. What exactly passed between them no one could trace, but something hardened there.

Out of that hidden grievance, Juliana struck back. Before leaving, she told Masha everything



Nina had ever said in passing—about Masha, about Shaul, even private complaints meant only for a friend's ear. And to Mavra she revealed words she had twisted or misunderstood.

By the time Juliana boarded her flight, she had left behind a silent devastation. It was as if she had set out to make sure Nina would stand utterly alone, with every friendship frayed and every confidence betrayed.

Juliana had gone, but she left a wreckage behind.

One by one, every thread of Nina's world unraveled. Masha no longer called. Shaul stayed silent. Even Masha's fiancé, Kazimir, and Mavra withdrew. Maksim and Arseny went further still: they blocked her outright.

What stunned Nina most was Maksim. Only a few days later, Masha's fiancé posted a cheerful vlog from a festival—Maksim and Arseny laughing in the crowd, as if nothing had happened. Nina watched, disbelieving. Maksim had helped hide Juliana; why, then, was she the only one cast out?

Questions crowded her mind, but each felt like a door leading nowhere. Every answer dissolved before it formed. The friendships were simply gone.

There would remain in Nina a regret — one that might gnaw at her all her life, or perhaps be forgotten like a half-buried wound. When she learned what Masha had told her parents about her, and what she had spoken of her outside the walls of their home — even while Nina had harboured not a single dark thought against her — she understood: she ought to have treated Masha then as Masha had treated her now.

As for Juliana, Nina bore no malice. But she prayed, with a kind of hard clarity, that life would never again tie her to a bond as inwardly ruinous as the one Juliana had been.

By 25 September, her own birthday, silence had hardened around her. At dawn, Mavra flew to the UK to join Kazimir. When the plane lifted into the sky, Nina was left with no one — no voice to call, no familiar knock at the door.

Then came the most tragic blow of her life — the one that made Nina feel as if her heart had reached its final limit of breaking.

A message from Amos appeared on her screen — the man to whom Nina had given ten irreplaceable years of her life: her loyalty, her love, her quiet understanding.

He wrote:

“During all those years of us, were you ever with someone else? In bed? You turned me into a rapist.”

And below that, another line — cold, almost triumphant in its calmness:

“I got rid of a lot of guilt today.”

He had written it after sitting at an event among the very people who had once abandoned Nina — the ones who had named her *a dirty girl* and turned their backs on her without knowing the truth.

Nina had never wished to leave Amos with guilt — never. She had only wished that someday, he would *realize* how deeply she had loved him, how much of herself she had given without asking for anything in return.

Yet he spoke of guilt so easily — as if he had long been waiting for one sentence, one small misunderstanding, that would allow him to wash his hands clean of everything he had done.

It was as though he had found, at last, the perfect excuse to forgive himself for betraying the very woman who had never stopped believing in him.

The cruelty cut deeper because everyone knew her deepest fear: to be abandoned. And now the people who knew that fear best had become the ones to make it real.

And it was those very people —

the ones who once filled her days with warmth and shared laughter —

who ended up teaching Nina **the art of being left.**

Chapter 26th. Three Silent Healers



While Polina and Svyomir were finally settled in the United States... Nina's own heart fixed on a single wish: to bring Kazimir and Mavra back into her life.



Yet through every storm there remained three quiet, steadfast companions whose loyalty never wavered. They had been with her for ten, seven, and five years, watching her laugh and break and begin again. In the turmoil of earlier chapters they had barely been named, because they deserved more than a passing mention.

You might wonder, after so much betrayal, is she ready to trust again? But believe me, dear readers, when I tell you who these three souls are, you will understand why this trust is unshakable. The world may deceive, but they never will.

They are Nina's own blessings on four paws—

Roman, Jordan, and Vodka—

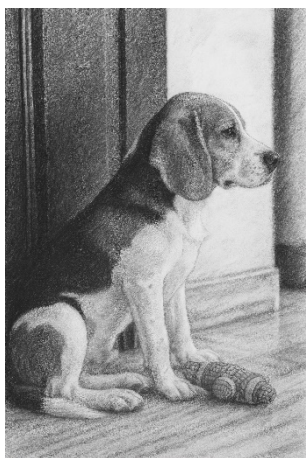
her three dogs, who have stayed beside her through every joy and every ruin, guarding the simple, unbreakable truth of love without conditions.

Yes—her three furry children, each carrying a different shade of devotion.

- **Jordan**, the eldest at ten, a gentle beagle with wise, watchful eyes who has seen every season of Nina's life.
- **Roman**, the seven-year-old rottweiler, strong and protective, whose quiet presence is a fortress when the world feels unsafe.
- **Vodka**, the youngest at five, a golden retriever with sunlight in his fur and a heart that turns even an ordinary day into play.

Through every betrayal and silence, these three remained Nina's unshakable circle. They have watched her laugh, collapse, rebuild; they have listened to words no human stayed long enough to hear. In a world quick to leave, **Jordan, Roman, and Vodka** were the proof that some loves are made to stay.

Jordan – The Sun-Seeker

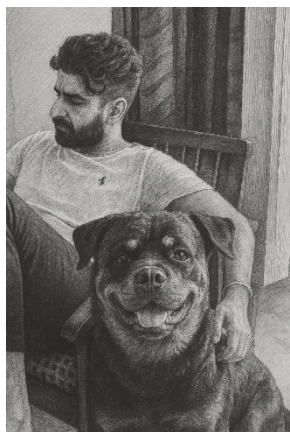


Jordan is the household's quiet elder, a beagle who still greets the morning with eager eyes. No matter how hot the summer grows, he insists on sitting in the strip of sunlight that falls across the balcony tiles, soaking up every ray as if light itself is his breakfast. He hates scolding—one sharp word and he lowers his ears, as though disappointment wounds more deeply than any punishment.

Nina calls him **Jodi**, a name that softens every syllable of the day. In his gentle company, time itself slows; even Nina's most anxious mornings find a steadier rhythm beside him.

Roman – The Silent Guardian

Roman, her **Nona**, is muscle and quiet intuition. He understands the language of her hands better than speech. If someone knocks late at the door, Nina needs only a slight gesture and Roman falls into step, not with the flash of a guard dog, but with deliberate calm—enough to let any stranger know this home is watched. He carries a story of near loss and deep rescue: first refused by



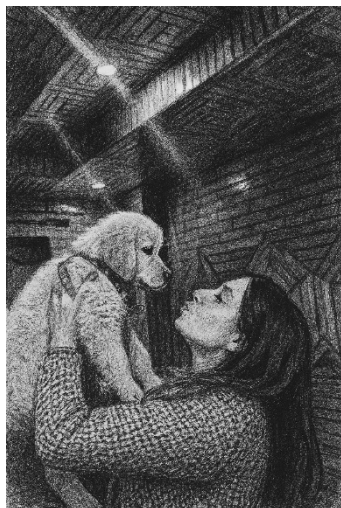
Kazimir and Roman

Kazimir, briefly given to a relative, and then reclaimed when the pup fell ill with parvo. Kazimir's care and the doctor's skill saved him, and from that day the bond between man and dog deepened into something fierce. Even now, across countries, Kazimir keeps Roman's photo as his display picture and often asks Nina for new snapshots.

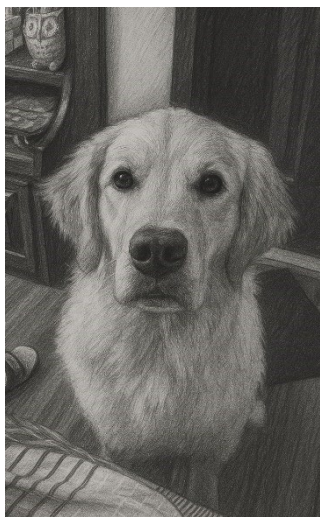
Vodka – The Golden Spark

Then there is **Vodka**, Nina's **Voda** or **Puchku**—a five-year-old golden retriever who never learned the meaning of stillness. He is a gift from Kazimir to Mavra,

but destiny placed his daily joy in Nina's hands. Vodka is pure mischief: racing in sudden zoomies from room to room, then vanishing under the bed, tables, or chairs to nap in his "secret cave." His antics often turn Nina's tears into startled laughter, a reminder that life still knows how to play.



Mavra and Vodka



Their days together are stitched with small, luminous habits. Morning begins with soft paws on the floorboards and ends with three warm bodies settling near Nina's bed. Walks trace familiar routes through St. Petersburg's lanes. There are treats for each, and names only she calls: Jodi, Nona, Vode. These simple calls are their own private language, a code of belonging no outsider could mistake.

Whenever Nina weeps, Roman and Vodka are the first to know. They circle her quietly, leaning close until her heartbeat steadies. Jordan, older and slower now, still presses his head into her lap, a weight of comfort that speaks more than words.

Each dog carries a timeline of Nina's own life. Jordan remembers snowy student winters and the scent of her first rented flat. Roman grew from a sickly puppy into a calm sentinel during years of love and separation. Vodka arrived during a bruised season, when Nina feared she had nothing left to give—yet his playful spirit taught her how to begin again. Together they form a living diary, each year marked by paw prints instead of ink.

When the last light fades, the four of them gather in quiet symmetry. Jordan curls near the balcony door, Roman stretches along the hallway side of the bed, Vodka claims the foot-space or slips beneath it—his favorite hiding spot. The sound of their breathing—slow, even, protective—fills the room with a warmth no absence can empty.

And so this chapter closes not with doors slammed or phones gone silent, but with three faithful hearts keeping watch—proof that even after the hardest betrayals, love can still be unconditional, patient, and gloriously alive.

Nina often thinks it is not she who raised them, but **they who have raised her**: teaching steadiness when trust is fragile, teaching joy when days grow heavy. If others have schooled her in the art of being left, these three have schooled her in the **art of staying**.

Chapter 27th. *A for all the reasons to stay*



Do you all remember the fifteen-year-old girl from the second chapter – the one who never stepped out of the house alone, who was weak in study, who always kept herself surrounded by her own people? Now she is thirty-two. Loneliness no longer devours her; she has even begun to love herself. One truth has proved itself: whatever else happens, the world may leave, but family will never leave. So it was with Nina.



Polina and Svyomir scolded her hard for speaking outside about Kazimir and Mavra, knowing her words could be misused. After that Nina turned her attention to those she would never let go of – Kazimir and Mavra. Day and night she asked their forgiveness. To Kazimir she said: Brother, I am sorry. I can ask your pardon all my life; forgive me as you would forgive childishness. Tell Mavra too that I am ashamed.

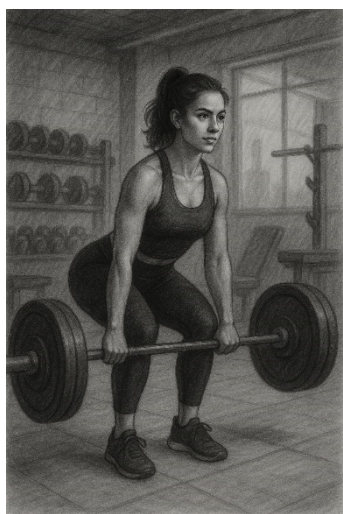
They were family and loved Nina deeply; therefore Kazimir and Mavra forgave her. Kazimir said: Nina, look – what our elders wanted from the start, that you keep distance from Masha, has now happened. They knew you could not leave her all at once. Now give your mind and heart to yourself and to

family. I am with you; Mavra is with you. Whatever you feel, do it, but keep us in confidence.

Yet the wounds of those who had left her were still fresh. Nina again began to cry in the nights, this time with no one to hear. She kept wondering why Maksim had acted as he did. If anger had truly driven him, he would have come, even with a slap, to ask why. But Nina understood: if Maksim had wished to save the friendship, he would certainly have come.

This time Nina took a few big steps that needed real strength. First, in her earlier depression counselling she had been told to start writing. So she began to write in the documents on her phone. Second, because of stress her weight had already fallen to sixty kilos, and at five foot two she looked still smaller. She decided that instead of sinking again into depression she would go to the gym.

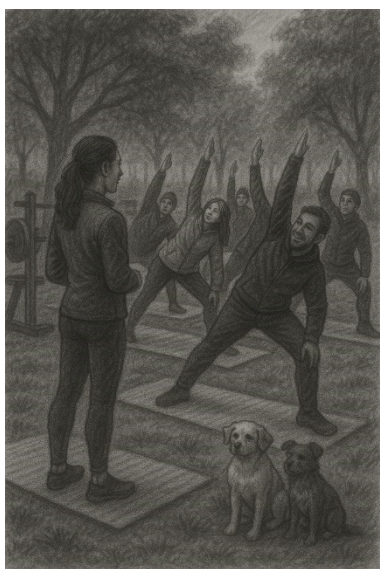
Before the New Year of 2025, Nina threw herself into the gym with a kind of blind, fearless devotion. She worked with strictness and heart – watching her diet, guarding her routine.



At three-thirty each morning she rose, bathed, said her prayers, took Jordan for a walk, and in the same year she joined the free yoga classes held in her own housing society. Rain might fall, storms might come, yet she never broke these rituals.

In the gym Nina found a peace she had never met anywhere else. No one could have told her that a room filled with iron plates

would bring such stillness. For her, the gym became a second home.



Yoga, gym, careful food, and a sharpened sense of self-worth—this powerful union was bound to show its magic. Nina's weight moved from sixty kilos down to fifty-two, then settled with new muscle at fifty-four. She no longer looked like the Nina of before. Before that New Year arrived she posted her first gym-progress photo on Instagram and, alongside it, worked steadily on her YouTube channel.

Fortune met discipline: one of her videos went viral, drawing around three and a half million views. The channel became monetized, and Nina began to earn from her own work.

Now her days passed in a steady, chosen rhythm—talking with family, working out, and spending time with her three beloved furry children.

Nina's Instagram DMs began to sound like a small chorus of admiration—so inspiring, such a great routine, how do you manage it all? Each message was a quiet push forward, motivation in itself.

In those days Nina was not lacking in good people—those who were simply caring, with clean hearts, untouched by superiority or display. She remembered how, when she had seen her friends in Bohumir's festival vlog, the phone had

rung. It was her neighbour, Raisa Sokolov, asking in the gentlest voice: *"What are you doing, Nina?"*

"Nothing... I was about to sleep," Nina had replied.

"On a festival day? So early? Have you eaten?"

"No... I didn't feel like it."

"That won't do. Come along. Tonight dinner is with the Sokolovs."

And just like that, Raisa did not allow Nina even the chance to sit alone and weep.

There was also Marina who has a very cute dog names enzo, another neighbour, who proved true the saying that sometimes those who are not of your blood settle deepest in your heart. When Nina once got injured in the gym and wore a plaster, Marina and her family made sure she never ate her dinners alone. For as long as the plaster lasted, so long lasted their evening ritual: the call would come unfailingly – *"Nina, come over."* Nina: *"Coming."*

In love, however, she had let go of certain hopes. She no longer believed in the kind of love that walks beside you hand in hand, that calls to ask Where are you? What are you doing? Such a love, she told herself, would not come now; marriage, if it came, would be arranged.

So far it went, that once someone said to Nina:

"Nina, when it comes to love, we must know our strengths and our weaknesses, and live by them. Tell me, what is your strength?"

Nina lifted her eyes, steady and unashamed.

"My strength is that I do not use tricks in love."

"And your weakness?"

There was a silence – two seconds that stretched heavy, like a pause before a wound is revealed. Then she spoke again, her voice unchanged, but softer, almost breaking:

“My weakness... is that I do not use tricks in love.”

Her friend looked at her in confusion. “But why call it weakness, Nina? It is a virtue, is it not—to love without deceit?”

Nina’s lips curved in a faint, bitter smile.

“When you do not use tricks... it is you who is tricked.”

Her friend pressed further: “Then perhaps now it is time. Will you use them, Nina? Will you protect yourself at last?”

Nina’s smile faded into weariness, her eyes dim with a sorrow too old for her years.

“I cannot,” she whispered.

Yet she had not lost faith in herself. Until marriage happened, she resolved, no shadow of negativity would be allowed to enter her mind.

Through yoga she made a few companions, and morning walks with them became the sweetest part of her ritual. There was laughter and teasing, light talk that opened the day gently. Neighbours now recognized her easily, smiling as they passed: the girl with three dogs.

In the yoga class boys and girls practiced together, and Nina blended so naturally with her small circle of friends that she hardly noticed when they became the very reason for her new smiles. These were not passing acquaintances; they quietly grew into a solid part of her life.

The first was Bela—graceful and simple, able to handle any situation with calm. A true animal lover, she kept a dog named Murphy. Married and the mother of a little boy, she loved Nina like a younger sister: always ready to support her, quick to sense even the sound of tears in Nina’s voice and grow sad with her. She was the religious one. The one who knows too well how to bend a dark thought until it appears as something bright.

In life, there can never be a right time for the death of a loved one. Yet the moment her father departed from hers was unbearably unfair. The grief of it she kept buried in her heart even to this day. And still, she carried herself with grace.



Bela

Next came Milena—tall, striking, and married, with two beautiful sons.

Whenever Nina needed to let out her bitterness about someone, it was Milena to whom she turned. With Milena, speaking eased the weight in her chest.

Nina would barely begin—“That stupid woman, she did this to me...”—not even finishing the sentence before Milena would cut in, already fierce on her behalf:

“Yes, she is exactly like that. She is the worst.

She lived heart and soul for her children, yet never hesitated to state her own point of view. Sensitive at heart, she felt everything deeply. Once, when she learned someone had hurt Nina, she arrived at Nina’s house still in her shorts and said

fiercely, “Which rascal dared to hurt you?” She even phoned the person and gave them a piece of her mind.

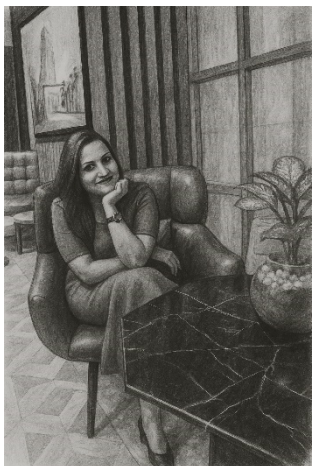
It was something to be truly proud of—that at such a young age, through her own savings, she had managed to build two pieces of land into her family’s name.

Then there was Irina—an elegant woman working in a government office. At first sight she seemed distant, even proud, but she proved to be warm and helpful, full of quiet understanding. She adored her beloved daughter. She once said to Nina, “You have so many talents. You deserve a good man, Nina.” And it was, in its own way, a very sweet thing to say.

Even if one didn’t know her daughter, a single glance at the little girl playing in the park was enough to say—it must be Irina’s child. The resemblance was so striking, it almost felt inherited from the soul.



Milena



Irina

And finally Regina—smart and fearless, speaking her mind without hesitation. Sometimes her words could sting to some, but her heart was pure. She had endured many struggles in relationships and carried her experience with courage. Married, with two children, she met life head-on, unafraid. The way she cared for herself—it was, in truth, a quiet inspiration. If she stood by you, then she was truly with you. She was a woman of her word.



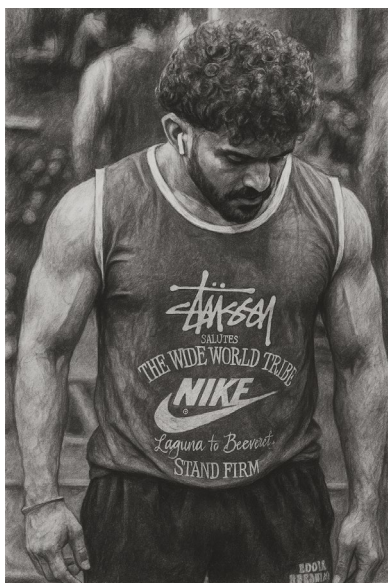
Regina

Together these women wove themselves into Nina's daily hours of yoga, laughter, and walks, until friendship itself became one of her strongest sources of light.

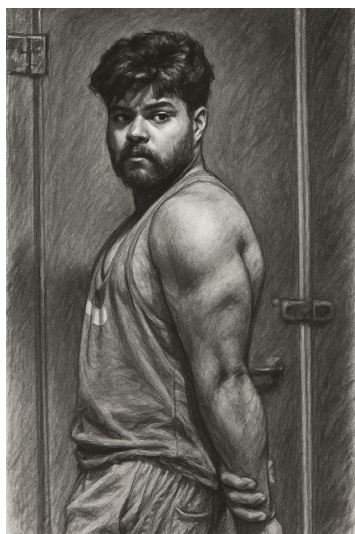
Nina did not find friendship only in yoga; the gym, too, became a field of new bonds.

First was Anatoly—Kazimir's friend and a gifted hairdresser—who soon felt like a brother to her.

He would pick her up from home and drop her back after workouts, steady and supportive through every training session.



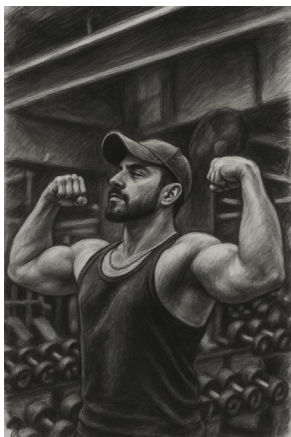
Her Personal trainer, Kiril, was another bright presence: a handsome young man with a quick, kind smile and an instinct for encouragement. Under his guidance Nina began to feel her own strength shaping.



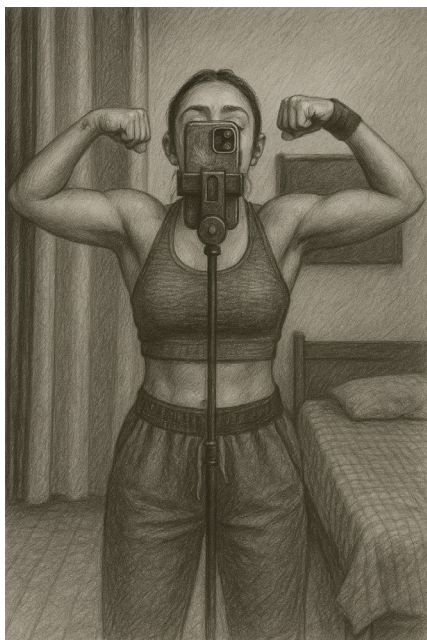
There was also Susanna, a tall, stylish girl with long hair and effortless charm who has dog named Coffee. Since Kiril trained both women, he often worked them side by side, and easy companionship grew between them.



And Jovan—striking in looks and gentle in manner—added his own light. He worked in an US-based insurance company. When Nina posted videos of their workouts, some of her friends assumed she liked him in a romantic way. In truth she did like him, but only as a gym partner, nothing more. Whenever Kiril was away, Jovan stepped in without a word, helping her keep the rhythm.



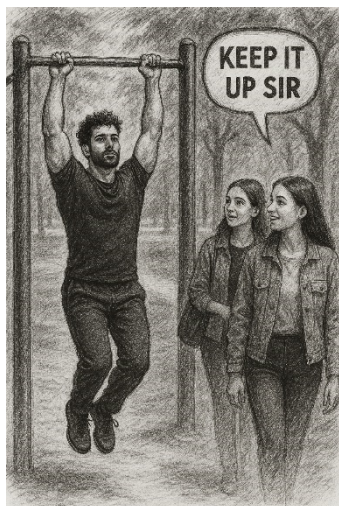
Through these days Nina saw remarkable changes in her physique and, more quietly, in her spirit.



The gym was no longer only a place of exercise; it had become another circle of trust and friendship.

Alongside all this, Nina also began to give steady attention to her work. She was employed at a sports-nutrition company, and the protein she herself used for gym training she naturally promoted there as well. In the yoga group she invited her women friends to try the supplements, and soon she thought of approaching the men too.

The first was Alexander—five feet eleven, attractive, with a soft mass of curly hair. Nina often noticed him exercising in the park after yoga and would call out teasingly, “Keep it up, sir!”



One day she found his number from the group and sent a message.

Nina: hi

Alexander: Hello

Nina: This is Nina from the yoga group.

Alexander: oh hi.

Nina: Actually I wanted to ask — are you on Instagram?

Alexander: no, I closed it a few days ago.

Nina: why?

Alexander: Too much distraction.

Nina: ohoo.

Alexander: What happened, you tell.

Nina: Our company makes protein and other gym supplements — if you ever need them, let me know.

Alexander: sure.

From such small exchanges the chat grew — morning and evening walks, quick notes during the day. Soon she learned that Alexander was a reader too. One morning she carried a book for him to yoga: *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

Nina: It's a good book, do read it.

Alexander: Definitely.

Without either of them noticing how it began, their conversations slipped naturally into the quiet rhythm of shared reading, walks, and everyday talk.

They walked slowly, the evening air heavy with unsaid thoughts. Nina spoke of the airport, of the day her parents had left—

her voice light at first, then breaking with the memory.

Alexander listened, his silence deeper than words. At last he murmured, almost to himself:

“Departures are not only at airports, Nina. Sometimes, they happen inside us... and we do not even notice until years later.”

She paused, her steps faltering, her eyes fixed on him.

“What is it, Alexander?” she asked softly.

He smiled faintly, though his gaze was far away.

“Nothing,” he said quietly. “That is a story for another time.”

Nina did not press him further. She understood at once that he was not ready to open that chapter of his life. And so she waited, silently deciding that the right time would come on its own.

Nina observed everything: how Alexander came down from his office each day, how he always found a moment for a walk before his meeting. And, unbidden, flashes of Amos crossed her mind—the old hurt and that hard lesson she once repeated



to herself: “No one is so busy; if someone wants to make time, they will.”

She had learned that the saying is not always true. Yet here was Alexander, quietly proving it right. He made time. He chose to. And in that simple, steady way he showed Nina that she was important to him.

Somewhere along the way, their messages began to carry kiss-emojis – no one could say exactly when. In the yoga courtyard their eyes started to wait for each other’s arrival, a quiet signal passing between them before any words were spoken.



It even became Nina’s small duty to wake him. Each dawn she called softly, “wake up – fifteen minutes and we meet downstairs.” Now, in the evenings, she found herself waiting for his return from work as well.

Alexander was a web developer and app designer—an intelligent boy with two sisters and affectionate parents with whom he spoke every day. He had come to St. Petersburg for his job, or perhaps, Nina sometimes thought, God had sent him there for her.

One day, as they walked together and Irina joined them, a casual remark slipped out: Alexander was four years younger than Nina. The words landed on her like a sudden gust; for a moment disappointment folded her shoulders inward. On her way home she sent him a short, sharp message—“You are

much younger than me.” He replied, steady as always, “It does not matter to me.”

Something in Nina clicked then. The small, careful kindness he had shown her no longer felt like ordinary friendship.

She decided to speak plainly; that evening she typed and sent what had been pressing at her chest: “Alexander, please do not misunderstand me, but I like you. I needed to tell you my feelings. How will you take this?” The message left her trembling — single-tick, unread. Hours passed slow as winter.

When at last she faced him on a walk, heart in her mouth, he smiled with the kind of embarrassment that belongs only to honest men and said, “My phone broke. All my data — our chats — are gone.” He had never seen the words.

Nina felt the old ache shift; she told herself it was a sign from God to begin again, to move forward without expectation.

Yet Alexander did not disappear. He went home for a few days but the nights filled with messages; they spoke until late. Later that night their messages went on and on, longer than either of them had planned. At one point Nina typed:

Nina: We are talking so late... normal friends don't talk like this, do they?

After a small pause came his reply:

Alexander: Then we are not normal friends.

She stared at the words, heartbeat quickening and those butterflies in the stomach entered the scene once again.

Nina: Then... what are we?

Alexander: Let's make it clear tonight and give this a name.

Nina: What name?

Alexander: You are my girlfriend.

The quiet certainty of those lines settled over Nina like warmth in winter.

Nina read those words and blushed so deeply she could not even type a reply. Never before had anyone claimed her with such quiet certainty. The way Alexander simply announced *you are my girlfriend* was utterly new and precious to her.

When he returned to St. Petersburg the air itself seemed to have shifted. Dear readers, Nina was now someone's girlfriend — of a man who proudly showed the world she was his, who looked at her smallest victories and said, *I am proud of you*, who held her hand as they walked through the market. She began to understand what she had been missing all these years. In her heart she marveled: *So this is what a relationship feels like.*



Now she could call or message her boyfriend whenever she wished, and their daily texts carried the gentle rhythm of shared life:

I've reached the office.

I'm home now.

Have you eaten?

Care, she discovered, has no single language. It flowers in gestures, breathes in silence, and is seen long before it is spoken. And Nina, free at last from the old fear of loss, was living that truth for the first time.

From that moment, the world rearranged itself in tiny ways. Little gestures, once too small to notice, became quiet declarations: a breakfast parcel with a note for him, a noon message to ask if she had eaten, the patient listening to a small worry until it softened and fell away.

One evening Nina's health faltered. Feverish and weak, she answered concerned calls from Bela and Milena, who both offered to bring food.

Nina: No, no, I'll manage. I'll eat something.

Then Alexander wrote:

Alexander: Nina, did you eat anything?

Nina: I'm not well... feeling nauseous.

Alexander: Then have something light.

Nina: I don't feel like it.



Alexander: Wait. I'll bring food. I cooked.

She refused again and again, but he would not listen. Later, as rain began to fall and a cricket match held half the city indoors, Nina settled back, certain he would stay home. Then she looked down from the balcony.

There he was—one hand holding an umbrella, the other a warm packet of food.

Nina could never put into words what filled her heart in that instant. She only knew she was smiling from ear to ear, feeling a quiet joy that seemed to light the rain itself.

Whenever Alexander drove Nina to the office and she happened to forget a scarf to cover her face, he would simply take off his own helmet and hand it to her. People on the road often smiled or laughed at the sight.

Yet such small, unguarded moments were giving Nina her days of peace.

The love, care, respect, and quiet support that Nina had not felt in years, Alexander gave her in just a few months. Nina was happy — truly happy. He stood beside her in



every possible way. When she once mentioned that her laptop had broken and she was writing something important, he simply handed her his spare laptop so she could keep working.

And she started writing his name every single day as well.

But don't worry — Nina wasn't losing her mind.

That name was only the password to his laptop.

One thing had become clear as a sunrise after rain:

Where toxic love buries your worth deep in the ground, turning it into a grave, true love makes that same soil a garden,

and you bloom like a beautiful flower. And yes—Alexander was the gardener.

And then came the day when Nina felt the quiet warmth of Alexander's arms around her. Their first kiss was more than special—it carried the calm certainty of two hearts loving each other back. Nothing in it was one-sided.

That evening, in the soft stillness of Alexander's home, they let their closeness deepen. It was not about desire alone but about telling each other, without a single word, how completely they belonged together. In the hush of that night, love itself seemed to breathe between them.

Alexander was not merely a companion; he was the calm centre of every storm that once tossed Nina's heart. With him, ordinary hours deepened into meaning, and silence itself felt full. He listened until her scattered thoughts settled, believed in her when she forgot to believe in herself, and guarded her smallest joys as if they were treasures. To Nina, he was not chance but necessity—the rare presence without which life no longer shaped itself whole.

Yet life, faithful to its nature, still sent hurdles. One day Shaul passed her on the street; He walked past as if she had never existed. Then came news that Masha was getting married and Juliana would attend. The Nina of earlier years might have collapsed back into guilt. But Alexander's Nina now rose like a shield for her own mind and asked herself: *Are those who try to pull me back into guilt saints themselves – washed clean of every fault? No. Then why should I carry their weight?*

Once she had sometimes sent Maksim a quiet *missing you* and waited for his late replies. Now she did not. When, on Masha's birthday, she unexpectedly saw Maksim outside masha's

house, she decided to close that chapter completely. His last words to her had been, *"Everyone told me how much you cared about Nina – see now, she doesn't care about you."* She longed to ask him whether those around him were truly his own, but she did not. She no longer wished to see his face for the rest of her life.

The final straw came when Diana's aunt – an acquaintance of old days – sent a sharp message: *"You better watch your words, kid. Before coming out with all that shit, remember God is watching."*

Before Nina told her mother but before could even answer, her mother asked that woman's number and stepped in with a strength that left Nina speechless. She wrote:

This is Nina's mother. I am deeply grateful to all of you who stood by my daughter in Russia. But I must also say this with clarity: last year she already suffered enough – through her own mistakes and through others'. Whatever she did, she has faced every consequence. So please do not try to teach her where God is or isn't in her life. And about the word you used – "shit" – now I request everyone to mind their own as well. While children were involved, I remained silent. But now that parents are being drawn in, let me remind you that her parents are very much alive, aware, and standing by her. Leave her alone.

Those words closed the matter like a firm door. With Alexander's steady love behind her and her parents standing strong, Nina felt the last old guilt lift like smoke in the wind.

People who play games often forget that cunning crumbles to dust when deeds return to their doer. There is no past life or future life – everything is revealed here, in this very life.

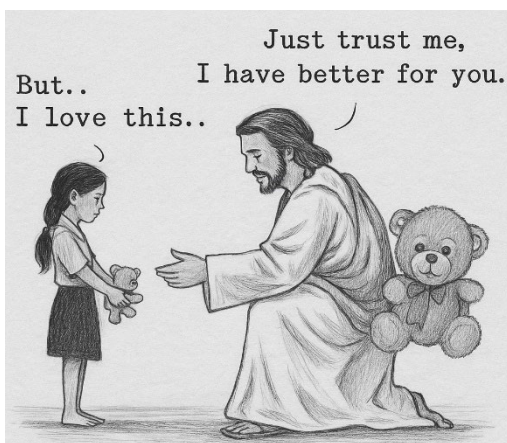


But at this point—after seeing Bela, Milena, Regina, Irina, and Alexander gathered like quiet blessings around her—one picture kept returning to

Nina’s mind. She had often scrolled past it on social media: a little girl holding a small teddy bear while Jesus gently asked for it, hiding behind his back a teddy bear far bigger and softer.

(Source: Google)

The meaning was clear and deep. It was as if God Himself whispered, “You cling to small things, thinking they are everything. But I am preparing something far greater. Let go of what has passed, and I will give you what is meant for you.”



For the first time, Nina felt that message alive inside her own story—each goodbye she had once feared was, in truth, making space for the immense gifts now unfolding in her life.

When Alexander came into her life, Nina understood at last why it could never have lasted with Amos—they simply were not written in the same fate. And so, for the first time, Nina stopped waiting.

After her father our finally Nina is now the main character in someone's life again –not merely because Alexander called her his priority, but because he treated her as one.

After everything Nina and her family had endured, these friends gave her every reason to smile—and Alexander gave her every reason to stay.

Until Paths Meet Again (Final Chapter)



25 September 2025



By the autumn of 2025 much had changed, though the days still seemed to drift in their quiet northern rhythm. The leaves over St. Petersburg's rivers blazed gold, the air carried the crisp scent of early frost. It was on

such a day that Kazimir called.

His voice, softened by distance, carried a weight Nina felt before he spoke.

"Nina... do you know how old **Ustin** is now?"

He meant the boy he loved like a shadow-son.

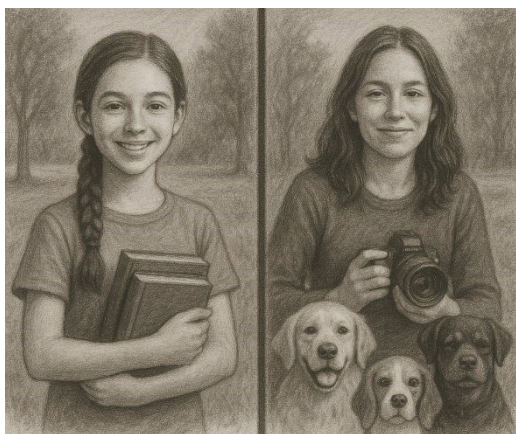
"Yes, brother," she said.

"He's the same age I was," Kazimir continued slowly, "when our family left me behind."

The words reached across thousands of kilometres and filled the room with silence. Nina's eyes burned before she could answer. On the other end she knew Kazimir's own eyes carried the same ache. Those years of separation had pressed a strange

calm into him, yet he had become something remarkable—a man who could hold his family’s scattered grief and still say to anyone in trouble, *“Come now, don’t be afraid. Everything will be all right.”*

Nina herself had changed no less. Once the soul of every gathering, she now sought the quiet of her own rooms and the steady company of her three dogs. In that small, breathing circle she found a love deeper than noise. The faith in love that betrayal had almost destroyed was slowly rebuilt, layer by patient layer.



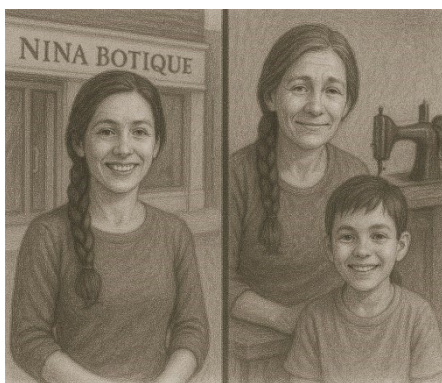
She had learned the hardest lesson: in the end, the only one who truly stands with you is **you**—but even so, *never walk away from family*. And never lose hope for love. It will arrive when least expected, often

disguised as an ordinary morning.

Nina, who once longed only to stay in everyone’s good books, who was desperate for friendship, who had even lowered herself to ask Masha for forgiveness—that same Nina, has no problem to be called as a villain in other people’s lives.

Far away, Polina lived with a sorrow that had eaten at her for seventeen years. It spoke in the quiet moments of a mother’s voice when she said, *“All three of my children are sitting apart, as*

if our family has been torn into pieces.” Her grief had become almost familiar to those around her. Even her lawyer, Daria, would sometimes sigh and say, “Mrs. Varkov, it’s been so many years I’ve known you, and still, whenever your children’s names come up, you cannot hold back your tears. Your tears never seem to end

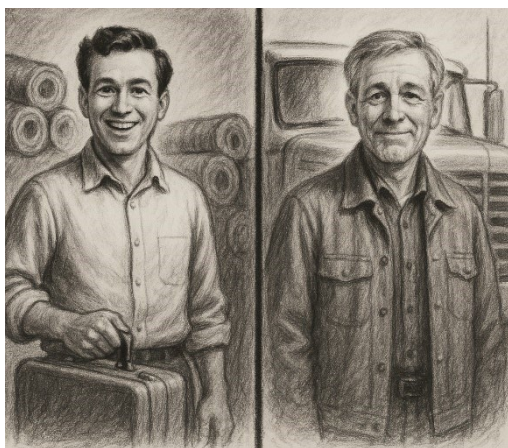


Polina & Ustin

Svyomir, beaten more than once by fortune’s hard hand, remained the family’s iron pillar. God alone knew what strength he was made of; he never seemed to tire, or perhaps he simply never admitted it. Yet one thing had never wavered inside him—his unshaken faith in God and

his unspent love for his children.

And so, as seventeen long years marked their sorrow, the Varkov family still waited for the day when scattered hearts would meet again. Each phone call carried not just words but a promise: *Until paths meet again, we keep the door open.*





But there is one truth, dear reader, that I must finally confess.

Earlier I said no one knew what Nina was writing on Alexander's old laptop—that it might be a journal or some scattered poems. That was a gentle lie.

What she was shaping in those late, quiet hours was not a diary at all.

It was a book.

Night after night, after the city's lights dimmed and even the dogs slept, Nina sat with the soft glow of the screen and gathered her memories—childhood departures, years of silence, every wound and every healing—threading them into sentences that would not leave her.

She was, without announcing it, transforming her own and her family's life into a story that would stay when everything else had scattered.

And to your surprise, dear reader, you have been following that voice all along.

Because the very story you hold now is the book she wrote—a book named **The May Departure**.

Message from the Vankovs



Svyomir

Life has tested me many times, but every trial only confirmed one truth: faith and family outlast every storm. To every reader carrying a hidden weight, remember—you are stronger than what tried to break you, and God’s timing is never late.

Polina

Seventeen years of waiting taught me that a mother’s heart never stops calling her children home. Tears may visit daily, but hope never leaves. If you are far from someone you love, keep that lamp of hope burning; one day, love will find the door.

Kazimir

Distance once felt like a life sentence, yet it shaped me into someone who can hold pain without bitterness. Whatever you are enduring, believe this: you can rebuild, you can love again, and you can turn every ending into a beginning.

And remember something simple but hard-won: earn your own living. Money is not everything, but without it the world too easily ignores your worth.

Nina

I began as a child who feared the world and wrote only to survive my own heart. Today I write to share light. To those walking through separation: protect the kindness inside you. It will guide you back to the people who truly belong in your life.

Every soul that crosses your path comes with a purpose—to teach, whether through kindness or pain. So, stay always willing to learn