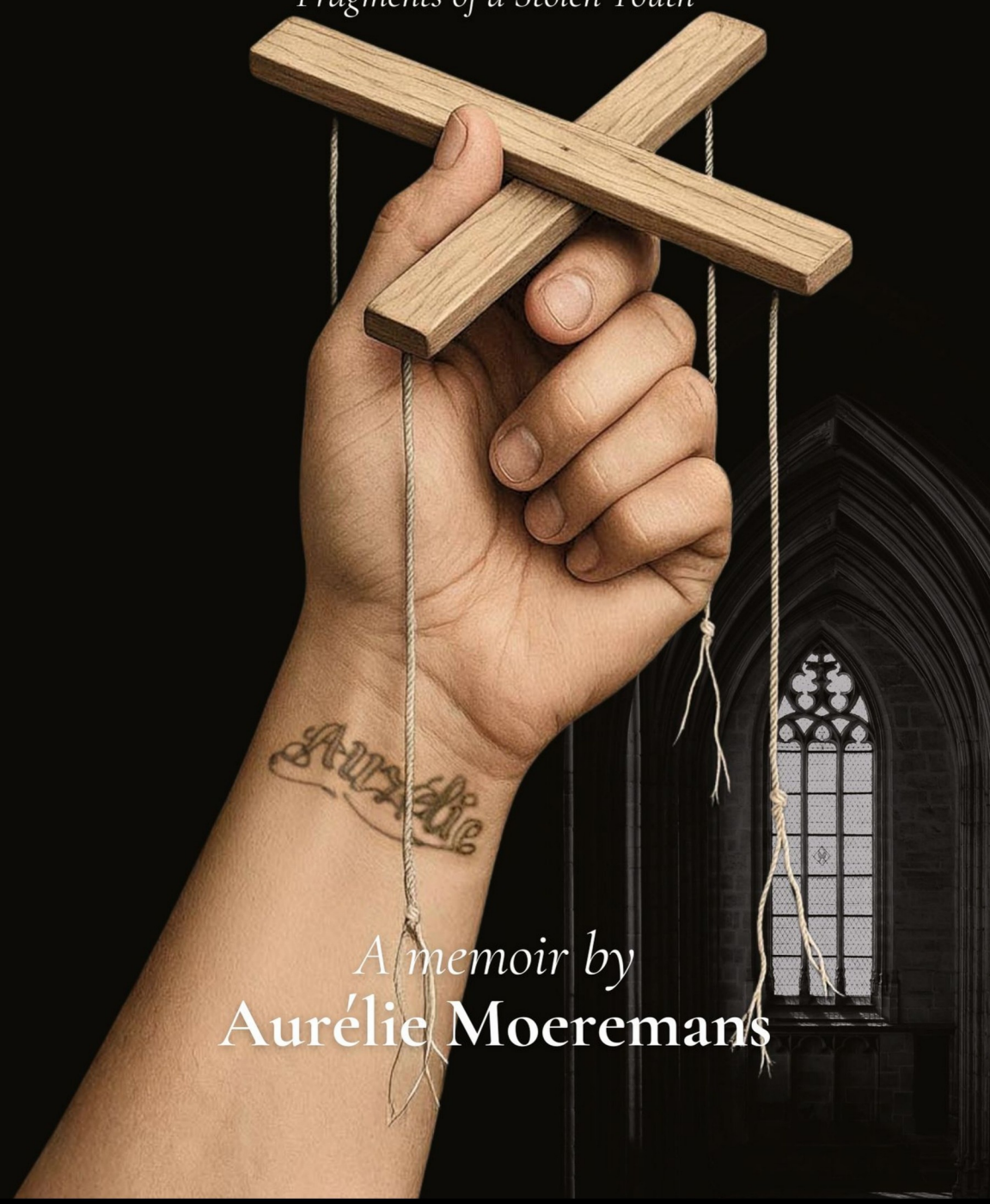
BROKEN STRINGS

Fragments of a Stolen Youth



A memoir by

Aurélie Moeremans

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Revised edition.

A Note on This Revised Edition

When I first released *Broken Strings*, I thought I was simply putting down a story I had carried for far too long. I never imagined how far it would travel.

By the time this revised edition was completed, links to the book had been clicked more than twenty-five million times. Readers from different parts of the world wrote to tell me that they had recognized themselves in these pages, noticed warning signs they had once overlooked, found the courage to ask for help, or simply felt less alone.

This edition has been carefully revised, not to change the truth of what happened, but to tell it more clearly and responsibly. Some language has been refined, certain details have been clarified, and the structure has been strengthened. The heart of the story remains the same.

To everyone who read, shared, recommended, translated, or sent me a message: thank you.

You transformed something I once wrote only for myself into something much larger than me. Your words reminded me why telling this story mattered.

I hope this revised edition continues to find the people who need it.

With love,

Aurélie

Author's Note

The events described in this book are true as remembered and experienced by the author and are presented from her personal perspective. Certain names and identifying details have been changed or omitted to protect the privacy of those involved.

This book was not written to attack, accuse, or harm anyone. Its purpose is to raise awareness and offer support to those who may have experienced something similar.

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Prologue

Some stories do not begin with "once upon a time."

They begin when no one is watching.

When a girl is too young to understand what is happening and too frightened to say it out loud.

This is her story.

Not the polished version.

Not the version others wanted her to tell.

Just the truth.

Raw, quiet, and finally free.

This memoir is based on the author's personal recollections. Some names, places, and identifying details have been changed or omitted to protect privacy. The events described reflect the author's experiences and memories to the best of her knowledge.

Trigger Warning

This memoir contains accounts of emotional manipulation, coercion, grooming, sexual assault, and psychological abuse. These experiences are shared honestly and with care, but some passages may be deeply distressing or triggering for survivors and sensitive readers.

Please move through these pages at your own pace. Step away if you need to. Your safety and well-being matter more than finishing a chapter.

This book was not written to reopen wounds, but to break the silence.

If you carry pain of your own, may these words remind you that you are seen and that you are not alone.

1

The Chance of a Lifetime

My name is Aurélie, and this is my story. Come with me as I revisit the places and moments that shaped me, even those I once tried to forget.

My story began with my parents. My mom was barely more than a girl when she became pregnant with me. My dad was older, but still unsettled and unsure of what he wanted from life. At the time, even surviving from one day to the next was a struggle, so owning a home felt impossible. There were days my dad stood in line at food banks while my mom was pregnant with me, waiting for donated groceries to get us through. That was how fragile life was for them: every meal a question, every day an improvisation.

Just months before I was born, my grandmother Alida passed away. I never got to meet Alida, but my parents gave me her name as my middle name, so a part of her would always live on in me. Her death was devastating, but the small flat she left behind in Brussels became an unexpected lifeline for my parents. It wasn't much: a small, worn apartment with a dim corridor leading to a steep staircase. The walls were bare, the rooms so cramped they seemed pressed against each other. It felt like a place no one would choose if they had another option. Yet in that tight space, two unprepared souls tried to raise a child, forced to grow up overnight.

That was where I was born, in Brussels. They called it the capital of Europe, but to me it was simply home, with quiet streets, gray skies, bakeries that smelled of warm pain au chocolat, and bicycles gliding past even in the cold rain.

We didn't have much, but there was always food on the table. My mom worked as a housekeeper in a home across the street and sometimes babysat one of my friends for extra money, while my dad took whatever jobs he could find, even collecting trash in the parks if that was what kept us going. Friends shared whatever they could: bags of food, secondhand clothes, or household items they no longer needed. Those little gestures mattered more than anyone could imagine.

I never asked for birthday presents or pocket money. Okay, maybe once or twice when I couldn't resist, but most of the time, I didn't. I knew how hard my parents worked and I didn't want to make their wallets cry even more. Yet they always gave me gifts, and that made me value them even more. Each time I unwrapped something, I thought about the sacrifices behind it and quietly wished they had kept the money for themselves. The guilt often outweighed the joy.

Growing up in that environment shaped who I was. I followed rules, got decent grades, and never really talked back. Though if you ask my dad, he'd probably tell a different story.

I was quiet and shy, funny only at home, where I loved making my family laugh. Nothing about me demanded attention. I wasn't the prettiest or the most popular, just a tall, awkward child who always felt a little out of place. Whenever my grandfather gave me pocket money, I saved it carefully instead of spending it. I had already learned from watching my parents that money didn't come easily, and I treated every coin like it might have to last me forever. I considered myself lucky if my dad didn't suddenly "borrow" it, because once he did, it never came back. If I asked where my money had gone, he would either act as though he had no idea what I was talking about or conveniently forget the whole thing.

I also wasn't allowed to hang out as much as other kids. My parents were protective, and I was already shy by nature, so having so little social freedom only made me more awkward around other people, the kind of girl who froze in groups and only came alive in the safety of family. Some things never change. I'm still very awkward; I'm just a little better at pretending otherwise now.

Before I started kindergarten, my mom taught me at home because my dad was rarely there. I didn't realize anything was unusual until I started school and noticed how different her French sounded from everyone else's. Her vocabulary was limited, and her French was hesitant and heavily accented. The other kids used words I didn't know, and some couldn't even understand her when she came to school. I felt different. I was also one of the few children with tan skin, and that only set me apart more. It was as if my voice and my face both betrayed me, reminders that I didn't quite belong in the world around me. For the first three years of elementary school, I was bullied by two popular girls in my class, Esther and Amélie. The bullying was both emotional and physical, and it damaged my self-esteem even further.

By the time I was seven, my dad had started earning a steadier income, and life felt a little less fragile. A year later my brother Jérémie was born, and though we were still far from wealthy, by then our home felt more stable.

When I was nine, we moved to De Panne, a small coastal town where everyone spoke Dutch. For the first time we lived in a house instead of a cramped apartment, and I had to start over with another language I didn't understand. Within two years I became fluent, and I did very well in school. Of the hundreds of students who applied to the Greek-Latin program, only nine were accepted, and I was one of them. I dedicated myself to my studies and dreamed of becoming a doctor one day.

But life had other plans. Something happened that would eventually take me away from Belgium and bring me to Indonesia, my mother's homeland. My mom had never taught me Indonesian because moving back there had been the last thing on her mind, so I arrived without a single word of the language. Well, maybe one or two phrases, but that was it.

Belgium was my birthplace, but I always felt just slightly out of step, never fully at ease. Maybe that's why, when something new and exciting finally appeared, I ran toward it without hesitation.

Everything began to shift during one of our visits to Indonesia, when I was thirteen, almost fourteen.

My grandmother spent her days glued to the television, watching Indonesian soap operas known as sinetron. One afternoon, while her favorite show played in the background, she looked over at me and asked, "Why don't you become an actress like her?"

I laughed. "Me, an actress?" It sounded absurd.

But she wasn't joking. She told me the girl on screen was my age, just playing an older role, and something in me clicked.

People had always told me I should be a model. I never believed it, not until boredom led me to a modeling school that summer. I figured I'd try a class or two, just to kill time. For a thirteen-year-old kid stuck at her grandmother's house, anything was better than nothing.

But when I got there, they told me I had to pay for a full two-month package, even if I only wanted one class. I was leaving Bandung in a week, so, disappointed, I walked away.

Before we left the building, I noticed a flyer on the lobby table.

Fresh Multitalented 2007, a talent competition.

It was blue and glossy, completely random. I picked it up without thinking. They were looking for talented young people, exactly as the name suggested. I had no real experience, but one word caught my mom's eye: free. She said, "Why not? Jérémie can join too."

Jérémie was eight years younger than me. He copied everything I did. I felt like his role model, his superhero second only to Spider-Man.

The competition was held in a mall in Bandung. It was my first time performing in front of strangers. I sang "Ziggy," a French-language song by Céline Dion. I don't know why it never crossed my mind to pick something easier, but somehow, I think I nailed it. For the acting portion, I performed in French too, since my Indonesian wasn't strong yet. To call it a performance would be generous. I was literally shaking. The lights were blindingly bright, hot on my face, and I had no idea what I was doing, but I gave it everything I had.

The next morning, I opened the newspaper and saw my photo among the finalists, right at the front. My grandmother pointed at it and said, "This couldn't be a coincidence." Out of all the pictures, mine was the one placed first. To her, it had to be a sign. Jérémie's photo was there too, featured in the children's category. Somehow, we had both been selected from among hundreds of children who had auditioned.

To join the final round, we had to pay five hundred thousand rupiah, around thirty dollars. I begged my mom, promising not to ask for a birthday or Christmas gift that year. After a long back-and-forth, she finally agreed, but we had to lie to Jérémie. He was too little to understand. We told him he had already won and didn't need to go back. My mom simply couldn't afford both of us.

The finals were in a large studio. It felt real, even if it wasn't televised. Backstage, time stretched unbearably until they finally

called us. Suspense music blared, the lights burned hot, and my heart hammered as the head judge, one of the country's top models at the time, walked down the line of finalists, each step heavy with tension. When she reached me, she stopped, looked me up and down, and finally smiled before whispering something in my ear. I didn't understand a word, but I was too shy to admit it, so I just smiled and nodded, hoping it wasn't a question that needed an answer. Which, knowing my luck, it probably was.

Moments later, she draped the first-place sash over my shoulder. It felt light as silk, almost too fragile to be real, and I held it tightly in place.

I won!

After that, they brought me to Jakarta for a series of auditions. The first few were brutal. At the first one, I couldn't memorize the script, so they let me read it, and even that was difficult. The second was worse. They wanted me to memorize everything, but I barely got through two lines, repeating sounds I didn't even understand.

The third audition was different. They were more interested in my look and expression. They told me to perform in French or Dutch. I chose French and improvised a scene as a rebellious emo teen fighting with her mom. I had no idea why I picked that or what exactly I said, but somehow not being understood gave me freedom. It felt like I could say anything at all and no one would know the difference.

All of it happened in just one week, a blur I could hardly keep up with.

After the auditions in Jakarta, I didn't expect anything to come of them. I saw it as a unique adventure, something fun to remember, a story to tell my friends at school. Soon, I was back

in Belgium, in my orange-walled bedroom covered in Avril Lavigne posters, slipping into class as if nothing had happened. I was convinced it was over. I never imagined it would follow me across the ocean.

Then one day, my grandmother called. The last production house I auditioned for wanted me back. They were offering me a leading role.

I couldn't believe it. At school, whenever we had theater shows, I never volunteered to act. I always chose the group chorus, hiding in the back. Even then, even when no one could see me, I prayed for it to be over. And now I was being asked to play the main role in a series. It felt unreal, but I was excited. Maybe, at the edge of the world, I could finally become someone new.

I remember my dad saying, "Chances like this never come twice. This is your chance at a better life." My mom, on the other hand, wasn't nearly as excited about moving back to Indonesia. She had built a life she was comfortable with in Belgium, but she gave that up for me. Once my dual citizenship was finalized, we packed up and left.

The first role sounded like a dream, but the language was a wall. I stood on set holding a script I barely understood, nodding at the director's instructions while panicking inside. I felt like I didn't belong, like I was pretending to be someone I hadn't yet become.

So after a few projects, I shifted to commercials.

Commercials were easier: no lines, just movement, emotion, and timing. Smile at the right moment, twirl, eat fried noodles as if it changed your life. That I could do. Soon I was booking jobs. Some weeks I shot two commercials. I know, I sound like I'm bragging, but hey, facts are facts.

By fifteen, I was paying the bills. I didn't even know how much I made, since everything went to my mom's bank account, but I didn't care. I just wanted to help.

It felt like the beginning of something.

Outside of work, though, I was still just a teenage girl in a city I didn't fully understand. I didn't know how to do my makeup properly. I was scared to go anywhere alone. I didn't have many friends yet, only people I met on set. I was no longer attending a regular school. Instead, I drifted between homeschooling, work, and sleep, the cycle repeating endlessly.

I was growing up in so many ways, yet when it came to love, I knew nothing at all. My only point of reference was a single date in Belgium that had ended with a kiss. It was sloppy. I hated it. I wiped my mouth on the sleeve of my black and white striped sweater as I walked home. I wasn't ready.

Not until Tom.

We met at an event in Jakarta, and he got my number through a friend. One evening he called, not knowing my mom was the one who kept my phone after hours. She scolded him for calling so late, especially when she learned he was older. But when she realized he was a famous actor, her tone shifted. She believed someone with a public image like his wouldn't risk his career by doing anything reckless.

We went on a few dates. We kissed, and when he wanted more, I told him, "I want to wait until marriage."

He said I was old-fashioned, that it was weird, especially for someone from Europe. I didn't care. I walked away.

I had always admired my mom for that. She had only ever been with one man, my dad. I wanted that too, not because I was naive, but because I thought it was rare, beautiful, something

worth protecting. Maybe it was also connected to my third given name, Marie, after the Virgin Mary. I used to feel a little embarrassed about it, but it always reminded me of purity, of holding on to something sacred.

Then came Zane, a sinetron actor, a soap star who never seemed to step out of character. He was dramatic, intense, and insincere, always speaking with his eyebrows bouncing up and down and his voice deliberately lowered, as though emotional depth could be performed. Sometimes, mid-conversation, his eyes would suddenly fill with tears, and I'd catch myself glancing around, half-expecting to spot a hidden camera. And when I told him it couldn't work, he staged the most theatrical goodbye I could imagine. I felt a flicker of fear, but mostly relief, certain I had dodged a bullet. I walked away without hesitation, not tempted to linger in his drama, because by then another boy was already telling me I deserved better.

That boy was Bobby. Although, at his age, he should have been called a man, not a boy.

2

We'll See

I was fifteen when I met Bobby.

He was almost twenty-nine.

We were cast together in a commercial, playing a couple. But I wasn't even supposed to be there. The casting call was for adult models, and my manager knew that, but he shrugged like it didn't matter.

"Just write twenty-one. You want the job or not?" he said, as if lying about my age was nothing more than a normal part of the business.

I hesitated for a second, then picked up the marker, wrote twenty-one on the casting board, and got the job.

It wasn't the first time I had seen Bobby. We had crossed paths before on another commercial. I remembered the piercing just below his lower lip, the earrings in both ears that caught the light when he moved, the thick chain around his neck that looked more like a dog collar than jewelry. He wore camouflage cargo pants with yet another chain dangling from the belt loop, but on his feet he had nothing more than flimsy flip-flops. The whole look was rough, careless, like he was trying to prove he didn't need polish to stand out.

Back then, he had a girlfriend, someone much older than me, probably close to his age. She was quiet, almost invisible, standing beside him without speaking to anyone. She stayed close while Bobby laughed and talked loudly with everyone, and she seemed unsure of where to stand.

By the time we were cast together again as a couple, they had already broken up. I never knew the full story, only that they were no longer together. He didn't seem heartbroken. He seemed completely fine, as though he had already moved on.

Later, when he spoke about her, he did so in the most humiliating way.

"She had horrible body odor," he laughed on set, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Like, seriously disgusting. I had to breathe through my mouth just to survive."

People laughed. I smiled too, but inside I thought, wait, didn't he like her once? Why would he say that, and why in front of so many people?

Something about it stayed with me. The way he told the story made people laugh, but it was cruel all the same. He told other stories too, the kind that made him look like the hero and everyone else the villains. That was his pattern, though of course I didn't know it at the time. He always spoke highly of himself, and somehow people believed it.

On set, Bobby was magnetic. Loud, confident, the kind of man who needed to be the center of attention. He always carried a guitar, not because he loved playing it, but because it made him look good. To him, it was more of an accessory than an instrument.

He joked with the lighting crew, teased the makeup artist, and chatted with the wardrobe team as though they were old friends. He wanted everyone to look at him, and they did.

And so did I.

He started sending me funny messages while we were still filming. At first they were silly comments about people on set,

little jokes made behind their backs to get a laugh, but I knew what he was doing. He liked me, and he wasn't hiding it.

I'll admit, I liked it too. I was attracted to him. He seemed mature and charming. To my fifteen-year-old eyes, he was like the most popular guy in school, only older, louder, and funnier.

That night, my scenes continued until the following morning, while his had wrapped earlier. Still, he stayed on set until I was done. I didn't really understand why he would do that, because if it had been me, I would have gone straight home after working all day. But it felt nice not to be alone, like I had a friend keeping me company through the long hours.

After the shoot he offered us a ride home. We didn't have a car then, and though we hesitated, he insisted with a smile.

"It's no problem," he said.

It felt harmless. We got in. The entire ride he was effortlessly charming, cracking jokes with my mom, making my little brother Jérémie laugh in the back seat, acting like he had known us forever.

It was disarming. Not creepy, not yet. Just easy, familiar, like he belonged there, like he had already found a way in. And I didn't even realize the door had opened.

From that day on, he kept showing up at our house, saying he was just in the neighborhood, even though his home was more than an hour away. We believed him. He messaged me constantly, asked questions about my life, said he missed me, missed my family too.

He told me, "There's a purity about you that's rare. You're rare. You're not like the wild girls out there."

I believed him. No boy had ever said anything like that to me before. The others I had met only cared about kissing, rushing

straight into things without really seeing me. But Bobby looked at me as if there was more, as if who I was mattered. In his eyes, I wasn't just another girl. For the first time, I felt special.

He brought snacks for my little brother, something sweet for my mom. He never came empty-handed. He knew how to fold himself into a family as if it were second nature.

He also began accompanying me to work, waiting through long hours on set as if he had nothing better to do. At first I told myself it was sweet, that he cared enough to give me his time. I liked having someone there just for me. But beneath that comfort was something heavier I couldn't name.

It felt like an invisible debt, as if I owed him for every hour he sat and waited. I didn't know why I felt that way, because part of me wanted him there. Maybe I just wasn't used to it. Maybe I didn't know how to receive that kind of attention. It was something I had never felt before, and the newness made me both happy and uneasy, like a gift I didn't know how to hold without dropping.

I liked it, though. *So this is what it feels like to be wanted.* Not just for how I looked or for what boys usually wanted, but for me. I thought I had found someone who really saw me.

Jakarta still didn't feel like home. I was even quieter there, too insecure about my accent to speak much. I missed the silence of Belgium, the comfort of speaking French, the way the streets emptied at night. In Jakarta I was working, auditioning, slowly being recognized by strangers in malls. I wasn't famous yet, but my face was becoming visible, and visibility came with weight.

My dad was still in Belgium, waiting to see if all this would lead anywhere. If I made it, he would move too, but for now he stayed behind. Once he was certain my work was steady, he planned to sell the house in Belgium that he was still paying off

and retire in Indonesia, starting a quieter life there. For the time being, it was just my mom, my brother, and me. My mom did everything, protecting me, managing work, guiding me through a world she barely understood herself.

She had always been strict. I was more scared of disappointing her than I was of Jakarta. If I wasn't home by seven, I might as well not come home at all.

One time in Jakarta, I went to the movies with a friend. After buying my ticket, I slipped the change into my pocket. I knew it was careless, but I was too lazy to pull out my wallet again. The movie had already started and we were rushing inside. Later, when I checked, the money was gone. It must have slipped out while I was hurrying.

It was only fifty thousand rupiah, around four US dollars at the time, but I panicked as though it were the end of the world. I begged my friend to lend me his, promising I would pay him back, just so I could walk through the door holding a bill in my hand. That was the kind of fear my mom inspired, the fear of disappointing her.

When I was younger, still in Belgium, my dad instilled fear in his own way, with words more than actions. His favorite threat was internat, a boarding school he described like a punishment.

"If you don't listen, I'll send you to internat," he would say, his fingers already moving across the keyboard as though he were arranging it.

I believed him. I was young, and he made it sound real, like my bags were packed and the train was waiting.

Another time, when I was only eleven, I got invited to a birthday party. Before I left, he looked at me and said,

“If I ever find out you’re using drugs, something terrible will happen to you, something that will change your life forever. You’ll see.”

I didn’t even know what drugs looked like. We were going to drink Fanta and eat cake. But the way he said it, so calm and certain, made me question myself: *Maybe I’m bad and just don’t know it yet.*

At the party, he called the house. My friend’s mother looked unsettled as she handed me the phone. His voice was still threatening.

“You better watch out. I’m warning you,” he said.

I felt so embarrassed. The people around me looked at me with concern. It was one of the rare moments I tried to feel like a normal teenager, just blending in with other kids, and even then my dad found a way to mark me as different. I smiled awkwardly, pretending it didn’t bother me, but inside I felt exposed.

I wasn’t afraid of being sent away. I was afraid that he truly believed I was untrustworthy, that he didn’t see me for who I was, only a reflection of his younger self.

He had been reckless, and I think he was terrified I would become like him. But instead of guiding me gently, he taught me fear. And I carried that fear for years, not just of him, but of myself.

That part of my life ended, but something else began. Bobby came, and he didn’t slip into my world quietly. He was on our couch, at our table, present in ways that didn’t feel like sneaking. He didn’t have to. The more he was around, the smaller my outside world became. I stopped messaging friends, stopped going out unless it was for work. He filled my days and my thoughts.

It didn't feel like control. It felt like love, even though I didn't know what love was supposed to feel like.

A few weeks later, he asked me to be his girlfriend.

It happened at the movies, just the two of us. The film was Drag Me to Hell, one of the scariest I had ever seen. The AC blasted freezing air into the room, and I sat rigid in my seat, arms locked to my sides. I could feel him stealing glances at me through the darkness, waiting for me to turn, but I kept my eyes on the screen.

The scenes were frightening, but so was the thought of him sitting beside me, waiting for the right moment. My head filled with questions I couldn't answer. *Am I ready? Is this wrong? He's almost thirty. I'm fifteen. What if he expects more than I can give?* The fear from the movie blended with the unease in my chest until I couldn't tell which one made my heart beat faster.

When the credits rolled and the names filled the screen, I still didn't dare to look at him. I stared forward, as if the white letters could protect me. Then, gently but firmly, he reached over and turned my face toward him. Before I could react, he kissed me. And then, with his eyes on mine, he asked softly,

"Will you be my girlfriend?"

I hesitated. He was so much older. I wondered if I could ever keep up, if I was making a mistake. How could I possibly say no, after more than a month of giving him hope, after seeing him constantly, even when he was the one inviting himself in? And then he smiled, brushed my hand, and waited.

I said yes.

Then, quietly, I told him where my boundary was.

“If you want more than kissing, I can’t do that. I want to wait until I’m married. Like my mom. She had only ever been with my dad.”

I was terrified of his answer, because the boys before him had always walked away the moment they realized there would be nothing more than kissing.

He laughed, his eyes narrowing as he said,

“We’ll see.”

My heart jolted with unease. *We’ll see? What did that mean? What exactly were we going to see? Was it a promise or a threat?*

He must have seen the confusion on my face, because then he quickly softened, his voice lighter.

“I’m kidding. Of course. If you’re not ready, you’re not ready. I want you for you. Don’t think about that.”

And I believed him. Why wouldn’t I? The boys before him had told me outright they couldn’t be with me without more. But Bobby said I was enough.

Still, something in me wavered. The way he laughed, the way he said we’ll see, it left a mark, a feeling I couldn’t name.

He kissed me again, gently at first, then more insistently, while I was still trying to process the fact that we were even a couple. I said nothing. I let it happen, telling myself, *This is what being in a relationship means.*

Before Bobby, affection with the boys I had known had always been private, shy, almost hidden. With Bobby there was no hesitation, no pause. To me it felt unusual, almost too bold, and I was still trying to understand if this was what being with someone older meant.

I walked out of that theater with my heart racing, not from the film, but from the thought that maybe I shouldn't have said yes.

3

The First Signs

On the drive back to the apartment, I sat quietly, staring out the window and trying to process everything.

My Indonesian was still limited. I had only just moved, and most of the time I stayed quiet because I was afraid of making mistakes. He looked over at me.

“I know your Indonesian isn’t perfect yet, but you need to learn to communicate better. Relationships only work if you talk.”

His words landed heavily. I already felt awkward and unsure, and now it sounded like I was failing at something I had barely begun. I smiled weakly, but inside, something stung. It felt as though I was already not enough.

He studied my face and smirked.

“Don’t stress. Come on, give me a kiss.”

He tapped his cheek, waiting. I leaned over and kissed him lightly, still awkward, still trying to understand what it meant to suddenly have a boyfriend.

Then he lifted the sleeve of his T-shirt, pointing to the top of his arm.

“Now that you’re my girlfriend, you should know what I like. I’m ticklish here. I really like it when you kiss me here.”

I nodded and smiled faintly, but I didn’t move. I laughed nervously instead, hoping that was enough. Thankfully, the car slowed as we approached the apartment. My head was pounding,

my chest tight. *It's just the long day, the lights, the noise,* I told myself. But something deeper was making me uneasy.

Inside the apartment, he grew bolder. I told my mom I had a headache from the long day. Before she could respond, Bobby cut in, saying I should rest, and right there in front of her he told me to lie down with my head on his lap. I hesitated. I had never been openly affectionate with anyone in front of her. It felt strange, almost shameful. But he insisted, stroking my hair slowly as if it were nothing. The sound of the television filled the room, the warm glow of the yellow light made everything feel almost normal, and my mom spoke to us as if nothing unusual was happening.

When he left, she turned to me.

"What's going on here?"

I admitted it.

"He asked me to be his girlfriend. We're together now."

Her reaction was surprisingly casual. A small smile, a reminder to keep studying. I felt a flicker of surprise, even disappointment. Part of me had been nervous about the age gap, but she was so composed. And I understood why. None of my relationships had ever lasted long, and she assumed this would be the same. More than that, she believed I was capable of taking care of myself, that I knew my own boundaries, and that my principles would protect me. To her, there was nothing to worry about.

In those early days, Bobby was already asking if I would marry him someday. I hesitated because I had never wanted to make promises about forever unless I truly meant them. To me, promises were supposed to stay sacred, not something you said casually to make a boyfriend happy. When he saw me hesitate, he grew upset. "Why are you even thinking about it?" he asked

sharply. To avoid a fight, I smiled and said, “Yes, yes, of course.” His face lit up, almost like a child’s, and he said, “Yay, I promise I’ll marry you one day.” Then he added with a grin, “But you know, I’m not really someone who makes promises. I’m the kind of guy who shows proof, not words.” At the time, it sounded like a joke, nothing serious or threatening. I only smiled back. To me, marriage still belonged to a distant future. I was fifteen, and in my mind marriage was something that belonged to the faraway future, maybe at thirty, after I had worked, lived, and built a life of my own.

Work continued. The advertising campaign Bobby and I had filmed was originally meant to consist of only three episodes, all shot at once. But when the promotions began, Bobby made sure everyone knew we were also a couple off-screen. Our job was only to promote a cell phone carrier on TV shows, but he turned every appearance into a chance to show we were dating.

The audience loved the idea of a real romance behind the camera. The more people talked about us, the more popular the campaign became, and the client decided to add two more episodes.

The day before the follow-up shoot, I had another job, a perfume commercial. Bobby came with me and stayed all day. The studio was filled with the thick artificial scent of fragrance, the air sharp and sweet, lights blazing down as I stood in front of the camera. I was exhausted, but he never left my side. He watched me the entire time.

By the time it ended, it was almost dawn. The sky was still dark when he drove us to the continuation of our commercial shoot. My mom sat in the front seat, Jérémie beside me in the back. They both fell asleep quickly, exhausted.

The car was an old dark blue sedan. The engine hummed steadily, the seats smelled faintly of leather mixed with smoke.

Bobby played Alter Bridge on repeat, his favorite band. He was such a fan that he even changed his artist name to share the same surname as one of its members, erasing the Chinese Indonesian name he had been born with. To me, it felt a little silly, almost like the way girls on Facebook would change their last name to Bieber. For him, though, it made sense. He liked to use an Italian surname, because he always said he looked more like a foreigner than Chinese. I never knew who made him believe that, but somehow he did.

I tried to keep him company for a while, but my body was too tired, and eventually I drifted off.

When we arrived, he woke me. His face was tight. He said nothing as we walked toward the makeup room. Then he pulled me aside because he hated fighting in public. “It’s embarrassing,” he always said. “People will gossip.” He was the type to mock other couples when they argued in public, always the first to laugh or make a joke at their expense, so he refused to let the same thing happen to us. But even from a distance, I knew my mom had seen something. That was when he exploded.

“You made me feel like a driver. How could you sleep while I drove you and your family? You should’ve been massaging me, kissing me, thanking me, encouraging me. I’m tired too, but I still drove all of you here. And this is what I get?”

I stood there, still groggy, confused at how something so small had become another fight. My heart pounded, heat rising in my chest. *I gave everything I had on set,* I wanted to say, but the words remained stuck in my throat. Somehow, it was always my fault.

Up to that point, there had been small misunderstandings, moments when he twisted my words or made me feel clumsy, but this was the first time his anger burned so openly. My mom began to notice a pattern. Since we became a couple, I didn’t look

happier. If anything, I looked heavier. She asked, but I always gave the same answer.

“It’s me, Mom. I upset him.”

And maybe I believed it. Every fight we had seemed to prove me right. He always found a way to twist things, to make me feel like I was the one failing.

He would ask questions I couldn’t answer, like one night when he suddenly demanded,

“If you really love me, then you should know my baptism name. What is it? My full name.”

I froze. I remembered that during our first commercial together, long before we were close, he had once rattled off his full name, a string of syllables that seemed to go on forever. I had laughed and said, “Wow, that’s a long name.” But it had only come up that one time, and I never imagined it would turn into some kind of quiz one day. Of course I didn’t remember every word.

“I… I don’t remember,” I admitted quietly.

His face hardened, his voice rising with fury.

“What kind of girlfriend are you? You don’t even know my name? See, I try to love you, I try to love your family, I do everything for you, and you can’t even remember my full name. And we both know you sometimes make it hard to love you.”

I shrank inside, wondering if maybe he was right, if maybe forgetting one detail meant I was unworthy of him.

He never missed a chance to remind me of everything he had already done, listing each thing as though he were keeping score. Then came the accusation. “And you? What have you done? I’m the only one fighting in this relationship.”

Every fight ended this way, with me shrinking smaller, convinced I was the problem. He had more experience, he had lived more, while I had never really been in a serious relationship before. So I told myself I was the one who had to keep up, to learn, to apologize, to be better. It became a habit. No matter what happened, I was the one who said sorry.

The invisible debt I had been carrying now had words, and those words cut deep.

Even before he stepped through the door, we knew he was there. The jingle of the chain clipped to his jeans echoed in the hallway, a small sound that somehow carried more weight than it should. Over time it became part of our apartment, as familiar as the creak of the door or the hum of the television.

Even when he wasn't there, I wasn't free. He demanded constant updates. I held my phone at all times, reporting where I was, who I was with, what I was doing. If I took too long, he accused me. If I replied quickly, he still found fault. Every message was another test.

There were times we fought just because I made a typo while saying I love you. It happened because I was always rushing, terrified that if I took too long he would accuse me of cheating. But rushing made my fingers clumsy, and that became another problem. I could never win. Sometimes I left my phone unlocked beside me so I could reply the moment his name appeared on the screen. Even that turned against me. If he saw me online for too long, he demanded to know who else I was talking to. He said if I really loved him I had no reason to speak to other boys, and eventually, he forced me to delete every male contact from BlackBerry Messenger, or BBM.

My mom saw how tense I had become, how I clutched my phone even during meals and paced whenever a message arrived. Sometimes she would look at me with a sigh and say,

“Enough,” but I couldn’t stop. My fingers shook when I typed. The sound of a notification made a knot in my stomach. By then, I feared Bobby more than I feared my mom, even though she had always been the person I was most afraid of disappointing. Eventually, she felt she had no choice. Talking to me seemed useless, so during study hours, she simply took my phone away.

The moment she did, I knew exactly what would follow. Even without my phone, I couldn’t focus on my books. The numbers blurred on the page, my mind repeating one thought: this will be another fight.

And I was right. When I got the phone back, the screen lit with dozens of missed calls and messages, each one angrier than the last. My hands shook as I held it, the glow of the screen burning into my eyes. He accused me of ignoring him, of lying, of cheating. I tried to explain but he refused to believe me.

Exhausted, I asked my mom to call him. She did. On the phone he sounded calm, even surprised, pretending it was fine, pretending to trust me. He told her he understood completely.

But when I had the phone again, his voice turned cold.

“Why did you tell your mom? Do you want her to hate me? Do you want her to make more rules to keep us apart? I’m tired of dating a child. You need to act grown up. Prove you’re not a little kid. Show me you can’t be controlled anymore.”

It became a cycle. Each time my mom took my phone, he blamed me. Each time I obeyed her, he called me childish. And every time I finished studying, instead of being happy to see me, he came looking for a fight.

One day, in the middle of an argument, my mom took my phone because I had to study. I couldn’t concentrate. All I could do was sit in my room and wait. The clock ticked louder than usual, my pencil felt heavy in my hand. Then I heard his voice

outside, laughing with Jérémie. My stomach dropped. He wasn't there to visit. He was there to check if I was really studying, not cheating or lying.

When I finally stepped out of my room, I expected him to sit with my mom the way he usually did, chatting loudly as if he belonged in our home. But instead, the moment our eyes met, he gave me a subtle signal to go back inside my room. Without a word, I turned, and he followed me in, his eyes fixed on me.

The look he gave me that day was different: dark and unblinking, like a predator watching its prey. One corner of his mouth curled into a thin smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

He closed the door behind him and, slowly, carefully, turned the lock. He even used both hands, trying to keep it quiet, but to me the single click roared in my head, louder than any shout, a warning that something was wrong.

He didn't stop watching me. His stare was steady, sharp, unrelenting. He sat down on my bed, never breaking eye contact, as if daring me to move. My body locked, my breath shallow.

I wanted to call for my mom. I wanted to yell for Jérémie. The words reached my throat but something pressed them down. Fear. Shame. Shock. I couldn't tell which one held me still. All I knew was that nothing came out. I was trapped inside my own silence. *And then, without a word, he unclipped the chain from his ripped jeans.*

4

The Sound of His Chain

The click of the lock still echoed in my ears.

Then came another sound: the faint clink of his chain. This time it wasn't an arrival. It was a warning.

He unclipped it completely and placed it carefully on the floor, moving quietly and deliberately, as though his only concern was making sure my mom suspected nothing. The silence it left behind felt heavier than noise. He stretched out on my bed, one arm behind his head and the other reaching for a pillow. His gaze moved slowly over me. A smile curled at the corners of his mouth, but it felt hollow. *Maybe he was just tired. Maybe he only wanted to rest. Maybe the chain meant nothing at all.* But the way he kept staring told me otherwise. The air in the room felt thick. My chest rose and fell too quickly. I didn't know what he was about to do, but I knew it would be bad.

Then he unzipped his pants. Not halfway. Not by accident. He pulled them down to his ankles as though it were the most natural thing in the world. In that instant, every excuse I had made for him fell apart. The chain had meant something. The stare had meant something. Somewhere deep down, I had known. Now it was right in front of me.

I braced myself for force, but instead, he softened. His voice was calm, his movements almost tender, as if nothing about this was unusual. He smoothed the sheet with his palm, then held out one hand as though inviting me closer. That gentleness twisted my thoughts. *If he isn't being violent, maybe I'm wrong for feeling afraid. Maybe I'm the strange one.* The boundaries blurred in my

mind until I could no longer tell whether he was crossing them or I was imagining it.

My eyes darted to the door. I thought of my mom only a few steps away, Jérémie in the living room. I looked back at him. He smiled again, thinner this time, and my stomach twisted. The fear and confusion must have shown on my face.

“What… are you doing?” I asked, my voice small.

He chuckled softly, almost playfully, as though everything were perfectly normal.

“Don’t be scared,” he said, lifting his hand and gesturing for me to come closer. “If you don’t want to kiss it, at least just touch it. It won’t bite.”

The calmness of his voice made me question myself. *Am I overreacting?* The only penis I had ever seen was Jérémie’s when he was a baby, and once by mistake on a stranger’s webcam. Now it was directly in front of me, real and threatening.

“No.”

He didn’t shout. He didn’t push. Instead, he smiled and pulled me into a hug, his pants still pooled around his ankles. I tried not to look, tried not to touch. My body trembled, my stomach churned, and I wanted to vanish. He stroked my back like I was a child in distress.

“It’s okay. Maybe next time,” he whispered.

Moments like that left me deeply confused. I was afraid, unsettled, yet part of me still believed he wasn’t that bad. I told myself that, because of his age and experience, he had needs I was still too young to understand. He seemed patient. He hadn’t forced me in the way I feared another man might, and that felt almost like proof that he loved me. I thought about his previous relationships and convinced myself that his exes had probably

given him what I could not, yet he still chose me. He stayed. He tried to understand. I felt as though I should be grateful for that.

But next time came the very next day. And the day after that.

I had not yet understood that refusing would not end the pressure; it would only return in a different form.

Every no was met with another request, gentle at first, then disappointed, then wounded, until I felt like I was breaking his heart just by holding my boundaries. He made refusal feel cruel, as if I was punishing him for loving me. Sometimes he would sigh and mutter, “Come on, I’m only asking for one thing. Why do you have to make it such a big deal?” He made my no sound unreasonable, as though I were being dramatic over nothing.

And whenever I resisted, he reminded me of what he had “given”: the dinner he had once paid for my family in Ancol, the sacrifices he claimed he’d made, the fact that he stayed with me even though my house had so many rules, like not being allowed to come home late or sleep over. He recited these like debts I could never repay.

Each time I gave in, the promise of peace dissolved. What had been so important yesterday became worthless once I agreed. Touching it was not enough. Then licking it was not enough. Then he wanted more. Every yes evaporated the moment it was spoken, replaced by another demand.

It wore me down. I started thinking maybe he was right, maybe I was selfish, maybe I was ruining everything. Deep down I knew what I wanted, but he made me doubt myself, made me feel broken for stopping where I stopped. His words framed my boundaries as childish, my fear as cruelty, my no as selfishness. And when I finally whispered “okay, fine,” it wasn’t because I wanted to. It was because I was cornered by his persistence, his

reminders, and his accusations that I brought nothing to the relationship.

The demands always came after fights, disguised as compromises. By then, I was too worn down to understand that there would never be a final request.

And when he finally saw and touched my body, he offered no affection, only comments that cut deeply.

“You tricked me with your bra,” he smirked. “I thought they’d be bigger. You’re lucky I like small ones.”

“You should really take care of your skin, it’s dry.”

“Your lips down there, they’re shaped kind of weird.”

I had never examined myself like that, never thought of my body as a list of flaws until he handed me one. Later, I stood in front of the mirror, pulling at my skin, wondering if what he said was true. The shame stayed with me, clinging to my skin.

It didn’t matter how much I gave, it never felt enough. The more I gave him, the more he made me hate the body I was giving him.

One afternoon, when my mom and Jérémie were downstairs at the apartment pool, he tried again. The apartment felt too still without them, and I was alone with him. That was when he asked whether I would try “petting.” The word sounded childish, harmless, but in his mouth it meant non-penetrative sex.

“I said no sex before marriage. Isn’t that basically sex?” I asked.

“Why do you always have to make everything so hard,” he replied. “I did that when I was in middle school. That’s what kids do when they don’t want penetration. Why are you making it such a big deal? It won’t hurt!”

I felt like I was failing, like I was frigid, like I was broken.

“You stress me out,” he said. “What do you even bring to this relationship?”

Tears welled up. I was so tired of the fights, so afraid of making him angrier. My voice shook as I whispered, barely audible,

“I just want to keep my virginity.”

He immediately seized on the opening.

“Just the tip,” he said. “I won’t go in, promise.”

But I shook my head. I didn’t want it, not even a little. I couldn’t understand how he could keep asking when my no was so clear.

He walked to the corner and pressed play on his phone. He had started doing that a lot lately, always playing music whenever we were in the bedroom so my mom wouldn’t hear anything suspicious. That day it was “Blackbird” by Alter Bridge. I didn’t think much of it then, not knowing that day would be the reason I could never stand hearing it again.

As if none of my refusals mattered, he unzipped his pants and pulled them down. With a grin, he said,

“John just wants to say hello.”

John. He gave his dick a name after my favorite Disney character, John Smith. He said it like it was something cute, something I should smile at. But to me it was grotesque, absurd, a joke I was never in on.

While I was still trying to process it, he lost patience. He yanked up my dress and clamped his hand over my mouth. His palm was heavy and suffocating, and the smell of cigarettes filled my nose as I gasped against it. Then he pushed into me, fast and

sudden, without warning. I froze, tears spilling from my eyes, his hand pressing harder over my mouth when I cried. My body shook as I squeezed my thighs together, trying desperately to push him out, to make him stop. The pressure made me sob harder, muffled against his hand. For a moment he muttered, “Okay, okay,” as if I was the one being unreasonable. Then he pulled back and, with a chilling kind of indifference, finished on his own, leaving me trembling and broken.

The pain wasn’t the first thing I felt. The betrayal was.

While he was still jerking off, I scrambled to pull my clothes back on and stood at the far end of the room, my body rigid, my mind spinning in shock, trying to process what had just happened.

When he was done, he sat back and checked the sheets, wiping himself casually with a tissue as if nothing about this was out of the ordinary.

“You’re not bleeding? Hm. Weird,” he said with a smirk, almost amused.

Then, as if he hadn’t just broken me, he kissed my forehead gently and murmured,

“Don’t worry. You’re going to be my wife.”

At the time, I didn’t understand that what had happened was rape. I thought rape only happened in dark alleys, that it was violent, sudden, and committed by strangers. I didn’t know it could happen in a bedroom, with music playing, followed by a kiss on the forehead and a promise of marriage. I didn’t know it could happen when someone smiled at you after, making it feel less like a crime and more like a secret you weren’t allowed to name.

I looked at him with a hatred I had never felt before, my chest burning with an emotion I hadn't known I was capable of. For a split second, the air between us shifted. He saw it too. He stopped smirking, his eyes flickering as if he had crossed a line. Instead of backing away, he leaned in again, his voice softer but more menacing:

"You're going to be my wife."

What is he talking about?

I wasn't thinking about marriage at all. I was thinking about how I no longer recognized myself.

A moment later I heard the front door open. My mom and Jérémie were back from the pool. Bobby immediately opened the bedroom door and stepped out as if nothing had happened. His voice grew loud, cheerful, too cheerful, filling the apartment with jokes and small talk, pretending nothing was wrong.

I stayed quiet, pretending everything was normal, though my eyes were still swollen from crying. My mom noticed. She gave me a sharp look, her tone irritated.

"Crying again? You two haven't even been together that long and you're already fighting all the time. Don't you ever get tired of it?"

Then she disappeared into her room, clearly annoyed.

The air in the apartment felt heavy, tense. Bobby decided to leave, sensing the awkwardness. But before he walked out the door, he leaned close, his tone soft, almost tender.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to leave you. Other guys would leave once they got what they wanted. But you're lucky you found me first. You don't have to go through all that, being used and thrown away. I love you, no matter what."

The words sank into me like another kind of trap. Instead of feeling loved, I felt smaller, like I was the one who had to be grateful, the one who had to hold on tighter.

That night I cried beneath my blanket, silent and shaking. I whispered prayers into the dark, begging God to forgive me, to undo it, to help me understand how love could look so much like harm.

As always, the call had to remain connected throughout the night. That was the rule. My room smelled faintly of Bobby's cheap baby cologne from the blue bottle. He said he wore it because, though he looked fierce, he had the soul of a child. Back then, I thought it was quirky, almost innocent. But now, that same scent clung to the air like a warning, making me sick every time it reached me.

Above my bed, a pinboard held photos of us and a prayer he had written for me to memorize. It used to make me feel close to him. Now it filled me with disgust.

I buried my face in the pillow, my body aching, and finally let exhaustion pull me into sleep.

The scent lingered in the room, as if mocking every prayer I had whispered.

5

I Thought I Was Saving Him

That night, I cried myself to sleep, hoping I would wake up and discover that it had all been nothing but a bad dream.

When I woke, the tissue he had left behind was proof that it had not been a dream. The phone was still plugged into the charger so it would not die and I would not be blamed. The call was still connected, as though the night before had never happened. I could hear him snoring on the other end, steady and almost peaceful, while I lay there hollow, afraid, and ashamed.

The day before still felt unreal. I didn't know what I was supposed to feel.

Is this what adult love is supposed to feel like? And if it is, why does it feel so wrong? I could not even look at myself in the mirror without feeling ashamed. Yet his words kept echoing in my head: if it had been anyone else, they would have left already. So I tried to convince myself that this meant he truly loved me, even when my body told me otherwise.

I lost my appetite. I stopped leaving my room unless I had to. Most days, I did not shower unless I had to work or knew he was coming over. Otherwise, he would notice and find something to criticize. According to him, now that I was no longer a virgin, I had no reason to refuse him. If I said no, he treated it as proof that I did not love him. And if I did not love him, he said, he might as well leave. The thought of that terrified me. I had never chosen to lose my virginity that way, but now that it was gone, the thought of being abandoned on top of everything else felt unbearable. So I gave in.

But it was not love. It was not intimacy. It was a lesson in obedience, one in which he taught me exactly what he wanted. He showed me how he wanted to be touched, how I was supposed to move, even how he wanted me to moan. If I did not get it right, he corrected me.

I was beginning to realize that my body had become a place for his experiments. After taking what I had wanted to save, he expected me to obey him in everything. In his mind, I was an object he owned, and he wanted me to see myself that way too. My BlackBerry Messenger status even read "Bobby's property," not because I wanted it to, but because he had ordered me to put it there. That way, if I ever secretly added another boy, something he was always accusing me of wanting to do, the boy would immediately see that I belonged to Bobby. I hated seeing those words beneath my name, yet I let them remain, as though deleting them would only confirm his suspicions.

Slowly and silently, I began thinking of ways to leave. I began to question myself. *Why did I think I had to stay simply because he had been my first? People do not always end up with the first person they have been with. Maybe I did not have to cling to my dream of being like my mom. Maybe that belief belonged to another time, another generation.* But it still hurt, because deep down I still wanted to be like her. I wanted to wait. I wanted to stand at the altar one day because I truly wanted to, because I loved the person waiting for me, not because my choice had been stolen and I was left believing I had no other option.

One day, my dad came to Indonesia. His visit was unusual. He rarely visited unless something truly important was happening. We were trying to save money, and my career had only just begun, so every trip needed a reason. At first, I did not know why he had come. He even seemed welcoming toward Bobby; they met and played guitar together as if things were normal. But that night my dad asked to speak to him alone before Bobby left.

When my dad came back inside, I asked what they had discussed, but he brushed me off and said I did not need to know. Later, on the phone, Bobby told me himself. He said my dad had told him he could continue dating me, but only if he gave me some freedom. I was still a teenager and needed time with my friends. I could not remain glued to my phone or live only for him. My dad said it was not fair that my life consisted only of work and Bobby. Even my homeschooling was suffering because I was so distracted, and my life no longer resembled that of a normal teenager. Bobby told him he agreed, that he understood.

But in reality, nothing changed. My dad stayed in Indonesia for another month and saw with his own eyes that Bobby was still at the apartment every day, still controlling me, still angry whenever I made the smallest mistake, even something as simple as answering the phone too slowly. He saw how I kept crying, how the weight on me never lifted. Worse, Bobby became bolder, almost defiant, as though he were daring my parents to stop him. He cracked sarcastic jokes at the dinner table that only he found funny, rolled his eyes at my mom, smirked at my dad. Each small act of defiance seemed to say, *What are you going to do about it?* It wasn't open war yet, but the challenge was clear.

After a month of watching nothing change, they finally decided to act. One night, after my study hours, I stepped out of my room intending only to ask for my phone back, but instead my parents asked me to sit with them. The atmosphere shifted immediately. Their eyes were sharp, their tone clipped, and I felt less like a daughter and more like a defendant about to be sentenced.

They said they had spoken to Bobby again while I had been studying, and this time they had been firmer. They told him they had already given him a chance, already warned him, but nothing had changed. They told him I wasn't ready for this kind of relationship, that I was still underage, still their responsibility,

and that he had to leave me alone. If I turned eighteen and still wanted him, then it would be my choice, no longer their responsibility. Until then, he had to stay away.

Then, their anger turned toward me. My mom's voice rose, my dad's face hardened. They reminded me of everything we had sacrificed, everything our family had already lost. "Do you think this is only about you, Aurélie? We uprooted our lives for your career. Your mom left Belgium, Jérémie left his school, your dad flies back and forth, our family is split across two countries, all for you. And look at you now. Crying every day, wasting yourself over some man. Is this what we gave everything up for?"

The words hit harder than any slap could have. I wanted to tell them the truth, I wanted to explain that what had happened to me wasn't love, that I wasn't simply being dramatic, but their voices only grew sharper. To them I wasn't the child who needed protection. I was the problem, the cause, the ungrateful one who had thrown away all they had built.

They ended with the same cold conclusion. "He is not good for you, Aurélie." But in their eyes I saw something else. Disappointment. Frustration. A sense that I had betrayed them.

I sat there in silence, numb and too stunned to answer, feeling smaller with every word. Part of me wanted to believe it was over, but another part of me knew Bobby too well. He would never simply walk away. When I finally spoke, it was only to ask for my phone.

They hesitated. For a moment, there was a tense back-and-forth, and then came the warning. "If you don't obey us, if we find out you're still with him, we'll take this away until you're eighteen. Not just during study hours, but completely. Remember that."

I clutched the phone tightly when they finally handed it back to me. I was furious. I was only fifteen, but at that age a phone wasn't just a device, it was a lifeline, a tether to the outside world. And now it felt like even that could vanish at any moment.

Still shaking, I went straight to my room and unlocked it with trembling fingers. My heart was racing as I braced for the flood of messages I was sure would be there, but there was only one message from him. "Call me when you get your phone back. Urgent."

So I called. My hand was shaking as I held the phone to my ear. The line connected, and before I could even say hello, his voice came through, sharp and demanding.

"How are we going to fight them?"

For a moment, I did not even understand what he meant. *Fight whom? My own parents?* My voice came out small, almost a whisper. "I don't want to fight anybody. They're my parents. I have to obey them. Let's just end it here."

As soon as the words left me, a chill ran through me. I waited for the explosion, for the shouting, for whatever would come next.

Then his voice cracked, breaking apart into sobs.

"I'm at the mall," he said. "Fifth floor of the parking lot. I'm just going to kill myself. I can't do this. I love you too much."

Everything in me went still. My whole body went cold. I didn't know if it was real, I didn't know if he meant it, but the sound of his crying, the way he screamed down the line, made me panic. I did not love him anymore, if I had ever loved him at all, but I did not want him to die. I did not want to be the reason someone ended his own life.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Okay. Let’s try to make it work. But you have to win my parents back. They’re really angry.”

For a moment, there was only the sound of his heavy breathing. Then his tone shifted. The sobs vanished, replaced by something steady and almost cold.

“That’s not enough. Waiting more than two years without a guarantee is too risky for me. I need something to make sure waiting that long won’t be for nothing.”

At first I thought he meant money. My thoughts scrambled. “I don’t have much, and you know my mom manages my account,” I said.

He laughed, sharp and humorless. “I don’t want your money.”

“Then what?”

“A naked photo of you.”

My stomach turned. “No,” I begged. “Please don’t ask me that.”

But he didn’t stop. His voice hardened. “If you really love me, if you’re really mine, this shouldn’t be a problem. Otherwise, what am I waiting for?” Then came the threat again, louder, more frantic. “If you don’t, I’ll jump. Right now.”

He began breathing heavily and sobbing again, making strange sounds as though he were actually standing at the edge. I was trembling so badly I could hardly breathe. I thought of the mall parking lot, his voice echoing in my head, and I broke. I told myself it would be just one, just once.

I sent him a photo of my bare chest without showing my face. He rejected it. He told me to show my face too.

I sent another, with only a glimpse. Still not enough.

His reply cut me like a knife. “Your whole face. Clearly. If you’re really mine, prove it.”

Tears blurred my vision as I forced myself to take the photo he demanded. The first ones I sent showed me crying, my face wet, my body shaking.

He accepted them at first, but moments later another message came. “Not like that. Stop crying. Make it look normal. Like you want it. Like you’re enjoying it.”

I stared at the phone in disbelief. *How could I possibly make myself look like that?* But I wiped my tears, forced my lips into something like a smile, and sent another.

I told myself it was just this once. But it wasn’t. One became two, two became three, and soon it became a routine, a twisted proof of love that he demanded again and again.

And every time I begged him to stop, the answer was the same.

“If you don’t, I’ll upload them. Everyone will see. Your career will be over.”

And then came the words that chilled me.

“You wanted this. How is it my fault? I didn’t ask you to stop me from killing myself.”

The words sank into me like ice. I went still, the phone heavy in my hand, shame hollowing me out. Somehow he had flipped it again. Suddenly it wasn’t about what he demanded, but about how I had failed him. Maybe it was my weakness. Maybe it was my fault. That was how he wanted me to think. And for a moment, I did.

And with that, he had what he wanted. Power. Shame. Leverage.

Once he felt secure, he pushed further. His voice steadied, almost calm, as if he was giving me a set of instructions. “Go to

the authorities," he said. "Tell them your parents are exploiting you."

I gripped the phone tighter, shaking my head even though he couldn't see me. "What? No…"

"You heard me. Tell them. If you don't, the pictures go out. Everyone sees you. Your career ends."

The word *exploiting* echoed in my head. I didn't even fully understand it, but I could guess. He was twisting everything, turning me against the very people who were trying to save me.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell my parents. I wanted to run into the living room and throw the phone into their hands, let them hear for themselves what he was doing.

But I didn't. I was trapped by the thought of what he held over me. Deep down, another fear dug in even more sharply. The memory of the earlier confrontation, of being scolded, cornered, and made to feel like the problem, had convinced me that they were no longer entirely on my side. For the first time, I felt I had nowhere to run, no team of my own.

That night, he kept me crying for hours while he dictated exactly what I was supposed to tell the authorities, drilling the words into me until my head pounded. At one point, between sobs, I told him my eyes were so swollen that I looked as though I had been beaten. He told me to prove it, to send a selfie. I did, and then he demanded more angles. I didn't even know why I obeyed, but I did.

After all, I had already sent him nude photos. What was a picture of my face compared to that?

6

His Puppet

By then, he had too many photos of me.

Every time I hesitated to obey one of his demands, he reminded me of those photos. Each threat, each demand, each "prove it" pushed me further into a corner, until saying no no longer felt possible. That was how he forced me through the doors of that office. After so many threats, so much coercion, and so many "negotiations" I had never truly agreed to, I suddenly found myself in a room full of adults I had never met before.

The walls were covered in crayon drawings: happy houses, stick-figure families, and suns with smiling faces. Certificates lined the walls, posters about children's rights and protection filled the corners. Everything was designed to look safe, but nothing about that moment felt safe.

It felt like a test I was destined to fail. I was pretending to be someone brave when, in reality, I was only a terrified girl sitting in a chair that felt too large for her. I was not a child with a voice. I was a puppet, my strings pulled tight. He had given me a script, word for word, line by line, and I had memorized it.

"My parents are using me."

"They are exploiting me."

The word felt strange on my tongue, too formal and too large for a girl my age. But Bobby had told me to use it, so I did.

"I'm not safe at home."

The words fell out of my mouth like foreign objects. I didn't even fully understand them, but I said them with a steady voice,

because I had to. If I broke down, they might ask questions. If they asked questions, they might see the cracks. And if they saw the cracks, Bobby would know that I had failed him. My life would be over.

Inside, I was screaming.

But to the adults in that room, I looked like a courageous teenager speaking up for herself. One of them even chuckled and said, “You’d be surprised how many parents are like that. Especially the parents of child actors like you. Poor kids like you should be in school, not working already. Childhood is short, and growing up isn’t fun, you know.”

Another person leaned forward and asked softly, “But you love him, right? You care about each other?”

I stared at them in disbelief. *That was their question? Not the age difference? Not why a man almost twice my age was in a relationship with a girl my age?*

All they wanted was reassurance that this was love. They even asked whether I needed help seeing Bobby again because they knew we were dating in secret. They probably thought they were being kind, but I couldn’t understand. Wasn’t the age gap alone enough for them to act? Weren’t they supposed to know the law?

And the most terrifying part was that they hadn’t even met him yet. They had only spoken to Bobby over the phone, and still they believed him. They believed my lies. None of them saw the manipulation. None of them knew that I was being blackmailed. None of them understood that my silence was not peace. It was fear.

Back at home, the silence was worse.

My mom did not yell or ask questions. She simply stopped talking to me. She cooked only for herself, Jérémie, and my dad.

Cabinet doors slammed, and her bedroom door closed harder than necessary. Every sound felt sharper than words. She was disgusted. I could feel it in every room, in every cold glance, in every clatter of the dishes.

And I couldn't even blame her.

In her eyes, I had done something unforgivable. I had betrayed her not only as her daughter, but as a person. She thought I had chosen him over them, and in a way, I had.

A few days later, everyone involved was called in on the same day. Bobby went first, presenting his version of the story before my parents even had a chance to speak. By the time my parents were finally called, his words were already hanging in the air, shaping how everyone saw them.

That was when Bobby made his move. He took the photo from that night, the one I had sent after saying my eyes were so swollen from crying that I looked as though I had been beaten, and turned it into evidence. He showed it to them and said my mom had done it. He claimed that, in addition to being exploited, I was being abused at home.

He turned even my pain into his weapon.

They believed him. He was charming, persuasive, the kind of man who always knew how to win hearts. My parents tried to defend themselves, but by then the damage had already been done. No one truly listened.

I remember the day they came home after giving their side. My mom was livid, moving sharply around the kitchen, banging plates, slamming cupboard doors, her fury filling every corner of the apartment. My dad argued with her, both of them breaking down, because the people who should've helped us had chosen to believe Bobby instead.

Desperate, my dad turned to the only weapon he had left: the media. He wrote a blog, contacted journalists, told anyone who would listen that his underage daughter was being manipulated by an adult man.

And it worked. The story spread like wildfire, but the narrative quickly shifted. I became known as the disobedient daughter who betrayed her parents for love. Headlines painted me as a spoiled teenager blinded by an older boyfriend. Some people pitied my parents, but others mocked them. Others mocked me.

It was surreal to see my private hell splashed across newspapers and TV screens, reduced to gossip for strangers who knew nothing about me.

It hurt. It still hurts.

But I know my dad didn't do it to hurt me. He did it because he loved me, and no one was listening.

When Bobby saw the media turn against him, his tone grew sharp and cold.

He was furious that his image had been damaged. He wanted revenge.

"If your parents aren't exploiting you, prove it," he hissed. "Stop working. Not one more cent for them. It's not your duty to support them. Let her suffer."

I argued with him because I had hated the idea from the beginning. Eventually, I begged him to at least let me finish the movie I had already signed on to make. I told him I could be fined if I quit. He finally agreed. "Just that one." Afterward, I was done.

That night, I cried in my room until every part of me hurt.

My mom walked in, saw me clutching my phone like it was my lifeline, and without a word she yanked it from my hands.

She locked it in the drawer of her room, her face tight with anger and disgust, as if she couldn't bear to watch me suffer under Bobby's grip anymore. She looked sick of seeing me that way: drained, diminished, and chained to someone who refused to leave my life.

A few days later, he showed up at my shoot. Somehow, he had found out where I was, probably through someone on set. My mom was there. The moment she saw him, she panicked and begged the crew to make him leave. They approached politely, asking him to go, but Bobby stayed cool, smirking.

"Relax, guys. This is a public space. I'm not here for Aurélie. I have friends here too."

He mocked my mom as if she were a joke, as if this was all a game and he was winning.

While she stepped away to the bathroom, he found me on set. He slipped a small phone into my hand and whispered, "Hide it in your underwear. If anyone tries to take it, say you'll report them. That's your private spot, nobody can touch it but me."

I nodded numbly, begging him to go, not wanting a scene at work. Before he left, he showed me his new tattoo, my name inked on his left wrist in my own handwriting. He had copied it from one of the letters he had forced me to write, letters he intended to use as leverage. I didn't yet understand that he had placed it there for a reason. The tattoo became another burden, another chain that made leaving him feel even more impossible.

As agreed, the film became the last job I was allowed to take.

After it ended, my days became even darker. I stayed in my room, day after day. My dad had gone back to Belgium without even saying goodbye, too angry to look at me, and I already missed him terribly. My mom no longer spoke to me. My little

brother was confused, caught in the middle of a silence he couldn't understand.

I clung to my phone, answering Bobby's constant messages: threats, demands, and reminders that he was doing all of it out of love. He told me I should be grateful. Everyone else only wanted to use me, even my parents, while he was supposedly the only person who loved me enough to fight for me. He called himself my hero, but by then I no longer believed a word he said.

One night, on the phone, he asked if I still wanted him to wait until I turned eighteen. I hesitated, because the truth was I had never wanted any of this. If he had not threatened to jump from that parking garage months earlier, none of it would have happened. My silence lasted a beat too long. He exploded, yelling down the phone so loud it felt like he was right there in the room with me.

"I do, I do," I cried, panicked. "Of course I do."

"Oh yeah? Prove it. Shave your head."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

But with Bobby, nothing was ever a joke. He knew my hair was the only thing I still liked about myself, the only part of me that still made me feel beautiful. He wanted to take that away too.

"You're not worth waiting for if you can't even prove your loyalty," he said over the phone. His voice had that low, dangerous edge I had learned to fear. Then the threats began again, darker this time. I no longer remember every word he said, but I remember the fear. He made me panic so badly that in the end, I just acted.

In the haze of exhaustion, I grabbed a thick chunk of my waist-length hair and cut it straight to my shoulders. The thick

lock of hair fell into my lap. My hands shook as I snapped a photo and sent it to him, proof that I had done it.

His reply came fast. “Not like that. You know that’s not what I meant.” Then, before I could even ask, he clarified. “I said shave it. All of it. Bald.”

I stared at the uneven cut in the mirror, frustration burning through me, strands scattered across the floor.

For a moment my mind flickered. What if I just kept going, shaved it all off, just to make the shouting stop? The thought scared me as much as his demand. I hated that the thought even crossed my mind. That was how far he had pushed me.

When he realized that I had actually considered it, his voice changed. He sounded satisfied that his test had worked. But instead of pressing me further, he quickly changed his mind. “On second thought, no. At eighteen you’ll still look like a butch. I don’t want that.”

But it was too late. A thick swath of my hair was already gone, lying lifeless in my hands.

Then he gave me another “choice.” He told me to check the refrigerator. When I said there was a cucumber inside, he got an idea. With chilling calm, he ordered me to put it inside my body and then serve it to my mom without washing it.

I was horrified. Of course I wouldn’t do that. But I pretended I had. I pretended to cry and swore that I had done it. I even swore to God, knowing he would believe me because I had always been too afraid to lie in His name. But for the first time, I was willing to lie to protect myself. I knew God would rather I lie than commit something so vile.

He demanded proof. He demanded that I do it again and send him a video. He said if I didn't send it within five minutes, he would slash through the tattoo of my name on his wrist.

But by then, I had learned his patterns. He had made the same suicide threats so many times, and nothing ever happened. I started to feel a flicker of courage, realizing his words were only weapons to get what he wanted, never anything more.

Then do it, I thought. *Stop talking and do it. Cut your wrist.* But I never said the words aloud.

On the phone, he began to scream, putting on a performance as though he were already hurting himself. He even claimed his blood was pouring out, crying for help, but I knew he was pretending. I knew it was just another performance, another trick to make me give in.

Exhausted, I hung up.

If he truly wanted to do it, then so be it. I no longer believed that he would.

Still, the entire ordeal left me shaken, as though I were trapped in a twisted horror film and forced to participate in grotesque games I had never agreed to play. Shame and anger tangled inside me, my thoughts spinning, so I left my room and went to the kitchen for a glass of milk, just to breathe. And then I heard my mom crying in her room. The sound pierced me. It was raw, broken, the sound of someone who had tried everything and had nothing left.

In that moment, I felt like the most foolish girl in the world.

I realized I couldn't do this anymore.

I would rather have him leak everything: the photos, the videos, and the false letters. I would rather lose my name, my career, my reputation, than remain his prisoner and hurt my

family. Let the world judge me, shame me, cancel me. I didn't owe him anything.

If it all came out, I would go home to Belgium. I would change my name and start over. I would leave my entire old life behind if I had to. But I wouldn't give him another second of my life.

That was when I destroyed the phone he had given me.

7

The Betrayal

Even after I destroyed the phone, it didn't feel like freedom.

I thought I would feel lighter, as though something had finally been cut loose from my chest. Instead, I still felt watched, as though he were close enough to hear my thoughts, follow my movements, judge me, and threaten me the way he always had. I knew he couldn't, but my body hadn't gotten the memo yet.

The next morning, when I met my mom in the kitchen, our eyes were both swollen from crying. I could hardly believe that one man had nearly torn my entire family apart. She looked ready for another argument, bracing herself for me to defend him again, but I stopped her.

"No, Mom. Don't. I ended it."

I told her about the phone, how I had kept it hidden, how I had been under his control even inside our own home. She looked at me with a mix of fury and disbelief.

"You think I didn't know?" she asked.

She did not look relieved. She did not hug me. She only looked at me as though she no longer knew whether she could trust me after everything I had done to turn against my own family. The silence between us wasn't angry anymore, it was cautious. She was bracing herself for the next betrayal, determined not to be caught off guard again.

She didn't give me my phone back. I understood. A part of me even agreed. But I needed to know whether he had followed through on his threats and uploaded the nude photos he had

used to control me. So I took the only device I still had with internet access, my PlayStation Portable, or PSP, and went down to the apartment lobby to use the Wi-Fi. My mom did not know it could connect to the internet. She thought I used it only to play Grand Theft Auto. The lobby was simple, with only a few plastic chairs and the echo of footsteps against the tiled floor. But it was quiet, and at that hour, I was alone. I sat hunched over the small screen, refreshing the search results as though my life depended on them. Maybe it did.

I typed my name into the search bar. Then his. Over and over. I scrolled through pages of results. I checked forums, gossip sites, blogs, porn sites, old fan pages. I checked anywhere that might contain something: an image, a rumor, even the faintest whisper of scandal. There was nothing. Still, I could not stop. I refreshed the results again and again, sometimes every hour. At one point, while I was hunched over the PSP, lost in that endless scrolling, a neighbor from the apartment stopped by. She ran a little salon downstairs. She noticed that my hair was short and uneven and gently asked what had happened. Before I could answer, she offered to fix it by evening out the ends and cutting it neatly to my shoulders. I agreed without thinking. It felt easier to nod than explain. As she carefully trimmed the jagged ends, I began to feel a little more like myself for the first time in days.

When I went back upstairs, my mom was stunned. She stared at me, eyes wide, taking in my suddenly short hair. “Why?” she asked. I forced a small smile. “To get rid of the bad luck,” I said. She looked at me like she didn’t understand, her face a mix of confusion and worry, but she didn’t press.

Sometimes, late at night, I would hear keys jingling in the hallway outside and freeze, certain it was him. In my mind, it was the chain he always wore, clinking against his jeans.

It had such a distinct sound that I heard it even when it was not there, like a ghost following me. Once, I heard someone outside whistling for a dog, and for a moment, I was certain it was Bobby. He used to whistle from a distance when I was at the park, a sharp call to let me know he was there. Back then it felt funny, almost sweet. Now it felt like horror.

Whenever I had the chance to go online, I checked again. At first it was every hour, then every few hours, then just once in the morning. Eventually, not at all. Maybe I was tired. Maybe I wanted to believe it was over. A small part of me, perhaps the smallest part, began to believe that it truly was. No leaks. No whispers. No posts. *Was it over? Could it truly be that simple?*

About a week went by. My mom began to soften. She started making small talk with me again, nothing deep, just little comments, and sometimes she even laughed at the TV.

Jérémie began to brighten again too. During the worst of it he had gone quiet, almost invisible, as if the tension had drained the light out of him. He was only a child, yet he had been carrying the weight of our silence, tiptoeing around us as though one wrong move might make everything worse. After the breakup I spent more time outside my room, and suddenly I was laughing with him again, playing with him the way I used to. I realized how much I had missed that. I felt sorry for my parents, but I felt even more sorry for him. He had no choice in any of this. He had been forced to leave his school and friends in Belgium, and now he had been dragged into the chaos surrounding me because of one man. I hated that he had lost so much because of me.

Then one morning, without a word, my mom placed my phone on the table. I stared at it like it was a trap. Then I reached for it. She didn't stop me.

I changed my number that same day. I did not even save the old one. It felt cursed, as though it still carried his breath. I

deleted everything: call logs, messages, and photos. I gave myself a clean break.

Later that night, my mom asked why we broke up. Her face tightened at the mention of his name, her voice still sharp with anger.

“I don’t want to talk about him ever again,” I said.

She exhaled like she had been holding her breath. “Alright.” She still wasn’t sure if she could trust me, I could feel it. But a few weeks later, something shifted. She caught me texting and smiling. She peeked over my shoulder and saw the name Milo. She smiled, as though she had finally seen a little life return to me.

I had been talking to Milo for weeks by then, long conversations that stretched late into the night until I felt like I already knew him. Feelings had already begun to grow between us before we ever met in person. Slowly, my mom began to believe this wasn’t another trick to see Bobby. She started to trust me again, enough to let me go out of the house.

That was when I introduced her to him. Milo was different. He was tall, muscular, clearly someone who liked the gym, with tattoos down his arms and long dark hair. The tattoos didn’t make him intimidating because his whole presence was warm and goofy. He even spoke with a slightly funny accent, since he hadn’t been born in Indonesia, which only made him seem more approachable. They only met once, when he came to pick me up for a date. He asked my mom’s permission politely, and in that moment I caught the look in her eyes. She seemed almost happy, maybe because she felt the difference. Bobby had always been overconfident, acting as if my mom was his equal, maybe even his friend, and she found that disrespectful. With Milo, she felt respected.

Milo felt like a best friend and someone I was beginning to fall for. With him, I laughed freely, the kind of laughter that had been missing from me for so long. I didn't have to pretend or shrink myself. I felt butterflies again, not the anxious kind, but the good kind. He showed me what a normal relationship could feel like. No tests, no punishments, just jokes, soft glances, and silly moments. It felt like peace, like something I had only ever watched from a distance in other people's lives. With him, it felt like healing.

Our first date was at a Thai restaurant. I had never eaten Thai food before, so I asked him to order for me. I don't remember what dish he chose, only that I couldn't eat it because I didn't like the taste. I was terrified of how he would react. The restaurant looked expensive, and I was bracing for anger, for disappointment, for punishment. But instead he laughed and apologized for ordering the wrong thing. He said it was fine, that he would have the food packed up for his mom, and promised that next time, I could choose. In that moment, I knew he was different. If it had been Bobby, that night would've turned into a fight.

On the way home, an Enrique Iglesias album was playing. When "Hero" began, the car felt like it belonged to another world. The city lights flickered through the windows, lighting his face in fragments that felt almost cinematic. Then he leaned over and kissed me. It was soft and unhurried, meant only for me. Private. Not for an audience. Not meant to prove anything. Just affection, the kind that made my chest ache in the best way. Bobby's kisses had always felt like performances, like he wanted the world to watch. This was the opposite. This was ours alone.

I felt like I was inside a scene from a movie, only it was real and it was mine. I carried that kiss home with me, still smiling when I told Kelly everything.

Kelly had been the only friend Bobby allowed me to stay in touch with because she had always supported our relationship. Sometimes, she and Bobby even spoke to each other without me. They had never even met, but somehow she had been on his side. I expected her to scream with excitement, but instead she went quiet. Then she said, “You know he’s dangerous, right?”

“Dangerous how?”

She told me he had just broken up with that actress, that her parents had filed a report saying he had taken her away from home without permission, that she was underage, and that it was everywhere on the news. She asked how I could possibly not have known.

I already knew. He had told me. But his version was different. He said the girl’s parents were overdramatic, that they were in love, that he was only trying to protect her, that they were out to ruin his name. He told the story like it was a heartbreak, not a crime. And I believed him.

My mom didn’t. After meeting him, she had gotten suspicious. Maybe it was the tattoos, maybe it was instinct, but she decided to look him up on the internet. She read the rumors, the gossip, the forums, and of course, she believed the media. She told me I was like someone who had escaped a lion’s den only to walk straight into a crocodile’s jaws, that I hadn’t found anything better, only a different kind of danger. Then she asked, “Why do you always pick the worst ones?”

Her words made me feel like I was either seeking out trouble on purpose or too naïve to know better. I had no answer. I just sat there, feeling my face grow hot. It was not quite shame, but the sinking ache of realizing that I might have chosen wrong again, even though I had genuinely liked him.

As I started pulling away from Milo, unsure, confused, and hurt, a text appeared from a number I didn't recognize. But I knew exactly who it was.

Bobby.

How did he get this number? Only a few people had it: my mom, my brother, and my best friend, Kelly. My stomach sank.

I called her immediately. I wanted so badly to believe I was wrong to suspect her. But she admitted it.

"I was worried about you," she said. "I thought maybe you were going to ruin your life with Milo. I thought maybe you needed help. I didn't know what else to do."

She had told him everything: my new number, my situation, even Milo's name. She thought she was saving me. She did not realize that she had just reopened the door I had fought so hard to close.

In that moment, all the fear I thought I had buried came back. I could have blocked him, but a different kind of fear stopped me. *What if he was planning something while he could not reach me? What if there was something I needed to know? Had he really cut his wrist after I destroyed the phone?* I did not want to respond, but I felt that I had to. I needed to know what he wanted this time, whether it had ever truly ended or had merely been waiting to begin again. *And just like that, Bobby was back.*

8

Legal, Not Free

His first message was calm. Too calm.

"I heard you have a new boyfriend :)"

Not long after, another appeared.

"That was fast. Were you already talking to him while you were still with me? :)"

I locked my phone, took a deep breath, and tried to make sense of it. When I checked again, another message was waiting.

"Did you tell him you were a virgin too? ;)"

I didn't reply. I refused to take the bait. My heart raced, my hands went cold. The air shifted, like something dangerous was coming. I knew that tone too well, mocking, always looking for a way to tear me down. The smiley faces at the end of each message only made them more unsettling, as though every threat had been deliberately disguised as something playful.

Then came another.

"You made a very bad choice. Do you think I'm just going to let you get away with it? I will never lose to your parents. I swore on my life. On GOD."

Still, I remained silent. But it was not strength. It was paralysis, the foolish hope that if I didn't respond, the monster would crawl back into the dark.

But monsters don't leave when they're hungry.

He called again and again. Finally, I picked up but said nothing. He dragged out the word "Hellooo" again and again,

sounding playful and mocking at the same time, until I finally snapped and asked, “What do you want?”

Calmly, he answered, “Oh, nothing. Just letting you know I have people ready to kill your parents if you don’t do what I say.”

My body went cold. My chest closed in. How could someone say something so terrifying so casually? Then he said the men were from Ambon, people willing to do his dirty work. For a moment, I wondered how he could possibly afford something like that when he often struggled even to keep credit on his phone. As if reading my mind, he said, “They’re cheap. They need the money, and they don’t ask questions. They know how to make it look like an accident. I’m not playing around this time. Try me.”

And then he hung up.

I panicked. I sent message after message, begging him not to hurt my parents and telling him that, if this was a joke, it was not funny. My hands shook. He had threatened me before, but this was different. This wasn’t just control. This was war. And I didn’t know how to fight.

When he didn’t respond, I called and texted again and again. Please don’t touch my parents. I’m sorry. I won’t disappear again. I think I even told him I loved him, because I was desperate, because I was terrified.

Hours later, he called back sounding proud, as though he had won. “I want to introduce you to someone,” he said.

I was crying, ready to beg him again to stop, when new voices came through the phone. He had put it on speaker. Deep male voices laughed and greeted me in the background. He introduced them as the men from Ambon he had warned me about.

“These are the ones who will take care of things if you mess up again,” he said.

Their voices were casual, almost friendly, but they made my skin crawl. At the time, I believed every word. It never occurred to me that he might be lying or that he had simply asked his basketball friends to play along. Back then, I was still a child being scared into obedience by a grown man. And it worked. When someone has already shown you what they are capable of, you do not question the threat. You just pray they don't act on it.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to run. But where? I was paralyzed. My best friend was the one who had handed him my number. That was the part I could never understand. She knew everything, how he broke me, how he manipulated me. She had cried with me and promised that she had my back, yet she still gave him my number. Maybe she thought she was helping. Maybe she believed she was saving me. But to me, it was a betrayal that left a wound deep in my chest. I wanted to confront her, but Bobby's shadow was so much bigger than hers that I stayed quiet. In the end, I let the friendship fade into silence.

While I drowned in fear for my parents, Milo reached out, asking why I had pulled away. But I was too afraid of making another mistake. I told him we couldn't continue and I blocked him.

The irony was cruel. One day, I was laughing at his funny accent and leaning against his shoulder. The next, I had to cut him out of my life. The butterflies turned into stones. I couldn't even mourn it properly. Milo had given me a glimpse of what normal could feel like. He did not demand proof of everything or become angry over things that should never have been considered mistakes in the first place: typos, late replies, male friends, or photos with co-stars. But once Bobby returned with his threats, I stopped laughing. I stopped talking. My eyes stopped lighting up. I was back in the cage.

At night, when we talked on the phone, he forced me to swear to God I hadn't slept with Milo. The calls lasted for hours, with me swearing over and over, naming every member of my family one by one as proof, begging God to strike me if I was lying. Of course it didn't convince him. It never could. Still, he pressed, doubted, accused, called me every name he could think of. I endured it in silence because fighting back only made things worse.

Before hanging up he said again, calm, casual:

"You're not that smart. Don't ever think of reporting me. Do you have evidence? Hmm?"

Of course I didn't. That was the worst part. Every threat came over the phone, leaving no evidence and no witnesses. It would be my word against his, and he was older, louder, and far more convincing.

He continued, "If anyone ever calls me in for questioning, you know they'll believe me. And my men will still carry out my orders. I don't even care if I go to prison, as long as your parents don't win. I already swore it."

His hatred of my parents had become completely irrational.

My mom didn't know the details, but she saw me curl back into myself. I saw the disappointment in her eyes. She had only just begun to hope again, and I had shattered that hope all over again.

She had been happy to see me light up, even if only briefly. She must have wondered why the little happiness I had found had to come with so many rumors and warnings. She had seen me laugh, seen me act like a real teenager again. And then it was gone. I think she even blamed herself for believing the rumors and allowing the little joy I had found to slip away.

I hated myself for disappointing her again. I hated that I couldn't tell her the truth because I was so afraid of him. Deep down I knew something was terribly wrong with him, that he was capable of cruelty. I hated how easily he had slipped back into my life and made me his prisoner again, this time with new threats.

I became even more obedient, more afraid with each day. I stopped working again. I felt like a zombie, nodding, agreeing, saying yes to everything. Time dissolved into an endless cycle of arguments, apologies, threats, and silence. Nothing ever truly changed. My mom seemed to be giving up too. She still cooked for me and made sure I was safe beneath her roof, but the distance between us made it feel more like duty than affection.

Bobby forbade me from working, and because of that my mom kept me from leaving the apartment. I was stuck at home, unable to go anywhere. For a long time, the only phone I had was an old device that could send text messages but had no internet access. No internet meant no connection to the outside world. My only connection was Bobby, the last person I needed. Sometimes I imagined myself as a princess locked in a tower. Except my tower was an apartment, and the man who came was not Prince Charming. He was the one making sure I remained trapped inside. Even as I approached eighteen, inside I still felt fifteen, frozen in time.

Eventually, my mom began talking about returning to Belgium without me because I was almost eighteen. She was exhausted, out of options, and I could feel her pulling away, as if she no longer saw a reason to stay. Bobby loved it, because if they returned to Belgium, I would be completely his. To him, it was proof that he was winning. To me, it felt as though something inside me were collapsing, and I was powerless to stop it.

Sometimes he appeared without warning, not inside the apartment, but in the garden below our building, saying he missed me so much he just had to see me, even for a second.

I remember once, while we were on the phone, he whistled loudly. The sound echoed both through the line and from outside my window. “Did you hear that?” he asked. I said yes. “Go to your balcony,” he told me.

When I stepped onto the balcony, I saw him in the distance, standing beside his car and waving up at me. Through the phone I could hear him crying, saying our love story was so sad, but also so beautiful.

By then, I understood that his visits were not about love. He wanted proof that I was exactly where I claimed to be. It was another way of checking whether I was lying. But in his mind, showing up like that was a romantic gesture. Later, on his drive home, he scolded me for not looking happier, reminding me of the effort he had made just to see me for a single second.

He told me we were like Romeo and Juliet, a love story so rare and forbidden that nothing could stop us. Sometimes he even whispered, “Soon you’ll be eighteen, and then we’ll finally win.” *Win what?* I wondered. He had made me lose everything. He seemed to forget why I was still there. It wasn’t because I was Juliet who couldn’t live without her Romeo. It was because I was afraid, and I had given up fighting.

Sometimes he cried on the phone, clinging to the fantasy that we were living through some grand romance. Maybe he believed it. I never did. I was simply quieter now, mistaking the absence of an immediate explosion for peace.

Before I knew it, my eighteenth birthday had arrived.

I woke in my own bed after the air conditioner had broken during the night, leaving the room unbearably hot. No cake. No

candles. No hugs. My mom was in the same apartment, but she felt far away. I didn't expect anything anyway. I didn't feel like I deserved anything.

When I was younger, after childish arguments with my parents, I would tell myself, *I can't wait to turn eighteen and be free.* I truly believed it would mean freedom: no more rules, no more control. I imagined parties, trips with friends, and perhaps even traveling the world.

But when the day finally came, I didn't feel safe at all. I didn't feel anything close to free.

My eighteenth birthday didn't feel like a celebration. It felt like mourning.

9

Sign It

For years, I told myself that turning eighteen would save me.

To me, eighteen had always been the finish line, the age when freedom would finally be mine after years of rules, restrictions, and being told no. I thought turning eighteen would give me the freedom to make my own decisions, leave the house without asking permission, and finally feel that my life belonged to me.

But when the day came, it didn't feel like freedom at all. It felt like a trap snapping shut. Instead of feeling lighter, I felt heavier, like something cold had settled in my chest, as though adulthood were not opening a door, but closing the only one left.

Ever since Bobby entered my life, eighteen had stopped meaning freedom. To him, it meant ownership. It meant the clock was ticking down to the day he had been waiting for, the day the law could no longer shield me. I would no longer be a minor. No one could use my age to protect me. No one could stop him. He had been waiting for this moment, not to celebrate me, but to claim me.

Even before the day arrived, I had stopped looking forward. Other kids my age talked about what they'd do once they turned eighteen: parties, trips, independence. But I was only afraid. Each day that brought me closer felt like another rope tightening around me.

That morning my phone buzzed. Just one message.

"Take a taxi to Plaza Semanggi. I'm waiting."

No happy birthday. No warmth. Just instructions.

I did not tell my mom. I did not need to. She seemed to know that something was wrong. She watched me move around the house like someone walking toward punishment, not celebration, and she didn't stop me. Maybe because she thought she couldn't. Maybe because she had already given up. Her silence was not approval. It was surrender. It was the silence of someone bracing for impact.

I slid into the back of the taxi, palms sweating, throat dry. My reflection stared back at me from the window, but I barely recognized myself. I looked like a girl playing dress-up in adulthood, but underneath, I was still a terrified, trembling child.

It felt strange to be outside at all. For years, I had been trapped inside that apartment, clinging to the promise that once I turned eighteen, my parents would no longer be able to stop me. Stepping out felt unreal, almost wrong, as if freedom itself was foreign. Even the air outside no longer felt like mine, and sitting in that taxi I realized how socially awkward I had become, how I had forgotten how to exist in the world, how to interact with people beyond the walls that had suffocated me for so long.

The driver glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "Are you Aurélie?"

I nodded cautiously.

"My wife watched your movie," he said with a smile. Then, without pause: "Aren't you also the girl from that gossip story? The one whose parents didn't approve of her relationship with an older man?"

He paused, apparently trying to remember Bobby's name.

I laughed too quickly and too loudly, hoping he would drop the subject. "No, that's just a gimmick," I said. My voice sounded wrong, like it belonged to someone else.

He kept talking, casual and curious, as if this wasn't the worst moment of my life. To him, it was gossip. To me, it was the trap I couldn't escape.

When the taxi finally pulled up, I stepped into the thick heat of the city. Plaza Semanggi. I had been here so many times before, shopping with friends, eating with my family, wandering the mall like any other teenager. But that day it looked different. The building itself had not changed, but the atmosphere around it had. The glass, escalators, and crowded walkways were all the same, but to me, everything felt staged, as if this familiar place had been transformed into a set where I was about to play a role I had never chosen.

He was waiting inside a coffee shop. Not alone. Two men sat beside him in neatly pressed suits, with folders stacked on the table in front of them. One carried a briefcase. They didn't smile. They didn't introduce themselves. They didn't need to. Their presence said everything.

Bobby stood, gestured to a chair, his voice clipped. "Sit."

I sat. He pushed a stack of papers across the table. "Sign this," he ordered.

"Sign what?" My voice caught in my throat.

The pages blurred in front of me, filled with legal terms, dense paragraphs, and official stamps. My breath quickened. The room tilted.

"It's just to help us," he said casually, his tone rehearsed. "So they can start the process. Church. Plans. That's all."

He made it sound harmless, but the grip he had on the pen told another story. His knee bounced beneath the table while his eyes remained locked on mine, like a predator watching its prey.

We had never talked about marriage in this way. I was barely eighteen. Getting married was not my dream, not my plan. I had wanted adulthood so I could finally breathe, not to step straight into another cage.

“I’ve waited for you,” he said, leaning closer as his voice tightened. “Don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”

He was calm, but I could feel the storm underneath. His face stretched tight, his tone low but dangerous, as if daring me to resist.

I stared at the papers, heart pounding, mind spinning. My hands felt heavy in my lap. Then an idea came to me. I picked up my phone and pretended that it had vibrated. I pretended to answer an important call, held up one finger to signal that I needed a moment, and stood slowly, carefully, as if nothing was wrong.

And then I ran.

I didn’t think. My legs moved before my mind could catch up. I darted through the mall, weaving past stores and slipping between groups of people. Every hallway blurred together, tiles shining, escalators humming, fluorescent lights buzzing. I wasn’t escaping. I was circling.

And then I heard it. The metallic jingle of his chain. The slap of rubber sandals against the floor. Heavy. Fast. Closing in. Panic surged through me. I pushed myself harder and turned another corner, my lungs burning as I searched for somewhere to disappear.

The mall thinned. Crowds disappeared. I stumbled into the parking lot. Empty. Exposed. My footsteps echoed against concrete. For one second, I stopped to breathe. And that was when I felt it. His hand, closing around my arm. Firm. Not rough. Not yet.

He stood in front of me, blocking my path, face arranged into a mask of concern.

“Hey, what are you doing, baby?” he asked in a soft, coaxing voice, as though nothing terrifying were happening. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, his voice almost tender. “I love you. I just need some peace of mind. Something that proves you didn’t lead me on after I waited more than two years.”

His words wrapped around me like a rope. His gentleness was a performance, but his grip told the truth. He tightened it slightly, his eyes sharpening.

“You remember what I said would happen if you disobeyed.”

I nodded. Because I did. The threats. The shame. The danger.

He softened his tone again, tilting his head like a disappointed father.

“Good. Okay, let’s go back. No need to be embarrassed. They came here for me. Just act normal. Don’t worry.”

So I went back. Back to the table. Back to the men. Back to the papers.

He pushed the pen toward me. My fingers shook. My thoughts screamed no, but my hand betrayed me. I thought of my parents, of what this would do to them, of how this moment could crush my family. And still, I signed.

Bobby smiled, satisfied, then turned to the lawyers. “If possible, try October 5th.”

October 5th. My dad’s birthday. My little brother’s birthday too. Tears spilled before I could stop them.

“Please don’t,” I whispered. “That’s too cruel.”

Marrying this man would already break my family. Doing it on a birthday shared by my father and brother felt unspeakably cruel.

The lawyer shrugged. “That’s pretty soon. We’ll try. But as we told you, Bob, it’ll be difficult to find a church willing to use false witnesses and skip the proper procedures. We’ll do our best.”

They packed up their folders and left. But Bobby wasn’t finished.

“This one is for me,” he said, pulling a blank sheet of paper from his bag as though he had planned every detail in advance. He dictated word for word:

“I, Aurélie, declare that I am of sound mind, fully conscious, and writing this statement of my own free will. I am not being forced or coerced. I want to marry Bobby. This is my will. My decision. My choice.”

He made me sign it. For his records. For proof. For control. Another paper to hold over me. Later, he would make me write more. Letters, statements, declarations. Each one a new piece of evidence for his collection, each one another chain around me.

But the first time wasn’t simple. My tears slid down my cheeks, one after another, falling onto the page. The ink bled, the words smudged. Bobby grew irritated, forcing me to start over. Again and again. I wiped my face, but the tears kept coming, staining every line.

While I was rewriting, one of Bobby’s old school friends walked in.

He was around Bobby’s age, already married, working as a manager at a company. He leaned over to check the paper, making sure it looked official enough. Then he chuckled.

“Your girl’s still such a little kid, Bob,” he said. “Even her handwriting looks like it belongs to a grade-schooler.”

His laughter cut deeper than the pen in my hand. My shame doubled. I kept writing. When it was finally done, we went to the ATM inside the mall. Bobby said he needed to make a bank transfer, so I stood beside him while he tapped the screen. I glanced at the screen by accident and saw his balance. Two million rupiah, barely two hundred U.S. dollars at the time. My eyes remained on the balance for only a second before he noticed. His head snapped toward me, his tone sharp. “Why are you looking? What are you trying to say?”

I shook my head quickly. “Nothing.”

But inside, the thought echoed. *Two million rupiah? He planned to marry me with only that?* How would he even pay for a church, or for the lawyers he kept talking about? Then I remembered he had only made a small down payment on the car not long ago. Maybe that was why only that much was left. Still, it didn’t make sense. I gathered my courage and asked softly, carefully, “Is this your only account?”

He exploded. “Don’t act like some materialistic princess. Money can always be made. Your family is poor too.”

Shame burned through me. I had only asked, but the way he said it made me feel cheap, greedy, ungrateful. I apologized immediately, afraid that he might explode again.

On the drive home, I cried silently. My tears blurred the streets into streaks of light.

“Stop crying,” he said, voice sharp. “Your mom needs to see you’re happy now that you’re free from them.” Then, almost laughing, he added, “You know, if you hadn’t signed, I already knew exactly what I was going to do.”

I turned to him, wary. He smiled faintly.

“I would kill your parents, tie their heads to my car, and drag them through the streets.”

His tone was casual, almost playful, like he was describing a scene from a movie.

I told him, “You would never get away with it.”

He shrugged. “Then I would go to jail. I don’t care. If I can’t have you, they won’t win either. I’ll still win.”

And at the time, I truly believed him.

For some people, turning eighteen means becoming an adult. For me, it had come to mean something else entirely. It meant fear dressed up as freedom. It meant stepping into another cage, one whose boundaries I could not yet see.

The lawyer’s words echoed in my mind. Skip procedures, fake witnesses.

None of it sounded legal. None of it sounded right.

10

Church at Dawn

Two months had passed since the day I signed those papers.

In the weeks that followed, Bobby grew tense, restless, and more controlling than ever. I remembered how determined he had been to hold the wedding on October 5, the shared birthday of my dad and my little brother, Jérémie. As the date approached, I panicked. My stomach dropped at the thought of being bound to him on a day meant to celebrate two of the people I loved most. It felt like a warning, like watching him sharpen a knife before making the first cut.

That fear sent me searching online. Late at night, I searched every question I could think of: *What happens before a Catholic wedding? Can someone marry me without my consent? Is confession part of the preparation? What happens if the bride says no?* I clung to every answer. I read that a Catholic marriage required consent, formal declarations, preparation classes, and specific procedures. The priest had to hear me say yes. I told myself that meant I still had power. If it came to that, I could tell the priest everything. I could beg him for help, and he would stop it. I trusted the Church more than the child protection office that had already failed me. That small belief gave me a sense of peace.

Still, those searches brought back an even more unsettling memory. A few weeks earlier, Bobby and I had another fight. Nearly two years had passed since my single date with Milo, yet Bobby still could not let it go. He cried, saying I had no idea how badly I had broken his heart or how deeply I had stained our relationship by seeing another boy. He claimed that it had given

him high blood pressure and that I had sinned against him too many times.

Then he said something that made my stomach turn. He said he could not accept the idea that, after everything he had taught me about pleasing a man and becoming what he wanted, someone else might be the one to "enjoy" me. He sounded proud, almost smug, as though I were something he had built and now owned. There was no love or hurt in the way he said it. There was only possession. It made my skin crawl.

I fell silent, too disgusted to respond and too accustomed to the way he turned every sin into mine. Then he suggested that it was time for me to confess my sins. "You've never gone to confession before, have you?" At first, I did not know what to say. But the possibility of washing away even a little of the weight I carried was tempting. *Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea.* So I agreed. Before we went, he told me to find my baptismal certificate. He said I needed to prove that I had been baptized Catholic before I could confess. It didn't feel strange at the time, so I sent it to him.

That day, he told me to wear business clothes: a blue blouse and a beige skirt I had bought for my soap opera role. He insisted that I wear more makeup than usual, even though most of the time he said he liked me better without it. I didn't question it. *Maybe he just wanted me to look presentable.* He drove me a long way, toward the area where his family lived. When we arrived, we didn't enter the main church. Instead, he led me to a small room at the back, the priest's office. The priest sat behind a desk with papers clipped to a board beside him. He looked nervous and uneasy. Bobby went in first and spoke with him while I waited outside. Then it was my turn.

The priest asked if I was ready to confess my sins. I felt awkward. I thought confession was supposed to take place inside

the church, privately, in a confessional like the ones I had seen in movies. But I sat down. I began with small sins from childhood, like making up stories or teasing friends until I went too far. Then I moved to something heavier. I told him that I had hurt my parents many times lately. My eyes filled with tears and my voice dropped. I was about to say, “I think I was raped,” but Bobby coughed loudly, warning me not to deviate from the version he wanted me to tell. So I changed my words. “I have committed fornication with my boyfriend.” The priest merely nodded, his pen moving across the page. He offered no comfort or guidance, as though he were not truly listening.

When I finished and stepped outside, Bobby was there, leaning against the wall, smoking, smirking. He had been listening. He knew everything.

The memory left me uneasy. If confession was supposed to cleanse me, it had only made me feel watched. Looking back, I could not shake the feeling that it had never been about faith. It had been part of something Bobby was preparing without my knowledge. *If that had been part of his wedding preparations, then I was already trapped.*

But when October 5 arrived, nothing happened. Bobby admitted the lawyers had backed out. They wanted more money than he had. He said he would find another way, even if he had to arrange everything himself. Silently, I prayed that no church would agree and that no priest would dare break the rules. Only later, after my late-night searches, did a new, cold worry settle in: *Why was there nothing online saying I had to prove I was baptized before I could confess? What had he needed that certificate for?*

A few days later, my soap opera finally wrapped. It was my last day on set: the final scenes, the final goodbyes. My suitcase was already packed with a month’s worth of clothes, scripts, and the usual chaos of set life. I felt nothing but relief. It was over. I

could finally go home. The truth was, I had been exhausted from the moment I arrived.

From the first day of shooting, I felt like I didn't belong. I didn't even know where to sit. I was new, a fresh face thrown into an environment where everyone already knew rules they never bothered to explain to me. I sat quietly on a couch in the waiting room, waiting to be called for my first scene. I didn't know it was her spot. No one told me.

Then the lead actress walked in, the star everyone else seemed to orbit. She looked straight at me. I stood, trying to be polite, my body moving faster than my brain. I smiled softly, nervous and respectful. She didn't smile back. She didn't say hi. She scanned me from head to toe, like I was something she hadn't ordered and didn't want delivered. Not knowing what else to do, I sat back down.

She left the room and returned with her assistant, who carried a can of bug spray. Smiling, though not warmly, she sprayed the air in front of me. It was the kind of smile meant to humiliate. Then, in a sweet tone, she said, 'Oops, I didn't know anyone was sitting on the lead actress' couch.' No one else was there. Just the three of us. The actress stood near the door, arms crossed, watching like a director savoring the scene, barely holding back laughter before she left. And of course, instead of getting angry, I felt guilty. I apologized, saying I hadn't known it was her sofa.

The bullying didn't stop there. It lingered, spreading into the smallest moments, the way people looked at me or didn't, the way silence itself felt loaded. Every day was a test, every step like walking on glass, waiting for it to crack under me. So when it ended, I was relieved. But I was also proud. This was the first job where the payment went straight into my account. That was the only reason Bobby allowed me to work again. I had just turned

eighteen, and for the first time I was allowed to open a bank account in my name. When I checked it, I saw it: hundreds of millions of rupiah with my name beside it. I stared at the screen again and again. Not because I wanted to spend it, but because I couldn't believe it. After all the exhaustion, bullying, and pressure, I finally had something that was mine.

I was just beginning to feel grateful that it was over, that I had survived the toxic environment on that set and could finally breathe again. And then my phone rang. It was Bobby.

He had seen the promo video for my soap opera, the one where I wore a white dress. He told me to make sure I brought it home. I told him I had already packed all my clothes, but one question stayed in my mind: *Why did he care about that particular dress?* Then he said, "Tell your mom you don't need the driver tonight. Make something up. I'm driving you home tonight."

His voice was steady, but not calm. It was a forced kind of steadiness, like someone trying to keep a house of cards from collapsing. I didn't argue. I didn't want to fight. Not on my last day.

So I obeyed. I told my mom that a production driver would take me home. I said it would be easier since I had all my stuff. I don't know if she believed me, but she agreed. It was still dark when I stepped out of the studio. Dawn had not yet broken. The air was cool and damp. My body ached. My eyes burned. I just wanted to shower, to sleep, to vanish into comfort.

Then I saw his car, the white Honda Jazz he had bought a few months earlier but could not afford. He had paid only the down payment, yet the monthly installments had already become my responsibility. I had lent him the money. He said he would repay me. He never did. Whether the car was registered in his name or

his sister's, I no longer remember. All I knew was that by then it felt like my debt.

The moment I saw that car, its windows tinted and its engine off, I knew I was not going home. He rolled the window down, his face unreadable, and told me to get in.

I did.

He started driving, but not toward my house. I asked where we were going. He said we were heading to his father's house because his dad wanted to discuss a car rental business idea. It didn't sound impossible because his father had once tried to get me to invest in one of his ideas before, so when Bobby said it, I believed him. I asked whether it really had to be that night because I had not slept, but his face tightened and he ordered me to sleep in the car.

The streets grew emptier. The city faded into smaller houses, then trees, then open land. An Alter Bridge album blasted through the speakers. He belted along to "In Loving Memory," straining his voice as though he believed he sounded good. The muscles in his neck strained as his voice cracked, overconfident and off-key. Worse, he swallowed half the words, letting the syllables blur together until he sounded as though he were singing with a mouthful of marbles.

A thought cut through me, sudden and sharp: *What if he was taking me somewhere to marry me that day?* My chest tightened, but then I glanced at my phone. It was Monday. That gave me comfort for a moment. *Surely no one would hold a wedding on a Monday. Surely it couldn't be today. Right?*

I looked outside, checking the streets. We really were heading toward his house. Once I was sure, I closed my eyes and slept.

When I woke, we were parked in front of a small, old church with cream-colored walls. A couple of cars sat nearby. Rats

darted past the building. Then I realized I knew this place. It was the same church where he had once made me confess my sins.

Several people stood outside, dressed semi-formally. I did not recognize any of them. And then I saw her, his mother. She hugged me warmly, as if this were a joyous day. Something inside me cracked.

This wasn't his house. There was no business talk. This was a trap.

While I was still in shock, I saw Bobby crouched beside my suitcase, searching through it until he found the white dress he had mentioned. He held it up. "Put it on."

I stared at it. "Why?" I already had an idea, but a part of me was still clinging to the hope that I was wrong.

His jaw twitched. "We're getting married."

I let out a small, dry laugh, confused and exhausted. But he wasn't joking. I looked around. None of these people were mine. No family. No friends. Only his. They were waiting.

"Bobby, no," I whispered. "I..."

He grabbed my arm. "You told me you wanted to marry me. Now prove it."

No one moved. No one asked if I was okay. He leaned in, his breath reeking of cigarettes. "You know what will happen if you don't."

Then, as though someone had called action, his expression changed. His eyes filled with tears, and his voice broke as he forced himself to cry. "We did it!" he exclaimed, clutching my hand too tightly. "Be happy, this is what we always wanted! I know it feels unreal, but it's happening!" He performed the role of the happiest groom alive while I stood frozen, my body rigid and my heart unwilling to follow his script.

Deep down, I had known this day would come ever since my birthday. I had carried the fear like a stone in my stomach, praying he wouldn't find a way, clinging to the hope that something, anything, would stop him. But now it was real and unavoidable. I had no choice, not if I wanted to keep my family safe. His threats, the blackmail, his promise to kill my parents, the photos, and the letters all held me in place.

So I nodded. I took the dress. I changed in a small room at the back of the church that smelled of dust and old wood. The fabric was stiff, like a costume for a role I hadn't auditioned for.

When I came out, Bobby was waiting. He told me to smile for the camera, to make it look like a memory worth keeping. His cousin raised a camera and began circling us, taking pictures from every angle as though he were documenting evidence, not joy. Every click felt like another chain, another reminder that this was not my wedding. It was his performance, and I was only the prop. Still, it was happening.

I walked down the aisle. The church was silent. My heart was louder than my footsteps. Bobby stood next to the priest, looking proud.

I looked at him, the man who once made me feel special. Now he did not look at me. He looked through me. Like I was a transaction. A checkbox. A trophy.

His family watched from the pews, dressed in their church clothes even though it was a Monday. A strange day to be married, but nothing about this was right. I searched their faces, hoping someone would truly see me, ask whether I was all right, or say anything at all. No one did.

The priest began. My hands were cold. My head buzzed.

Then came the part meant for the parents, when the bride kneels to receive their blessing. Except mine were not there.

As the priest signaled, Bobby leaned in and hissed, “On your knees. Act like they’re your parents,” pointing toward an older couple seated beside his parents.

Act like they’re my parents?

In the front row sat an older couple I had never seen before, watching and waiting.

I bowed my head, knees on the floor, and whispered awkwardly, “Hi... I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

The woman leaned forward kindly. “Shh, it’s okay. Just pretend.”

What is this? This can’t be my life. It was so bizarre, so wrong, I almost found it funny. There I was, kneeling before strangers, pretending they were my parents and asking for their blessing as though any of this were sacred.

Once it was over, the priest turned back to me, his voice steady and formal. “Do you take this man to be your husband?”

I hesitated and glanced around, hoping someone would stop the ceremony. No one did. Bobby squeezed my hands, his nails digging into my skin. It was the first time he hurt me physically. By then, I was too tired to fight and too worn down to imagine escaping. I told myself there was nothing left to do but accept it and go along with whatever was happening. So I did what I’d always done. I obeyed. I nodded while the camera recorded us. *So that was marriage? Just a nod, a squeeze of his hand, and suddenly I was his?*

11

Not My Daughter

The priest finally pronounced us husband and wife.

I froze. For a moment, I wondered whether even the priest believed the words he had spoken. I could not believe anyone would call this a wedding. Nothing about it was sacred. It was a staged performance designed to trap me.

For a moment, the church fell silent. Then his family erupted in applause, too loud, too cheerful. The sound jolted me, like a victory parade celebrating a battle I had never agreed to fight. They were not clapping for me. They were celebrating him, as though he had claimed a prize. It sounded less like congratulations and more like a chant.

Then came the signing. When the papers were handed over, Bobby leaned in, scanned them, called the priest over, and began arguing with him.

What's going on here?

They argued over the missing civil documents, the fact that I was under twenty-one, and whether witnesses could sign in place of my parents while my parents were still alive. Their voices dropped to whispers as they bent their heads together, debating what could and could not be done. I caught only fragments. It felt like adult business, the kind of rules people argued over in offices. *For a fleeting moment, I let myself believe that maybe none of this would count. Maybe it could still be undone.*

He slid a church document in front of me and told me to sign. My hand trembled as I wrote my name, not daring to read a single line. I thought it was over, but he told me to remain there

with the pen still in my hand. He leaned close as though he were signing too and motioned for his family to take photos. Then, under his breath, he told me to smile. They gathered around, taking pictures of us bent over the document as though it were the crucial shot in a film. Everything felt rehearsed, as if a director had remembered the most important scene at the last second.

When the signing ended, his entire family was already lined up, posing as though this were the happiest day of our lives. Strangers smiled at me excitedly, nudging one another and whispering about my sinetron. Before I could catch my breath, Bobby pulled me forward, wrapped his arm around me, and turned me toward the cameras. “Stand here. This is your family now,” he said, softly but firmly.

So I stood beside people whose names I did not know, smiling for photographs I had never wanted and pretending any of this was real. One by one, they asked for additional pictures, as though this were a meet-and-greet. It felt less like a wedding and more like a spectacle. *How could I be both a bride and a celebrity sighting at the same time? For a moment, I told myself that these might be the only wedding photos I would ever have. If so, I might as well smile. Maybe, somehow, the future would look different.* He watched me with the proud expression of a father admiring a child who had remembered her lines.

After the photographs came breakfast, presented as a celebration.

No one sat. Everyone stood with plates in their hands. There were trays of rice, a bowl of noodles, and someone handing out fruit. His family laughed and chatted as though they were at a birthday party.

I was not hungry. I could never stomach heavy food in the morning. I took a small plate of fruit and stepped aside, waiting for Bobby to take me home.

He walked over and looked at my plate. “That’s it?”

I whispered that fruit was enough.

“Eat the noodles,” he said. “In Chinese tradition, noodles symbolize a long marriage. You have to.”

“I don’t want to,” I said, louder now.

His hand shot out and pinched the soft skin at my waist, twisting until I gasped. Pain flared through me, sharp enough to bring tears to my eyes. “Don’t make this difficult,” he muttered.

I blinked back tears, swallowed, and picked up the noodles. The tears slipped down my face as I forced myself to chew. A man nearby started to approach me for a photograph, noticed my tears, and quietly turned away.

His mother noticed and approached us, looking confused. “She doesn’t like the noodles?”

Bobby smiled quickly. “She’s just being stubborn.”

His mother chuckled and said, “But she has to. In Chinese tradition, noodles make a marriage last long.”

I smiled weakly. Inside I was breaking. Not even an hour had passed, and he had already pinched me until my skin burned.

If this is what a long marriage looks like, how could I survive it?

After breakfast, we did not go home. He drove me to a small photo studio.

On the way, he told me to put on even more makeup. “Make it heavier so you don’t look like a kid.”

Some of his relatives at the church had said I looked too young, like a schoolgirl playing dress-up. Their comments had embarrassed him, and now he wanted to erase the child they had seen, at least in the photographs.

I opened my makeup bag, layered on more foundation, darkened my lips, and tied my hair lower. Anything to hide the girl who was still shaking.

The studio was small and cramped, smelling of ink and old curtains. A wrinkled blue backdrop hung behind the chair, while a buzzing fan stirred the hot air. It was the kind of place used for passport or ID photos, nothing more.

The photographer barely spoke. “Sit. Look straight. Smile.” The shutter clicked. Done. “I’ll come back for it later,” Bobby said as he headed for the door.

I didn’t even understand why we needed those photos. The priest had made it clear that a civil marriage was impossible. From the argument inside the church, it had sounded as though everything should have ended there. Yet after all that, Bobby had still brought me there and insisted on taking those photographs, as though there were another document he could use, some hidden way to make everything real. I did not know what he was trying to create, and I no longer wanted to know. I stopped asking questions. I only wanted to go home. My mom still thought I’d been shooting since the day before. If I didn’t arrive soon, she’d start asking questions I couldn’t answer. Overnight shoots were common in Indonesia, so for the moment, she had no reason to suspect that anything was wrong.

The guilt clawed at me. I hated lying to her. Even small lies always made me feel dirty, and this wasn’t small. This was a mountain I didn’t know how to carry.

Back in the car, the silence pressed in around me.

I rested my head against the window, still thinking about my mom waiting at home. Bobby changed the subject as if nothing had happened. He started talking about rings. “We’ll need our own soon. Something simple.”

Then he added that the payment from his last project had not arrived yet, so I would have to pay for the rings first. *Of course.*

During the ceremony, we had used borrowed rings. Mine had been too large and kept slipping around my finger. I did not even know who they belonged to. They were props, slipped onto our fingers for the photographs. For the performance. Like everything else that day.

I said nothing and stared at the road ahead. *Am I married? Is this what marriage is?* It felt like a bad soap opera, a script someone had written for me without ever asking whether I wanted the role.

As we drove, I opened my phone. A message from my mom waited on the screen. “Hi miss, take good care of you, okay?”

She never texted like that. It wasn’t her style.

She knows something is wrong. Maybe not what, but something.

When we pulled up to my building, he kept the engine running. “Enjoy your last days with your mom,” he said. “As soon as the church gives me the letter, I’ll come get you. Once I have that letter, no one will be able to stop me.”

I clung to one fragile hope. No civil documents had been signed because I was still under twenty-one, and without my parents’ consent, the marriage could not be made legal. They had argued about it inside the church, whispering that nothing could be made legal without my parents’ signatures.

Maybe the church would never release the letter. Maybe everything would remain in limbo. Maybe there was still a way out.

I got out of the car and went straight upstairs.

My mom opened the door in her pajamas and smiled gently. "Just getting home now? You must be so tired."

I forced a small smile. "Yeah, I just finished shooting. I stopped by the mall for breakfast before coming home."

I smiled, but inside I was falling apart. She had no idea what had just happened. No idea that her daughter had been handed over behind her back or that I had lied to conceal it. I would rather have been screamed at or punished than stand there hiding the truth from the one person who had always fought for me. But this wasn't just a lie. It was a wall I'd built between us.

She did not seem to understand what had happened, but worry lingered in her expression. I told her I was tired and needed sleep. She let me go.

I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. I did not sleep. I simply went numb. *How was I supposed to enjoy my last days?* I did not even want to be alive.

For the next few days, I barely moved. I replayed everything over and over, as though my own mind were punishing me. *Why didn't I run? Yes, he had threatened my parents. But was there truly no other way? What if I had told my mom and begged her to stay calm? Maybe she would have helped. Maybe we could have become a team. Maybe we could have gone back to Belgium.*

Instead, I had remained silent. Now I was counting down the days as though they were hours. I hated myself for being so afraid, for letting it happen.

Weeks had passed since the ceremony, yet there had been no sign of the church letter. Then one afternoon, as I sat spiraling on

the couch, my mom noticed. She watched me for a moment before sitting down slowly. When she spoke, her voice was soft, almost casual. “You know, I received a strange letter the other day.

“There was no name. It was anonymous. It said I should keep you close because Bobby had bad intentions. It said he was planning to marry you on October 10.” She let out a small laugh and shook her head. “Of course, I didn’t believe it. You were either at home or working. I saw you every day. At first, I was worried. I thought about it constantly, but the days kept passing and nothing happened. You were still here, right in front of me, so I convinced myself it was nonsense. But now... I just need to ask...”

She turned toward me. “You didn’t... right?”

I broke.

The tears came fast. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m so sorry, Mom. I never meant for any of this to happen. I didn’t want it. I’m only still here because I was waiting for him to receive some kind of letter from the church. I’m sorry. I didn’t know what else to do.”

She froze. Then she screamed.

She screamed as though something had died. “GET OUT!” she shouted, her eyes wide and her voice shaking. “GET OUT! YOU’RE NOT MY DAUGHTER ANYMORE!”

She ran into her bedroom, slammed the door, and locked it.

I stood there shaking. I had hoped we could finally talk, that she would let me explain, but she did not want to hear me. She was not ready. She had already seen enough.

And just like that, I had no home. No mother. No safety. No voice left to explain.

12

The Good Girl

I didn't think anything could hurt more than what Bobby had done to me until my own mom said she no longer wanted me.

When she screamed, "You're not my daughter anymore," it was not only her voice that cracked. My entire world did too. The weight of her words crushed me in a way even Bobby never had. It felt as if someone had reached inside and ripped out the very thing that kept me breathing.

I did not scream back. I did not fight. I dropped to my knees outside her bedroom door and sobbed louder than I ever had in my life. I did not try to stop. I wanted her to hear me. I needed her to. I begged through the door, through the walls, through the shame, asking her to take it back. I begged for forgiveness, told her I didn't want this, that I'd figure something out, that I'd stay, that I'd make it right.

The only reply was her voice, distant and shaking. "Get out of my house. You don't need to wait for that paper. Just go."

Her words kept echoing in my head, hollowing me out until I could no longer think clearly. I did not know where else to turn, so I called the only person I could think of: Bobby. Still breathless, I told him what had happened.

"She knows," I sobbed. "Mom knows everything."

His response was neither concern nor sympathy. It was joy.

"Seriously?" he asked, his voice filled with excitement, as though he had just won something. "So, should I come get you?"

I said yes. He did not care that the church letter was not ready or that none of this was supposed to happen yet.

“She kicked you out? What did she say?”

I stayed silent, but he kept talking.

“It’s okay if she doesn’t want you anymore. It means you’re all mine. Start packing your stuff. I’ll pick you up. Wait for me in the lobby.”

Then he laughed. Actually laughed. “Yay!” he said, as if this were some kind of celebration, like I was a prize he had just earned.

His joy was unbearable, but I was too numb to argue. I packed like a ghost, barely looking at my belongings as I shoved whatever I thought I would need into a bag. Then I waited for him downstairs, like a girl waiting for her sentence to be carried out. I was still shaking, still struggling to breathe, and still crying so hard that my voice kept cutting out when he arrived.

This wasn’t part of the plan. I wasn’t supposed to leave yet. The church letter wasn’t ready. But my mom didn’t care. She didn’t want to see my face or even have me under her roof. She just wanted me gone.

I cried the entire way there: as I crossed the street, inside the car, and through the front gate of his parents’ house. It was not quiet crying. It was ugly, loud, and raw. My body kept folding in on itself, my chest tightening like something was crushing my lungs. But I didn’t care how it looked anymore. I had already lost everything.

His parents opened the door. They took in my red eyes, my shaking hands, and my face wet with tears, but they said nothing. They just stood there, unsure of what to do.

I walked straight to the bedroom, collapsed onto the bed, and kept crying.

That night, I didn't sleep. I couldn't. Instead, I opened my phone and began sending my mom message after message. I didn't care if she never replied. Each message felt like a thread I was desperately trying to tie back to her heart. I told her I was sorry, that I didn't want this life, that I couldn't breathe knowing I had broken her. Please take it back. I can't survive without you. Hearing her say those words had shattered me in a way nothing else ever had.

I begged the way a child begs for her life.

For three days, I did not stop. Morning, afternoon, and night, I kept texting, hoping, pleading, and praying. I didn't know if she was reading them, but I had to keep trying.

Until finally, she replied.

She said she was sorry. That she didn't mean it. That I would always be her daughter.

And just like that, I could breathe again. Not fully, but enough to stay alive.

Bobby noticed the shift, and he didn't like it.

When I was broken, silent, and alone, he was calm. He smiled. He was in control. But now that even the thinnest thread connected me to my mom again, he grew tense. Cold.

"She's not a good mother," he said one night. "A real mother wouldn't do that to her child. She only wants you when you're making money again. She wants to own you. That's why she's pretending to love you again. I told you from the start, you were never their daughter. You were their cash cow. Now that you're not working for them, they're done."

I stared at the wall, letting his words sit and rot. Part of me knew he was twisting the truth again, but part of me, still raw and bleeding, couldn't fight back. Not yet.

The house was small, a modest home in a quiet town far from where I had lived. Bobby and his parents were not the only people living there. His older sister, her husband, their toddler, and a live-in nanny lived there too. Seven people in a house that barely fit them, and now I was number eight.

Yet for a house that full, it wasn't as loud or chaotic as I expected. Everyone mostly kept to themselves. Bobby's father was quiet and simple, the kind of man who didn't say much and didn't expect much either. His sister was always busy with her little family, often arguing with her husband, but they never involved themselves in my problems with Bobby. The nanny was soft-spoken and kind, already elderly and far too gentle for a house that operated this way. I often saw her wince from back pain or rub her legs while quietly mentioning that her salary was repeatedly paid late. It broke my heart, seeing someone that age still working like that, like a worn-out ghost moving through the background.

The only person who consistently unsettled me was Bobby's mom. She was small and aging, but there was something about her that felt staged, like everything she did was for show, even when no one was watching. The way she moved and spoke felt strangely performative. She reminded me of the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella*, except this was not a grand estate. It was a cramped house in the suburbs, and there was no prince coming to save me.

Soon the days began to blur, each one folding into the next. That was when the routines began, and with them, the rules. I wasn't used to living with strangers. I wasn't used to waking up

and immediately seeing people I didn't know. And I definitely wasn't used to smiling when I felt like dying inside.

Still, I clung to one small hope: now that my mom had forgiven me, maybe I could see her again, even for a moment.

So I asked, gently, carefully, "Can I see Mom?"

He laughed. "Excuse me? How long did they keep you from seeing me, huh? How many months did they hide you from me like I was some criminal?"

I stayed quiet. I didn't know what to say.

He leaned in closer, voice low and sharp. "Now it's their turn."

Tears rushed to my eyes. "But that's not fair," I whispered. "Why am I still being punished?"

He shrugged. "They did this." Then he softened his tone, as if he were granting me mercy. "One day. If you're a good girl, if you behave, maybe one day you'll earn it."

So I tried. I wanted to prove that I was a good girl. I wanted him to see it. I wanted everyone in that house to see it. Maybe if I did everything right, he'd let me see her again. Maybe if I made myself useful, I could earn back the right to see my own mom.

I learned to make coffee for Bobby. Then came the floors, which I wiped by hand, because according to him that was the only way to really get them clean. I washed his clothes by hand too, since the machine had stopped working. Just my luck.

I remember the first time I did it, my hands throbbed for hours, aching deep in the joints as if the bones themselves were swollen. Every movement sent pain through my fingers, but I told myself to keep going, because maybe this was the way back. Maybe if I proved I was a good enough wife, I could see my mom.

When his mom saw me struggling, she smiled gently and said, “You’ll get used to it. You have to learn how to be a good wife someday. Besides, our helper is old now. She deserves a rest.” I remember thinking, *What did she mean by that? Was I supposed to replace the maid?* But it was true, the nanny was old. Most days, I saw her resting her head on the ironing board, drifting off in the middle of a task from sheer exhaustion. She barely spoke. She just moved from chore to chore, like her body was running on autopilot, as if this house had drained her too.

At first, I only washed Bobby’s clothes and mine. But then one day someone added a few extra pieces. “Can you wash these too?” Then, on another day, “Oh, just these, if you don’t mind.” And before I realized it, I was washing laundry for his parents as well. Thankfully, his sister still had the decency to do her own family’s laundry elsewhere. It was the one quiet mercy in a house where, day by day, everything else started falling on me.

The helper was still around, but her duties had shrunk. She mostly ironed now. Washing, folding, and scrubbing somehow became my responsibility.

As my chores multiplied, my body began to betray me too. By the time I arrived at Bobby’s house, I was on my period. I didn’t think much of it at first, it had come right on time. But as the days passed, it didn’t stop. It just kept going. I wasn’t in pain, just confused. Every morning I woke up expecting it to be over, but it never was. Day after day, the bleeding continued. I tried to brush it off, telling myself it would end soon. But a quiet worry started building in the back of my mind. I felt lightheaded and weak, as though my body were failing to recover. Still, I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know how to. So I kept moving, smiling when I needed to, cleaning, folding, handing Bobby his coffee like everything was fine, all while silently wondering why I hadn’t stopped bleeding.

After two weeks, Bobby began to grow irritated. “You’re still bleeding?” he asked with a frown. Not out of concern, but frustration, as if my pain were inconvenient, as if my body had betrayed him. I told him I didn’t know why it hadn’t stopped. He rolled his eyes and walked away.

I clung to anything that reminded me of love, even if it was just words on a screen. At night, when I finally lay down, I reread my mom’s message: “You will always be my daughter.” I must have read it a hundred times, clinging to it like proof that she still loved me.

But every morning when I opened my eyes and saw Bobby next to me, my body froze. For a split second I didn’t remember where I was or who I was with. And every time, my heart jolted in horror before my brain caught up. *Oh. Right.* My body never got used to waking up with him there, and I don’t think it ever would.

It went on like that for weeks. Each time I startled awake, Bobby grew more irritated. He sighed, rolled his eyes, muttered under his breath, “Wow. Still? You sure it isn’t just for attention at this point?”

Every time I froze or flinched, he treated it as another reason to tighten his hold. Through it all, I waited for the moment he might say I’d been good, that I could see my mom again.

Instead, he spent hours playing his electric guitar in the next room, loudly enough to rattle the walls. He wasn’t in a hurry to let me go anywhere. He didn’t need to be. I was already here. He had won. I belonged to him.

He had what he wanted. He was happiest when I was broken because that was when he felt most powerful. He liked me best when I had no fight left in me.

Still, I held on to one last piece of hope.

But the more I tried to prove I was a good girl, the more I began to notice something unsettling. No matter what I did, it never seemed to matter. Bobby's mom continued to elevate him as though he were someone the entire world should admire without question. Sometimes I felt she was more afraid I might embarrass him than anything else. Once she even told me not to leave the house without powder and lipstick, even if it was just to the end of the street to hand Bobby a towel while he played basketball. "What will people think?" she said.

Another time, just after I woke up, she looked at me and said, "Good thing your fans can't see you right now. They'd be shocked." She smiled as if it were lighthearted, but it didn't feel like a joke. It felt like a reminder that even half asleep I was already failing, because in her eyes I was never allowed to be real. In her world, it was never about me. It was always about him, about protecting his image.

Then one afternoon, while guests were visiting, she suddenly picked up a mop and began cleaning the floors, even though I had already cleaned them that morning. She didn't say anything. She just mopped slowly and deliberately while the guests watched. I stood frozen, certain that the guests would assume I had been sitting around doing nothing while an older woman did all the work.

I asked gently, "Why are you mopping again? I already cleaned the floors this morning."

She smiled and said, "It didn't look like it."

Her smile told me everything. It wasn't just Bobby who wanted me small.

That was when I realized the nightmare had only just begun.

13

He Cried

Two months passed. Two months of bleeding that refused to stop. Two months trapped inside the house, going nowhere.

Every day, Bobby called the priest and pressured him about the letter that, for some reason, still had not been issued. Until that letter was in his hands, he made sure I had no opportunity to run or disappear. He seemed paranoid that I might somehow slip away. But by then, I had already resigned myself to staying. *What else could I do?* I felt married, even though everything about the marriage had happened in the wrong way. I could not see an escape worth the risk it would bring. My mom understood that too. She knew I couldn't come to her yet.

Each morning I woke up in a house that didn't feel like mine, surrounded by people I barely knew, doing chores I never agreed to. And because Bobby knew I was walking on eggshells, doing everything I could to earn his permission to see my mom, he used that to his advantage. He became more controlling and no longer bothered to hide his cruelty. If I didn't do something exactly the way he wanted, he'd snap.

Once, I forgot to put the cap back on my bottle of baby oil. He saw it open on the sink, hurled something across the room without a word, and screamed so loudly that my entire body flinched. Another time, it was the laptop. He picked it up, tilted the screen toward the light, and spotted a single fingerprint. That alone was enough. He slammed the laptop shut and raised his voice, starting another fight as though my mistake had been an act of betrayal. Even when I tried my best, it was never good

enough. There was always something: a flaw, a fault, or some imagined failure. He never missed an opportunity to find one.

All the while, his guitar echoed through the walls and his off-key voice spread through the house like mold. My mom's words repeated in my head like a heartbeat: "You will always be my daughter." I clung to those words like oxygen. But I still wasn't allowed to see her. Every time I asked Bobby, gently, carefully, like I was approaching a wild animal, he grew cold. Not angry, just quietly dangerous. "Did you ever ask your mom this often when you wanted to see me?" he'd ask. Then he would laugh a little, but his eyes never matched the sound. "If you keep pushing, I'll want to let you go even less. Just focus on being a good girl. I'll decide when you're ready. You have to earn it and be patient."

So I waited, and I bled. The bleeding didn't stop. It wasn't heavy, but it was constant, enough to leave me weak, dizzy, detached from my own body. Most days, I felt as though I were floating, my body going through the motions while the rest of me had sunk somewhere deep inside, beyond anyone's reach. I tried to hide how pale I'd gotten, and food didn't help. In that house, no one ever ate fresh meat. They said it was too expensive. Every day, we ate the same thing: canned pork. At first it tasted fine, even comforting, but eventually the smell alone made me sick. I lost my appetite completely. I could barely keep anything down, and before long, I began losing weight.

I smiled when I handed him his coffee. I nodded when his mother told me to mop the floor at six in the morning. I didn't let anyone see how slow I was moving, how often I had to sit down. I didn't want questions. Then one morning, I stood up too quickly and everything went dark. My vision spun as I reached for the table, barely catching myself before I collapsed. His mother saw what happened and called for Bobby in a panic. I tried to explain it away, that I hadn't eaten enough, that I had simply stood up too

quickly, but she wouldn't let it go. So I told her about the bleeding, that it hadn't stopped.

She looked horrified. "What if she can't have children?" That was her first thought. Not that I might be sick, not that I might need help, but that I might fail to give him a child. My body was breaking down in front of her, and all she saw was a womb.

That night she told him I needed to see a doctor as soon as possible.

The next day, as I was getting ready, Bobby blocked the bedroom door, arms crossed. "Let me see," he said.

"See what?" I asked.

"Your pad. I want to see it."

"What?" I stared at him, confused.

He looked annoyed. "I just want to make sure you're not lying. I'm not wasting gas just to have a doctor tell me you made it all up. You've lied before. You're good at it."

The heat rose in my chest. "You think I'm making it up?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"You always seem to be bleeding when I want something. I'm not saying you're lying, I'm saying it's convenient."

Convenient. That was his word. As if my pain, my body, my fear were nothing more than tricks to be doubted and inspected. It was the first time he had demanded that I show him directly. Before that, I had once caught him opening a used pad from the trash, but he had never confronted me like this, face to face.

I wanted to scream, but I didn't. I stayed still, because my silence was the only power I had left. I told him no. He leaned closer, wearing the same smile as the villains he was often

typecast as in soap operas, as though those characters had begun bleeding into real life. “If you have nothing to hide, then let me see,” he said.

I hesitated, but I showed him. He looked at it without a word. No apology, no guilt, not even the slightest flicker of discomfort. Then he grabbed his keys as though nothing humiliating had happened. “We’re going,” he said, treating the inspection as nothing more than another task crossed off his list.

We didn’t speak in the car. By the time we got to the clinic I was already numb. The clinic was small and quiet. The doctor was an older woman with kind eyes and a gentle voice. She asked questions I was not ready to answer, about my menstrual cycle, the pain, and the stress I was under. I felt the tears rise before I could stop them. She gave me a quick exam. She didn’t find anything physically wrong. “This can happen when someone is under extreme emotional stress,” she said softly. “Hormone levels can shift, and the body can react in unexpected ways. The bleeding is your body’s way of sounding the alarm.”

Then she looked me in the eyes and said the one thing no one else had: “Right now, the important thing is rest. Keep her comfortable, keep things calm, and her body will find its way back.”

I wanted to believe it could be that simple. The doctor’s words stayed with me, offering a fragile and unfamiliar sense of hope, but Bobby only brushed them aside. On the drive home I stared out the window. I wanted to believe that, now that he knew I had been telling the truth, he would ease up. Maybe he would finally understand. But Bobby didn’t seem comforted. He seemed irritated. “Well,” he finally muttered, “at least we know you’re not dying. Or infertile.” I stayed quiet. He glanced at me. “Maybe if you start shooting again you’ll be happier. It’ll help the family too. The money from your last soap’s already close to gone.”

It was the payment from the first soap opera whose earnings had gone directly into my personal account, but it was already gone because I'd transferred it all to Bobby for his needs and his family's expenses. According to him, because we were married, my money belonged to him too. He hated the idea of me having anything that was separate from him. I didn't answer. I felt myself shrinking smaller and smaller with every word.

That night I sat alone on the edge of the bed, knees tucked to my chest. I opened my phone and scrolled through old messages I had not touched in months. They were still there: offers, casting calls, campaigns. People still wanted to work with me, and the realization sparked something small inside me, faint but real. So I replied. I said yes. I said I was ready. Then the same question appeared again and again: "Who will be signing your contract?" I said I would. They told me I could not sign because I was under twenty-one and, legally, still considered a minor. One of my parents had to sign unless they were both deceased. I would not be able to sign independently until I turned twenty-one. Bobby was not my parent. He didn't even have proof on paper that he was my husband. All he could do was show people photographs from our so-called happy day, but photographs were not legal proof.

He was furious. "I'm your husband in Christ!" he shouted. "Who do they think you're living with? What more do they need from me?" But the law didn't care about ceremonies held in churches without witnesses. On paper I was still single, and on paper only my parents could speak for me. He made calls, asked around, tried to find a loophole. There wasn't one. Then he turned to me and said it like it was nothing. "Okay. Let's go see your mom. You'll ask her to sign."

My heart stopped. "Really?" I whispered. He smiled. "Yeah. But remember why you're going. You're there to get her signature."

I didn't care why. I just wanted to see her. That February, I was allowed to see my mother for the first time in months. The day before we were supposed to go, I sent her a message: "Mom, can you cook some really good meat?" That was all I said. I didn't explain why. I did not tell her how much I missed her cooking, how sick I was of eating the same canned food every day, or that I had not eaten fresh meat in months. I didn't say I'd been dreaming about it. Just that one quiet request. If she'd known the truth, she would've been sad, because ever since I was little she'd always tried to give me the very best.

The moment I entered the apartment and smelled her cooking, my chest tightened. After so long, I was finally seeing my mom again and breathing in the familiar scent of her food. I didn't even make it halfway across the room before the tears came. She opened her arms and I ran into them like a little girl, like I was five again, lost in Brussels and crying for home. She caught me, and every defense I had left collapsed in her arms. I told her I was sorry, that I never wanted to hurt her, that I missed her every single day. She held me close and whispered, "As long as you're happy, I'm happy too."

I wanted to scream, *But I'm not happy*. I wanted to tell her, *I don't feel safe.* But I didn't. I couldn't risk losing her again. So I smiled. I nodded. I told her I was happy, that I missed shooting, that I wanted to work again. And she believed me, partly because it was true.

She signed the contract, but only after we changed the bank account listed for my payment. Bobby had tried to use his own account, but my mom and I replaced it with one in my name. And just like that, I joined a new soap opera called *Magic*. The name felt ironic. Nothing about my life felt magical. But maybe this could be the beginning of something better.

Starting work on *Magic* felt like being reborn. Even though Bobby still followed me everywhere, even though I still had to walk over to him between takes, even though he wouldn't let me get too close to the other actors, I finally had something that was mine again. The cast was young, with most of them around my age. They laughed easily. They said I was funny. They had no idea what I was going through. And then one day, just like that, the bleeding stopped.

It should have been a relief, but instead, I was terrified. I no longer had an excuse, a shield, or a reason he might accept when I said no. My body was no longer broken, which meant it was available again. But I couldn't let him touch me. I felt nothing. Not even hatred. Just silent, hollow dread. So I lied. I told him I was still bleeding. At first that was enough, but I knew him. Sometimes, words were not enough for him. Without warning, he would demand proof.

So I created my own evidence. Every night before bed, I went into the bathroom and opened a fresh sanitary pad. I squeezed ketchup into the center and added soy sauce to darken the color. I kept the two small bottles hidden inside the compartment at the back of the toilet, beneath the lid, where no one would notice them. I got good at it, good enough to fool him. I placed a tissue underneath the pad to keep the mixture from touching my skin, but it did not help. The acidity still made my skin burn. I started to itch. It turned red. Raw. I winced with every step. I chose that pain because it felt like the lesser one.

One night, after a long day of shooting, I came home exhausted and still wearing the school uniform from the set. I had not yet changed or prepared the pad when Bobby looked at me and asked, "Still bleeding?"

I nodded. "Yeah." I turned my back to him, pretending to be busy, hoping he would drop it. But he wasn't done. "Let me see."

My stomach dropped. I hesitated, and in that moment, without warning, he pulled down my school skirt himself. He looked at the pad, then back at me, his expression saying, *Do you think I'm stupid?*

Apparently, the fake blood had not been convincing enough.

Without saying a single word, he spat in my face. His spit landed warm and wet on my cheek, then slid past my jaw and down my neck. He looked at me like I was nothing. I did not move. I did not cry. I did not scream. I simply stood there, my chest rising and falling, as though I were trapped at the bottom of the ocean with no air left. Then he began to cry, huge, angry, messy tears, as though he were the one who had been hurt.

That was when I realized he hadn't just spat in my face. He had turned violence into a performance.

And now he wanted to be the victim too, as if I had done this to him.

14

The Ritual

The cruelty didn't crash in. It crept in.

"Why did you hurt me like that?" he asked. "Why do you treat me this way? I did everything for you. I sacrificed everything. I kept my promise. I waited for you. I married you. Is this what I get in return?"

I didn't understand how we got there. One second he was spitting in my face, the next he was on the floor sobbing, making me feel like the monster. Somehow, amid all that chaos and confusion, I began to wonder whether he might be right. He twisted my empathy until I believed that I had hurt him, that I had gone too far, and that I had failed.

He said he was sorry, but only after making sure the blame still belonged to me. He claimed that he never would have done it if I had not pushed him, that he did not want to hurt me, but that his soul was breaking. He said that all he had ever wanted was for me to love him as I had in the beginning. According to him, I had changed and broken his heart, and that was why he had treated me that way. Then he reminded me that even the Bible said it was a wife's duty to serve her husband, as though God Himself were on his side.

In the end, guilt wore me down until I gave in again. After that, he held me close, still weeping but calmer now, like nothing had happened. He whispered another apology, his gaze lingering on the uniform. "Keep it here," he said softly. "I like it."

I froze as a knot formed in my stomach. *Is he serious?* Moments later, as if nothing had been said at all, he drifted off to sleep in my arms.

I lay awake, staring at the ceiling, swallowed by confusion and lingering shame. I did not even wipe the spit away. I let it dry on my face, thinking, *What the hell just happened?*

After that night, it became routine. He did not need a serious reason. Sometimes it was because I left the bathroom light on. Sometimes because I forgot to close my baby oil bottle. Once, just because I didn't charge his phone. Whatever it was, the punishment was always the same.

Spitting. Crying. Forced sex. Apology. Sleep.

Every time he cried afterward, I forgave him. His tears looked so real, so desperate, that in those moments he didn't seem dangerous. But deep down I knew something was wrong. The more it happened, the more I realized it had nothing to do with me at all. He wanted it this way.

The uniform only made it clearer. After the uniform was left at his house, he often asked me to wear it to bed. If I said no, or even admitted that wearing it made me uncomfortable, another fight could begin. He used his words to cut into me again and again, deliberately breaking me down and pushing me until I cried. Slowly, I noticed how much more satisfied he seemed whenever I cried in that uniform, as though my tears were part of what he wanted. When I finally understood that what aroused him was seeing me dressed as a schoolgirl and crying, I threw the uniform away and told him that I had lost it.

He did not believe me, and we argued about it. When his father overheard us and asked why a missing school uniform mattered so much, Bobby fell silent and never mentioned it again.

I remembered the way he talked about me to his friends when they asked why he was with someone so young. He told them he loved me because I was mature for my age, wise beyond my years. But the truth was the opposite. The truth was that he wanted me most when I looked like a child. The uniform revealed the truth he never dared to say aloud: what he had really wanted from me all along.

I often thought about the life I could have had if things had gone another way. Before Bobby took me away to live with him, I had been invited to enter one of the country's most prestigious competitions. The invitation came directly from someone in a senior position within the organization. They said I had everything they were looking for: grace, intelligence, presence, and especially the ability to speak four languages. Those were their words, by the way, not mine. Becoming a Miss had never been my dream, but the opportunity excited me. It had always been my mom's dream.

Ever since I was little, people in Belgium had told her that I looked like a future beauty queen, someone destined for a crown. She carried those words with her, and I grew up hearing them too, but I never saw myself the way they did.

Bobby didn't allow it. He said the pageant world was fake and toxic and that I was too pure for it. I obeyed him, even though I was heartbroken. Still, he didn't trust me. He thought maybe I would change my mind, that I would sneak behind his back and join anyway. He also knew that if I won, I would not be allowed to marry during my reign, and that possibility frightened him. So he made sure I couldn't.

He told me to get a tattoo, and he made sure everyone knew I had one, so I would never qualify for the pageant. He invited a journalist he knew to the tattoo studio to film the process. At the time, pageant rules did not allow contestants with tattoos, and

Bobby knew it. That journalist quickly became his go-to. Not every reporter was on Bobby's side; some kept their distance, and I could tell they had doubts about him. The journalists who had previously interviewed my dad seemed to understand that something was not right. But this one didn't care. He was loyal to Bobby, or maybe just to the headlines. As long as Bobby gave him access to me, he stayed close.

Bobby had it all planned. He told me he wanted a tattoo of Jesus on his right arm, so people would see how religious he was. He even said his right arm offered the perfect angle for the camera, so the tattoo would remain visible whenever he filmed guitar covers. The night before, he rehearsed his answers in front of the mirror as though he were preparing for a press conference. He asked me which sentences sounded more sincere, whether he should mention God more, or throw in something about forgiveness. He was so sure this would be his moment.

At the studio, I had a feather tattooed on my leg while he sat beside me having a giant portrait of Jesus inked across his right arm. "So people will know how religious I am," he said proudly, like that somehow covered everything else.

When the footage aired, they only showed me, my tattoo, my face, my story. He was livid. "Seriously? I sat there all day, gave them everything, suffered through the pain, and they don't even show my Jesus tattoo?"

Making me look bad wasn't enough. He wanted screen time too.

Months later, after I had moved in with him, Bobby invited the same journalist back for a couples interview about our so-called happy life. Unlike me, Bobby loved attention. Whenever I was at events, if there were journalists around, I always tried to avoid them. I never liked the attention. Bobby was the opposite.

He would flash his biggest smile and circle past them again and again, hoping they would stop him for an interview.

I worked in the industry because I needed money. Bobby chased fame as though it were air. I would never, ever invite a journalist to cover my daily life, but Bobby was different. If he could have had cameras following him every day like the Kardashians, he would have loved it.

Before the interview, he coached me to smile, hold his hand, act as though I were in love, and convince the public that my parents were delusional and that Bobby was the love of my life. I hated it, but I played along. I really tried. I wasn't good at pretending yet, and apparently it showed.

When the interview aired, he invited his friends and parents to watch. He sat there smiling proudly, thrilled to see himself featured on an entertainment-news program. Every time his face appeared on the screen, his family and friends clapped and patted his shoulder like he had just won an award. But Bobby kept glancing at me, as if my performance hadn't quite delivered.

A while later, he decided to watch it again online. He scrolled through the comments as though they were reviews of his performance, and then he found one he didn't like. It said something like, "The girl looks pressured. The guy talks the whole time but makes her hold the mic. He seems too dominant. I think she needs help."

He was furious. He tried to report the comment, but since the video wasn't on our account, there was nothing he could do. I told him not to take it to heart, that it was just one person's opinion, that these things happen. I remained calm and tried to defuse the situation, but that only made him angrier.

He exploded. He accused me of looking pleased by the comment. According to him, I wanted people to see him as a

monster and had deliberately tried to destroy his image. If I truly loved him, he said, I should have been smarter and more careful. It didn't matter what I said. He wasn't looking for logic, he was looking for a reason to unleash what was already brewing.

After raging uncontrollably, he gripped my face with one hand and raised the other as though he were about to hit me. But he did not. Instead, without a word, he spat on me again, and again, and again.

Time slowed. It felt like falling, knowing I was about to hit the ground while still having time to think, *Is this really happening?* I was in shock. It felt as though I were hovering above my own body, forced to watch the horror unfold below me.

He didn't stop. He spat until there was nothing left, until his mouth made a dry clicking sound. The last spit came from deep in his throat. The smell was revolting, sharp, like breath rotting on my skin.

That's when I screamed for the first time.

Not a polite, restrained cry. I screamed. It came from somewhere I didn't even know existed, a place buried so deep I thought I'd lost it forever. The sound tore out of me, raw and uncontrolled, echoing through the room like a scream from a horror film, the kind that makes walls tremble and strangers freeze.

He panicked. He tried to cover my mouth and ordered me to be quiet before running downstairs to his parents. I didn't know what he told them, probably that I was being dramatic, probably that they should just ignore me. And they all did.

Except the maid. She burst into the room, wide-eyed. When she saw me, shaking, soaked in tears and spit, she didn't ask anything. She simply wrapped her arms around me. She cried

with me, stroked my hair, and whispered, “Please calm down. Please.”

I sobbed into her arms. “I want to go home,” I whispered. “I want to go home to my parents. I can’t live like this.”

Bobby must have heard, because when he came back into the room he suddenly said, “Fine, go back to your mother then.” The maid, looking uneasy, slipped out of the room.

“Come on,” Bobby said. For a moment I thought he meant it. My heart raced as I grabbed my suitcase and started putting my clothes inside. He even helped me pack, but the entire time, he spoke as though he were the one being betrayed. “You’re really doing this? Fine. Don’t regret it later.”

I stayed quiet, terrified that if I said the wrong thing he would change his mind. Deep down, I knew I would never regret leaving him. Besides, the church still had not issued any letter confirming our so-called marriage. If everything had truly been legitimate, why was the letter still missing?

Instead I texted my mom, my hands shaking. “Are you awake?”

She replied: “Yes. Are you coming?”

I didn’t trust that it was real, that I would actually be allowed to go home.

As we walked down the stairs, I allowed myself to hope. For a few brief moments I believed I was really leaving, that maybe this was finally it.

But right at the front door he collapsed, sobbing, shaking, screaming. “You can’t do this to me,” he cried. “I’m your husband in Christ.”

And just like that, the act began again. His mother appeared next, fanning herself with a handheld fan as if she might faint.

She always reached for that fan whenever we fought, claiming that the conflict made it difficult for her to breathe.

“Please, just make up,” she pleaded, her voice breaking. “This is childish. Don’t leave like this. We all love you.”

Watching her, I could not help thinking, *The apple really doesn’t fall far from the tree.*

I stood there holding my suitcase while two grown adults tried to convince me that I was the cause of everything. Bobby cried, then locked the door and slipped the house key into his pocket. I was too tired to fight, too tired to even try to grab it. Once again, I stayed.

I went back to the room, to the silence, to the cage.

That night, I prayed, *God, is this really what You want for me? Is this my punishment? Is this what I deserve for hurting my family?*

Later my mom messaged again: “Are you okay?”

I typed, “I almost came home,” then deleted it. Instead, I sent, “I’m okay, Mom. Don’t worry.”

I wasn’t okay, but I had forgotten how to say it out loud.

Later that night, he chose to sleep on the floor, perhaps as another dramatic gesture meant to make me feel guilty and beg him to return to bed.

I didn’t.

I let him stay there.

15

Angel

After the chaos, I didn't know what to expect anymore.

I thought he would use my attempt to leave as another excuse to break me down. Instead, he changed. He did not apologize, at least not directly, and he never mentioned my attempt to leave again.

He began acting gentle, as though he could somehow undo the damage. His anger didn't vanish; it only put on a new outfit. He still corrected me whenever I was "wrong," but now he did it with practiced patience, as though I were a child who simply needed guidance. He became sweet, even playful. He tried to make me laugh with exaggerated impressions and silly voices. He began using affectionate nicknames again.

We went out to eat and joked around with his friends as though we were a normal couple. From the outside, it probably looked like love. I knew better. I had seen this version of him before. It was an act, another reset.

I wanted to believe him and play along because this version was easier to endure than the one who spat on me whenever I made a mistake. But deep down I still wanted to leave.

That afternoon, one of his friends arrived carrying a beige document with a pink logo. He said that the priest had finally issued the church letter. Of course, it arrived at the exact moment when I felt I could not survive another day in that house.

Bobby jumped up and down with excitement, waving the letter in the air as though he had just won the lottery. He

displayed it where everyone could see it, beaming with pride while I stood silently nearby.

Maybe this is my fate, I thought. *Maybe this is God's answer to the prayer I whispered last night.*

After that, life continued as though nothing had changed. But something inside me had shifted. The letter was there, and with it disappeared the hope I had been secretly holding on to: that perhaps the marriage was not valid after all.

I had been hoping for a miracle, some confirmation that my instincts were right and that the marriage could not possibly be real. But with the letter in Bobby's hands, that hope disappeared. So I told myself that I had no choice. *If this is truly my fate, I might as well try to be happy, even if I have to pretend. Fake it until you make it,* I thought. *Maybe things will get better. Maybe love can grow if I endure this long enough. After all, according to him, we were now bound until death did us part.*

***

I was still a teenager, and Instagram was only beginning to take off. Everyone I knew was curating their lives, posting their best angles, their happiest moments, their picture-perfect escapes. I began doing the same, not only for myself, but for everyone watching, especially my mom. She did not want to see Bobby. She could barely tolerate hearing his name. She was furious, and she had every right, but part of me thought that maybe if she saw me happy she would soften. She had always said, "As long as you're happy." *Maybe if I look okay, she'll believe I'm okay. Maybe she'll accept Bobby again. And if she accepts him, maybe he'll treat me better.* Every time he mistreated me, he blamed my parents for his behavior. *Maybe everything will calm down if we all pretend hard enough. Maybe this is the best choice I have. If my parents accept Bobby, perhaps living with him won't feel so unbearable.*

So I played along. I posed for photographs. I smiled in every shot. I wrote captions that made me sound carefree, happy, and lucky. Even after the worst fights, even after being called names, even after the nights I cried myself to sleep, I posted like everything was fine. There was an image I was trying to protect, not only online, but in real life too: the image of a strong girl who made her own choices, who was mature enough to handle a relationship, who didn't need saving. I told myself that if we were going to spend the rest of our lives together, if this was truly my life, then I had to at least try to love him again. I even agreed when one of his friends suggested making a staged romantic video that resembled a pre-wedding shoot, the kind of thing I had always put off because I never had the energy for it. This time, I went along with it, playing the role he wanted and the role everyone expected me to perform.

I lied to myself so many times I began to believe the story I was selling. Maybe, if I could make everyone else believe the story too, it would no longer feel so wrong.

I was not working at the time. Filming had recently ended, and I was waiting for news from the production company. I was waiting to learn whether the project would continue and, if it did, when I would be called back to set. My phone wasn't ringing. My calendar stayed empty. And with nothing to do, he started offering me distractions.

"Let's go to Jogja," he said one morning, as though he were offering me room to breathe. "And then Bali."

I had never been to either place, and he knew it.

So we went. Even though I paid for the tickets, the hotels, the meals, I didn't complain. I wanted to feel something different, something new. Being somewhere else was enough to trick my brain into thinking I was free, even if I wasn't. I also thought the

trip would be good for Instagram: new photographs, fresh surroundings, and something different to post.

He started asking me to post more often. “Tag me,” he would say. Every photo had to be perfect. We retook the same shot ten times. He posed beside me like a proud partner, then inspected every photograph on my phone to make sure he looked good before allowing me to post it. He controlled the angles, the lighting, and the captions, making sure we looked like a dream couple.

It was a lie, but a beautiful one. When you’re drowning, you take any illusion that floats.

Until Bali broke it again.

We were walking along Jalan Legian, the loudest and wildest street I had ever seen. Music blasted from every bar and club. Lights flashed while tourists shouted and laughed in every direction. It was chaos in the best way. I had never been anywhere like that before. It felt alive, like the world had color again.

I had never really drunk alcohol before. My parents had forbidden it while I was underage, and even now, Bobby did not allow it. I didn’t mind. I had tasted beer once and hated it. As we walked I saw a girl dancing in the street, laughing, clearly tipsy, until her friends pulled her back inside. I smiled, watching her. She looked so free. *I’ll probably never experience that kind of freedom with my own friends,* I thought. Bobby followed my gaze and sneered, saying that if I were not with him, maybe I would have ended up just like her, a lost girl, a sinner. He did not realize that, to me, she did not look lost at all. She looked alive.

That was when a white tourist approached us. He looked a little lost and asked for directions in English. He glanced at me first, perhaps assuming that I would understand him. There was

nothing strange about it. The interaction was brief and completely ordinary.

Bobby saw it. Something in him snapped.

Before I could answer, Bobby cut him off and pulled me by the wrist, hard enough to make me stumble. He said nothing until we turned a corner, away from the lights and music, and then he exploded.

“You liked that, didn’t you?” he hissed. “Flirting. Smiling. Acting like a little slut.”

Our fight that night was loud and ugly, as though all the false peace between us had been building pressure and waiting for the first crack. Then he did it again. He spat in my face.

After Bali, I no longer felt like myself. I was back inside the cage I had briefly believed I had escaped. The difference was that this time I saw the bars clearly.

A few days later, he was already acting sweet again, showering me with attention as though nothing had happened, and I let him, too tired to resist, too numb to care. We went to a mall near his house. A temporary animal exhibition had been set up inside, displaying exotic animals in cages that were far too small. I didn’t expect much. Then I saw her.

A tiny monkey with pale yellow fur, a small face, and soft eyes. She trembled behind the bars, gripping them with both hands, blinking at the crowd as if she were asking for help. Back then, I knew nothing about the cruelty behind the way monkeys like her were captured. I didn’t understand what it meant to tear them from their mothers and sell them into captivity. I looked at her and thought, *She’s so sweet.*

She and the small cage cost five hundred thousand rupiah.

Bobby asked whether I wanted to buy her. Without thinking, I said yes.

I named her Angel.

It felt right.

I was excited when we brought her home. I wanted to cuddle her, give her a warm space, make her feel safe. When I opened the cage to hold her, Bobby stopped me. He pulled my hand back and said, “Don’t let her fool you. She’s clever. Monkeys are manipulative. You can’t let her think she’s in control.”

“She’s a baby,” I said.

He wasn’t listening.

He grabbed a thin, rigid broom made from bundled sticks. He opened her cage and, before I could stop him, he began hitting her.

Once.

Twice.

Again.

Not to scare her. To hurt her.

I screamed. I begged. I cried. “Please stop. Please, please stop.”

He did not stop until her temple began to bleed, until she whimpered, until she crawled into my arms, trembling and clinging to me as though I were her last hope. Only then did he lower the broom.

Then he smiled. “See?” he said. “Now she knows who’s in charge. Now she’ll depend on you. If she misbehaves, show her the broom. She’ll remember.”

I sobbed, holding her, kissing her bloodied face. *He broke her just to make her depend on me,* I thought.

That was how Bobby believed love worked: break, then soothe; hurt, then hug; control, then call it care.

Angel clung to me for hours. She curled beneath my chin, her body trembling until she finally fell asleep. I stayed awake all night, holding her and trying to convince myself that none of this was my fault.

But deep down, I knew it was not that simple.

I was no longer the only one in pain. I had become a witness to Angel's suffering and a fellow survivor trapped inside the same cage. I saw myself more clearly in her tiny body than I ever had in a mirror.

He had broken me too, not all at once, but piece by piece, word by word, threat by threat. And just like Angel, I remained attached to the person who hurt me because he was also the person who occasionally held me.

That night, I held Angel until morning. In her trembling body, I saw everything I had become.

16

In Public

Angel was never just a pet.

She was my best friend, the truest reflection of me, and my only witness. In a house that never felt safe, she was the one creature who treated me as if I still mattered. Most days, she was lively and curious, keeping me busy and briefly distracting me from my miserable life. But whenever something happened and I cried, she changed. Her playfulness disappeared. She sat silently beside me with her head bowed, then looked at me without turning away. I saw myself in her, and it seemed as though she felt everything I felt. Our bond was so deep that I could hardly explain it.

Bobby had completely stopped pretending. The false patience, the sweet words, and the carefully softened voice were all gone. Maybe he had grown tired of keeping up the act. That afternoon, he came home from basketball with a towel hanging from his shoulder, exhaling loudly as though he had just accomplished something extraordinary. He stood in front of the mirror, lifting his shirt, admiring his own body, waiting for praise that never came. I ignored him and remained on the floor with Angel, stroking her fur and letting her distract me. I could feel him watching me, irritated by my calmness and by my refusal to feed his hunger for admiration. He continued watching me through the mirror, flexing and waiting for praise. But when I finally spoke, I asked the one question he did not want to hear. I asked when I could see my mom again. He turned his head toward me, the smile vanishing in an instant.

“You still have to be a good girl. Seeing your mom once doesn’t mean you can stop earning the next visit,” he said.

“I still do everything you ask,” I told him.

“Oh really? Did you clean the room?”

“Yes.”

“Every corner?”

I stared at him, unsure what he meant or why the question mattered so much. Then he smiled in that mocking way, as if he had already decided on something cruel. His eyes flicked toward the wardrobe. Without a word, he stepped out and returned dragging a chair. He placed it beside the wardrobe, climbed onto it, and ran his fingers across the top, reaching all the way to the back. He climbed down slowly and opened his palm.

Dust.

With that same dusty hand, he gripped my face and squeezed my cheeks until my lips protruded. His jaw tightened in the familiar way it always did when he was angry, but this time, there was triumph in his eyes. “You lied,” he said quietly, and then he spat in my face.

He shoved my head backward with his dusty hand, then walked away as though nothing had happened. He turned on the shower and began to sing. Off-key as always, his voice rose over the sound of the water, casual and careless, like this was any other evening. The ease of it made my stomach turn. He could spit on me, then wash himself clean as though he had done nothing.

The spit had landed just under my eye. I sat on the edge of the bed, trembling with rage but still speechless. *What could I do? I have no choice. He’s already my husband.*

That was the trap.

The shower stopped, and after a pause the door creaked open. He stepped out, wrapped in a towel, his tone almost kind. “That’s why you need to stop lying. You’re not even good at it. I’ll always catch you.”

As he wiped his face, he suddenly cried out.

Red ants were crawling all over his towel, and one of them bit him on the lip. He flinched, cursing under his breath, and shook the towel furiously. A sharp flash of satisfaction passed through me, almost making me smile, but I forced my expression to remain still. He looked straight at me, making sure I wasn’t laughing. My eyes betrayed me, though, and I knew he saw it. Karma had arrived too quickly, and it felt almost sweet. Apparently embarrassed, he picked up his clothes and changed in another room.

As I put Angel back into her cage, I passed his mother, who for once was upstairs. She stood in front of a wardrobe I had never been allowed to open because Bobby claimed it contained important documents. Now the door stood wide open, and she was holding a photograph. I had no interest in knowing what the photograph showed, but her long, heavy sigh made it obvious that she wanted me to ask. I glanced, and she shifted as if caught, pretending to be embarrassed.

“It’s Bobby with his ex-fiancée,” she said, her tone somewhere between confession and provocation, as though she wanted to remind me that, in her eyes, I would never be worthy of taking that woman’s place.

When I looked closer, the shelves inside told the rest of the story. He had kept everything: dolls, cups, photographs from their time together. So these were the “important documents” he had hidden from me: a museum of his life with someone else. For a moment I was stunned. If the situation were reversed, if I had hidden tokens from someone before him, he would have

punished me without hesitation. I kept my expression still. I refused to give her the reaction she wanted.

Her disappointment was obvious. Then she added, almost wistfully, “She was such a good person. She used to take me out. She was very kind. And her Mandarin was excellent.”

Bobby’s mother had often called me lazy for not learning Mandarin. Now she was deliberately praising his ex-fiancée for having the very skill I lacked. In that moment I understood. It wasn’t just me she disliked. She had already decided what kind of woman deserved her son, and I was not that woman.

Bobby appeared a moment later, dressed and ready. He glanced at our faces and seemed to understand that something had happened, but he did not ask. Instead he walked straight past and headed for the car.

I followed, still carrying the sting of what I had just seen in that wardrobe. All the dolls, cups, and photographs proved that he had preserved an entire past he had deliberately hidden from me. He always said I was his whole life, yet his mother held the evidence that I wasn’t. That wound sat fresh in me when I slid into the car. So when I teased him, it wasn’t really a joke. The remark came from a small shard of hurt, but also, strangely, from a sense of satisfaction. For once, the evidence was clear. For once, it wasn’t me who had done something wrong, and that gave me a flicker of courage. I let myself poke at him, just a little. “Important files, huh?” He didn’t like it. His face tightened, and the silence between us turned sharp.

We drove to an electronics store to buy and install a CD-ROM drive in my laptop. His nephew often borrowed my laptop, and I had forgotten to check if the screen was clean before leaving the house. In the store I opened it and saw fingerprints in the corner. I reached to wipe it with the edge of my shirt before he could see, but it was too late. When I glanced up, his expression had already

changed. His face was tightening with anger. His jaw clenched, his eyes locked on me, and I knew what was coming before it happened. Then, for the first time, he spat at me in public.

The store clerk was in the middle of handing me a CD to test when he saw what happened. His arm froze in midair. He seemed unsure whether to finish handing me the CD or look away. Bobby hurried outside, as though only then realizing that we were in public.

I stayed at the counter, humiliated. Tears slipped down my face, not from physical pain, but from shame. It was worse because someone else had seen it. Witnesses make a thing real. I bowed slightly to the clerk.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. My fingers trembled as I put the laptop away. I did not allow myself to sob in front of him, but my throat closed as though a stone had been laid across it. The ache of holding back was so intense it felt physical.

When I was little, my dad sometimes scolded me in public without hesitation. He never hit me, but his voice was loud enough to make people turn. Once, walking home from school, he exploded over something I can’t even remember now, and a woman across the street met my eyes as if to check I was safe. The embarrassment alone made me want to disappear. What happened in the store felt like that childhood humiliation multiplied a thousand times. This wasn’t a raised voice that made people glance and then look away. This time, Bobby had spat directly in my face, in public.

We drove in silence. My face was still damp with tears, while he hummed lightly as though we had just left a movie theater. I watched the streets crawl past the window until I finally found my voice.

“I want to go to my mom’s apartment,” I said.

He kept his eyes on the road. “Go ahead,” he said at last. “Go to her. I’m embarrassed to have a wife like you anyway. What if that clerk was one of my fans? He doesn’t know what you’ve done. He only saw me spit on you. You always make me look bad to people who don’t know the background. People who don’t know how disgusting you can be.”

Back then, almost no one recognized him. Whenever anyone asked for a photograph, it was usually with me, and if someone handed him the camera to take the picture he would step into the frame instead, pretending he had misunderstood. It was not confusion. It was pride. He couldn’t stand being left out. He couldn’t stand the thought of looking smaller than me. He would rather look foolish than admit the moment wasn’t his.

I said nothing, not because I agreed, but because I didn’t want him to change his mind. We were already halfway there, and I held my breath, afraid that a single wrong exhale would cost me the only chance I had.

For a while, he drove as though he truly intended to take me there, his expression smug, as though he were the one choosing to leave me. But the closer we came, the shakier his hands grew on the wheel. His eyes started to dart, searching for an exit. And then, right on cue, the script returned.

Here we go again.

“We can’t do this,” he said. “You can’t keep running to your mom every time we have a problem. That’s not how marriage works.”

His voice softened. “Please don’t go. I love you. I’m sorry. Let’s go home and make up. Please.”

I wanted to go home so badly that I considered jumping out of the car, not to die, but to make my escape real, to wrench myself free and run to my mom’s apartment. We were close. It would

have been easy. But I thought too long. The car had already turned around, and Bobby was driving too fast, and suddenly all I could see was myself getting hurt, ending up in a hospital and creating an even bigger scene. I didn't want that. I didn't want this night to become more proof that I was the problem.

Then, as always, he brought God into it. "Our marriage was blessed by Him," he said. "Leaving me would be a sin. You'd go to hell. A wife who leaves is cursed for life. To disobey me is to disobey heaven."

The sad part was that part of me believed it. Part of me feared that if I ran, God would turn away too. He had a way of making duty feel like fate, convincing me that no matter what kind of husband he became, my responsibility was to accept him, that our promise to God bound me to him no matter what.

Then he offered another promise to keep me from leaving. "Tomorrow you can see your mom. I promise. But not now, not like this. It's not right to separate while we're fighting."

As though the problem were not what he had done, but how I had reacted. As though my reaction had somehow made my attempt to leave invalid.

Obviously, my bad.

17

What's Canonical?

I hadn't slept all night.

My body felt heavy, but my mind refused to rest. I kept wondering whether he would truly let me see my mom that day or whether his promise had only been meant to stop me from leaving the night before.

I sat on the edge of the bed, my knees pulled close, watching the minutes crawl by in silence.

He slept peacefully beside me, his breathing steady and his face calm, as though the world had never touched him. The sight made me sick. *How could he sleep so peacefully while I sat there suffocating? How could he look so innocent when I already hated him with every part of me?*

Looking back, I think my love for him had already died by the time he asked me for those photos, perhaps even when he stole something I could never reclaim.

Whatever I had once felt for him was gone. In its place, hatred had spread through every part of me.

When his eyes finally opened, he found me sitting there, staring at him. For a brief moment, he looked startled. Then came the soft, practiced smile, the one he used whenever he wanted to appear sweet and charming. He reached out to touch me gently, as though he were proud that I was still there, still obeying. To him, my silence was proof that I belonged to him.

He sat up slowly, his face calm as though nothing had happened, and began explaining himself as though I had been

waiting for his wisdom. He said he had not let me go to my mom the night before because a wife should never leave the house in the middle of a fight with her husband. “A husband and wife must always resolve their problems first,” he said. “Running away only makes things worse, especially if other people become involved.” He repeated it carefully, like a teacher correcting a rule I had broken.

I listened with my eyes lowered, nodding so he would believe that his words made sense to me. Inside, I was waiting to see whether that day would be different, whether he would actually keep his promise. I did not want to look angry or give him any reason to change his mind. So I gave him a gentle, obedient smile, allowing him to believe that I understood.

Then he framed his permission as an act of generosity, as though allowing me to see my own mom were a gift. He told me to make him a cup of coffee, so I did, because saying no felt impossible in the quiet of that room. I moved slowly through the small kitchen, my hands working automatically as I watched the water boil and waited for time to move. As I stirred the coffee, one sharp thought passed through me: *If I weren’t afraid of God, I would spit into this cup.* But Bobby had taught me a different kind of fear. He had eroded my courage little by little and replaced it with guilt disguised as faith. He had taught me that serving my husband was my duty, that according to him we were bound before God, and that anything he called obedience must be holy.

I carried the cup back to him, holding it steady so he would not see my hands trembling. He accepted it with a small, satisfied smile, the kind that always came before a lesson. “You know what I always say,” he said proudly. “I give proof, not promises.” He tapped the table as though concluding a deal, then nodded as if granting official permission. “You can go to your mother’s today.”

The word *permission* sounded like a victory for him, not freedom for me. Instead of feeling relieved, I tensed. This was not a gift. It was an exchange. I gave him the obedient performance he needed to feel like a generous husband, and in return, he gave me one fragile fragment of freedom. I gave him the careful smile I had learned to wear, keeping my hatred hidden behind it.

He added one more condition. His voice was soft, but the command beneath it was clear. “But remember, don’t complain, and don’t tell her too much about our private problems. Your job is to make your mother accept me again. Keep the story pretty. Keep it tidy.”

I stayed quiet and nodded, eager to leave before he changed his mind. All I wanted was to go home to my mom, Jérémie, her cooking, and the comfort of a small room filled with ordinary love. I wanted a break from Bobby’s face, his voice, his endless demands. Just one honest breath at my mom’s table before I had to put the smile back on and return.

Throughout the drive, I prayed under my breath that Bobby would not trick me again and would truly take me to my mom’s apartment without causing a scene. Every few seconds, I watched him from the corner of my eye, searching for any sign that he might change his mind or turn the car around. He glanced at me, then said, solemn as if we were closing a contract, “Swear to me now, in God’s name, that you won’t tell your mom anything bad about us. Or call me and leave the line connected so I can hear everything you say. It’s hard to trust you. You’re always making things up.”

My patience snapped. “I already swore to God!” I shouted, my voice trembling. “Isn’t that enough? Why can’t you just trust me?” I didn’t mean to sound so sharp, but the hurt came out as anger, and I couldn’t hold back the tears. “I won’t say anything. I

just miss my mom," I cried, the words spilling out like water I'd been holding under my ribs for too long.

His face softened for a moment, then went rigid again. "All right," he said flatly, sounding rehearsed rather than sincere. He looked at me, his voice suddenly lighter. "Don't cry. Your mom will start asking questions."

I nodded and wiped my face with the back of my hand, forcing my grief back into silence. For once, I wasn't asking for miracles, or love, or change. I was only asking for an hour at my mom's table, a small space where breathing didn't feel like begging.

When I stepped into my mom's apartment, Jérémie ran to me and threw his arms around me as though I had been gone for years. He looked so relieved, like he'd been waiting for me his whole life. I held him tight and wouldn't let go. My mom hugged me for a long time, her eyes wet as always, but this time I didn't tease her for being sentimental like I usually did. I cried too, quietly and without warning, and for a single fragile moment I felt safe, as if nothing in the world could touch me. I did not want to leave. I wanted to stay there forever, but even as that thought bloomed, shame and the belief that I had been foolish sat heavily in my chest, reminding me it wasn't possible.

She looked at me, maybe wondering why I was crying, because usually I was the tough one, the girl with the iron heart who never let tears fall so easily. "Are you okay?" my mom asked gently, but her expression told me that she had already seen through my answer.

Of course, I gave her the answer I had rehearsed so many times before. "Yes, I'm fine, just tired, maybe a little worn out from all the shooting." I forced a small smile, hoping it would be enough, hoping it would stop her from seeing everything I was trying so hard to hide.

She did not believe me. I saw it in her narrowed eyes and in the color rising across her face. She knew I was still hiding something. I wanted to tell her, I really did. The words were heavy and raw behind my teeth, ready to spill. But before I could speak, I checked my phone. It had become a ritual, making sure no call to Bobby had been secretly left connected. He had done it before, listened in without me realizing.

Once I was certain it was safe, I tried to speak, but fear tangled the words before they could come out. I didn't even know where to start. So instead I said softly, "It's just, it's a lot. I don't want to talk about it." Shame clung to every word. Part of me wanted to confess, and part of me knew confession would only make things worse.

She sighed and let it go, not because she believed me, but because she could see how fragile I was. Maybe she also knew that neither of us could be certain when we would see each other again. So instead of pressing me she let it be, and slid a plate toward me. "Try this cake I made," she said, as if to ease the tension. Then, after a quiet pause, she asked softly, "Can I ask you about your wedding? I know it has already happened, but I'm curious."

I nodded, reluctant to revisit it but knowing she had the right to ask.

"When did you have time for the marriage preparation, the meetings with the priest, and all the canonical requirements? You were always filming. I feel like I missed everything."

I blinked at her, confused. "What procedures? We didn't do any preparation," I said honestly.

Her face shifted, confusion hardening into concern. "Aurélie, a Catholic wedding can't be held without a civil marriage certificate first. Something was wrong if they went ahead

anyway. And beyond that, there should have been a canonical process." She leaned in, lowering her voice. "That process requires you and your fiancé to meet with the priest for interviews. He asks about your readiness, your faith, your family, and whether you are freely choosing to marry. It's mandatory before the Church approves a wedding. You didn't do any of that?"

I shook my head and seemed to shrink into the chair. None of what she described had ever happened. I told her we had done none of it. I had simply arrived, and then the ceremony had begun. I admitted that I had met the priest once, but only because Bobby had forced me to go to confession, insisting I was guilty of too many sins. My mom covered her face with both hands, as though she could not believe what she was hearing. "This isn't Las Vegas, Aurélie," she said, her voice rising with worry. "You can't simply say 'I do' and expect that to make everything valid. A Catholic wedding isn't like buying peanuts from a roadside stall. I'm sure even Las Vegas weddings don't work that way." She stood and paced around the small room, unable to believe what she was hearing. "It sounds as though he trapped you and made you believe that you belonged to him so you wouldn't try to leave."

She looked at me then, searching my face, and asked gently, "Did you really want to marry him?" My promise to Bobby not to tell my mom anything bad about him seemed to lodge in my throat. The lie sat like a stone in my chest, but this time, I could no longer hold it in. My hands began to tremble, and the tears returned, quietly at first, then in an unstoppable rush.

She sat beside me on the sofa and remained silent for a moment. Then she spoke carefully. "Could I meet the priest? I just want to understand what happened." I looked at her and nodded.

What if I had never been his at all?

18

My Fault

I had always been afraid to tell my mom the truth.

It was not because I did not want to open up, but because my mom often reacted before she had time to listen.

She often acted before thinking, and I was terrified that telling her the whole truth would somehow make everything worse. Still, this time felt different. For some reason, I trusted her. I even found myself hoping that her meeting with the priest would bring back something: an answer, a sign, anything at all. Maybe it would even reveal a way out of the life that had trapped me. But deep down, I believed that possibility was almost impossible. The letter had already been issued, and once the Church had declared the marriage valid, wasn't everything final? Right or wrong, I believed that once a marriage had been sealed by the Church, divorce was no longer possible.

After our conversation about whether the wedding had ever been valid, I tried to put the question aside and enjoy the little time we had left together. We talked, laughed, and played with Jérémie until my phone rang again.

"Get ready and meet me in the lobby," Bobby said. "I'm already on my way."

And just like that, the small pocket of peace was gone.

When I got into the car, I felt lighter than I had before seeing my mom. Maybe it was because he had brought Angel. Maybe it was because, for the first time, a small spark of hope had appeared inside me. *Hope for what, I didn't know. It was simply hope, and that was enough.*

Bobby began interrogating me immediately, demanding every detail of my visit: what I had done, what I had said, and what my mom had told me. I answered selectively, hiding everything we had discussed about the wedding and the priest. He didn't need to know. Instead of letting it go, he found another reason to accuse me, demanding to know why I had taken so long to answer his messages.

"I was with my mom," I said. "I barely ever see her, and I'm with you every day. Do you really have to turn one late reply into a problem?"

That did not satisfy him. His expression returned to the sullen, unpredictable look I knew so well. At one point, I saw him gather saliva in his mouth, the familiar warning that he was about to spit on me. This time, he stopped himself. I no longer knew how much longer I could live that way, constantly waiting for the next time he would spit on me. The silence stretched between us as the city lights blurred past. Eventually, we reached his house, far from everything that felt safe.

As soon as we arrived, he sank onto the sofa in front of the television, as he always did. When he turned it on, a gossip show was airing. A familiar face appeared on the screen: Zane, the boyfriend I had dated before Bobby, the one who had always been so dramatic. The report said that his girlfriend at the time had gone to the police over domestic violence.

I wasn't surprised when I saw it. From the beginning, I had sensed that something was wrong with him. He was not only dramatic, but quick-tempered, so learning that he had crossed that line did not shock me. I was still thinking about the report when Bobby, who was hardly any better, commented.

"Ha, that's your ex. Disgusting, like a sissy. He only dares to hit women."

His words brought back a memory from the early days, before we were together. Right in front of my mom, he had declared that he would never lay a hand on a woman. He said only cowards hit women. He even claimed that he could not use one of his hands to strike anyone. I no longer remember whether he meant his right or left hand, only that a single line ran straight across the palm. According to him, the line meant that a single punch from that hand could kill someone instantly. He had many stories like that, strange and superstitious, half threat and half performance.

He laughed at Zane, and although the report was disturbing, I felt a flare of anger I could not fully explain. He had almost spat on me again during the drive home, repeating the ritual I had learned to dread. Without meaning to, I gave him a thin smile and looked directly into his eyes.

“Honestly, what’s the difference between you and him?” I said. “Hitting or spitting, what difference does it make? I think I’d rather be hit. Being spat on feels more humiliating.”

It was the first time I ever dared to fight back, even if only with words. Maybe it was because I had just seen my mom. Maybe it was because I finally knew that I was not entirely alone.

He turned toward me as though he could not believe what he had heard. Then a thin, one-sided smile appeared on his face.

“What did you say? Say it again.”

My heart pounded. I could not tell whether it was fear or adrenaline, but I repeated myself.

“I’d rather be hit than spat on.”

He lowered his head and laughed. Then he reached behind my head, grabbed my hair, and yanked it so hard that my face was pulled upward.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

That was when I realized that what I felt was fear, not adrenaline. Even then, I forced myself to meet his eyes and nod. I didn't want to be spat on anymore, and I thought he would never actually hit me.

He released my hair but did not look away. His eyes remained fixed on mine, unblinking. For a moment, the room seemed to shrink around us. *He only wants to scare me,* I told myself. *He won't cross the line.* Then his hand moved. The slap came so quickly that the crack against my face sent the world into darkness. For an instant, everything vanished. Even the room seemed to disappear. When sound returned, a sharp, endless ringing filled my ear and pulled me back into my body. That was when I understood what had happened. He had slapped me.

I was still in shock when he leaned in close and said, "You asked for this, remember? From now on, I promise I'll never spit in your face again."

He smiled as he said it, as though the entire moment were another performance. Then he pulled out one of his favorite lines.

"You know I give proof, not promises."

And it was true: after that night, he never spat on me again.

The television remained on. The hosts laughed as though nothing had happened and moved on to the next gossip story. Downstairs, Bobby's nephew had been practicing Mandarin with his grandmother. Suddenly, both of them fell silent.

The entire house seemed to fall silent. The slap had been so loud that, to me, it sounded like a gunshot.

The slap was not a loss of control. It was a decision, a new rule. In his mind, he had not crossed a line. He had simply

changed the form of violence he considered acceptable. Now every bruise would be called a choice, my choice.

Not long after the ringing in my ear began to fade, my mom sent me a message. She was on her way to the church to find out what had happened.

Her words returned to me. A Catholic wedding could never be that simple. This was not Las Vegas.

All that time, I had stayed because he used my fear of sin against me. He had convinced me that we were married, that only death could separate us, and that we had already become one. *But what if we had never become one at all?*

What if I had never truly belonged to him and had no reason to keep accepting any of this?

19

Holy Truth

After he slapped me, I didn't say a single word.

I did not go downstairs to eat. I stayed in my room, still trying to understand what had just happened. Bobby did not say much either. He went about his routine as though the day were completely ordinary. One moment, he was doing sit-ups. The next, he was sitting with a cigarette in his hand, replaying his old commercials like someone longing for his glory days.

I sat in the corner of the bed, my thoughts spinning without direction, like a radio unable to find a signal. *Was this my fault? Had I somehow asked for it? How much farther would he go to hurt me?*

When he finished his cigarette, Bobby came back into the room. His shirt was damp with sweat, and a faint smile appeared on his lips, as though my condition amused him. He watched me for a beat, then said, teasing, "Come on, I didn't even hit you that hard. If I had hit you any harder, you might not have woken up."

He smiled as though he were trying to reassure me, but the expression felt like another threat. "You asked for it, remember? So why are you acting like this now?"

I had never asked him to hit me. I had only wanted him to understand how degrading it was to be spat on. I had no energy left to explain myself. Instead, I clenched my hands until my nails dug into my palms.

That night, when it was time for bed, he took a Bible from his bag. Lately, he had been carrying a Bible everywhere, especially to my shoots, where my friends sometimes teased me about it. At

home, however, he never read it. I was not even sure he understood what was inside. It seemed less like something he believed in and more like a prop designed to make him appear religious in public. But that night, for the first time, he brought it into the bedroom. He held it as though he intended to read, or perhaps only to place himself above me, morally and spiritually.

As though he were God and I were a sin he had the right to punish.

He climbed onto the bed and stood on the mattress, pressing one hand against the wall to steady himself. I was lying on my side near the reading lamp, the same side I always slept on. That night, he claimed that he wanted to read the Bible and ordered me to move. It felt like another excuse to create tension and remind me who was in control.

“Move,” he said, cold and sharp.

I didn’t. I stayed where I was with my eyes closed, pretending to sleep and hoping he would walk away. I did not want to speak to him that night, or perhaps ever again. But he knew I was pretending to sleep.

Instead of walking away, he stepped on my face.

His bare foot pressed against my cheek, damp, filthy, and covered with dust from the floor. I felt the grit on his skin and smelled the sour sweat. It was not the physical pain that broke me. It was the humiliation and disgust of realizing that he could treat my face like the floor without the slightest hesitation, as though I were not human.

That moment did more than humiliate me. It erased me.

Anger surged through me. I shoved his leg away, but before I could sit up, he struck me on the head with the Bible.

The hard corner struck the top of my head. Sharp, burning pain spread through my skull, and I could already feel a lump beginning to form.

He stood over me and said, totally calm, “If I hit you with the Bible, then whatever pain you feel is God’s business.”

He made it sacred. He made it holy. He made it my fault.

In that moment, I understood how damaged and dangerous he truly was, not only because of his violence, but because of the way he twisted faith to justify it.

I looked up at him, heart pounding. “You’re fucking sick,” I whispered. Those were the first words I said after the slap.

The words escaped before I could stop them. His expression did not change, but the atmosphere in the room did. I didn’t wait to see what came next.

I ran into the spare bedroom, slammed the door behind me, and locked it immediately. My hands shook so badly that I could barely turn the lock. My throat tightened, my breathing became ragged, and my heartbeat thundered in my ears like an alarm. The dusty spare room was where he usually played guitar, but that night, it became my hiding place. There was only a thin, dusty mattress on the floor, without a frame, sheets, or pillows. I slid down beside it, curled into the corner, knees pulled in, eyes fixed on the thin strip of floor beneath the door. I kept expecting the door to burst open. I imagined him pounding on it, kicking it down, and coming after me like a monster in a horror film.

He called my name a few times, low and annoyed, but that was it. It was late and he didn’t want to wake his parents or make another scene. He wanted control, but not noise.

Eventually his shadow disappeared.

Then my phone lit up.

Mom

“Can you talk?” she wrote.

At the same moment, I heard Angel crying in the next room, trapped in her cage, shrill and desperate. He answered her, “Angel, stop. Calm down. Come on, quiet.” I held my breath. While Bobby focused on Angel, her cries covered every sound I made. That night, she became my tiny protector. It did not feel like a coincidence. It felt like grace. My hands stopped trembling.

I called her; she picked up right away. “Is anyone near you? Can anyone hear us?”

No footsteps, no creak of a door, just Bobby’s voice coaxing Angel in the other room.

“No,” I whispered. “What is it, Mom?”

She paused, then said softly, “Aurélie, I was right. Your marriage is not valid.”

What?

“I met the so-called priest,” she said. “The one who performed your ceremony. At first, he would not even look at me. He kept his eyes on the ground. I asked him, ‘How could you do that to a child? How could you perform that ceremony?’”

My grip tightened on the phone.

“Eventually, he admitted that he had been wrong. He said the ceremony should never have taken place, and he asked for forgiveness.”

I listened in stunned silence, almost afraid to believe what I was hearing, but desperate for her to continue.

“He also told me that, before a Catholic wedding can take place, the couple’s names must be announced to the congregation on several Sundays beforehand. It is part of the procedure, giving

anyone who knows why the marriage should not take place an opportunity to object. He admitted that an announcement had been made, but when your name and Bobby's were read, the microphone volume was deliberately lowered so the congregation would not hear them."

"Then I went to the diocese," she continued.

"They were shocked and said they had known nothing about the ceremony. They apologized for what the priest had done. I asked them, 'What if my daughter wants a divorce?'"

She let out a breath. "They told me that divorce is not recognized in the Catholic Church, but that only applies to a valid marriage. According to them, your marriage had been invalid from the beginning. If you choose to pursue it, we can apply for an annulment. The Church can then issue a document confirming that you were never spiritually bound to him. That document would also allow you to marry in the Catholic Church someday, should you ever wish to."

The possibility of marrying in the Church someday was not what mattered to me then. I had never planned to marry young. When I moved to Indonesia, my plan had been to focus on my career until I was thirty and only then consider marriage, unless I happened to meet someone who changed my mind.

Still, hearing that the ceremony had never created a valid marriage left me speechless, but this time, the silence came from relief. It felt as though an enormous weight had been lifted from my chest. For the first time in a long while, I could breathe.

I closed my eyes, and the entire ceremony replayed in my mind: his nails digging into my hand at the altar, the priest, the strangers pretending to be my family, the vow I had never meant, and the kiss I had never chosen.

I was never his, not even in God's eyes.

I had always believed that saying the vows inside a church automatically made a marriage sacred and binding. Now I knew that was not true. The vow had been coerced. The marriage had never existed in the way Bobby claimed it did. The God I loved had never bound me to him.

This was not my punishment. It was not my fate.

I could not speak for a long moment. Then I whispered, "Thank you, Mom. I need some time to think about all of this." She didn't push. She had no idea about the silence I lived in at Bobby's house or how small I had learned to make myself in order to survive. I hadn't told her a word. She could not have known how completely this truth would change everything.

For the first time in months, I felt the bond I had believed tied me to him beginning to loosen. I realized that he had lied to me and forced me to believe in an unbreakable bond that had never existed. I was not trapped. I was not crazy.

I now held a truth that could burn down everything he had built.

20

Don’t Die

I woke to the sharp snap of a guitar string.

My neck ached from sleeping without a pillow. The pain pulled me fully awake and reminded me where I was: the spare room Bobby used to play guitar or retreat whenever he was angry. It was where I had ended up the night before.

My hands shook as I reached for my phone. My mom’s message asking whether she could call was still there, and the call log showed our long conversation from the night before. It had not been a dream.

The marriage had never been valid. I was not his, not in God’s eyes and not under the law.

All the guilt I had carried began to loosen. The shame, the vows, and the fear had never belonged to me. They were tools he had used to keep me small.

Once I could see the strings, they began to lose their hold on me.

I stood and opened the door. Bobby’s mother appeared at the end of the hallway and looked at me, startled and suspicious. I did not give her time to question me. I smiled, asked whether she had eaten, commented on the weather, and mentioned how tall her grandson had become. My voice stayed light. She blinked, nodded, and walked away.

I followed her downstairs and entered the living room, where Bobby’s dad was watching television at full volume. The noise

made the house feel almost ordinary. I sat nearby, calm and casual. Being in the open felt safer.

Eventually, Bobby came downstairs as though nothing had happened. I did the same. Pretending had become a way to survive. I could not let him see that anything inside me had changed, especially that I now knew the truth about the marriage.

He told me to shower because we were going into the city. I showered, dressed, and we left.

We met his friends after their basketball game at an open-air roadside *warung*, a simple food stall with plastic chairs and the smell of fried food in the air. It was loud and crowded, exactly the kind of setting he loved. He came alive there, performing for everyone and tossing jokes around like confetti. But I could see the strain under the charm. He felt the distance in me.

A man passed outside wearing a stained cap, his forearm covered in bright cartoon tattoos: Donald Duck, Mickey, and Goofy. The sight was so unexpected that I gave a small, genuine smile.

Bobby saw me smile and followed my gaze. The moment he noticed the man, his eyes went cold. He leaned in and hissed, “Car. Now.”

We slipped away from the table. No one asked why.

The second the car door closed, he grabbed my hair and jerked my head toward the window. He slammed it against the glass once, then again. “You embarrassed me,” he growled. “You made me look like a fool.”

“I was looking at his tattoos,” I shouted. “They were Donald Duck and his friends. I only smiled because I thought they were funny.”

He refused to listen. Then, almost as quickly as he had exploded, his entire manner changed. His voice softened. “Enough. Don’t cry. Dry your tears. If we stay out here too long, they’ll think we’re fighting. Come on. Let’s go back.”

I wiped my face, still trembling, and followed him.

Back at the table, he slipped easily into his charming persona again, smiling and murmuring apologies as though nothing had happened. I tried not to cry. Then he reached into my bag, pulled out my debit card, and held it up. Whenever I was paid, I was expected to transfer the money to him immediately. That time, I had forgotten.

“Today I’m treating everyone,” he shouted. “It’s on me.”

He wanted to humiliate me quietly, in a way only I would understand. He made control look like generosity.

I stayed calm.

Later, when the night was over and the performance was done, we drove home.

He was still furious, shouting, calling me names, and accusing me of not respecting him as a husband.

Husband. The word sounded almost ridiculous to me now.

When we returned, my eyes went directly to the false marriage letter displayed on the wall.

Before I leave, I should take that letter, I thought. *It would be safer with me than in his hands, where he could use it to manipulate the media again. Even after I’m free, I don’t want to spend my life explaining that I was deceived, trapped, and forced into a lie.*

That night, I spent longer than usual with Angel because I knew I would not remain in that house much longer. I had no

idea what would happen to her after I left. I didn't even know how I would get out. While Bobby was in the shower, I saw my opportunity. I took the letter from the wall and noticed its date of issue: only a few days after the ceremony. My stomach turned.

Why had the priest waited months before giving it to Bobby? What had he been hiding?

I tucked the letter beneath the mattress. Because Bobby had displayed it so prominently, taking it was risky. I could only hope that he would not notice until after I was gone.

I was wrong.

The moment he came out of the bathroom, he called for me and demanded to know where I had put the letter.

How did he know so quickly?

I had been caught. I lied and said that I had only wanted to examine it. When he continued questioning me, I pretended that I had forgotten where I had put it and began searching.

If he found it beneath the mattress, he would know that I had intended to hide it.

He tore Angel from my arms and gripped her head as though he could crush it at any moment. "Tell me where the letter is!" he shouted.

Terrified, I immediately lifted the mattress and handed him the letter. I begged, "Please, don't ever hurt Angel again."

The moment he took the letter, I screamed for his mother. "Ma!" Bobby glared at me. His expression did not change, but his eyes seemed to ask, *What are you doing?*

I kept shouting, pretending that I was only asking, "Is there any food left, Ma?" The ridiculous question worked. His mother answered from downstairs, and the moment I heard her voice, I

ran down with Angel in my arms. I just wanted to be safe. I could not stay upstairs alone with him. I was terrified and I still didn't have a good plan to leave that place.

I remained downstairs until both of his parents had gone to bed. Eventually, I had no choice but to return upstairs.

Bobby was not finished.

He attacked me with questions, fast and loud. "Why did you hide the letter? What were you planning to do with it? Why did you take it?"

I said nothing. Then he used the same threat again. He grabbed Angel and closed his hand around her head as though she were something he could crush. Tears began to fall, but this time, something inside me snapped.

"Do it," I said.

He froze, his eyes narrowing as he tried to decide whether I was bluffing. He hesitated just long enough to make me believe that he might actually hurt her. Then he struck the cage, shoved Angel inside with brutal force, and turned on me.

He seized my right arm so tightly that his nails broke the skin. I remained silent, watching how far he would go, until blood began to run down my arm. The moment he saw the blood, his expression changed. The anger disappeared, replaced by shock.

Then he broke down. He released me and stumbled backward, as though the sight of my blood had knocked the air from his lungs. He began striking his own head with his fists and pacing back and forth, his body shaking with silent sobs.

I looked at my arm. A straight cut had opened across the skin.

This could work in my favor, I thought.

This time, I did not respond to his crying. Usually, I would have felt sorry for him and tried to comfort him. That night, I felt as though I had won something back, and I did not care how loudly he sobbed. I pulled the blanket over myself, set my alarm, and tried to sleep. I had to work the next morning, and for once, I could not wait to leave the house. The injury still burned, but now it also felt like evidence.

***

The next morning, the cut was clearly visible, and angry blue bruises had spread along my arm.

The director usually dressed my character in long sleeves, autumn layers, and beanies, a consistently covered-up look.

Somehow, that day I had a short Sweet Seventeen birthday scene that required me to wear a white spaghetti-strap dress. If I remember correctly, it was the same dress I had worn to the church on October 10, the costume Bobby had instructed me to bring that day. It was the first time in months my arms were exposed on set.

I didn't plan to say anything. In the cramped makeup room, I even tried to conceal the bruises, my hands shaking as I worked foundation over the blue marks.

Bobby was playing basketball that day, so he was not on set to monitor me.

By the time I stood in front of the camera, the marks were speaking more loudly than I ever could. Eyes lingered. An actor tilted his head and asked, "Are you all right?"

For the first time, I told someone the truth. Not everything. Not the entire story. Just enough. My voice trembled, small and shaky, and I was terrified of being judged, of being doubted, of making things worse.

Instead of judgment, I received concern, support, and the reassurance that I was not alone.

Why had I stayed silent for so long? If I had spoken sooner, maybe it would never have gone this far.

After the shoot, I was still speaking quietly with a few people when Jo's mother overheard us and noticed the bruises on my arm. I showed her Bobby's threatening messages, including the ones he had sent between the calls I kept declining. She didn't wait. "I'm taking you home," she said. "To your mom. Right now."

Hope flared inside me, bright and immediate, but everything was happening too quickly. It felt like being pulled from a burning building before I had time to catch my breath.

I nodded and climbed into her car, trembling and silent, with her children beside me. She talked the whole drive about how my mom would never accept this if she knew, how I couldn't keep living like that. Her voice blurred as my phone lit up again and again: "Pick up. Don't you dare ignore me. Pick up. Or else. I swear to God, if you don't pick up next time, watch what happens."

I couldn't take it. "I'm so sorry," I said. "I've changed my mind. I'm not ready. Not yet. Could you drop me at the nearest McDonald's?" She looked surprised and tried to reassure me, saying I'd be safer with my mother and shouldn't be afraid. I told her that I was not mentally ready and did not want to involve her family, but I promised that I would leave him as soon as I could. She hesitated, then saw the panic in my face and nodded. When she pulled into the lot I felt a small wave of relief.

I picked up his call. My voice was light, casual. "Hey. Sorry I didn't answer earlier. I was talking to Jo and his mom and didn't want to be rude. We're at McDonald's now. We got hungry." He exhaled sharply and hung up.

Minutes later, Bobby walked in, rigid and cold. “Let’s go,” he said. As I walked toward the car, I glanced back at Jo and his mother. They looked deeply worried. I forced a small, steady smile at them so they would know I was okay.

As soon as we were in the car he fired at me, “If you want to go back to your apartment, don’t humiliate me in front of your friends by running away like that.”

“I was not running,” I said. “I was just hungry.”

He didn’t believe me. “Don’t pretend. If you truly can’t love your husband, the man you married before Christ, fine. I’ll drive you home.”

I stayed quiet. He began sobbing loudly, the way he always did before something more dangerous followed. I had no idea what he was planning. I thought I was ready for anything, but I wasn’t.

Near my mom’s apartment he suddenly drove like a man who had lost his mind. On the toll road he screamed, “I’D RATHER DIE THAN BE SEPARATED FROM YOU! WE ARE HUSBAND AND WIFE UNTIL DEATH DO US PART! HOW DARE YOU QUESTION THE CHURCH LETTER? I CAN’T STAND THIS PAIN! LET’S JUST DIE TOGETHER! I LOVE YOU!”

He jerked the steering wheel from side to side as though he meant to drive us into the concrete barrier. The car lurched violently. The tires screamed against the road as the lights and concrete blurred around us. I thought we were going to die. I screamed and begged him to stop, but he laughed through his sobs, both hands locked around the wheel. In panic, I grabbed the steering wheel and pulled with all my strength. We fought for control as the car swerved violently across the lane and metal scraped beneath it. I shouted anything he wanted to hear, any

words that might make him stop. The struggle for the wheel felt endless, as though death itself were pulling us toward it.

“I know we’re married. I don’t doubt it. I won’t leave you,” I begged.

There was only one thought in my mind: *Don’t die.*

He ordered me to swear, and I swore to anything he demanded, anything that might keep us alive.

Then his panic shifted into ragged relief. “Thank God! I love you, my wife! Aurélie!” he cried, sobbing my name.

In that moment, I promised myself that I would get out before this killed me.

When he finally pulled into the driveway, I felt relieved to be back for the first time, not because the house was safe, but because I was still alive.

21

Scars and Witnesses

That night, I prayed for a way out, for safety, and for the right moment.

I kept praying until I fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke later than usual. Even on days when I had an early call time, I was usually awake before sunrise, cleaning the house before leaving for the shoot, but the night before, I had fallen asleep while still praying, exhausted after what had happened in the car.

The sound of a key turning in a lock woke me. Bobby was opening the drawer where he kept the church documents, as he often did. When he saw me stirring, he smiled.

“I’m surprised you’re only waking up now,” he said, as though he were merely making conversation.

This time I didn’t just nod and stay quiet. I met his eyes and said, “I work. That’s why I’m tired.”

He paused, then nodded as though he had accepted my answer. For a moment, the room felt calm, but I knew that kind of peace never lasted.

Since opening up to my friends on set, something inside me had begun to shift. For the first time, I had truly told someone what I was living through. Saying it out loud made it real. Their reactions made me understand just how wrong everything was. None of it was normal, and none of it should ever have been accepted. Little by little, that truth began to make me braver.

That morning, I did not follow my usual routine. I did not rush to make his coffee or place his needs before my own. I went straight to the bathroom. I showered quickly because it was almost time to leave for the shoot, and for the first time, I did not arrange my morning around his needs.

When I stepped out, my skin still damp and a towel wrapped around my chest, he was already waiting. His face looked calm, but his grip told a different story. He grabbed my arm and pulled me close, speaking directly into my ear so the maid ironing in the next room would not hear him.

“Don’t start acting brave with me,” he hissed. “Don’t think that just because you’ve made new friends, you can start disrespecting me.”

He spoke in little more than a whisper, but his fingers dug painfully into my skin.

“I didn’t do anything,” I told him quickly. “I overslept, that’s all. I have to get ready for work.”

He held on for another moment before releasing me with a small shove.

“Watch yourself,” he muttered. “Don’t start acting arrogant.”

He turned away and made his own coffee. I slipped into my room and locked the door behind me. My hands were still shaking, but beneath the fear, a small spark of courage had appeared. He had noticed the change, and it made him uneasy. Somehow, I knew that things were slowly beginning to shift in my favor.

I dressed in a sleeveless top and a cardigan. That day, I made a decision: I would no longer hide what he had done.

Let people see. Let them ask questions.

By the time I went downstairs, the morning air was already hot and heavy. I carried the cardigan in my hand, leaving my bruised arms uncovered. I told myself that it was only because of the heat. But deep down, perhaps I wanted the truth to become visible.

In the living room, his mother stood in front of a mirrored cabinet, fixing her hair as usual. She saw my reflection, turned around, and immediately noticed the bruises on my arm.

“What happened to your arm?” she asked, staring at the bruises scattered across my skin.

Before I could answer, Bobby appeared beside me so quickly that it seemed he had been waiting for the question. “Oh, that’s from the show,” he said quickly. “She’s been filming a lot of fight scenes lately.”

His mother did not seem convinced. “That looks intense. Are you sure?”

I could not answer while he stood so close beside me. I forced a small laugh. “Yeah... fight scenes.”

She leaned in, lowered her voice. “It’s not... Bobby, is it? If it is, you tell me, okay?”

I smiled nervously and shook my head, pretending that her question was absurd. But my heart was pounding so hard I was afraid she could hear it.

The atmosphere inside the car immediately became tense. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” he said quietly. “You wanted her to see. You think I’m afraid of you now? I know every trick women like you use. You can’t outsmart me.”

I stayed silent. Thankfully, we had a driver that day, so Bobby could not scream, threaten me openly, or pull another dangerous

stunt on the road. The driver's presence forced him to control himself, and I could see how much he hated it.

Once we reached the set, he refused to leave.

He followed me everywhere and even sat beside the director as though he had the right to judge my performance. He knew how much I disliked being watched during a take. He did it deliberately to disrupt my concentration. When I stumbled over one of my lines, he laughed loudly enough for everyone to hear. My co-star looked at me with concern. "Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

That simple question, that moment of someone else seeing what was happening, made something in me harden. *This isn't normal.*

I can't keep letting this happen.

I shook my head. In that moment, I decided to fight back in my own way.

After the take ended, I pulled Bobby aside and spoke calmly and directly. "I need you to leave. I'm working."

He smirked. "Oh, so now you're brave? Just because you gave me a little attitude this morning, you think you can tell me what to do?"

"I need you to leave."

He leaned closer with the familiar mocking grin that exposed his crooked lower teeth. "Why? Do you want to flirt with your co-star when I'm not around?"

He wanted a reaction. This time, however, I had something he had not expected.

"If you don't leave," I said, keeping my voice steady despite my pounding heart, "I'll message your mother. I'll tell her the

bruises aren't from a fight scene. I'll tell her exactly what you did."

The words came out before I had fully realized that I was capable of saying them. I had no idea how his mother would react if she learned the truth.

Would she believe me? Would she even care?

He laughed coldly, but the sound was unmistakably false. "Go ahead. You think she'll believe you instead of me? She already knows you're crazy. Try it."

I pulled out my phone.

The moment I pulled out my phone, his expression changed and the threats began. "You'll regret this. I'll hurt you even worse than before. You think you're strong now? Just wait." He spat on the ground in front of my feet, a warning of what he intended to do once we were alone.

As I typed the message to his mother, he spat out more poison. "You think you're something, but you're not even a good wife. You can't do anything right, you can't even give me a child. And don't think I don't know the truth. You weren't a virgin. You didn't bleed the first time. You thought you could deceive me?"

I looked at him, stunned. Of everything he'd ever said, this cut the deepest. He was the one who had taken what I had wanted to save, yet now he was accusing me of deceiving him.

Then, just as quickly, he changed tactics and softened his voice. "Baby," he said, his voice dripping with false sweetness. "Stop being dramatic. Come here. Let's talk."

I ignored him and pressed send.

He watched me from a distance, his eyes narrowing. For a moment, he seemed unsure whether I had truly sent the message.

My phone remained silent. Seconds later, his began to ring.

He looked down, then up at me. For the first time, I saw fear in his eyes.

It was his mother.

He stepped away to take the call. Even from a distance, I could hear his mother shouting angrily through the phone. He did not argue, turn around, or even remain where he was long enough to finish the call. He lowered his head, walked directly to his car, and climbed inside.

Then he drove away.

Just like that.

Did that really just happen?

The silence that followed no longer felt dangerous. I no longer felt as though I were walking across broken glass or holding my breath. The silence felt clean and still, like standing in the center of a storm that had finally moved away.

I found one of the people I trusted most on set and told him what had just happened. Relief spread across his face. “Call your parents,” he said. “Tell them everything. I promise, they’ll protect you.”

I followed his advice. I called my parents and asked them to come.

While I waited, I felt everything at once: relief, fear, shame, and hope. I didn’t know which one to trust. But I knew that this was the dividing line between who I had been and who I might still become.

When they arrived and I saw them walking across the set, every defense I had left collapsed. For the first time in years, I felt like an ordinary daughter whose parents had finally come when

she needed them most. Between scenes, I told them everything. The slaps. The bruises. The threats. The spitting. The shame. The fear.

As I spoke, I knew there would be no going back. My parents would never allow him to take me again.

They said that they had always sensed something was wrong with him. That was why they'd tried so hard to stop him when I was younger. But they had never imagined the extent of what he had done to me.

My mom cried. My dad just kept shaking his head. They both felt that they had failed to protect me. But they promised: from now on, they'd make up for it. "No more secrets," they said. "Tell us everything. Don't carry this alone."

In that moment, I felt supported for the first time in years. It felt as though the cracked, unsteady ground beneath me had finally begun to hold my weight.

They reminded me that Bobby had never possessed as much power as I had believed. He had neither money nor influence. His only real skill was manipulating people who had not yet learned to recognize his tactics.

People like me.

He was not someone who deserved the power my fear had given him. He had seemed strong only because I had been too frightened to look at him clearly. But once I did, everything collapsed. I finally saw the strings, the tricks, and the frightened boy behind the curtain who had spent years pretending to be a monster.

After that day, I blocked him on every social-media platform and closed every channel through which he could reach me. Only one door remained open: email. It became the last way he could

reach me. At first he tried to sound detached, cold, as if he didn't care. He messaged to ask when I planned to pick up my things. He even mentioned Angel as though she were merely another possession I had left behind, as if we were simply tying up loose ends.

But when I replied and asked when my driver could collect my belongings, he began avoiding the question.

Said he was busy.

Suddenly, the man who had barely worked throughout our relationship became the busiest and most unavailable person alive. He delayed, made excuses, and stretched the process out simply to prove that one final thing remained under his control. Or at least, he thought it did.

When that didn't shake me, he got jealous. Accused me of getting closer to one of my co-stars. "I saw your tweets," he wrote. "The way you look at him. You're getting bolder now, aren't you?"

But even if I had truly been growing close to someone, it would not have changed anything. I was never his in the first place. Not truly. Not by choice. Not by love.

He never protected me. Never cared for me. He had never treated me as an equal. He used me. Controlled me. Broke me. *I had never been his to lose.*

Then the tone of his emails changed again. He began to beg.

He said he was sorry. That he'd made mistakes. That he shouldn't have treated me the way he did. He said that whatever the priest had told my mom did not matter, because in his eyes, in God's eyes, we were still bound. "No matter what happens," he wrote, "I'll always be your husband in Christ. I'll wait for you. Forever."

Even in his apology, he continued twisting the truth, hiding behind God's name and clinging to the same old tactics. It was almost surreal that he still believed those tactics could work.

That day on set, when he fled the moment he heard his mother's voice, I finally saw him for who he truly was.

Not a monster, but a coward.

Not God, but a shadow.

Not powerful, but small.

So very small.

And for the first time, I didn't feel afraid.

I felt free.

22

The Last String

From that day on, I was never alone.

My dad and our driver stayed with me on set from morning until night, sometimes even until dawn. Bobby's car appeared near my filming location more than once, but he never stayed for long after seeing my dad. He didn't dare go near me again, not with my dad watching.

My mom refused to remain silent either. Once I finally told her the entire truth, she became furious with the people who had been responsible for protecting children but had chosen not to see what was happening. She contacted them one by one and said, "You were supposed to protect my child. And you failed."

My mom sent them the photographs she had taken of my arms, which were still covered in bruises, as visible evidence of what I had endured. One of them appeared deeply shaken after learning what had happened and offered to help. He returned with someone who appeared to be a lawyer. They told us that if we intended to pursue legal action, we would have to act quickly while the injuries were still visible.

They asked what evidence I had. I showed them the bruises, then remembered one piece of evidence Bobby had overlooked.

He had erased almost everything else: my BBM history, my voice notes, my photographs, and nearly every trace of what he had done. But one detail had escaped his attention: a single photograph I had sent by email.

I normally sent everything through BBM, but one day, while he was demanding another photograph, the service stopped

working. I was terrified of what he might do if I failed to send it, so I searched for another way. I believed that sending it by email would prove that I was still trying to obey him and that the delay had only been caused by a technical problem.

That single photograph remained. In it, I was fifteen years old, topless, and crying.

As they examined the photograph, I covered my chest on the laptop screen with my finger, overwhelmed with shame. Their response crushed me.

The lawyer shook her head. “You took the photograph yourself. You posed for it and sent it. That means you consented. Unless you had been physically restrained and someone else had taken the photograph, perhaps the case could be viewed differently. But not this one.”

“Because you sent it by email, it could even be used against you,” she warned. “You could be accused of distributing pornography.”

I could only stare at her in stunned silence. I asked about the bruises still covering my arm. They told me that the physical evidence alone would not be strong enough.

“Do you have a video of him hitting you? That would make the case much stronger.”

A video? Who prepares a camera for abuse as though it were a scene in a film? How could I possibly know when his hand would strike?

His hand always moved faster than my fear.

I felt the last of my hope beginning to collapse. All I wanted was justice, yet the only evidence I had could apparently be turned into a weapon against me.

They also warned me that pursuing the matter through the police would involve fees and legal processes I could not afford. I had nothing. When I escaped Bobby, I had left with no money of my own. Every rupiah I had earned had ended up in his hands. I was beginning again from nothing, and we could not afford to risk everything on a process with no certain outcome.

My mom was furious, but in the end, she held my hand and said, “What matters most is that you’re safe now and back with us. You survived.”

I nodded. I agreed with her. Peace sounded nice, and maybe that was enough. But deep down, I still wanted justice.

Bobby continued emailing me occasionally. In one email, he warned me not to speak publicly about our relationship, claiming that doing so would only destroy my own reputation.

One day, my dad said, “If you don’t want to take this to court, at least write something on Facebook. Briefly explain what happened and mention the photographs. That way, if Bobby ever releases them out of spite, people will already know the truth: why he had those photographs and how he obtained them.”

Why would I expose something so humiliating? But what if he really does it? What if he releases everything?

After hesitating for a long time, I finally published a post on Facebook. The post spread almost immediately, not because people understood what had happened, but because the media distorted it. They extracted the most sensational details and turned them into headlines:

“Aurélie Sent Nude Photos to Her Ex-Husband Every Day.”

“Aurélie, Who Once Eloped, Refuses to Be Called a Widow?”

“Aurélie Enjoys Sending Nude Photos.”

I regretted the post immediately, but once something has spread online, it cannot truly be taken back.

Bobby, meanwhile, seemed to thrive on the attention. He moved from one television program to another, apparently delighted that his name had suddenly become a popular topic. He performed the role of the loving, heartbroken husband who had supposedly been abandoned without reason.

He said we had always loved each other, that I had always been happy with him. He prayed on camera. He said he forgave me. He said he missed me. He even brought photographs of me smiling beside him and presented them as proof that I had been happy.

On one program, he even brought his mother with him. She claimed that I had come to their house and begged them to allow me to marry their son.

As if. Even if their son had been John Mayer, I still would not have begged anyone to let me marry him.

I wanted to laugh, but mostly, I felt sad watching people believe her.

On another gossip show, he participated in a staged hypnosis segment. When they asked whether he had ever been violent toward me, he answered with his eyes closed, pretending to be under hypnosis, “Of course not. I love my wife. My wife, come back.” Somehow, that performance was treated as evidence of his innocence.

Because Bobby kept appearing on television, journalists began arriving at my filming locations without invitation. I was exhausted by all of it. When they asked about Bobby, I answered calmly. I even smiled broadly because smiling was what I did when I felt nervous, and I was trying to remain polite. I did not

turn my pain into a performance. I simply wanted to continue with my life.

But people saw it differently:

“She’s lying.”

“Bobby looks devastated.”

“Aurélie is still smiling while talking about being beaten.”

“Victims don’t talk like that.”

They didn’t realize I had already cried for years. I had already spent years living inside that sadness. I wasn’t performing my pain anymore. I was trying to survive it.

While the public judged me, mocked me, and called me cruel names, the wounds inside me were still bleeding.

I had wanted justice, not only for myself, but for every girl who had been trapped in a story no one believed. I wanted to show that monsters can be charming, that evil can smile, and that survival is messy.

But I quickly learned that justice was never guaranteed. At the time, it felt as though truth alone was not enough. Without money, connections, or powerful people willing to help, justice could still slip through your fingers.

Maybe one day that would change. But at the time, that was the reality.

So I let them believe whatever they wanted.

23

Free

I chose to focus on what I could still control.

My healing. My safe circle. My next breath.

Little by little, the fog began to lift. Not all at once, but slowly, like light slipping through curtains I had been too afraid to open.

For a long time, I had wondered what it would feel like to finally live without him.

Would I miss him? Would I feel empty? Would anyone ever see all my flaws and still choose me?

He had taught me to see myself as nothing but flaws and to believe that no one else would ever accept me. But after I finally escaped, not a single day passed when I wished I had stayed. I never felt the devastating heartbreak he had convinced me would follow if I left.

The truth was that whatever love I had once felt for him had died after what he did to me when I was fifteen. What remained was fear, guilt, and the illusion that I owed him something. For years, I mistook those feelings for love. They were not love. They were survival.

Bobby was my first serious relationship, or at least the first one that appeared to be a relationship. Because I had nothing healthy to compare it with, I wondered whether the anxiety was normal, whether fear was simply part of intimacy, and whether love meant sacrificing more and more of yourself until nothing remained.

I didn't know what a healthy relationship looked like. When he said it was love, I believed him.

It was control, dressed up as care.

Fear, disguised as devotion.

Power, pretending to be protection.

When you have never experienced healthy love, it can be frighteningly easy to mistake pain for passion and believe that love is supposed to hurt.

Years later, when I was twenty-two, I was in a long-term relationship and we began discussing marriage. For a while, I believed that was where my life was heading. His father initially had reservations because of the rumors that I had previously been married. Because of that, I began the lengthy process of seeking an annulment.

Bobby never appeared when he was summoned, seemingly determined to delay the process and make it as difficult as possible. By then, he had already had a child with another woman, yet he continued finding ways to interfere with my life.

Even without his cooperation, the available evidence was more than sufficient to establish that the so-called marriage had never been valid. Eventually, the annulment was granted, formally recognizing that the marriage had never validly existed.

The ironic part was that, once the annulment was finally granted, I never needed to use it, not for a wedding and not to prove anything to his father. By the time I received the document, his father had already accepted me without requiring any proof. In the end, I did not marry his son either.

That experience taught me something important: love does not require paperwork, proof, permission, or anyone else's validation in order to be real. When love is genuine, it reveals

itself through the way someone treats you, not through signatures, stamps, or declarations of ownership.

After Bobby, I still entered relationships that were unhealthy in different ways. They were less extreme, but they still caused pain. And no, I am not about to become the Taylor Swift of memoirs and turn every ex into a chapter. That is not the point. Although... no, I'm kidding.

The point is that I repeatedly found myself with people who treated me poorly, and for a long time, I dismissed the pattern as bad luck. Eventually, I understood that it was not simply bad luck. Because I believed I deserved so little, I tolerated behavior that should have made me walk away.

I also do not want to pretend that I understood everything or that I was always a perfect partner. Of course I was not. How could I have known how to build a healthy relationship when Bobby had provided my first model of one? I was still learning how to build something healthy and how to love another person without disappearing inside the relationship.

I had struggled with self-worth long before meeting Bobby, and his treatment of me only deepened those wounds. It took me years to understand that my lack of self-worth had made it harder to recognize harmful patterns, establish boundaries, and leave when those boundaries were violated.

So I decided to stop.

I stepped away from long-term relationships, not because I had given up on love, but because I needed to offer some of that love to myself first.

I chose healing.

Love is not something you earn through suffering. It is not a reward someone gives you for being good enough, quiet enough, or obedient enough.

Love begins with you.

Once I began to understand that, everything slowly started to change.

I stopped trying to be who they needed me to be.

I stopped dimming my light to make others comfortable in the dark.

I stopped apologizing for the way I fought my way out.

That was when freedom began to feel real.

Freedom did not look the way it does in films. There was no wind in my hair, no music swelling in the background, no perfect sunset or neat ending.

It was quieter than that. Less dramatic. More real.

It looked like waking up and realizing that no one was monitoring my every movement.

It looked like silence that no longer frightened me. Like finally feeling safe. Like no longer having to explain myself. Like choosing myself without guilt.

Freedom was not a grand final scene. It was the space that came afterward. It was the quiet part no one talks about, where healing begins, the noise fades, and you slowly discover who you are without fear.

At first, I had no idea where to begin, so I typed “how to love myself” into YouTube.

I tried looking into the mirror and saying, “I love you.” At first, it felt ridiculous. I rolled my eyes and laughed at myself. But over

time, something softened. The way I looked at myself began to change.

I tried affirmations, although at first, I did not believe a single word. I continued until they no longer sounded as though they were meant for someone else.

I reached for God.

I learned to sit with myself in silence.

I found the courage to seek help from professionals, healers, and people who could guide me back toward myself. I attended retreats, tried hypnotherapy, and read books about the subconscious mind.

I learned to rewrite the beliefs I had lived with for too long. I learned to stop treating myself like the enemy.

Little by little, I began to feel whole again.

I could write another book about that process alone, but for now, let us simply say that healing happened one page at a time.

Today, I am happy. I have learned to love and accept myself as I am.

As I learned to accept myself, something beautiful happened: love found me.

Real love.

The kind I didn't have to chase.

The kind that arrived gently, without fear, without noise, without force.

Today, my life feels peaceful.

Thirteen years later, I am the same age Bobby was when I finally escaped him. The older I become, the more clearly I see how pathetic his need for control truly was.

It was not love.

It was not even obsession.

It was fear: fear of losing control and fear of being seen for who he truly was.

He did not choose someone younger because he loved more deeply. He chose someone younger because he believed she would be easier to control. He needed someone he could make feel small so that he could feel powerful, someone he could confuse, manipulate, and overpower rather than confront his own inadequacy.

Now that I'm his age, I see it for what it was.

Not power. Not love. Only weakness in disguise.

The contrast with my life today could not be clearer. Today, I am married to my soulmate, a man who loves me with gentleness and respect. My life has moved forward and is now built on peace rather than fear.

Bobby, meanwhile, continued appearing on gossip shows and talking about me seventeen years later, as though our history were the only story he had left to tell. When news of my marriage became public, he appeared on television to discuss me once again.

"Now I can be more at peace. Back then, I was still a kid, you know."

Still a kid?

He had been thirty-two, the same age I am now. He was a grown man, fully responsible for his choices.

I was the child.

For years, I wondered whether reaching his age would finally help me understand him. But now that I am here, I see the truth more clearly than ever.

There is nothing to understand.

Nothing to excuse.

It was simply something that should never have happened.

I wrote this book for anyone who has ever lived in silence or carried a burden that never belonged to them.

If you are still in the middle of it, if you feel trapped and unsure of what to call it, I want you to know that your confusion makes sense. What is happening to you is not your fault. Surviving day by day is already an act of strength.

And if you have already left but the echoes still follow you, if someone made you believe that the chaos was your fault or that staying meant you were weak, please know this: you were not weak.

You did what you had to do to survive.

No language can fully describe what survival can cost, and no neat conclusion can make what happened fair. But your story matters because it happened, because you lived it, because you are still here.

The world may not always understand. People may look away, distort your story, or call it something it was not. But the truth stays with you, and that truth is enough.

I cannot tell you how or when healing will come. I can only tell you that it is real, even when it moves slowly or looks nothing like you expected. Living in your own truth, without apology or shame, is already a form of freedom.

Healing has no finish line and offers no final promise. Only this: if you are still inside it, you are not invisible. If you have made it beyond, you are not broken. Wherever you are in the process, your survival is extraordinary.

I waited until I reached the age he had been when he entered my life, until time itself confirmed what I had always known: that what happened had never been love. It had been cruelty disguised as devotion.

I wrote this book to reclaim what had been taken from me and transform my testimony into something that might help someone else. If these pages can help even one girl recognize the storm before it closes around her, then telling this story will have been worthwhile.

If you made it to the end, thank you.

This was not an easy story to tell, and perhaps it was not an easy one to read either. If you are carrying your own story, I hope you feel less alone.

I am proud of the girl I once was. And I am proud of you too, whether you are surviving, healing, or simply finding the strength to turn another page.

At first, I wrote this book only for myself. It was part of my healing, a way to make sense of everything and finally put the chaos into words. I believed that I would keep it private, a testimony meant for no one else.

But when my husband read it, he told me not to hide it. He said, “Maybe your story can help another Aurélie out there, someone who is still searching for a way out, or a reason to hold on.”

That was when I realized that the book was no longer mine alone. It also belonged to every girl who had ever been silenced and every survivor still carrying the weight in secret.

This is for us.

A Letter to My Younger Self

Hey, little girl.

I know you are frightened. You believe that if you stay quiet, try harder, and love him more deeply, perhaps he will change. You believe that if you are good enough, the pain will stop.

But listen to me: none of it was ever your fault.

Not the yelling. Not the guilt he planted inside you. Not the way he made you believe that you were difficult to love.

You were never too much, and you were never not enough. You were only a little girl trying to survive something that should never have happened.

I wish I could hold you and tell you that none of this will determine who you become.

You will not always feel small. One day, you will understand that love should not hurt, silence is not peace, and obedience is not proof of love.

The voice he tried to silence will rise again. And this time, your voice may help someone else find her own way toward freedom.

You will find your way home, not all at once, but slowly, like morning light slipping through curtains you once kept tightly closed.

You will rebuild yourself from the pieces he tried to break. You will learn that healing does not mean forgetting. It means forgiving yourself for what you had to do in order to survive.

This book is for you, not because your pain needed a purpose, but because it never deserved to remain hidden.

You won't be trapped forever. You will leave, and when you do, you will never return. Healing will take time, but you will laugh again, love again, and breathe without fear.

One day, you will meet someone who shows you that love can be gentle, touch can be caring, and safety can exist without control. You will understand what peace truly means, and you will know that you deserve it.

You will laugh again. You will breathe again. You will stand beneath the sunlight and realize that you made it out.

And when you look back, you will understand that the little girl who once cried in silence was the one who ultimately saved you.

So please, never lose hope. You are not weak because you survived. You are not broken because you were hurt. You are human.

One day, you will become the woman writing these words, her head held high and her heart finally her own.

You made it.

You are free.

With all my love,
Your future self,

Aurélie Alida Marie Moeremans-Bigenho