

AWAY

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AWAY

Family, Betrayal, and the Price of Dreams

This book would not have been possible without my family.

Chapter 1

Andy

Today is my birthday, but I can't stand birthdays. Each one feels like a countdown, another reminder that time is slipping through my fingers. I'm the kind of man who's never satisfied, constantly chasing something more. Sure, I've accomplished plenty, but my mind is always on the next project, the next challenge. And aging? It feels like a slow betrayal.

I live in one of those countries where every day's a grind. Thirty-eight years here is like seventy-six anywhere else. The pace is exhausting, but I wouldn't know what to do with a normal life if I had one.

I'm a software developer. You know the type—the ones who think up ideas nobody really needs, pitch them as groundbreaking innovations, and somehow convince investors to pour money into them. That's the dream. But the reality is far messier.

I remember the early days—People used to ask, "Are you one of those .com guys?" They had no idea. We were all trying to ride that wave, launching websites, selling them for fortunes. Then, the game shifted. Smartphones hit, and the world needed apps. Hundreds of us worked from our garages, hoping to strike gold with the next big app. Some did. Most didn't.

When I look back, it's funny. I picture myself sitting in some sleek office, surrounded by employees who all work for me. I'd sit back in the boss chair, sipping coffee and watching it all run smoothly. But life doesn't

work that way, does it?

“Earth calling Andy”, my wife, Anna calls out, breaking into my thoughts. She’s good at that, snapping me back to reality.

Anna. My partner. She’s everything to me. She has a sharp mind and an even sharper wit. We met through my sister—they’ve been friends since they were kids. One thing led to another, and here we are, raising a four-year-old daughter in a rented apartment downtown.

We both work from home. It sounds ideal, but when you add a child into the mix, it’s pure chaos. If you’ve been in my shoes, you know what I’m talking about. Juggling work, deadlines, and a kid—it’s like walking a tightrope over a pit of fire.

“What are you thinking about?” Anna asks again, determined to pull me from my daydreams.

“Oh, nothing special” I say. “Just thinking about how we’ve been here for almost two years. Can you believe that?”

Before Anna can answer, my brother Marvin cuts in with a laugh. “Bro, you change your life every two years. What’s next?”

The whole family laughs because they know it’s true. Every couple of years, something shifts in my life. It’s not intentional. I don’t plan it. It just happens. Luckily for me, Anna’s always been there, rolling with the punches.

But now that we have Lara, I’ve been thinking maybe it’s time to settle down. Maybe.

Two years ago, our world turned upside down when someone broke into our house and took everything. It’s one of those moments that stays with you, the kind of shock that makes you realize just how fragile life is. Anna was at work, and I was at home, wrapping up some last-minute work when I walked into the house and saw it—the place ransacked,

everything gone. It was like something out of a movie. I stood there, frozen, bags from the market slipping from my hands.

By the time Anna came home, I'd already filed a report with the police, though I knew it was pointless. The local station was a joke. Corruption runs deep in this country, and everyone knows it. The officer behind the desk barely looked up when I told him what had happened. I sat there for an hour, waiting for someone to take my report, only to be met with indifference. It was like I didn't even exist to them.

"Go to that office", the receptionist said, gesturing to a small room in the back. "The officer will take your report."

Officer Martinez sat behind a desk buried under piles of paper. He listened to my story with a look that said he'd heard it all before. I wanted him to react, to show some sign of understanding. But all I got was a blank stare.

"This is your report. Anything else you want to add?" he asked, handing me the paper.

"Do you think I'll get my stuff back?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"We can't guarantee anything, sir", he said flatly.

That was it. No promises, no reassurances. Just bureaucracy. I could feel my frustration boiling over, but what could I do?

As I left, another officer waved me over. "Hey, mister. You want a lift home? It's part of our service.

I hesitated. Trusting the police here is a gamble, but I figured, why not? I've never been in a police car before.

The ride home was short, but it gave me time to think. This country, this system—it's broken. You can't rely on anyone but yourself here. And as

I stepped out of the car, Anna rushed to my side, fear etched on her face.

“What happened? Why were you in a police car?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Nothing. It’s fine” I said, trying to reassure her. But it wasn’t fine. Nothing about this was fine. I explained the whole situation to Anna—how I’d been working on my stuff, stepped out for no more than an hour, and when I came back, the door was broken, and my computers were gone.

“I checked the house, but I’m pretty sure nothing else is missing. Not that we have much worth stealing anyway” I added, trying to downplay it, though the pit in my stomach told a different story.

Anna stood there, shocked and scared. This wasn’t the first time we’d faced a break-in, but no matter how many times it happens, it never feels less violating. In my country, it’s never just the first time. You live knowing it’s only a matter of when it’ll happen again.

Later that evening, I went to a local repair shop, hoping to find a second-hand computer. The moment I stepped inside, the atmosphere hit me. The place felt less like a store and more like a refuge for people who seemed to be there just to survive, drifting through life without purpose. Faces were blank, indifferent, as if they were simply passing time, hanging on to the routine of existing. The whole shop had an oppressive, humid smell, like damp clothes left out for too long. It reeked of neglect, like no one cared enough to air it out, let alone make it inviting.

The clutter was everywhere—broken devices piled high on countertops and the floor, cables spilling out of open boxes, dust clinging to every surface. It was clear no one had ever thought of designing the place or making it remotely professional. But what struck me most was how fortified the shop was. Heavy metal grates surrounded the workspaces, separating the tech kids from the customers. It was like walking into a fortress disguised as a repair shop, built less to attract business and more

to fend off the next inevitable break-in.

I walked further inside, scanning the chaos, when something caught my eye—my stolen laptop, sitting right there on the counter. I couldn't believe it.

“That's mine!” I shouted, startling everyone in the shop.

The technician looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

I pointed to the stickers plastered on the back—Simpsons characters, a dead giveaway. “That's my laptop. It was stolen today.”

The shop owner looked uneasy as I demanded they call the police. When the officers arrived, the situation quickly unfolded. The man who'd brought in my laptop wasn't just some random customer—he was a local gangster, and I had walked right into the middle of one of his shady deals gone wrong.

In this country, no matter where you go, there's always a local gangster or two lurking around. They're a fixture in every town, every city. They steal your things, they get aggressive when they're high, and most people have learned the unspoken rule: don't mess with them. You don't make eye contact, and if they say "hi" you say "hi" back, but never initiate. You just try to stay off their radar.

This one, though, was different. He was from China. A lot of these guys come with good intentions, trying to make a better life, but when they get here, they find a whole different game. It's like they adapt to the environment. If people behave, maybe they will, too. But if the streets get ugly, they know how to play dirty, fast. Survival mode kicks in.

I couldn't help but think about where he came from—probably some tough city in Asia where life is as hard as it is here. In a way, they're survivors like us, just trying to navigate through chaos. But I bet he didn't expect this. No one does. They come here because they couldn't get a visa to a better country, to a place they thought would offer more.

And that's where their bad luck starts. They end up here, trapped in the same violent cycles as the rest of us, doing whatever it takes to survive.

In the end, I got my laptop back, but not before paying the technician for wiping the very files I needed for work. It was absurd, but that's life here. Corruption, theft, and chaos aren't just the exception—they're the daily routine.

"Earth to Andy" Anna said. Her voice was pulling me from my thoughts again.

The party was winding down, but those memories lingered. Something was about to change. I could feel it.

Chapter 2

My town

I live in a relatively small town—the kind you’d visit on a weekend, stroll through its narrow streets, and think you’ve seen it all by Sunday afternoon. On the surface, it has a certain charm: colorful colonial buildings, small parks where children play, and the occasional street vendor selling local crafts. But beneath that charm lies a more complex reality, one that’s shaped by a broken system and a peculiar law that defines everything here.

Half the people in town work for the government, thanks to an absurd constitutional law that guarantees if you’re hired by the government, you cannot be fired. Yes, you heard that right. Once you’re in, you’re set for life, no matter how poorly you perform or whether you even show up to work. It sounds insane, but it’s the truth. Imagine the weight of that law on our public services—on how anything functions, if you can even call it that.

It’s no secret that taxes here serve two main purposes: barely covering the enormous payroll for these lifetime government workers and filling the pockets of politicians. Our national budget is a bloated beast, sustained not by progress or efficiency, but by nepotism and corruption. We pay taxes, not for roads or schools, but for politicians’ luxury cars and beach homes, while government employees receive salaries for jobs they barely perform.

Now, try to picture a system where nobody fears losing their job. The result? Complete apathy. Most government employees stroll through the day like they're on a permanent holiday. You'll find them wandering around town, shopping during office hours, grabbing long lunches with friends, or just not showing up for work at all, "sick" for weeks, months, or even years. It's a common joke around here: If someone disappears, don't bother searching—just check the registry at the Ministry of Health.

Of course, not everyone takes advantage of the system. There's a small, rare breed of government workers who actually show up and do their jobs. But if you ever need something from one of them, brace yourself for a long wait. The lines stretch out the door, because these few functioning employees are drowned in the workload of their absent colleagues. It's like trying to empty a sinking ship with a teaspoon.

Some might suggest, "Why not just automate everything? Get rid of the paper-pushers, bring in technology, and streamline the process" Believe me, we've tried. I've personally proposed automating some of the government's systems, but every attempt has been shot down. Friends of mine have tried too, and they all failed. Technology is a threat here, not because it isn't possible, but because it makes corruption harder to hide. Our system thrives on paper, mountains of it. Paper trails can be conveniently lost or buried, unlike digital records. Automation would pull the curtain back on the secrets no one wants exposed, and that's why it will never happen.

In my town, justice moves at a glacial pace. Lawsuits, disputes, and criminal cases drag on for decades, sometimes outliving the people involved. It's all tied up in those endless paper records, so many that the courts themselves are bursting at the seams. You walk into one of these court buildings, and you'll see files stacked to the ceiling. There's not enough space to store them all, so they shove them into bathrooms, corridors, any spare corner they can find. The weight of all that unresolved paperwork is literally threatening the structural integrity of some of these buildings.

Of course, if you have enough money, you can speed things up. Bribery isn't just a side effect of the system—it *is* the system. Want a trial to move faster? Slip some cash to the right judge, and watch as the wheels of justice turn miraculously in your favor. If you don't have the money, well, good luck. Your case might sit in limbo for decades, just another folder in an overstuffed cabinet.

And then there's the other half of the population, the ones not sucking at the government's teat. Most of them run small businesses—shops, restaurants, repair services, anything to get by. These are the people who keep the local economy alive, working hard for every cent.

Finally there's this last 10 to 15 percent, people like me and my wife, Anna. We're professionals, offering services, but we're a minority here. Most people don't bother with higher education. Why would they? It's expensive, and in this society, education doesn't pay off the way it should.

My country is not just poor in terms of money—it's intellectually poor too. Our leaders like it that way. Politicians don't want an educated population. Educated people ask questions, they think critically, they're harder to control. So the system keeps us dumb, fed on a diet of sensationalist news, propaganda-filled TV programs, and state-controlled newspapers. They want you to be quiet, obedient, and distracted. They want you to look at the surface and never dig deeper. As long as you're compliant, the system can continue without interruption.

It's a trap, really. The more you understand, the more you feel the weight of it all. And sometimes, I think that's why most people prefer to stay ignorant—it's easier. You can walk through the streets of this town, past the government offices and small businesses, past the decaying buildings and the ever-present sense of stagnation, and you can almost believe everything's fine.

Almost.

Chapter 3

The idea of a new future

I woke up that morning with the familiar knot of unease in my chest. It wasn't a new feeling—it's something that comes and goes, usually triggered by my work. As much as I love software development, there's something about how I do it now that makes it unbearable. The joy I used to get from coding, from creating, has been overshadowed by pressure, deadlines, and the never-ending demand for faster results. It's like trying to keep pace in a race where the finish line keeps moving further away.

You see, in today's world, companies treat time like a currency, and developers are expensive. Salaries and hourly rates are high, so naturally, companies scramble to find ways to squeeze more out of less time. They search for magical tools and shortcuts to get the job done faster, all without sacrificing quality. But that's not reality. It only creates stress, frustration, and burnout.

As I lay there, staring at the ceiling, I felt a shift inside me. Maybe it was a thought that had been simmering for a while, or maybe it was the exhaustion finally catching up. Either way, I knew something needed to change.

I turned to Anna, who was still half-asleep beside me. "Anna, honey" I began hesitantly, "I was thinking... maybe it's time I did something else."

She blinked, slowly waking up, her expression a mixture of curiosity and concern. “Something else?” she asked, propping herself up on her elbow.

“Yeah” I sighed, struggling to find the right words. “You know I love being a software developer. I love technology. But between the noise here, working from home, and the constant pressure... It’s becoming too much. It’s hard.”

“And it’s perfect timing for you as well, right?” I added, turning to Anna. “You just wrapped up Francisco’s house.”

Francisco had been Anna’s most demanding client yet. She had fully designed a massive 3-floor house, complete with a garden, four bedrooms, and two consultation spaces for both Francisco and his wife. It was the kind of high-profile project most architects dream of, but the process had been grueling. Seven long years—the longest project Anna had ever worked on.

The time it took was largely due to the economic struggle. Every single thing, no matter how small—a window, a door handle, or even a few tiles—was outrageously expensive. It didn’t matter what it was, prices arrived impossible to afford. It wasn’t fair, but it was reality.

Even Francisco and his wife, both highly successful in their medical careers, struggled to cover the costs. And if doctors, who make good money, found it difficult, it was nearly impossible for the average person to build or renovate anything.

Anna exhaled, clearly remembering the strain of the last few years. “Yeah” she said quietly. “It was a lot. I’m glad it’s finally over.”

Anna looked at me for a long moment, her brow furrowing slightly. “I understand”, she said softly, but I could sense the gears turning in her mind. “But... I don’t know what to say about that. Do you have anything in mind?”

“I do”, I said, a bit too quickly, betraying my excitement. “I’ve been thinking about a few things... maybe something different. A project of my own, something that lets me breathe again.”

She sat up now, fully awake, her eyes narrowing with that practical look I’d come to know well. “But wait”, she said, holding up a hand before I could get carried away. “Before you start with your ideas, think about the money. If you want to do something new, you’re going to need money for that, right?”

I felt my enthusiasm deflate slightly. “Yes, I know” I muttered, lowering my head. I hadn’t thought it all the way through yet, but I couldn’t shake the urge to dream, to plan. “We have savings, don’t we?”

Anna sighed, her voice turning firm. “No, Andy. Look, I don’t think we have to—”

“I know, I know” I interrupted, not wanting to hear her finish the sentence. “You don’t want to spend the money, I get it.”

“It’s not just that”, she said, her tone softening slightly, but still carrying that edge of practicality. “Babe, it’s really hard to live in this country as it is. Every ten years or so, we hit a terrible crisis. We never know what’s coming next. We need savings for emergencies—for those unexpected situations that always seem to pop up. And we’re lucky. You make good money working for clients, thank God. But that’s the thing. We *have* savings, and that’s rare. You know how many people around us don’t?”

I nodded, feeling the weight of her words sink in. She was right, of course. In this country, stability is a luxury. We don’t know if inflation will skyrocket tomorrow, or if the next economic disaster is lurking just around the corner. Having savings was our safety net, the one thing that kept us above water. But there was something else stirring inside me—something I couldn’t ignore.

“I get it”, I said, trying to choose my words carefully. “I really do. But... How can I say this without sounding like a complete moron? I like to dream, honey. I want to *do* things. I don’t want to look back one day and realize I spent all my time worrying about money and security. I want to build something new, something for myself.”

Anna looked at me, her lips pressing into a thin line. For a moment, I thought she was going to argue, but then she let out a sharp laugh. “You know what?” she said, her eyes narrowing slightly with a smirk.

“What?” I asked, confused by the sudden shift in her mood.

“You *do* sound like a moron”, she said, shaking her head but with a hint of affection in her voice.

I couldn’t help but laugh, though it stung a little. “Yeah, maybe I do. But can’t a moron dream?”

She smiled, that familiar warmth returning to her face. “I never said you couldn’t dream. Just... Don’t be reckless, okay? We’ve worked hard to get where we are. And I know you want more—I get that. But let’s be smart about it. We can’t afford to throw it all away on a whim.”

I nodded again, appreciating her honesty. “You’re right”, I said. “I don’t want to be reckless. I just want... I don’t know, something different. I’m tired of feeling like I’m constantly running just to keep up.”

Anna leaned over and kissed my forehead. “We’ll figure it out”, she said softly. “We always do. Just don’t forget that we’re in this together, okay?”

I smiled, feeling a little lighter. “Okay.”

Chapter 4

Surprise, surprise

Yes. Life is pretty straightforward: Boy meets girl. Both get jobs and rent an apartment. Then they move in together. Soon, they start a family. Maybe they get married first, maybe the kids come before the wedding—the order might shift, but the outcome is almost always the same. This cycle has been repeated for generations, and on the surface, it might sound like a nice, simple progression. But not for me. Not in today's world.

The society we've built doesn't make things easy for families anymore.

There was a time, before the women's revolution, when it was common for one parent to stay at home to raise the kids. Usually, it was the mother. It wasn't perfect, but at least you knew your children were being looked after by someone who loved them. There was a sense of security in that. But now? Things are different. Now both parents go to work, and the question becomes: who takes care of the children?

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that women should stay at home while the man goes to work. No. It could just as easily be the man staying home. It's not about gender. It's about something much deeper. It's about *raising a child*. It's about how we've structured our families in a way that now relies on babysitters and full-time nurseries to fill the gaps. But are we really thinking about the long-term consequences of this?

We've created a system where we outsource the most fundamental responsibility—raising our children—to others because we have no choice. Work consumes both parents. We're trapped in an economic cycle where two incomes are necessary just to stay afloat. But what kind of society are we building when the people who need the most love and attention—our kids—are being raised by strangers? We need to rethink this.

The irony is, nobody in power seems to care. Politicians aren't concerned with the future of families. They're too busy trying to line their pockets, coming up with superficial laws to fix problems only when they're forced to, or when the media catches wind of something they can't ignore. And if the media becomes too critical? Well, they'll just buy them out, keeping their voices quiet. It's a cycle of self-preservation, not societal improvement.

The truth is, nothing will change unless the next generation forces it. That's how it's always been—new ideas come in, and the younger generation adapts to them. Meanwhile, the older generation clings to what they know, complaining about how things used to be better, until, eventually, they're no longer around to say anything. Change doesn't come from those at the top, or even those of us stuck in the middle. It comes from the bottom, from the young. And I just hope that when their time comes, they'll see the flaws in how we've structured things and have the courage to fix it.

Because, in the end, the world we leave behind is the one our children will inherit. And if we're not thinking about how we raise them now, what kind of future are we really creating?

“Hello, Mom, how are you?” I said as soon as the door opened. I handed her a bag filled with goodies. “Take this, please. It’s a bottle of wine, some juice for Anna, and I think there’s something for dessert in there too.”

It was another Saturday night at my parents’ house, one of those nights we try to have once or twice a month. I love these gatherings. There’s something about everyone being together, eating, drinking, and staying up late, catching up like there’s no tomorrow. The chaos of it all feels like home, like the one constant in a world that never stops moving.

The conversation was, as usual, all over the place. Mostly small talk—how’s work, how are the kids—but every now and then, I can’t resist the temptation to stir the pot a little. I’ll throw out a topic that’s bound to make some people uncomfortable, just to see who’ll take the bait. Most of the family prays for it to end, but I can’t help myself. It’s like two voices are constantly warring inside me—one saying, “*Speak your mind*” and the other whispering, “*Easy, you’ll regret this.*” Spoiler alert: the second voice never wins.

Tonight was no different. Everyone was there, including Anna’s father and sister. We’d all gathered around the table for another big family dinner. No one could have predicted the surprise that was about to come our way.

We’d already eaten, and everyone was in good spirits. The wine was flowing—my brother-in-law was about to open the seventh bottle—and I wondered whether it was thirst or the kind of quiet desperation that

comes with too much drinking. Either way, the night was going well. We were laughing, joking, enjoying each other's company.

"I'll get the cake", Anna announced, pushing back from the table. "Make sure you all have your glasses ready for a toast!" she added, her voice taking on an almost commanding tone.

"What?" I muttered under my breath. *Anna talking about toasts?* That's not like her. Immediately, my gut told me something was up, and I had a sinking feeling I wasn't going to like it. I tried to catch her attention, but she had already placed the cake on the table and stood next to me, a glass of juice in her hand. Juice. That was clue number one.

"I have an announcement", Anna said, and suddenly the room fell silent, all eyes on her.

"Oh, let's hear it, Anna! What is it?" My mom was practically bouncing with excitement, her hands clasped together in anticipation.

"I'm pregnant!"

Anna's voice rang out, clear and confident.

The room exploded in cheers and congratulations. Glasses were raised, hugs exchanged, and everyone celebrated with the kind of joy that fills every corner of a room. My family was ecstatic. And I was too—sort of. But here's the thing: I didn't know she was pregnant. We were pregnant, actually. Anna had chosen to make the announcement to everyone at once, including me. I didn't mind that. She knows I'm not one for the theatrics of who hears the news first.

But the shock was like someone had doused me with ice water. My thoughts scrambled in a hundred directions. I was happy, of course. This is what we'd been wanting—a sibling for our daughter. Anna had always talked about wanting to give her a companion, someone to share toys with, to run through life with, not just as kids, but as adults too.

Still, I couldn't shake the gnawing anxiety. My mind raced as I tried to picture it: working from home, with the family—*now* a bigger family—under the same roof. I loved being a father, and I was excited for this new chapter, but the practical side of me couldn't help but wonder how we were going to manage. One child was already hard enough. But two? I wasn't sure how we were going to pull it off.

I looked at Anna, her eyes shining with excitement, and I realized I needed to push the worry aside. This was a moment to celebrate. Whatever came next, we'd figure it out together. That's what we always did.

Chapter 5

Nine months passed

Nine months passed, and Anna was fine. Her pregnancy had been smooth and uneventful, just like last time. It wasn't much of a surprise—she's always been healthy and active. We try to keep things light: low on fats, sugar, and all the other things people can't seem to live without. Personally, I avoid doctors like the plague. Once you're in their hands, they'll find a way to diagnose you with something, and then it's a never-ending cycle of pills, treatments, and worry. If you ask me, avoiding that stress is the secret to longevity—That's the secret for living as long as a member of The Rolling Stones.

Our doctor for this pregnancy was Dr. Rodriguez, the same one who helped deliver our first. Finding him wasn't easy. You'd think doctors would be more open-minded these days about vegetarian parents, but when we first started looking, the reactions we got were... intense. The moment we mentioned Anna would be going through her pregnancy without eating meat, most of the doctors looked at us like we'd lost our minds. It was as if we were announcing a death wish. But Dr Daniel Rodriguez? He was different—young, progressive, and more than willing to adapt his approach to suit our needs. It was a relief.

I focused on the positive side of having another child, trying hard to forget the sleepless nights and endless crying we'd gone through with Lara. I envy those parents who talk about babies that sleep through the night and hardly ever cry. That's not our story. Never has been.

It was late May, a day hotter than usual, though in this tropical climate, that wasn't much of a surprise. Summer technically ends in March, but the heat lingers, sticky and oppressive, until June brings a fleeting sense of relief. Julia, our second daughter, decided she wanted to make her entrance into this humid world. Anna was calm but clearly ready.

"I can't handle the contractions anymore", she said, wincing. "Let's go. She's coming."

Another girl. I wanted a boy this time for the change, but it wasn't something that kept me up at night. Sometimes I wonder if I'd even know how to handle someone too much like myself.

"Let me call my mom", I told Anna, fumbling around, trying to gather the bags, my phone, and close the doors all at once.

"There's no time for that. Bring Lara", she said firmly, already halfway out the door, her hand resting on her belly for support.

"Okay, okay. Wait!" I muttered, glancing around in a mild panic. "I'll call a taxi."

We have a car, but it's too small, especially with a new baby on the way. That's been a problem since Lara was born, and I knew it was only going to get worse with two kids. I keep telling myself we'll get a bigger car eventually, but life moves fast, and we never seem to get around to it.

The taxi arrived quickly. It was an old clunker, one of those cars that defy the laws of roadworthiness. Here, though, it's not surprising. If your car breaks down, it means you lose a day's pay, and money is always tight. I thought back to a friend who used his car as a taxi despite the giant hole in the floor. He once picked up a woman during a rainstorm, and when she complained about the water flooding in from the hole, he just laughed and said, "Wait, a hole? You didn't break my car, did you?"

We arrived at the hospital, and I hurried through the paperwork while Anna was whisked away in a wheelchair to the birthing room. Lara was all smiles, thinking this was some grand adventure, completely unaware of the chaos that was about to unfold. Once I found a place to sit, I started sending messages to both our families, letting them know the time had come.

I was nervous, of course, but more than anything, I was calm. I knew the drill. This wasn't my first time around. Instead of worrying, I was more focused on being prepared—ready to fix anything that went wrong, rather than expecting the worst. It's just how I am. I've always been the type to expect things to work out.

Twenty minutes passed, and a new doctor stepped out of Anna's room. I hadn't been given any updates, so I stood up to meet him.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Ramirez", he introduced himself. "I'll be covering Dr Rodriguez, your wife's doctor. He's unavailable today, but don't worry, we work closely together."

Honestly, I was fine with it. I know some people would lose their minds if the doctor they'd trusted for nine months wasn't there on the big day, but I've never been one to get worked up over things like that. "Nice to meet you, Doctor. How's my wife and the baby?"

"They're doing well", he said, nodding, "but I have to tell you it won't be a natural birth."

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling a twinge of concern.

"I just spoke with your wife. The baby is slightly tangled in the cord, and I don't want to take any risks. We'll be performing a C-section to keep things safe."

There's a thing about doctors here—they often lean toward surgeries because they can charge a fortune to medical insurance for it. But I

wasn't about to argue. "Of course, Doctor. Whatever is necessary", I said.

He gave a polite nod and returned to the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Family members started arriving soon after. My sister was the first—she's always there for me. Then Anna's sister and father showed up, followed by a few friends. I was sweating, and it wasn't just the heat. It felt like the walls were closing in, like the whole hospital was boiling over.

After two long hours, a nurse came out with the news: Julia had been born. Our second daughter was here.

Chapter 6

You may think a second child is easy to handle

After all, with the experience we had raising Lara, we felt confident we could do a better job the second time around. And in some ways, we did—but it wasn't quite how I'd imagined. The nights were still brutal, so much so that there were times I wasn't sure if it was night or day anymore.

"Andy, the baby's crying", Anna said in a tired voice. "I think she's in pain."

"What? But... it's 4 a.m.", I groaned, rubbing my eyes in disbelief.

"Yeah, babies get sick at any time, honey."

"Okay, I'm coming... Have you tried those drops the doctor gave us the other day?" I asked, desperately hoping for a quick fix.

"I don't think it's related, but I'll give it a try."

"Please do", I mumbled, still half-asleep. "I've got to be up in a couple of hours to code... this guy needs something done today."

Half an hour later, Julia finally settled down, and I dragged myself to check on Lara, praying she was still asleep. The last thing I needed was two kids crying for attention. Thankfully, Lara was out cold, sleeping

peacefully. Julia, too, had returned to blissful silence, at least for the next couple of hours until hunger inevitably struck again.

I tiptoed to my desk, the faint glow of the rising sun reminding me that I wasn't going to get any more sleep. "Hey, dude. You need caffeine!" the sky seemed to say. So, I brewed my first cup of the day and sat down to work.

As predicted, two hours later, Julia's cries broke the silence once more. At least this time, it was something Anna could handle—feeding. Or so I thought.

"Oh, Jesus, it hurts like hell!" Anna cried out from the bedroom. Her face twisted in pain as she tried to feed Julia.

I rushed over. "What's wrong? What can I do?"

"My nipples... They're killing me. It feels like a knife is stabbing my chest every time she sucks", Anna winced, holding her chest.

"Remember the pump we saw at the pharmacy the other day?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"Yes! I'll get it now. Hang in there."

Still early in the morning, I raced to the pharmacy. As I ran, I could only imagine her pain—like Dwayne *The Rock* Johnson giving you the worst nipple twist of your life. Forty minutes later, I returned with the pump. Expensive? Absolutely. More than I ever thought a plastic contraption could cost. But Anna needed it, so I didn't hesitate.

Helping her get the pump set up wasn't easy. I'm good with computers and tech, but anything to do with the human body? I'm useless. After about forty minutes, we finally got it working, and some milk, free of the blood stains from Anna's damaged skin, came through. Julia was fed,

and the crying stopped, but Anna was left with sore nipples that would take at least a month to heal.

I wanted to collapse and sleep, but there was no time for that. Sleep isn't meant for people like me, so I went straight to the kitchen for more coffee. By the time I finished my fourth cup, it was nearly noon. Coffee was my breakfast and lunch in those days.

With the job done, I heard the familiar ping of my chat app. It was Einar, the guy I was working for at that time.

“Morning, Andy”, Einar typed.

“Hi, Einar. How's everything?”

“Fine. I had my meeting at this big company I told you about yesterday.”

Einar had hired me and two other developers also from this country. It's common for U.S. and European companies to outsource work to people like us. We share very similar time zones. Also they can pay ten times less for the same job, and for us, it's good money. We can live “fine” on that.

Einar was a classic businessman, always chasing more—more ideas, more money. He was single, of course, with no time for a family when there were deals to close and cars to buy. He often talked about how, in Miami, you're only somebody if you drive a \$100,000 car. And he'd laugh, referencing Will Smith's song about the city.

Anyway, I was working on a mobile app for Einar. He's a big dreamer, but a bit old-school. That day, he was upset, so I asked what happened.

“The meeting was horrendous.”

“What happened?” I asked, curious.

“I’m a businessman, you know? Fifteen years in the industry. I take this stuff seriously. And the last thing I expected when I got to their HQ for a partnership meeting was the thing I saw.”

“What was it?”

“The guy who opened the door. He was sleepy! I asked if he was okay, and he said, ‘Sorry, I just took a nap.’ Who takes a nap when they know I’m coming to talk about business? And then... he had no shoes! No shoes, Andy! Can you believe that?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I didn’t know Einar in person, but I could picture him in a sharp suit, expecting a formal meeting. Things have changed. The businessmen of yesterday have been replaced by young kids in T-shirts and flip-flops.

“What did he look like?” I asked.

“A twenty-something kid with a macchiato, wearing a T-shirt that said *Eat. Play. Sleep. Repeat*”

“That’s bad, Einar. But did the meeting go well, at least?”

“It went okay. They gave me some good feedback. We’ll see what happens.”

We chatted for another half hour about the project and my next deadline before I realized it was almost 1:30 p.m. Time to make lunch for the family. That’s life for a home-office, non-millionaire developer. If you think it’s glamorous, think again. We ended up eating simple tacos with cheese and tomatoes.

Later that day, Francisco, one of the other developers on the project, messaged me.

“Hey Andy, how’s it going?” Francisco asked.

“Good. Einar told me about his experience yesterday. Pretty funny.”

“Yeah, I heard. Hilarious” Francisco replied. “What do you think of this company? Does it have a future?”

“With Einar? Hard to say... I want to start something of my own. My own projects.”

“Yeah. We make decent money, but I don’t think it’ll last.”

“Why don’t we start something together? Just the two of us.”

“It’s possible. But we need a sales guy. I’m not good at getting clients.”

“I can do that... or maybe we can bring someone in to handle it for us.”

“I don’t know, man. I just had a baby. Honestly? I’d love to take a year off and just *be* quiet.”

Francisco laughed. “That’s why I don’t have kids yet.”

“You live with your girlfriend now, right?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“She’ll want kids. Trust me. Most women do sooner or later.”

“Maybe... Anyway, any advice about having kids?”

“Yes” I said, without hesitation. “Get an office, away from home.”

Chapter 7

The idea was growing

After a year, I decided to leave Einar's project and take up a remote job with an Australian consulting agency. I didn't feel compatible with Einar anymore. The project was going nowhere, and I couldn't see a future for it. I wasn't an investor, but I was still part of the future of that project, and it concerned me deeply.

In life, there are two kinds of people. The first are those who couldn't care less if the company they work for collapses; their only goal is to receive a paycheck and be left alone. If things go to hell, they just find another job. Then there are people like me. I shouldn't care about the company's future, but I can't help it. If I see something wrong, I speak up—and that always leads to trouble.

I basically told Einar he wasn't making great decisions, and of course, that pissed him off. I could tell he no longer wanted me on the team. He was always pushy, constantly reminding me of what I was missing, as if trying to fire me without actually doing it. The problem was that there was no legal paperwork between us, and it's not as easy to let someone go when you're hiring remotely from another country.

Some people might say, "Einar can screw off. You should sue him" but that's not my style. I knew it was time to leave.

Being a software engineer made me lucky, though. Our industry is always in demand, especially in countries like this. They pay what is good money for us. Sure, there are challenges—like the new wave of kids skipping formal education and diving straight into the market after watching an hour-long YouTube tutorial. They offer their services for less, which undercuts those of us with more experience.

But the tech industry has the potential to bring real economic growth. I remember once pitching an idea to the mayor of a small city here. I put together a detailed presentation about how tech could transform the local economy. “If you invest in tech” I told him, “your city will grow. There will be demand for housing, groceries, entertainment, healthcare—everything. All you need to offer is fast internet, secure office spaces, and safety for everyone.”

I even showed how the northern part of Mexico, with its booming tech industry, was miles ahead of the rural, poorer south. It was the U.S. influence, of course, but the point was clear: technology could elevate entire communities.

The mayor was polite and thankful, but nothing ever came of it. Today, that city looks exactly the same as it did back then. Maybe he was waiting for me to tell him how much money he’d personally make from the deal.

Back to my own career. Changing jobs in the tech industry isn’t just about listing your skills on a CV. That’s just the beginning. Companies want you to prove that you can do exactly what they need at that moment—and they want to pay you as little as possible for it. Here’s how it works:

First, you spread the word, and recruiters start calling. They’ll hound you, trying to see if you fit any of their clients’ needs. That’s the first interview, an easy one. Once the recruiter likes you, they set up a meeting with their client. The next person you talk to is usually the HR

manager, someone who doesn't know about tech but just wants to see if you're normal, fit the company's values and won't cause problems. That's the second interview.

The third interview is with a technical lead, the person who cares about how you work. There are hundreds of ways to do the same task in software development, but they want you to do it exactly *their* way. Once you pass that, you have to code live. This fourth interview is all about solving a problem while the interviewer watches your screen. They won't tell you exactly what they want; you just have to figure it out.

Sometimes, they'll throw in non-tech questions, like, "How many gas stations does your city have?" They don't care about the actual number—they want to see how you think.

Some companies even want a fifth interview, where they fly you out for an in-person whiteboard test. I was once invited to Amsterdam for a two-day all-expenses-paid trip to do this. I declined because I couldn't just disappear from my current job for two days on a whim.

After a month of interviews, I got the good news—I was hired. It felt like winning on *America's Got Talent*. But even with the new job, life at home wasn't magically fixed. Working from home, with two kids and a wife dealing with painful nursing, it was still chaos. Anna and I started fighting more frequently, and I knew something had to change.

"Look, Anna, I've been thinking about starting a business."

"That again? We've already talked about this" she sighed. "Besides, Andy, you just got a new job."

"Yes, a new job. But I'm sure it'll be the same as before"

She looked at me, surprised. "You don't want to work in tech anymore?"

"I do", I said quickly. "But not like this. I'm tired. Really tired."

“And you don’t think I’m tired, too?” Anna replied, a bit frustrated.

“I know you are. And that’s why I’ve been thinking about a way to change our lives. Just hear me out.”

Her silence told me she was bracing for one of my crazy ideas. The first plan I presented was real estate, specifically building small apartments out of shipping containers for students. We lived near a small city with four or five universities, but students had to rent far away because housing was limited. My idea was to buy a piece of land, stack up shipping containers, and turn them into stylish, affordable apartments.

“Look” I said, showing her my spreadsheet. “Here’s the cost of the land and the containers. We could start with two, but there’s space for up to eight if we stack them. It’s a great idea, right? Besides, it’s related to your business too”

I paused to gauge her reaction. It wasn’t the enthusiastic support I was hoping for, but she wasn’t outright dismissing it either.

“Yes, Andy, but the land is cheap because there’s an old ruin on it. We’ll need to clear that before we start. That’s an extra cost you didn’t factor in.”

That comment hit me like a punch to the gut. I can’t stand her attitude. Even if it’s something impossible to move forward with, I still get defensive.

“Anna, you always see the bad side of everything.”

“And you, my dear, are too optimistic”, she replied. “You have no idea how much work this would take.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling slightly insulted.

“I design houses and apartments for a living, remember? And I work with the people who build them. They barely care about the quality. They slap up walls and floors, but unless I’m there, watching every step, they do a terrible job. They care about getting their paycheck on Friday, and then they come back on Monday, broke.”

“But this is different”, I protested.

“No, it’s not” she cut me off. “We can’t just have the *idea*. We need people who know how to bring it to life. This shipping container project is new for this town, and we don’t do ‘new’ here. No one will do a good job building these apartments.”

I could see the exhaustion on her face, the weight of her practical concerns. “Okay, okay. I don’t want to make a mess out of this.”

“Good”, she said. “Let’s not waste time on this now. The girls are hungry. Let’s go back home.”

Chapter 8

A heart-to-heart with mom

It was late afternoon, and I had finally found a quiet moment to talk to my mom. She's always been the person I turn to when things get too heavy. I figured she'd understand. After all, she's been through plenty herself, raising three kids and managing life with my dad.

"Hey, Mom" I said as I walked into the kitchen, where she was making *mates*. A local beverage we drink as much as coffee. It consists of a handmade gourd with a metal straw. We pour hot water over *yerba*, a kind of dried herb that people sometimes mistake for marihuana. It tastes horrible to outsiders, but for some reason, we love it. Maybe it's genetic—the bitterness becomes oddly comforting.

"Andy! I wasn't expecting you to drop by" she smiled warmly. "What's going on, honey?"

I took a deep breath. "I just needed to talk."

Stella gave me that knowing look, the one she always had when she sensed something serious was on my mind. "Sit down", she said, handing me a round of *mate*. "Tell me what's going on."

"It's about Anna" I started, running my fingers through my hair. "You know I've been trying to come up with new ideas—business

ideas—something to change our lives. I'm tired of the way things are. I don't want to be stuck doing the same thing forever.”

Stella nodded, listening intently. “And how does Anna feel about all this?”

“That’s the thing, Mom. She’s not on board. Every time I bring something up, she shuts it down. Like with this real estate idea I had—buying some land and building student housing with shipping containers. I thought it was a solid plan, but she’s so focused on the negatives. She says it’ll be too much work and that the workers here won’t do a good job. She always sees the obstacles.”

Stella stirred her tea quietly, not saying anything at first, which made me nervous. “Andy” she said softly, “I understand where you’re coming from. I really do. But Anna has a point.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Anna’s not trying to hold you back. She’s being practical. You’re a dreamer, and that’s one of the things we all love about you, but dreams alone don’t build a future. Anna knows what it takes to make things happen in the real world, especially when it comes to building and design. She’s been in the trenches, working with people who don’t always care as much as they should.”

I sighed, feeling frustrated. This wasn’t the response I was expecting. “So, you’re saying I should just give up on my ideas? Just keep doing the same thing forever?”

Stella reached across the table and put her hand on mine. “No, Andy. I’m not saying you should give up. But maybe you need to find a middle ground. Talk to Anna, really listen to her concerns. She’s not trying to stop you from chasing your dreams—she’s trying to make sure those dreams are grounded in reality.”

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the steam rising from my *mate*. “It just feels like every time I try to do something different, I hit a wall.”

“That’s part of life, honey”, she said gently. “Especially when you’re raising a family. You and Anna are a team. You have to make decisions together, even if it means reworking your plans or taking things slower than you’d like. She’s thinking about what’s best for all of you, not just herself.”

I knew she was right, but it didn’t make it any easier to accept. I wanted my mom to side with me, to tell me I was right and that Anna was being too cautious. Instead, she was reminding me of the balance I needed to find, the compromise I hadn’t been willing to see.

“I just thought you’d understand”, I muttered, feeling a little defeated.

Stella smiled softly. “I do, Andy. I understand more than you think. But marriage, raising kids, and building a life together—it’s not just about chasing dreams. It’s about supporting each other through the hard decisions and the tough conversations. Anna’s not your enemy in this. She’s your partner. Your best friend”

I didn’t respond right away. Part of me wanted to argue, to push back. But deep down, I knew Mom was right in a way. Anna wasn’t trying to stifle me—she was trying to protect our family from the risks I hadn’t fully considered.

Chapter 9

Our second option

The conversation with my mom helped, but probably not in the way most people would expect. For me, it wasn't about hearing "slow down" or "be more practical." Instead, I took it as, "*Okay, keep thinking of crazy ideas, but try to bring them closer to the ground.*" Of course, I wasn't sure if *closer to the ground* meant the same thing for me as it does for non-dreamers.

I crossed the shipping container real estate project off my list. It wasn't going to happen, and I accepted that. So, I opened a new spreadsheet, ready to dive into research for a completely different kind of business.

Yes, I know what you're thinking. *He's crazy.* I'm aware something might be wrong with me. I had a stable, well-paying job, and yet here I was, looking for something new—something I had no experience in. It felt like an itch I couldn't scratch, an inner search for something beyond the monotony of this reality. Maybe it's the same reason some people jump out of planes or race cars at high speeds: they need that rush of adrenaline to remind them they're alive. Perhaps that's what I was chasing, in my own way.

"Anna, listen... I know you don't want me to say this, but I can't help it. I need to tell you about a new idea I have."

Anna didn't even look up from what she was doing. After years together, I'd learned to read her expressions like a book. She was annoyed, probably already bracing herself for whatever crazy thing I was about to suggest.

"Andy", she said, finally turning to face me. "We need to talk about this. I know how your mind works. You're going to keep bringing up ideas until one of two things happens: either I listen to one of them, or you finally get tired of it and move on."

"I'm not going to get tired of it, Anna", I replied, more stubbornly than I intended.

"That's exactly my point", she sighed. "I could spend the next year hearing new business proposals from you, one after the other, or I could just... give in to one and save us both the trouble." She crossed her arms, giving me that stern look I knew too well. "I've been thinking about it. Every time you come up with a new idea, it's like you won't let it go until I say yes to something."

"I just want us to do something that excites us" I said, feeling a bit defensive. "Something that feels like it's ours. We can keep going like this, with me working remotely and you managing your architecture projects, but is this really what we want?"

Anna sighed again and sat down. "I get it, Andy. You need to chase something bigger, something new. But it's exhausting for me to keep hearing new ideas and having to explain why each one might not work. I feel like I'm constantly the one pouring cold water on your excitement, and it's not fun."

"I'm not asking you to shoot them all down", I said, softening my tone. "Just hear me out. I don't expect every idea to be perfect. But I need to try."

“That’s the thing, Andy”, she said, meeting my eyes. “I’m tired. Tired of having to *hear you out* with every idea. I feel like the only way this stops is if I say yes to something. And maybe you’re right—maybe I should. But I need you to understand that I’m not just saying yes because I believe in all these ideas. I’m saying yes because I need to stop this endless cycle. I need to stop hearing pitch after pitch.”

Her words stung, but I couldn’t deny that she had a point. I was relentless when it came to new ideas, always chasing the next big thing. “So, what are you saying? You’ll just say yes to anything?”

“No”, she said firmly. “I’m saying I’ll listen more. But I’m also saying that I might have to say yes, just so we can move forward. Otherwise, we’re stuck in this loop forever.”

I nodded, realizing what she was getting at. She wasn’t agreeing because she believed in every idea—I was wearing her down. It wasn’t the victory I wanted, but it was something.

“Okay, I get it”, I said. “But this next idea? I think you’ll actually like it.”

Anna raised an eyebrow. “Alright. Let’s hear it then.”

Chapter 10

A new venture

When I say opening a “pub” I don’t mean those classic London pubs with cozy booths and friendly bartenders. No, what we call a pub here is more like a bar mixed with a nightclub. A place where you can grab a drink, listen to live music, and, by the end of the night, the crowd is dancing, partying, and shouting over the band. It’s not just a place to relax; it’s an experience. A hub for rock, funk and blues lovers to let loose, from early evening drinks to late-night chaos. There’s something we both love and it doesn’t exist in town. To me it sounded like a great and successful idea.

Now, the funny thing is, I don’t even like people all that much. Crowds make me nervous, and the idea of running a business that relies on socializing with *lots* of people seemed absurd. But there I was, pitching a business that would put me at the center of that very scene.

The idea was huge. And, of course, I had no experience—neither did Anna. Not as waiters, not as managers, nothing. But that didn’t matter. The only thing I knew for certain was that I was crazy enough to dive headfirst into any challenge.

We started talking about logistics, themes, décor, and what kind of music we’d play. We imagined people lining up to get in, live bands playing their hearts out, and us, right in the middle of it all, watching our business thrive.

The more we talked about it, the more excited we became. It felt like this idea, unlike the others, had a real shot at success. Maybe that's the thing about dreams—you just need the right one to click, to get the wheels in motion. And this one felt like it was finally on the right track.

What I would later learn is that the country wasn't ready for it.

Chapter 11

My brother Marvin

The first person I went to for help was Marvin, my brother. He's been around the block when it comes to nightlife. He knew the people, the processes, and most importantly, he knew how to navigate the ups and downs of that world.

"So, what do you think about the idea?" I asked, waiting for his reaction. Depending on what he said next, I'd either dive in headfirst or delete the entire spreadsheet and walk away.

"What are you talking about, bro? It's fantastic!" he grinned. "I love the idea! I'll get in touch with the people I know right away. We'll have everything set up in a couple of weeks, max."

"Good. I like that" I said, nodding. "But make sure we get the right people involved, you know what I mean."

Marvin leaned back with a smirk. "Of course, bro. You came to the right guy. I'm excited, man!"

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear! Anna's already sketching up ideas for the decor, based on all the feedback I gave her."

"And what are you thinking? How's the place going to look?" he asked, leaning forward, curious.

I had a clear vision. Our town is small, a bit behind the times. People aren't exactly *cosmopolitan* here, so anything remotely different tends to surprise them. I wanted something unique—a New York-style blues bar, dark but chic, bohemian but elegant. I imagined blue and yellow bulbs scattered throughout, purple velvet curtains hanging in front of small wooden tables, and a modest stage for live bands. The kind of place where you could order exotic drinks and food, all while soaking up the atmosphere.

The big question in my mind was: *Will the town like it?*

“They will love it. This is awesome, bro!” Marvin said, eyes lighting up. “But hey, just so you know... I don't have any money. I mean, to help get things started, buying stuff and all that.”

Of course Marvin didn't have money. He's never worked for long. He quits jobs over trivial reasons—hours not being convenient or people not meeting his standards. He never sticks with anything. Honestly, I doubt he'll ever work a steady job. But that's Marvin. He still lives with our parents, where he's had everything handed to him. It's dangerous, really, to grow up with no rejections and never learning how to earn things on your own.

Mom changed when it came to Marvin. She was strict with me and my sister, but with him? She softened. It was almost like she'd become less objective, letting him float by without consequence.

“I know, kid” I replied, patting him on the back. “But don't worry, you'll make money from all the good work you'll be doing.”

“Cool, cool. Exciting. So, speaking of money, what's my cut going to be?”

We joked about the idea of making a ton of money. By the time we finished a bottle of wine, we were laughing, imagining ourselves like those mafia guys in movies who run a bar as a front for something

bigger. It was ridiculous, but that's the kind of fun I have with Marvin. We're very different in some ways, but when we're together, we get each other.

As I walked home, I felt alive—like this could actually happen. But the real surprise came when I arrived and saw Anna genuinely excited about the project. She was already working hard on designs for the pub.

“Hey, babe” she called out the moment I stepped through the door, skipping the usual “hello.” “Come look at these ideas I've been working on for the place.”

I smiled to myself. No greeting? Fine by me. When you're caught up in inspiration, everything else falls away. I walked over to see what she'd come up with.

Her designs were stunning. They captured everything I had in mind—dark, atmospheric, full of rich colors and the moody ambiance I'd been dreaming about. This would be the most beautiful pub in town.

“I love this, honey” I said, genuinely impressed. “They're excellent. Are you excited? Do you like the idea now?”

Anna paused, her excitement tempered by something else. “The only thing I'm going to say is: be careful, Andy. Don't push too hard. I still don't know why I'm doing this, but... it's kind of exciting. I just don't know.”

Sensing where the conversation could go, I quickly changed the subject. “How about we celebrate tonight? Is Tamara available for babysitting?”

She smiled, a little relieved. “Sounds nice. Yeah, I think we could take a break...”

Tamara is a young college student who babysits our girls. She needs the money, and the hours she works don't interfere with her day-time classes.

We met her thanks to my mom—Tamara attends the same church. Normally, the people from that group are decent enough, though I won't get started on religion. I don't believe it makes people better. It just makes them scared. The whole "*Obey or end up in hell*" rhetoric they cling to isn't something I can stomach. I mean, how many people question whether the book they follow hasn't been altered to suit the desires of those in power? But I digress.

The truth is, Tamara is a rare find here. You can't let just anyone into your home. Too many horror stories of maids or babysitters ending up with the house empty or even kidnapped kids.

After Tamara arrived, Anna and I went out to celebrate and do some *research*. We took the car to the most popular area of bars and nightclubs in town.

"Do you realize all these places are so ugly, Andy?" Anna asked, looking around at the different bars as we drove by.

"That's if you're being polite. I'm not polite, so I'll say what it is: these are a bunch of shitty places."

Anna pointed at one spot down the street. "Look at that one over there. That's the only decent place in town."

The place she pointed to was called *Cosmopolitan*. It was a clean bar that turned into a nightclub after 10 p.m. Most of its décor consisted of a giant *Fernet Branca* sign and rows of white bulbs hanging from the walls. Nothing particularly original, but it was clean, and nothing was falling apart. That was more than could be said for the majority of the bars here. Most places were dumps, barely functional, and a far cry from what I had in mind.

Apart from *Cosmopolitan*, the only other nice spots in town were the bars inside the two luxury hotels, but no one could afford to hang out there for long. After visiting the area, we grabbed a quick bite. As expected, our

choices were limited to pizza, fries, and sandwiches. We settled on a vegetarian-friendly spot we always go to. In this country, being a vegetarian is practically alien, and people often look at us like we're from another planet.

We took a seat and asked for the menu, but the waiter—a surly kid who clearly wasn't thrilled to be there—gave us the bad news: “The kitchen's closed.”

“What do you mean closed?” I asked, already feeling the frustration rise.

“We stop making food at a certain hour”, he said flatly.

“But this is a restaurant, right? You're supposed to serve food.”

“Look, pal, it is what it is. Want anything to drink? That's all I've got for you.”

I ordered a beer, and Anna got some overly sweet chocolate drink that the guy probably threw together just to get us off his back. The waiter left, looking like he couldn't wait to end his shift—or his existence—I looked at Anna and shook my head.

“This is exactly what I'm talking about, Anna. Shitty service. Our pub is going to be so much better.”

“And what about the kitchen hours?” Anna added. “All the places here close at the same time. We can do better than that, right?”

“Absolutely. You'll see—it's going to be fabulous.”

The formula to create the best place in town seemed simple: do the opposite of what everyone else is doing.

When we got back home, we found Tamara sitting on the couch, reading aloud from her prayer book. Honestly, the first time she did that, it

creeped me out. She caught me staring that time and nervously explained it was part of her belief system—these special prayers are meant to be shared aloud, not just for herself but for the household.

Tamara, my mom, and my dad all go to *Universal Church*, a religious group originally from Brazil. They're always in the news for one controversy or another. Some say it's a cult, and they've been trying to shake that label for years. They move millions of dollars around under the guise of charity, but since religions don't pay taxes, they've got a pretty sweet deal. The guy who started it all is now a billionaire, despite starting with nothing.

When my parents first told us they had joined *Universal Church*, the family was in uproar. "Not the cult!" my sister shouted. It caused chaos, especially since we were raised Catholic, and this switch was serious business to everyone—except me, of course.

I still remember the phone call with my sister, who was the most disturbed by it all.

"Andy, you have to get them out of that place!" she said urgently.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Mom and Dad! You know they're going to *Universal Church*, right?"

"Yeah, I know."

"They're going to end up in some cult ritual, or worse! I can't believe it!"

"Carina, take it easy", I said. "It's not that serious."

"Not that serious? I've read up on it. The stuff they do there is terrifying."

"Look, I'll talk to them, but they're adults. It's their decision."

“That’s bullshit, Andy! Either help me get them out, or I’ll burn that place down myself!”

Chapter 12

Rent

One of the most important things we had to accomplish before continuing with the design and other preparations was to secure a place to rent. This was our first real challenge, and we were about to take it on that morning.

In this town, you can't open a place in a family neighborhood if you plan to play loud music or sell alcohol. People value their peace and quiet here, especially after work when they come home to rest. It's one of the few things that's in common with "normal" countries.

The only places available for bars or nightclubs are located near the river. Yes, we have a river—but it's so heavily polluted you can't even swim in it during the summer. Oddly enough, we still drink the water, but we definitely can't bathe in it. The irony doesn't escape me.

Anna and I made a list of real estate agents and set off, hoping to find something we could fall in love with. We visited several agents, but the conversation always went the same way:

“Good morning, sir. How can I help you?”

“Good morning. We're looking to rent a space. We want to open a pub.”

“A pub? So, like a bar?”

“Yes, but more than that. We’ll have live rock bands and a space for people to dance.”

“I see... Well, that’s a bit complicated.”

“Why?”

“The only places authorized for that kind of activity are down by the river. We don’t handle that kind of business.”

“Okay, I see. Do you know of any agents who might?”

“This town’s small. You’re local, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, no agent in the city handles those kinds of properties.”

“And why is that?”

“They’re not listed with any of us.”

“Thanks for your help. I guess we’ll keep looking.”

We were about to leave one agent’s office when he suddenly said, “Look, let me give you a piece of advice before you go.”

We stopped in our tracks and turned to listen.

“If you really want a place down by the river, you’ll need to talk to this man.”

He handed me a card with a name: *Martin Lee*. “Talk to him”, the agent said. “He’s not exactly a real estate agent. Far from it. But he’s definitely the only person who will help you. And good luck”

“What was that about?” Anna asked as we walked outside. “Who is this Martin Lee?” It was definitely a very weird situation. The deeper we were in this business, the weirder it became.

“Absolutely no clue” I replied. “But I know exactly where to ask”

When we got home, I called my brother Marvin. He’s always had his ear to the ground for this kind of thing, and I needed answers.

“Hey, kid. Are you free to talk—in person?” I asked him over the phone.

“Hey, bro! Sure thing, my man. I’m working. Come by and talk.”

“Working?” I asked, surprised. “Won’t that be a problem with your boss?”

Marvin laughed. “A problem with my boss? Do you even know where I work?”

“No idea. I didn’t know you were actually working”

“Yeah, of course. Come on, man. I’ll text you the address.”

It was strange hearing that Marvin was working, considering his usual aversion to employment. When I arrived at the address, I saw a massive government building. Suddenly, it all made sense. If Marvin was involved in something shady, it would be in a government building. That’s where most illegal things happen around here.

“Sorry, sir. Is this 523 Cordova Street?” I asked the receptionist, who was glued to a small TV, watching some local game.

“Hm?” he grunted, not even bothering to look at me. His eyes stayed on the screen.

“I’m looking for the main accounting office. Is it here?”

Without a word, the man pointed lazily toward the elevator and held up three fingers. I took that as my cue to head to the third floor. The game on TV clearly held more importance than offering directions.

Upstairs, I found a narrow corridor filled with cluttered offices. Papers piled high on shared desks, no computers in sight—this place was a relic from the 70s or 80s, but for our government, it was perfectly normal. After wandering for a bit, I finally spotted Marvin chatting with a girl, sipping coffee. I knocked on the door, and he waved me in.

“Yes?” asked the woman at the first desk.

“It’s for me”, Marvin interrupted before I could answer. “He’s my brother.”

The woman said nothing and continued with her paperwork.

“Hey, bro!” Marvin greeted me with a huge smile. “Let’s go outside. I can take a cigarette break.”

We headed to the smoking area, where Marvin greeted about half a dozen people along the way. It was clear he was well-connected, but too bad he wasn’t making any real money from those connections. Maybe the pub would change that.

“So, this is where you work now” I said, watching him light his cigarette.

“Yeah. Got this gig from a friend.”

“And what exactly do you do here?”

“Here? Nothing, dude!”

“Nothing?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Look, here’s how it works. My friend, he’s a lawyer—been in the government since forever. His dad got him a position, and now he’s allowed to hire a couple of people every year. So, he ‘hired’ me. I don’t do anything, and I get a salary.”

“That’s... helping people, right?” I asked, still trying to make sense of it.

“Helping people?” Marvin laughed. “Nah, he helps himself! He takes fifty percent of my salary.”

“What?”

“Yep. But hey, he does the important part.”

I was shocked. “He’s stealing money from us—taxpayers! This is corruption!”

“Calm down, bro. Don’t give me the lecture now. What did you need to talk about?”

“Oh, right.” I pulled out the card with *Martin Lee’s* name on it. “I’ve been asking around about places to rent for the pub, and everyone tells me to go through this guy.”

Marvin took the card and nodded. “Yeah, Martin. That’s the guy you need to see. I can introduce you, but be careful. He’s dangerous, so tread lightly.”

He explained how Martin controlled the illegal side of town, managing who could rent the prime spots near the river. Marvin described it like a jail economy, where Martin was the guy you had to go through for anything.

Later that night, my brother Marvin set up a meeting to see Mr Lee. Let me tell you, I wasn’t too comfortable with the whole situation, but I was learning new stuff. All this was part of the new business I wanted to be

part of and I had to play the game. I guess this is what Anna tried to warn me about without even knowing.

Martin Lee invited us to a live music event at one of the venues he controlled. When we arrived I saw a big, dark warehouse with bars on both sides and a simple handwritten menu: two types of beer and strawberry daiquiris. Lots of young kids on the front. One of them was already wasted, one hour before the concert.

“Hey, Martin, my man!” Marvin called out when a bald, stocky man approached eating some peanuts. He had the air of someone who trusted no one.

Martin Lee was a tall, chubby guy, dripping in jewelry. His wrists and neck were adorned with thick gold chains and bracelets, all of it gleaming under the dim lights. His white shirt looked expensive but stretched tightly across his chest, like it was a size too small. He couldn’t have looked more cliché if he tried.

In his forties, Martin wore a suit and pants that were clearly high-end, but somehow, the entire outfit came off as vulgar. Everything about him screamed excess. Later, I learned that Martin’s brother had gone to the same school as my sister, Carina. As I said, this is a small town...

“Hey, kid”, Martin replied gruffly. “Long time, no see.”

“All good, dude. This is my brother, Andy.”

Martin shook my hand, but I could feel him sizing me up. He didn’t trust me, and I wasn’t sure I trusted him either.

“Your brother tells me you want to open a bar”, he said.

“Yeah. And it seems the only available places are by the river.”

“That’s right. It’s because of the noise and the drunks. No one wants them near the neighborhoods. Even here, we get complaints from a hotel a couple of blocks away. The locals are always trying to shut us down, especially around election time.”

“Election time?” I asked.

“Yeah, the politicians want votes, so they pander to the neighbors. We don’t vote, so they don’t give a fuck about us.”

I showed him a picture of the place we were interested in—well-kept, in a prime spot by the river.

“Yeah, that one’s empty now. The last guy, Horacio, tried to run a disco there. Lasted two weeks.”

Martin chuckled. “He had no clue what he was doing. Hired cops for security, can you believe it? That’s the last thing you want in this business—cops!”

He laughed loudly, as did Marvin, but I wasn’t in the mood for it. This wasn’t funny to me—it was terrifying. Now I wasn’t sure I wanted to get involved in this world.

“And the rent?” I asked, trying to shift the conversation.

“No rent. I take twenty percent of whatever you make. If you don’t make money for a month, you’re out.”

“Twenty percent?” My heart sank. This was worse than I’d imagined. I wasn’t sure I wanted to go through with this anymore.

I forced a smile. “Let me think it over and get back to you.”

Martin turned away, more interested in his peanuts than the conversation. We drank in silence, listening to the live band play. The place was barely

half full, mostly teenagers in dark clothes leaning against the walls. It didn't seem like a thriving business, and I wasn't sure if this was the future I wanted.

The next morning, I invited my brother for coffee near his "work." Anna and I needed to discuss the rent issue and what Lee was offering.

Coffee places in this country are very popular, and I have to admit, they're quite lovely. They act as gathering spots for all kinds of people—retired men reminiscing about the past, lawyers meeting with their clients, and even the occasional student with a book. It's like a microcosm of the town. Two conditions must exist for a café to be popular: clear windows and lots of foot traffic. This way, patrons inside can talk about anything that comes to mind while watching the world go by.

The waiters, however, are a different story. They all seem to have a permanent bad temper, as if bringing your coffee or croissant is a personal favor. (Yes, we eat a lot of croissants here—it's practically a breakfast staple) You'd be lucky to get a smile, and don't even think about paying with anything technological. Cash is king, and if you don't have it, you're in for a rough time. Some cafés even have a look that says, *If you want to pay by card, maybe go somewhere else.*

Still, despite the grumpy waiters and old-fashioned ways, there's a certain charm to these places. They've been around for ages, and everyone in town has their favorite spot. It's not just about the coffee—it's about the experience, the people-watching, and the endless conversations.

"Hey, brother" I said, handing him a coffee just the way he liked it. "Thanks for coming. I know you're 'working' now."

“Yeah, very busy, bro”, he laughed.

It wasn’t funny. His so-called job was just a front for siphoning money from taxpayers, but I wasn’t about to start a fight with him. He was the only person who could help me right now, and picking a battle about his shady job wasn’t worth it. Today, I was in “businessman mode.”

“I told Anna the whole story about Martin”, I said, stirring my beverage. “We think it’s crazy to accept his offer.”

“Well, you know, that’s standard here” Marvin said, shrugging. “That’s how it works in this town. The local authorities only give permits for that area near the river.”

“Yeah, but listen—I found a place that could actually work. It’s in the perfect location. We both saw it and loved it.”

Most towns in this country are built around a central square. You have the church, the city hall, the national bank, and the post office—all the essentials. Over time, the main street became a pedestrian zone, and it’s now the heart of the city, packed with small businesses and shops. That’s where I found our spot.

“You got a place downtown?” Marvin’s eyebrows shot up. “That’ll cost you a fortune!”

“No, it’s on the quieter part of the street. The rent’s actually half the price because nothing’s open at night. No night activity means no high rent. It’s perfect for us.”

I wanted to show him the place, so we went there. Obviously, Marvin could leave work without anyone noticing—it wasn’t like he had much to do there.

From the outside, the place looked like an old, elegant house, hidden between small shops. All you could see from the street was the old elegant door, but that didn't matter. The magic would be inside.

"You've got some problems here, bro", Marvin said as we walked through the building. "First, the permits. The local authorities aren't going to give you one to open a pub here."

"I know that", I said, pulling out my tablet. "But according to the law—look here—there are no houses nearby. We can open a pub and no one can say anything. They *have* to give us permission!"

Marvin looked around, then out the window. "You realize there's a hospital just 400 feet from here, right? Look, you can see it from here."

"Yeah, I saw it, but I figure if we keep the noise down, we won't have any problems."

"I don't know, bro. It's risky."

"Come on, let's give it a try. You know me, I always make things work."

That's who I am. I believe every problem has a solution—you just have to find it. People quit because they're lazy, but I'm not. I knew we could pull this off.

We rented the place before even starting the paperwork. Of course it was risky because if we spent all that money without securing the permits, we'd be screwed. But something told me this was the right move. Maybe it was destiny. Or maybe I was just listening to that little voice we all have inside but we never pay attention to.

The landlord was a man in his sixties, a peculiar figure who still lived with his elderly mother. She seemed to have outlasted everyone else in the family, as if she was determined to stick around long enough to see her son outlive his usefulness. He had spent his whole life living off rental income, never pursuing any real career or trade. His "job" if you could call it that, was collecting rent from properties that had been passed down through generations.

These properties were his inheritance, part of an odd family legacy where everyone seemed to die off, leaving behind another house. He was the only surviving son of a sprawling family tree filled with aunts and uncles who, somehow, managed to do well financially. They left behind not just houses, but an easy life for him to manage. And manage he did, though without much enthusiasm or effort.

He was the type of man who never had to struggle, who never had to hustle. His life was simply waiting for the next tenant to move in, collecting checks, and occasionally dealing with a broken pipe or a faulty lock. He seemed indifferent to our plans for the place, more interested in making sure the rent kept coming in than in what we were planning to do with the space. In fact, I don't think he cared whether we were opening a pub, a shoe store, or a circus.

The place itself was a two-story building. The lower floor was a small shop with prime real estate—direct access to the main street, where businesses thrived thanks to the constant foot traffic. The upper floor, where we planned to set up the pub, was much bigger but cheaper due to its lack of street-level visibility. It could comfortably hold about 200 people and featured a fantastic patio for smokers. If there's one thing I've learned in this town, it's that having a designated space for smokers is essential. Without it, you lose half your clientele before you even open your doors.

The upper floor had three large rooms, perfect for placing tables and chairs. Next to those rooms was a spacious area for the bar, and beyond that, the kitchen. But the true centerpiece—the thing that made the place glamorous—was the marble staircase. It was a stunning, long staircase made from a kind of marble you just can't find anymore. Anna added her magic touch, setting up blue lights along the stairs, turning it into a focal point of elegance.

The landlord agreed to the rental, even with the changes we wanted to make, probably because he knew it was either our money or nothing. No one else in town would rent a space like that for a business or a home.

The place was perfect, and Anna's redesigns were the cherry on top. Anyone who walked in would instantly know that this pub wasn't just another hole in the wall—it was going to be the best place in town.

Chapter 13

Lost with cables and sound

One of the things I was laser-focused on was the audio system. I wanted great sound for both live bands and a DJ. The plan was to have bands play for an hour or so, and then transition into a dance party that would last all night. From the start, I envisioned Funk, Rock, and of course, Blues filling the air. For dinner time—right at the start of the evening—I pictured Jazz setting the mood.

I got lucky with the audio equipment. A local store gave me a great deal, which was a miracle. But, as excited as I was, I had to admit that I was completely out of my depth. I was learning about sound systems as I was buying them. I had no idea what half of the equipment was for, so I just nodded along as the sales guys threw terms at me like “cable type T” and other jargon. I felt like an idiot but wasn’t about to admit I was setting up the biggest venture of my life without knowing the difference between a subwoofer and an amplifier.

I spent more money than I’d planned, but at least I left the store with a handful of invitations for our opening night. Promotion was something I couldn’t afford to ignore. I didn’t have a clear idea if this pub would succeed, and I couldn’t rely solely on good intentions. I needed bodies through the door.

While I was drowning in cables and soundboards, my brother Marvin was busy spreading the word. His strategy was to build a sense of

mystery around the pub. With no money for ads on TV or in the papers, we had to rely on originality and whispers to get people talking. Meanwhile, Anna was deep into remodeling and decorating, transforming the place from an old forgotten building into something modern and unique. The changes were amazing, but the progress wasn't fast enough. I was getting anxious. The money I'd budgeted was starting to slip through our fingers faster than expected. The spreadsheet I'd made—detailing every cost and payment—was precise, but if this pace continued, we were heading for a serious budget crisis. Contractors here took their sweet time.

“Anna, honey, we need more progress. A lot more” I said, feeling the panic rise. “We’re running out of money. What’s the problem?”

“It’s the electricity”, she sighed. “The wiring in this place is ancient, and most of it isn’t even up to code.”

“Shit” I muttered. This wasn’t part of my perfect plan. “We can’t open with the place like this. If we’re not up to regulation, they’ll shut us down.”

Just as I was starting to feel overwhelmed, Marvin strolled in, his usual carefree self. His timing, as always, was impeccable.

“Look at this place! It looks amazing!” he said, taking in the new bar setup and lighting.

“Hey, bro” I said, my tone not matching his enthusiasm.

He noticed right away. “Why the long faces? What’s wrong?”

“It’s the electricity. The wiring is ancient. The place isn’t safe.”

Marvin waved his hand dismissively. “Come on, man. Who cares about that? Look, all the places in this town are out of regulation. It’s way too expensive to get everything up to code.”

“No, bro” I shot back. “What happens if something goes wrong and someone gets electrocuted? We’re done.”

He shook his head, amused by my concern. “Listen, nothing’s happened in any of the other places, has it?”

“That’s crazy and risky. We need to pass the inspection, or they’ll shut us down.”

Marvin leaned in, dropping his voice like he was letting me in on a secret. “You’re not seeing the full picture here.”

“What picture?”

“Regulations, inspections—they don’t mean what you think they mean. This isn’t Switzerland, bro. Do you think anyone actually follows the rules here?”

“And what about the inspections?” I asked, still skeptical.

“Inspectors don’t care if everything’s perfect. They’re going to find something wrong no matter what, even if it’s made up. But they’re not looking for fines or official punishments.”

I frowned. “What are they after then? Bribes?”

Marvin grinned. “Not exactly money. They’re happy with a nice dinner or a bottle of champagne to take home to their girlfriends. They’ll come in, make some noise, and if you give them a little ‘something,’ they’ll go away.”

I let out a sigh. He was right. This is how things worked around here, and I knew it. Corruption greased the wheels of every business transaction, big or small. It wasn’t about rules; it was about who you knew and what you could offer them.

“I get it” I said, my frustration cooling. “But this is too important. Anna, can you keep that guy here for another day or two? I’ll find another electrician who can get the job done right.”

“And what does ‘right’ mean?” Anna asked, crossing her arms.

“Good and fast. And as cheap as possible” I said, already thinking ahead to the next hurdle.

Chapter 14

Hiring the staff

Hiring staff in this country is always a tricky business. Finding a job isn't the hard part; it's making enough money to cover your bills with the meager salary that's the real challenge. One dollar here is expensive—some countries need 20 of their local currency to buy one, others need 100 or more. For those of us in the southern part of the continent, it's even worse. You end up working twice as much just to afford what people in the U.S. or Europe take for granted. For us, money is like a gust of wind—fleeting and impossible to hold onto.

I needed to hire the pub staff, and that meant dealing with the messy reality of wages. Salaries for these types of jobs are among the lowest. People get tired of working long hours for such little pay, and sometimes they jump to another job that offers just one extra dollar a day.

Marvin and I decided to hold the interviews at my place, and we had several roles to fill.

“Hey, man. How are you?” I said, opening the door as Marvin arrived.

“All good. How's the electrician going?”

“Not good. It's on hold for now. I need someone who can do the job without tearing down all the walls just to pass a few cables. The guy

we've got thinks he's from Germany or something. He wants to do everything by the book."

Marvin laughed. "Take it easy, bro. What this guy really wants is to charge you more. He saw the kind of guy you are."

"And what kind of guy am I?"

"The kind who wants to do everything by the rules, dude. What else?"

He was right, of course. Here, it's nearly impossible to find a place that's up to code—no fire escapes, no hygiene checks, bad wiring. Nothing's done right because doing things properly is simply unaffordable.

Our first candidate was Pamela. She was applying to be in charge of booking live events for the pub. Pamela wasn't just anybody—she had a radio show where she talked about rock music and knew all the local bands. My brother had warned me: "Don't let her know she's special, or she'll charge you special prices."

"Pamela" Marvin said, "this is my brother Andy, the owner of what's going to be the best pub in town."

"Nice to meet you, Pamela", I said.

"You too", she replied. "This is Tony; he works with me."

Tony, her partner, was tall, thin, and quiet. He played bass in a local punk band, but his look was anything but punk—more like a timid accountant.

"So" I started, "did my brother tell you we're looking for live bands to play every weekend?"

"Yeah, he told me. Let me just say, it's a great idea. This town needs something like this."

“Thanks, Pamela. I appreciate that. Positive comments are always welcome, especially since I’m new to this. I don’t know anything about nightlife. I’m betting everything I have on this.”

She smiled. “It’s going to be fantastic, Andy. There are no places for rock bands to play here. Let me tell you a short story...”

I could sense she was starting to see the potential in this project, which made me feel more confident.

“For the last election, a politician invited all the local bands to a meeting. He knew they were desperate for venues. It’s impossible to find a place to play because of all the complaints from families, and the government doesn’t offer any affordable places. This politician promised that if he won, he’d build community centers where bands could play for free.”

“And did he win?” I asked.

“He did. But guess what? He’s done nothing. The bands are still waiting for those community centers” she said, her voice filled with frustration.

Typical politicians. I didn’t have the heart to say out loud that it was naive to believe such a promise. Community centers cost a fortune, and without rent coming in, how would they pay for maintenance, staff, and utilities?

We agreed on Pamela’s fees for the job. She asked when the place would be ready, so I mentioned the electrical issues. She offered her brother Victor, who she said was a very handy guy. I told her I’d love to meet him and see if he could help.

The next interview was for security, a critical role in a town like this.

The man called himself “Little Boy” though the name didn’t fit. He was nearly six feet tall and built like a tank. He had an unsettling presence and spoke in short, clipped sentences, but you could tell he knew his job

well. Later, I found out the nickname came from the Hiroshima bomb, which made sense given his intimidating size.

“You need to keep the troublemakers out”, Little Boy said. He wasn’t a man of many words, but when he did speak, it kept me on edge.

“And are there a lot of troublemakers in this town?”

“This is nightlife. People drink too much, and they can’t handle it. Even the girls get aggressive. That’s why I recommend hiring a woman to work with me. I can’t touch the women—legal trouble.”

“Do you know anyone who’d be up for it?”

“My wife” he said, matter-of-factly. “She works with me. We’ve got a baby girl, but my dad takes care of her at night.”

“Perfect. Bring her in on opening night.”

I watched him walk away, stiff as a soldier. I imagined him and his wife in all black—they seemed like the type to already have that uniform. If his wife was anything like him, I knew we’d be in good hands.

Then came Dale, the barman. He was shy, and I’d never have picked him without Marvin’s recommendation. Marvin swore Dale was the best barman in town. But there was a catch: Dale was always juggling multiple jobs. He was stretched thin, and I worried he wouldn’t be able to give our pub the attention it needed. Still, I took him on with a mental note to keep an eye on his performance.

The last interview was with the DJ—Bobby, one of Marvin’s old friends. Bobby was the best DJ in town, no question about it. His whole life revolved around music and getting high. Crazy high. Marvin and I used to joke about his wild personal life—Bobby was the kind of guy who seemed to swing both ways, but we never confirmed it. He was one of those eccentric artists bursting with creativity, but in this society, that

kind of energy often turns inward, becoming destructive. Still, Bobby had talent, and that's what mattered.

By the end of the day, I had Pamela for booking bands, Little Boy and his wife for security, Dale behind the bar, and Bobby spinning records. I wasn't sure if they were the perfect team for my vision, but one thing was clear: they all loved what they did. And in this business, that's half the battle.

I was partially right...

Chapter 15

Chairs and tables

Another week had passed, and we were creeping closer to the opening night. The electricity issue still loomed over us, but luckily, Victor—Pamela’s brother—came through in the end.

“So, we need to update the cables and install new switches” I explained to him.

“No problem” he said calmly, the kind of calm that only seasoned workers have. I knew right then he was the right guy for the job.

“Great. But listen, I don’t want to tear down all the walls to put new cables. The last electrician wanted to do that, and while I know it’s the right way to do things, we just can’t afford the time or the mess.”

Victor nodded. “Don’t worry, Andy. I can use most of what’s already here. It’s not as bad as the other guy made it sound.”

That was exactly what I needed to hear. “When can you start?”

Victor worked quickly, but he came with his own set of issues. His drinking habit was a problem. When he drank, he disappeared for days, and his family was used to it. They’d just shrug it off, but Anna and I nearly went crazy when he’d vanish in the middle of an important task.

Unfortunately, we had no other choice but to stick with him. At least, when he was sober, he was reliable.

We ordered most of our pub furniture online from suppliers in other cities. The prices were better, and today was a special day: the tables and chairs were finally arriving. These were critical. Chairs and tables for a pub aren't just furniture—they're battle-hardened tools that have to survive people dancing, spilling drinks, eating too much, and sticking gum underneath.

We had ordered small wooden tables with four chairs each. The seller offered them unpainted, but Anna had requested black, so we paid extra to get them painted. Today, the truck showed up, and we began hauling everything upstairs. I called in as many people as possible to help, including some of my brother's friends.

But then Anna came up to me, looking tense. "Andy, these aren't black. They're unpainted."

It felt like someone had poured ice water over my head—acid, even. With the opening just days away, this was the last thing we needed. I stared at her, not wanting to believe it.

"Say that again? Don't tell me the chairs aren't painted" I said, almost pleading.

"Look" she said, showing me one of the chairs. Sure enough, the wood was bare, not a trace of black paint in sight.

I nearly lost it. "You've got to be kidding me! I told him to paint them black. We *paid* him for that!"

Anna immediately called the seller. He claimed he ran out of time and couldn't finish the painting, offering to refund the extra money in two weeks. Anna was furious, ready to sue him, but we didn't have time for legal battles. We needed a solution, and fast.

“What the hell are we going to do now?” I asked, running my hands through my hair in frustration. “We’ve got five days until the opening!”

Thankfully, Marvin had a way out, as he often did.

“Take it easy, bro. I know a guy—Emiliano. He’s a great carpenter. Let me call him. He’ll paint these in no time.”

“Call him now, please. I’m desperate.”

Marvin dialed Emiliano right away. Emiliano agreed to take on the job and get everything painted in record time. I couldn’t believe my luck. Not only was Emiliano an expert, but he knew exactly how to paint wood for the kind of heavy-duty use tables in a pub would face—hot plates, cold drinks, everything. Normal paint wouldn’t cut it.

He got to work immediately. The tables and chairs were painted just in time, though they still had the faint smell of fresh paint on opening night. Postponing wasn’t an option. We had a packed schedule, including a live acoustic duo coming in from another part of the country to perform live the best classic rock songs. Their act was costing me a fortune but what the hell, they were fantastic, and their set added a beautiful, relaxed vibe to the evening.

Those final days before opening were brutal. The money was draining faster than we could keep up with. At one point, we barely had enough for groceries at home. I felt like I was hitting rock bottom, with everything riding on the success of one single night. It’s terrifying when your future depends on one moment, one idea. You’ve got to have confidence—not just in the idea, but in yourself. There’s no room for doubt when you’ve thrown everything into the pot.

Chapter 16

Opening night

It was a Friday—one I'll never forget. The air was crisp, winter still clinging on, and the town was quiet, abiding by one of its unwritten rules: "*Never open a bar in winter.*" Winter is for staying in, for cozy nights at home. Summers are when the town comes alive, when the streets are packed with people looking for a good time. But I didn't have the luxury of waiting for summer. Money needed to start flowing in, not out.

At this point, Anna was spending more time at home with the girls, not at the pub. But tonight was different. Everyone was here. It was a now-or-never moment.

"Don't run out of beer. *That's rule number one*" Marvin said, watching me nervously check the fridges for the hundredth time. "You can be out of food, but if you run out of booze, these people will tear the place apart."

And I believed him. People here could be animals when it came to their drinks. I didn't want to give them any reason to wreck the place, so I stocked up—720 bottles of beer, an assortment of liquors, and enough mixers to last the weekend. Or so I thought. Truth is, I knew nothing about alcohol. Smirnoff, Jägermeister—it was all foreign to me. I was a computer nerd, after all. My drinks of choice were coffee, Coke, and Red Bull, whatever kept me awake to finish my endless lines of code.

But let me tell you, I couldn't have been more wrong about the beer.

Anna had outdone herself with the design. The first thing you saw when you walked in was the grand white marble staircase, gently illuminated by that striking blue light she had chosen. The walls were painted a deep, elegant mix of red and gray, and she'd added blue, red, and yellow lights throughout, casting a warm, intimate glow. The décor was a blend of vintage pieces and modern touches, making the space feel like a chic New Orleans bar—if such a thing even exists.

Once you climbed the staircase, a small patio awaited, set with tables and sofas that we'd have to move later for the smokers. To the right of the stairs was a cozy lounge area with more sofas, perfect for relaxing with a drink. Beyond that were four smaller rooms, each filled with tables and chairs. The first room housed the stage where our live musicians would play, and right next to it was the DJ booth we'd specially designed for Bobby. At the very back was the bar, modest in size but perfectly functional, staffed with five people ready to serve over 20 different drinks.

The place was a masterpiece. It felt alive, even before the people arrived. We later found that photographers and filmmakers loved the pub's unique vibe, using it for photo shoots and short films. It became a local gem, a beautiful project I was proud to be part of. It was a shame we eventually had to close it down.

By 8 pm, though, no one had shown up. My brother, ever the optimist, took a stunning picture from the upstairs landing, capturing the empty entrance. That photo would eventually become our pub's first post on social media.

“Marvin, what's going on? Where is everyone?” I asked, my voice tight with worry.

“Don't worry, bro. It's early for this town. People go out late here.”

That was news to me. I had hired him because I didn't know anything about the nightlife crowd, but all I could think about was how much money was on the line. If people didn't show up, I was finished. I'd drag them in off the streets if I had to.

"Hey, you're Andy, right?" one of the musicians called out. They had arrived earlier for a sound check with Bobby.

"Yeah, that's me."

"Cool. We've got everything set up, but where's the audience?"

"They'll come. Just be patient."

"No problem. We usually start late anyway. But hey, can we get some Jack Daniels? Put it on our tab, yeah?"

"Sure" I said, pretending I knew what I was doing. These guys were pounding back drinks like water. I knew if I drank like that, I'd be under the table before the first chord. But that's the life of musicians, I suppose.

Suddenly, one of the waitresses called out, "A couple's coming in!"

Finally! I was ecstatic. I knew one couple could lead to another, and so on—or at least, that's what I told myself to stay calm—I gathered the staff—Anna was still tidying up, Marvin was giving orders, and the rest were standing around, waiting for action. Even my parents were there, probably to see if their son would pull off a success or sink into disaster. My sister had come by to show support as well.

This whole venture was an experiment. If it worked, it would be because of hard work and a few smart decisions, not because of marketing or publicity. We didn't have money for that. The best we could manage was some buzz from Pamela's radio show and word-of-mouth. But one thing was certain: people in this town loved to drink like the world was ending tomorrow. If that held true, we'd be in for a wild night.

Chapter 17

Running a pub

Those first few clients made it real—I was officially running a business. My dream had materialized, and I didn't have time to be scared. The pub filled up quickly after that first couple, like someone had flipped a switch. Suddenly, it felt like the entire town had decided to show up at once.

The musicians were playing, drinks were flowing, and more people kept arriving. Marvin was buzzing with excitement.

“Hey, bro” he called, sidling up to me, “You sure you’ve got enough beer? This is gonna get wild.”

“It’s already wild” I said, feeling the rush of it all, “But yeah, don’t worry. Come, I’ll show you.”

I took him to the back room next to the kitchen, a dark, cramped space that doubled as our storage and changing room for performers. Three fridges packed with beer stood there, chilled and ready. Later, when the pub became popular, people would talk about “backstage” like it was some kind of secret VIP area, marveling at the fact they were getting a glimpse behind the scenes of the best places in town to party.

Marvin nodded approvingly. “Okay, this’ll work. For tonight.”

“For tonight? There’s a lot of beer here, bro. It’s gotta last us the weekend.”

“You’ll see” he said with a grin, already eyeing a woman across the room. “Hold on, I need to talk to that chick. She’s stunning.”

He left me standing there, thinking. If Marvin was right and we ran out of beer, we’d be in trouble. Our supplier wouldn’t be open until Monday, and I had no van or truck to haul more in. I was alone with a small car, and that wouldn’t do for the amount of alcohol we needed if this crowd kept growing.

I stepped back out into the main area, and it was packed. Wall-to-wall people. It was chaos. Not at all what I had envisioned. In my mind, the pub was supposed to have a steady flow of customers—some sitting, others enjoying the live music, a few groups coming and going throughout the night. I didn’t want massive crowds; I’ve never liked them. They make it impossible to give good service, and the stress becomes overwhelming.

But here we were, in the middle of the night, and I’d lost control. I remember thinking, *This is the best night of my life as a business owner—and also the night I lost complete control.*

It was 11 pm, and I could barely breathe. The place was jam-packed, with more people lined up outside, waiting to get in. Little Boy and his wife were doing their best at the door, but the sheer volume of people was staggering. I saw a few trying to climb over others on the staircase. It was madness.

“Andy, we need help in the kitchen!” someone shouted.

I turned to see a guy I didn’t recognize, walking toward me from the kitchen area.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m Benjamin. Marvin dragged me in to help out. It’s crazy back there.”

“You were here as a customer?”

“Yeah, I just came to say hi to Marvin, and next thing I know, I’m washing dishes.”

“Alright, let’s go. I’ll help you out.”

I followed him into the kitchen, and it was chaos. People were loving the idea of being able to get food at any hour, but it was more than we could handle. We weren’t prepared for this kind of volume. Plates were stacked high, glasses everywhere. In a country like this, dishwashers are a millionaire’s item only. We couldn’t afford one! Washing glasses and dishes is all done by hand.

I ended up washing dishes, up to my elbows in soap and suds, cursing my “brilliant” idea to serve food so late. When I finally caught a break, I headed back to check on the bar. My dad, of all people, had taken over the cashier role. He was busy counting the mountain of cash piling up in our tiny cash register box.

My dad is somebody special. He’s the kind of man who lived life on his own terms, doing things that others might call crazy—but that’s part of what made him who he is. In so many ways, I see a reflection of myself in him, though it’s only now, after having kids of my own, that I truly understand him. When you become a parent, you start to see your own parents in a different light. The choices they made, the sacrifices—they all take on a new meaning.

My dad wasn’t perfect, but he did his best with what he had, and that’s what matters. He gave me more than just his time—he gave me moments that shaped me. I can still picture those Saturday afternoons when we’d rent movies from Blockbuster, or when he taught me Judo. To others, they might seem like ordinary days, but to me, they were treasures—simple, quiet memories that anchored my childhood. Those

moments are etched into my mind, vivid and alive, and they stay with me, even now, like warm snapshots of a time that shaped who I am.

It's those shared experiences, the little things we did together, that made all the difference. They were ours, and they're irreplaceable. We didn't need big speeches or grand gestures—just a rented movie and a couple of hours on the couch were enough to make everything feel right in the world. Those are the moments that live on, long after the store has closed, long after the games are over, and long after life has carried us both into different roles.

They say you don't truly appreciate your parents until you've walked a mile in their shoes. And now, standing in my own shoes as a father, I understand just how much love and effort my dad put into the smallest things. His legacy isn't in what he accomplished—it's in the memories he created with me, the way he showed up, even when life was tough. Those moments, small as they might seem, stay with you—forever.

“How's it going, Dad?”

“It's fine, but we're running out of change. We've been giving people these handwritten IOUs” he said, holding up small scraps of paper with amounts scribbled on them, “so they can get their change later or use it to buy more drinks.”

I blinked. “So...people are using our signed IOUs as currency now?”

“That's right. It's working for now.”

I couldn't believe it, but what choice did I have? We were swamped, and the card reader for electronic payments wasn't set to arrive for another week. I made a mental note to get more change the next day, but for now, we were stuck.

“There's another issue”, my dad added, pulling me aside.

“What is it?”

“There’s too much cash. This little box can’t hold it all. Where do I put these?” He showed me a thick wad of bills.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying not to panic. “Just...try to make some room, Dad. I don’t have a safe or anything secure right now.”

The bar was a whirlwind. My mom, my sister, Anna, and her sister were all behind the counter, frantically serving drinks. It was a far cry from the elegant evening I had imagined. The kitchen was a disaster zone, plates and glasses piling up faster than we could wash them. Tony, another guy I had to hire to serve food, was waving for help, clearly overwhelmed.

I had dressed up for the occasion, hoping to play the part of the suave bar owner, but instead, I spent the night washing dishes in the kitchen.

That night was everything and nothing like what I had imagined. It was a runaway success and an absolute mess all at once. But one thing was clear: I had just been baptized by fire into the world of running a pub.

Chapter 18

Job done

It was 4:30 a.m., and the pub was still alive with energy. As my brother predicted, we had enough beer to make it through the night, but not nearly enough for a second night like this. Panic started to creep in—how on earth was I going to get another five hundred bottles of beer before tomorrow? I couldn't help but envy bar owners in other countries who had the luxury of selling beer from barrels. Here, it's a different story. For some reason, beer from barrels is more expensive than the bottles. Don't ask me why; the logistics behind that make no sense.

One of the musicians staggered toward me, clearly too drunk to walk straight.

"Hey, dude. Great party, huh?" he slurred.

"Yeah" I said, already knowing he wouldn't remember a word of this conversation tomorrow. "Lots of people."

"You see how good we are?" He raised his glass of Jack Daniel's—the one I paid for—and swept his arm around in a dramatic circle. "We killed it, man."

Musicians and their egos. I chuckled to myself.

"Yeah, you were great" I said, and honestly, they were. The band really nailed it. But of course, he wasn't finished.

"Okay" he said, leaning closer, "This is the part where you pay us, right?"

"Sure thing." I headed to check with my dad, who was handling the cash for the night. The place was so packed, it took me ages to make my way over.

"Hey, Dad. I need the money for the musicians."

"Sure, son. I've got everything under control" he said proudly, gesturing to the money pile.

"Thanks, Dad. So, what did you think of the show?"

He grinned, shaking his head. My dad isn't exactly a fan of rock music.

"I saw them downing whiskey like water" he said with a smirk, counting the money. "You should be charging them instead."

"Yeah, they practically drank their payment" I said with a laugh. "But it was a great night."

As I started to head back, one of the waitresses flagged me down.

"Andy, Little Boy wants to talk to you."

I nodded and pushed through the sea of people. Some recognized me as the owner and congratulated me on the place.

"This guy! This fucking guy!" shouted one of the drunk patrons to his equally drunk friend. "He built this badass place. Best thing this shitty town's ever seen! Cheers to that, man!"

It took me what felt like an eternity to make it to the door, but when I finally got there, Little Boy and his wife were waiting. She looked even

smaller standing next to him, her face set in a fierce, no-nonsense expression that could terrify anyone.

"Hey, Little Boy. What's up?"

"We need to close the bar by 5 a.m." he said, his voice as direct as ever. Little Boy was a man of few words, but those few always got the point across.

"At 5? That's in half an hour" I said, checking my phone.

"Yes. Local authorities expect doors shut by six, tops. If they catch you open past that, you'll either have to bribe them or they'll shut you down. Start moving people out now, or you won't make it."

"Alright, I'll handle it."

I took a deep breath, realizing I had no idea how I was going to move this many people out in half an hour. But I had to try.

"Dale!" I called out once I finally reached the bar again. "We need to stop serving beer."

"Yeah, I was going to tell you that", he said, looking relieved. "It's getting out of control."

The staff all looked exhausted, so the news of cutting off the booze was a welcome one. But the patrons? Not so much. Complaints started rolling in immediately. Bobby, our DJ, had the music cranked so loud, it felt like the walls were vibrating. I tried to find him to tell him to tone it down, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Anyone seen Bobby?" I shouted, barely able to hear my own voice over the music.

"Don't know", said some random guy at the DJ booth. "I'm Jonas, filling in. This shit's fire, man!"

Annoyed, I finally tracked Bobby down in the bathroom. He was leaning over the sink, sniffing. Was that...?

"Bobby, dude" I said, trying to get his attention.

"Hmm? Oh, Andy, man. What's up?" He looked dazed.

"We gotta turn the music off. I'm closing the bar."

"Alright, alright, but we can't just cut it like that", he said, gesturing wildly. "Let me ease it down, or these people will riot. I'll take care of it."

He stumbled back to the DJ booth, and sure enough, the music started to fade. People grumbled as they slowly filed out, the more sober ones helping their drunk friends. One guy even stopped to complain that I was closing too early, asking why I'd give up all the money coming in. At that moment, I realized money wasn't everything. Sometimes, you just had to close up shop and breathe.

My brother Marvin was by the door, kissing some girl goodbye. Once she left, he came over, grinning from ear to ear.

"So, bro, it's finally over" I said, drained but happy.

"Yeah, man! That was insane! Can't wait for tomorrow!"

"Don't remind me", I groaned. "I'm dead."

"Get ready. My friends are already planning to come back every weekend. You'll need more beer!"

I nodded, though my brain had already shut off for the night. Tomorrow was a whole new battle, but for now, I just wanted to sit down, have a strong cup of coffee, a couple of croissants, and celebrate with Anna.

Chapter 19

Security keeps the place safe

After that wild first night, the weekends followed suit, each one as chaotic as the last. We were thrilled that the pub was doing so well, but the workload was relentless. I quickly learned I was terrible at estimating how much beer we'd need. Every weekend, we ran low, and I had to make emergency trips to restock. The storage space we had wasn't nearly big enough for the quantities we needed, so we borrowed Anna's father's car to haul more beer. We'd drop the girls off with my mom or Anna's sister and hit the road, both cars packed to the brim with bottles.

We were buying so much beer that we became the biggest buyers in town. I soon had my own dedicated sales rep, Javier, who answered all my newbie questions and kept me up to speed on the constant price hikes caused by inflation. In countries like this, prices can change weekly—sometimes even daily—so you have to be quick on your feet.

Once the beer was loaded, we had to rush back to the pub and get it into the fridges. The bottles needed hours to cool down, and there we were, running on just four hours of sleep, lugging box after box up the stairs. Each box weighed about 45 pounds, and with hundreds of bottles to move, it felt like an endless climb. I tried hiring kids to help, but they all quit after a week, so I gave up and started doing it myself. In a way, it became my personal workout.

Running the pub meant sleepless nights from Thursday to Sunday. By Monday, Anna and I were zombies, but we still had to get the girls to school by 7 a.m. It was brutal, but we kept pushing through.

When I started this venture, I imagined we'd get a crowd of well-dressed, sophisticated people. You know, the kind you'd find in a more cosmopolitan setting. Instead, what we got was a lot more casual. The customers were mostly in jeans and t-shirts, which threw me off. So, one night, I asked Little Boy about it.

"Hey, Little Boy. How's everything tonight?"

"All good" he said in his usual monotone.

"Why is everyone so informal? I was expecting something a bit more... fancy."

He looked at me, confused. "What do you mean?"

"You know, people dressed up. Fancy clothes, nice outfits. But everyone's so casual."

He laughed. "We're turning away people in shorts and hippies. Trust me, you don't want those types in here. We tell them it's a private party or that they need an invite."

I laughed. "Won't that create a problem?"

"No. You don't want *crotos* here."

I hadn't heard that word in years. It's an old local slang for dirty, shabby people. Little Boy's bluntness always cracked me up, but he was right.

"We're keeping the troublemakers out" he continued. "We know who they are, and if we let them in, this place will turn into a trash heap in

two weeks. You'd be left with nothing but junkies. No one else would come."

I nodded, appreciating his honesty. "Thanks, Little Boy. I'm glad you've got our back."

Despite Little Boy's efforts, the pub had its fair share of issues. One night, I found Anna looking frustrated as she checked the tables.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"People are stealing the candles", she said, shaking her head.

"The candles? The cheap little things in the middle of the tables?"

"Yeah, they're taking them. And the soap from the bathroom too."

"Who steals soap from a bathroom in a bar?" I muttered, baffled.

That was our first disappointment—people stealing everything they could. Candles, soap, even glasses started to disappear. We had to keep track of everything, and one night, even a giant decorative champagne bottle vanished from the bar.

"Dale, where's the big champagne bottle?"

"The decorative one? It was right here a minute ago."

"Well, it's gone now. I don't want the bar left unattended anymore."

The theft was one thing, but then came "The Fight, the Sex, and the Ugly."

Little Boy and his wife handled fights like pros. Every weekend, some drunk idiot would start something over a girl or just because he was hammered. Then there was "The Sex" like the time Dale called me to help Little Boy in the bathroom.

"What's up, Little Boy?"

"We've got a situation."

"What kind of situation?"

"There's a couple in the men's room. Fornicating."

"Fornicating?" I thought. Who talks like that?

"Damn it" I groaned. "This isn't a motel."

"I'm gonna kick the door in. You're with me" he said, ready to take charge.

Before I could suggest another way, he kicked the door open with one swift motion, sending the lock flying. Inside, we found a woman in her thirties and a much younger guy. She was giving him a handjob, and when we stormed in, she reflexively yanked his... well, you get the picture. The guy didn't even care, but the woman panicked, sending a jet of... well, let's just say it hit Little Boy square in the face. I'll never forget how furious he looked as he wiped his face clean.

Then there was "The Ugly." One night, Anna looked even more disgusted than usual.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Someone took a shit in the bathroom."

"Well, that's what toilets are for."

"Yes", Anna sighed, clearly frustrated. "But she didn't quite make it."

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"She did her thing on top of the toilet—on the lid. Not inside it."

I stared at her for a second, trying to wrap my head around it.

"Wait... What? She missed?"

"Yep. It's on the toilet, not in it."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. We had to hire a night-shift cleaning crew immediately.

The pub was a lot to handle, but it was ours, and we were making it work, one wild weekend at a time. And through it all, Little Boy and his wife were the gatekeepers, keeping the chaos just controlled enough to keep the place from going under.

Chapter 20

Toilets are the biggest challenge

I remember another night, packed as usual. The beautiful marble staircase, which I had been so proud of, was swarming with clients eager to party. The energy was electric, and things were getting a little out of hand.

Suddenly, Little Boy approached me, his usual calm demeanor slightly strained.

"Andy. Come quickly. We have a situation."

"What now?" I asked, already dreading the answer.

"The men's toilet. We need more."

"More? What do you mean?"

Then I saw it—the line for the men's bathroom. It snaked out the door, wrapping around tables and almost reaching the bar. Beer does that to you, I thought, everyone's got to pee.

Little Boy, ever pragmatic, added, "They're starting to relieve themselves outside." He paused, lowering his voice, "In the neighbor's entrances. If you don't fix this, you're going to have serious problems."

And he was right. The next few days, complaints started pouring in from the neighbors. They were generally nice people, but they didn't like being disturbed, and understandably, they were furious. The smell at their doorsteps? Well, that wasn't something they were willing to tolerate. In a small town like this, you had to be good to your neighbors or face the consequences. They'd stay nice, but only if you were nice back.

"Andy" one neighbor told me, voice firm but polite, "I don't care how fun your place is. My house shouldn't smell like a public restroom when I step outside."

I knew I couldn't risk further tension with the locals. They could make my life a nightmare, and in a town where word spread fast, I didn't need that kind of trouble. If they turned on us, they could make enough noise to get the authorities involved, and that could lead to the pub being shut down.

So, I bit the bullet and spent a significant chunk of cash installing new toilets. We built more, and thankfully, that solved the problem. It wasn't cheap, but in the end, it saved us from disaster. Keeping both our clients and neighbors happy was essential to our survival. Without those new toilets, we might've been forced to close.

Chapter 21

Drug dealer?

A bigger men's toilet service brought with it new problems. We started seeing more people gathered in that area, and soon, the men's restroom turned into a social hub—where guys weren't just chatting. They were also sharing some illegal substances.

"Andy. We need to talk" Pamela said, her voice low but urgent.

I trusted Pamela to manage the bands, and she had done an excellent job. It's not easy to deal with artists. She had endless stories about musicians calling her in the middle of the night, desperate for a gig. Artists live by night, and they think everyone else is awake too. It took Pamela a while to figure out it wasn't that they wanted to disturb her—it was all the substances they put into their bodies that made them forget what time it was.

Eventually, she bought a new phone for daily use and turned her work phone off at night. That saved her some headaches.

"Sure" I said, "Let's grab a drink and talk over there. It's quieter."

I chose the cozy living room area that Anna had designed so beautifully. She'd set up several intimate spots with armchairs and a coffee table in the middle, illuminated by soft, colored lights. It felt like a different world compared to the rest of the place.

Even though smoking was forbidden inside, I noticed cigarette burns on our expensive furniture. I muttered to myself, "These people are savages."

"So, what's the urgency?" I asked as we sat down.

Pamela didn't waste time.

"The new toilet" she said flatly.

"What about it?"

"Well, it's doing its job. Guys aren't peeing outside anymore, but now it's something worse."

I blinked, confused.

"Worse? What could be worse than that?"

She leaned in, speaking quietly but seriously.

"Your pub is becoming the next drug dispensary in town."

"What?!?" I was floored.

"A small-time drug dealer has turned your men's bathroom into his office. He's there every night, standing just inside the entrance, making quick deals. You can't even see him doing it—it's that fast. He sells these tiny packages, sometimes even lets people pay him later. He's here all the time. Your toilet is his base of operations."

I sat back in shock, trying to process what she was telling me.

"Can you point him out to me? I need to know who this guy is."

Pamela nodded but added, "Don't mention me. I can't get caught up in this."

I assured her I wouldn't, but the whole situation was overwhelming. Drugs were something I had no experience with, and the last thing I wanted was for the pub to become the next legend in town—a notorious drug den.

Drugs are a serious problem here, not just because they're illegal, but because the police control the trade. The way it works is simple: kids sell drugs at street corners, with police protection. When things get out of hand—like when a kid gets too deep into the product or steals from his own sales—the police step in, arrest them, and teach them a lesson. It's a system, an organization really, but it's corrupt from top to bottom.

The only way out of this mess would be for people to stop buying drugs, but that's a fantasy. Politicians and judges have built a society where drugs are often the only way out for many kids. And when the media starts sniffing around, the police need to show they're "doing something" so they arrest a scapegoat.

I didn't want to be the next scapegoat.

The next day, I put up signs in every bathroom, reading:

"If you see or know about any illegal activity in the establishment, please report it to the authorities."

I even included the phone numbers for the local police and drug abuse department. It seemed like the right move—letting people know I wasn't part of this.

A few days passed, and we had another busy weekend. Business was booming, but I was exhausted from hauling beer bottles up the stairs, managing the staff, and keeping everything running smoothly. I felt like I had finally found a rhythm, even enjoying the hard work, until Pamela approached me again with fresh bad news.

"You saw those signs you put up?" she asked.

"Yeah" I said, "What's wrong now?"

She handed me her phone, showing me a Facebook post from a local woman we knew—Lina. She'd been a regular at the pub but had some personal issues, and when we didn't cater to her every whim, she turned against us. She was on a crusade to tear us down.

The post read:

"Check out the ridiculous signs the new pub put up! What a bunch of losers."

Lina had taken a photo of the signs I'd put up, and now everyone in town was mocking us for trying to keep the place drug-free. People were even tearing the signs down.

It wasn't just her, though. Even Bobby, our DJ, was giving me the cold shoulder. He hadn't spoken to me in days, and I knew why. Bobby lived on drugs; for him, the thought of the pub being drug-free was an insult.

I didn't know what to do next. Should I put the signs back up? Respond online? I was lost in thought when my brother interrupted me.

"Hey bro. This is Harry" Marvin said, introducing me to a scruffy-looking guy.

"Hey, man! Great place you've got here!" Harry said, brimming with enthusiasm.

"Thanks, but there's something we need to discuss..."

Before I could explain, Harry cut me off.

"Yeah, I know, dude. This place is getting out of control. You need to kick those guys out. It's bad for business. If you don't, the cops are going to show up soon."

I was getting tired of hearing that. It seemed like every week someone was warning me the pub was about to collapse, or worse, that I'd end up in jail.

"Yeah" I said, "And Marvin here suggested you might be the solution. We keep the bad guys out, and you handle...things."

Harry nodded, speaking fast. Was he stoned? Possibly.

"Totally, dude. I'm not shady. I'm loyal. You won't have any trouble with me. Trust me."

And that's how we solved our drug problem. I hired Harry as the "official" pub dealer. He promised to keep things quiet, and in exchange, we kept control. It wasn't the solution I wanted, but I needed peace.

Later, I learned that every bar and restaurant in town had someone like Harry. Drugs were everywhere. Maybe I was just too old-fashioned to understand that this was how things worked now.

Chapter 22

Rock bands

One of the things I was most proud of was giving a platform for Rock, Blues, and Jazz bands to play. We hosted hundreds of local bands—some of them seasoned professionals, but also plenty of young kids who had never had the chance to play live before. That was the beauty of it. The whole idea was to create a space where these underrepresented genres could thrive. And I was incredibly proud of that.

I'd hear interviews later, of musicians thanking the pub for being the first place they ever performed live. Some fans even asked if they could buy the instruments we used as souvenirs. Word spread beyond our town, reaching other cities, and soon we were welcoming popular artists from across the country. They'd play a few songs, sometimes even talk about the pub as a remarkable experience in the region. It felt like we were building something special.

But, for every positive reaction, there was always a negative one lurking around the corner. Not everyone in town was happy with my decision to focus on just Rock, Blues, and Jazz. Apparently, it made me some sort of villain for the other music communities. Social networks, radio shows—you name it—they all seemed to echo the same complaint:

"The owner of this new pub refuses to allow any other form of music to play live."

At first, I tried to ignore it, but after a while, it got under my skin. It was stressful to listen to the radio shows, filled with gossip and accusations. It wasn't that I was trying to exclude people—I just wanted to create a home for music that was slowly disappearing from my country's nightlife. Was that really so difficult to understand?

I overheard one such conversation on the radio. It was one of many that followed, but this one stuck with me. The radio host was interviewing a girl named Claire, who claimed her band had been rejected from playing at the pub.

"Why do you think they won't let you play?" the radio host asked, already stirring the pot.

"It's because they think they can do whatever they want" Claire said, bitterness dripping from her words. "This town is only for the corrupt."

"So they only allow certain genres, like Rock or Blues? What about Pop? or Hip-Hop?"

"Nothing", Claire replied. "Me and my band play Salsa. We went there, asked for a date, and they flat-out rejected us."

"That's terrible" the host chimed in, clearly relishing the drama. "It's a bad example for our growing society. We need freedom for art, not exclusion. Hopefully, the pub owner reconsiders before it's too late."

And then Claire dropped the bomb:

"Let me tell you something, mister pub owner" she said, addressing me as if I were sitting there with her. "Be careful. If you keep shutting people out, you might end up with no customers at all. Don't challenge the people. You will always lose."

I turned off the radio. I couldn't take it anymore. They didn't understand what I was trying to do. I wasn't excluding anyone just to be difficult. I

had a vision—Rock, Blues, and Jazz. These genres weren't just music to me. They were a culture, a lifestyle, and they were fading away in this country. I wanted to create a space for them to live on, but to some people, that made me the enemy.

The negative attention didn't just come from the airwaves. The neighbors, who had been mostly cordial, were starting to grow weary of the noise. They were nice people—so long as you didn't disturb them. But now, with live music every weekend, some were losing their patience. At first, we'd exchange polite greetings when I'd see them outside, but over time, I started noticing their sideways glances, their passive-aggressive comments about "late nights" and "rowdy crowds."

One day, an elderly woman who lived next door approached me as I was leaving the pub.

"You've got a nice thing going here, Andy" she said, her tone friendly but with a warning edge to it. "But you might want to remind your guests that this isn't a rock concert every night. People around here like their peace."

It was hard to argue with that. I'd seen some of the patrons leaving late at night, loudly talking and sometimes, yes, relieving themselves in unfortunate places. It was starting to become a bigger issue than I expected.

"I'll make sure we're more respectful of the noise, ma'am" I told her. "Thanks for letting me know."

She gave me a nod but didn't seem entirely convinced. And so, the balancing act began—trying to keep the music alive, while not alienating the neighbors or allowing the town's gossip mill to eat me alive.

It was exhausting.

But despite the noise complaints, the gossip, and the criticisms, I never backed down on the music. I knew there were other places for Salsa, Pop, and Reggaeton. They were already popular, thriving. What I wanted to do was different. I wanted to give Rock, Blues, and Jazz a home.

Chapter 23

Time flies

Time passed faster than I could keep track of. We were always exhausted. Running a pub like this wasn't just a job—it was a 24/7 lifestyle. But it felt good to see the trend we started. Other bars in town were picking up on our style. Suddenly, everyone was talking about opening a pub like ours, and more places began offering live music because they saw how well it worked for us.

I was proud of what we had done. My ego thrived on the thought that we had given something meaningful back to the community. But running a place like this, especially one that sells alcohol, brings a whole new level of crazy. One night, I was busy selling beer like any other night when a girl approached me.

"Hi. I'd like a martini, please" she said with a casual smile.

"Sorry" I replied, "but if you want a drink like that, you need to go over to Dale, our barman. He makes the best martinis."

"What about you? I want you" she said, catching me completely off guard.

"Well, I'm selling beer" I laughed, trying to deflect the awkwardness.

"Okay, give me a beer then" she said, still lingering.

I handed her the beer, but she didn't move. Instead, she leaned in closer.

"Thanks. But what I really want is more from YOU."

I was caught in a dilemma. Was she being flirtatious or just having fun? In a small town like this, you can't afford to make the wrong assumptions. Word spreads quickly, and being labeled inappropriate could hurt my reputation as a family man.

"Sorry" I said, still unsure of her meaning. "What do you mean?"

She leaned in further and whispered, "I'm talking about doing things no one's ever done to you before."

Oh, I got it now. This was definitely a proposition.

"Well, that sounds... interesting" I replied cautiously, "but I'm with her." I nodded toward Anna, who was busy at the other side of the bar.

The girl blinked in surprise. Maybe she thought I was single.

"I see", she said, pausing for a moment before adding, "but I could make both of you happy."

Now, *that* was a curveball I didn't see coming. How do you politely refuse something like that? In today's world, it might be more common, but I'm not exactly from this era of casual everything. The idea of inviting a girl young enough to be my daughter into a room with Anna and me wasn't just awkward—it was unimaginable.

"Thank you, really" I managed, "but I think we'll pass."

Thankfully, she took it well and turned to leave. Crisis averted.

Funny situations like that were common in this job. Some customers became regulars, weekend friends, even if they were a little strange at

times. Sure, many of them seemed to have a personal agenda that involved me or Anna in more than a friendly way, but we learned to laugh it off. This job made you a bit of a psychologist—people came to the bar not just to drink, but to unload their problems, and all you had to do was listen and pour.

Still, despite the fun and the connections we made, we weren't saving as much money as I'd hoped. I thought we'd have enough to expand, maybe open another pub, but every week we were spending more than we saved. The constant repairs, replacing stolen decorations, broken equipment—it was a drain. Musicians never cared about the equipment we lent them; they trashed it without a second thought.

It finally hit me why so many businesses in town treated their customers like they didn't matter. Why no one gave out free things, why no one went the extra mile. Because, frankly, people didn't deserve it. Who would want to invest in decorations or equipment if it was just going to get stolen or broken?

I started thinking about the future. As much as I loved software development, it wasn't an option anymore—I was too burnt out. I did use my skills to build an app for the pub, which put us ahead of the competition. People loved it. We were one of the most tech-savvy businesses in town, a rare thing in a country where decent software is unaffordable for small businesses. Most places still rely on spreadsheets or even handwritten notes.

But I didn't want another pub. I wanted something quieter, more family-friendly. We needed a change. I was tired of breakfast at 6 a.m. before collapsing into bed for four hours, only to wake up and do it all again. That's when the idea of opening a restaurant came to me. Something more stable, with better hours. I'd always told myself, *never put all your eggs in one basket*, especially in a country as unpredictable as ours. The economic collapse was always looming, just waiting to strike. You never know when, but you always know it's coming.

"Opening a restaurant?" Anna asked, surprised. I couldn't blame her for being taken aback.

"Yeah" I said, trying to explain my reasoning. "It's mostly about the hours. We're killing ourselves with the pub, the late nights, and dealing with savages every weekend. I want to move from Neanderthals to normal families. They'll be quieter, more respectful. And the girls—we can't keep running this lifestyle while trying to be parents."

Anna nodded thoughtfully. "I know what you mean. But do we have the money to open a restaurant?"

"I've been running the numbers."

I showed her the plan I'd been working on. It wasn't just another small place—I wanted something big. A Hard Rock Cafe kind of vibe, but without the chaos. No more live bands, no more drunk customers, no more hidden drug dealers or politicians sneaking in with young escorts. I wanted families. Quiet, peaceful families with kids. I wanted to be able to go to the restaurant with our own family, sit down, and enjoy a meal with friends.

Chapter 24

Opening a restaurant

We started looking for a place to rent, and it felt like déjà vu—like we were back in the crazy loop of starting all over again. But this time, two years had passed since we'd opened the pub. The memories weren't as fresh, which made the idea of doing it all over again easier to digest. It's like when you go through a breakup: at first, you swear off relationships, but after some time, you find yourself ready to jump back in.

I had a clear vision for what I wanted. But everything depended on finding the right location, and neither Anna nor I had any experience with restaurants. We toured several places, nice ones, but nothing fit the bill. One big issue with restaurants is the kitchen. You either find a place with a big enough kitchen, or you build one from scratch. Since we didn't have the budget to build, we were hunting for a spot that had previously been a restaurant.

While searching, I was also interviewing potential staff for key roles. I knew from experience that having skilled, reliable people was crucial.

"This is Mary", Marvin said, introducing me to a woman in her forties.

"Mary, this is my brother Andy."

"Nice to meet you, Mary", I said. "Marvin tells me you're a very experienced chef."

Mary rattled off her resume, listing the high-end places she had worked. I felt a little out of my depth, not speaking the same culinary language. It reminded me of when we started the pub, and I had no idea what I was doing in the audio department. But Mary seemed solid—she'd worked long hours for low pay in one of the popular riverside restaurants in town. She was burnt out from 14-hour shifts and was looking for something new.

"I'll give you a call as soon as we've secured the place" I said.

With Mary on board, the kitchen was starting to take shape. She even knew a few people who could join her team. Waitstaff were easier to find, and I convinced Dale to come on as the bartender. Everything was falling into place. The only thing missing was *the place*.

That's when Marvin dropped a suggestion I wasn't thrilled about.

"Why don't you go to Martin and ask him?" Marvin said casually.

"Martin Lee? The underground kingpin of town?" I replied, raising an eyebrow.

Marvin chuckled. "Yeah, him. Look, he's shady, sure. But the guy knows the real estate game here. He's got places ready to go."

"You know me, Marvin. I'm not looking to get into anything illegal."

"Just talk to him", Marvin urged. "See what he's got. I'll set up a meeting, no harm in that."

I reluctantly agreed. Martin Lee was notorious in town, but we'd hit a dead end on our own. None of the places Anna and I had seen were viable for a restaurant, so I figured I'd hear him out.

The meeting was set at one of Martin's properties, a retirement home out in the middle of nowhere. Marvin insisted on coming with me, probably

sensing my nerves. As we drove down the long, tree-lined road, it felt like something out of a movie. The secluded setting made me uneasy. It would be the perfect place to make someone disappear.

When we arrived, a guy opened the gate with a wave of his arm, motioning us inside. The house itself was a strange blend of old country charm with mismatched modern touches. The door and windows, clearly recent upgrades, didn't fit the vintage feel of the place.

We rang the old bell, which clanged loudly, and a silent man motioned us inside. After a few minutes, Martin appeared, looking like he had just rolled out of bed—T-shirt, shorts, flip-flops, and a glass of what I assumed was whiskey in his hand.

I couldn't help but notice how his eyes lingered on my hair. My long hair seemed to fascinate him, perhaps because he had none of his own. Every time I met him, I felt like he wanted to knock me out and steal it for himself.

"Hey, kid. How are you?" Martin said, directing the question to Marvin. Clearly, I wasn't memorable from our last encounter.

"All good, my man", Marvin replied. "When are we gonna give that business a shot, huh?"

I later found out what "business" he was talking about. Marvin had once worked for Martin, retrieving packages dropped by small planes over remote fields—packages filled with drugs. The police almost caught him, and he decided to back out of that life. But Martin, it seemed, was always ready to pull him back in.

"I don't know, dude. Last time was messed up" Marvin said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, yeah. We moved operations. Got new spots now. The cops were breathing down my neck because of this judge who has it out for me."

"Anyway, we're here for something else" Marvin cut in, steering the conversation back on track. "Remember Andy? He's looking for a restaurant location."

"Ah, I remember you now", Martin said, his tone changing. "You're the guy with the pub. The one who turned down my offer. Too bad, kid. We could've made a killing together."

He led us through the house to the backyard, which had a big pool. The setting felt surreal—girls lounging in the pool, Martin puffing on a cigarette, playing the role of the untouchable boss. We took seats by the pool, and a girl brought us drinks.

"So, what's the deal? What do you need from me?" Martin asked, his usual mocking grin on display.

"I'm looking to open a restaurant" I said, trying to stay calm. "Something family-friendly."

His face changed, turning serious, almost intense.

"A restaurant?" he said slowly, as if I had just told him the meaning of life. "I like that. I can help. I've got the perfect place—big, prime location. You can make serious money, if you know what I mean. Not by selling food precisely" And laughed loudly.

I knew what he was hinting at—money laundering. Restaurants and hotels were perfect for it. You could declare every table full, every day of the week, and funnel dirty money through the books. I could already see the offer coming.

"You get 1% of what we move through the restaurant", Martin continued. "It may sound small but trust me, it's a lot of money. My friends move serious cash, and they need a small town like this. It'll keep you comfortable, and no one will suspect a thing."

"Why haven't you opened a restaurant for this yourself?" Marvin asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"I did. But the cops wanted 10%, and the judge was asking for another 20%. Greedy bastards. So, I shut it down. But if you open it, no one will suspect anything."

My stomach turned. This wasn't the plan. I wanted to open a restaurant, not get involved in a criminal enterprise.

"Look, Martin, thanks for the offer" I said carefully, "but money laundering isn't what I'm looking for right now."

"It's your call, kid", he said, leaning back. "But you need to understand how this country works."

He paused, as if about to deliver some profound truth.

"This country runs on illegal businesses. Sure, we've got laws, but they're just for show. You want to know how things really work here? Laws are like red lights—you can either stop and pay the ticket, or get a friend who knows the judge and get off scot-free. It's all a facade. Nothing actually works here."

It was a twisted but honest assessment of the world we lived in. But I wasn't ready to sell my soul for it.

I left the place feeling uneasy. One of the most dangerous guys in town just gave us a lesson on how to survive in this country? Sure, he might know how things work here, but he has no interest in changing them. He plays the game as it is, manipulating the system for his own gain. But my vision was different—I wanted to make a change, even if I was the odd one out.

The truth is, why would anyone want to change if the people themselves don't want it? It's like trying to convince a chain-smoking father to quit. His daughter might beg, plead, and use every method she can think of, but unless *he* is convinced, nothing will work. People only change when they truly want to. Most of the time, that moment comes far too late—right when the doctor delivers a terminal diagnosis and says, “You have lung cancer, and you're running out of time.”

Despite my misgivings, I closed the deal with Martin. We got the place for a fair monthly rent—no strings attached, no shady business. It was a straight-up rental, which was a relief. But the place had history, and not the good kind. It had been a dive bar for years, a hole where the worst elements of town gathered for cheap drugs, one type of beer, and endless heavy metal shows. The kind of place that reeked of neglect, both physically and morally.

There was a ton of work to do, but I had the best architect in town at my side, ready to transform this dump into something spectacular. And with renewed energy, we were ready to take on the challenge once more.

Chapter 25

From an amazing pub to a revolutionary restaurant

I was excited to share the great news with Anna. We decided to celebrate and called Tamara to babysit the girls for the night.

"I'm scared, Andy", Anna said as we sat down to talk. "Do you really think it's a good idea to get into business with this guy? He sounds dangerous."

"It's okay, honey" I reassured her. "He told me if we can't pay the rent, we just let him know, and that's it. He's been in the business for years. He knows how things work in this country. Trust me. When it's your time, you give the place back, no hard feelings."

Anna wasn't convinced. "I don't know... But we need to be cautious."

"Listen, once we get the keys, I need you to come with me and check it out. He said the place is a mess, but maybe he's exaggerating..."

Anna looked skeptical. "Andy, if *he* says it's a mess, then it's probably the worst place in town."

She was right. A couple of days later, we got the keys and went to see the place for the first time. As soon as we walked in, I could feel the regret sinking in.

On the outside, it didn't look too bad. The building was an old house, the kind we both loved—early 19th-century architecture with solid walls and beautiful floors. I thought with a fresh coat of paint and a big, eye-catching sign, it could have potential. Anna already had an idea to hang something cool in the front window, like a guitar, to give it that Rock Café vibe we were aiming for.

But as soon as we stepped inside, reality hit us. The reception area was dirty and run-down. The bathrooms, although big enough for a nightclub, were in shambles. Two of the toilets were broken beyond repair. Anna started brainstorming ways to update them on a budget, but even with her clever ideas, we knew this was going to be expensive.

The kitchen? Empty. Not a single appliance or piece of equipment in sight, just bare walls. We'd have to buy everything from scratch, though at least the space was big enough for a full kitchen staff.

The main dining area, though spacious enough for twenty tables, was in dire need of repairs. Cracked walls, peeling paint, and signs of neglect everywhere. There was a stage on one side, but since we weren't planning on live music, Anna envisioned a cozy lounge area with sofas, a space for people to relax and unwind.

And then there was the patio—another disaster. It was huge, almost the size of the indoor space, but overgrown with two-meter-tall grass, piles of trash, and remnants of some unfinished construction. It looked like a jungle. We'd need to clear it all out and install a big windowed door to open the space up and make it inviting.

The more I looked around, the more concerned I became. This was going to take *serious* money to turn around. We started by using all our savings, but it wasn't enough. We had no choice but to take out loans.

“Are you sure we need to go to the bank for this?” Anna asked, clearly uneasy. Given the endless economic crises in this country, long-term

bank loans were a gamble. You never knew if you'd be able to pay them back.

“That’s how business works, honey” I said, trying to keep the tension from rising. “If you want to make money, you have to invest first.”

“Yes, but that’s in a normal country” Anna shot back. “Do I have to remind you where we live?”

“Look” I said, pulling up my spreadsheet. “I’ve accounted for everything—the repairs, the new kitchen equipment, furniture. We can make this work, but only if we get the loan.”

Eventually, we decided to take the plunge. The bank offered us the loan through their online service, sparing us the painful bureaucracy and endless questions we couldn’t answer.

It was a risk, but like every step we’d taken so far, it felt like the only way forward.

Anna managed to find workers for the remodeling, all through a friend from her college days. They were inexpensive but, truth be told, they looked like a bunch of lazy slackers. At first, I thought it was just my imagination. Later, I realized I was right.

The electrical work was a disaster, just like at the pub, so we called Victor again. Despite his monthly three-day disappearances after heavy drinking, we were okay with him. He worked quickly, did a good job, and didn't charge too much.

However, the rest of the crew? Not so much. As the weeks went by, the lack of progress became glaringly obvious. Every day I visited the restaurant, and every day, it looked exactly the same.

"Anna, these guys are wasting our time" I said one evening after another frustrating visit.

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking surprised.

"They're not working, honey. The place hasn't changed. They smoke more than they work. Look at the floor; it's covered in cigarette butts."

Anna sighed, clearly tired. "I'll talk to them, but I know they're working. Maybe slower than you expect, but—"

"Slower? Set deadlines. Tell them they need to deliver or there's no payment. We can't keep pouring money into this with nothing to show for it."

She reluctantly agreed, though I could see she didn't want to push too hard. But my patience was running thin.

Then, one quiet Sunday afternoon, we were relaxing with the girls, watching cartoons, trying to clear our minds from the stress of the pub and the restaurant. Suddenly, my phone rang.

"Hello, Andy?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"I'm Juan, Anna's friend, in charge of the remodeling at the restaurant."

"Oh, right, Juan. What's up?"

"One of the guys working on the patio got bitten by a scorpion."

"What?"

"Yeah, it's pretty bad, but look... we don't have insurance."

"No insurance? So what does that mean?"

"It means we've got a problem. He's okay for now, but if this kid goes downhill, we could be in serious trouble."

"Did you take him to the hospital?" I asked, already grabbing my keys.

"That's the thing... my truck won't start."

"Jesus. Tell him to stay put. I'm on my way."

I hung up, quickly explaining to Anna, "One of the workers got bitten by a scorpion. I need to get him to the hospital."

I drove like a man possessed, making it to the restaurant in record time. The kid was pale but still conscious, holding a jar with the dead scorpion

inside. I threw him in the car, and we raced to the hospital, navigating the quiet Sunday streets, thankful it wasn't a weekday when hospitals are impossible to access because of the overcrowding.

This was my first experience at a public hospital. Healthcare in our country is technically free, but it doesn't work. There's not enough funding because half of the money is pocketed by the corrupt directors and their cronies. So, like everyone else who can afford it, we pay twice—once through taxes for the public health system we don't use, and again for private care that actually works.

We arrived at the hospital, following signs to the emergency room. There were about 20 people waiting. Only one doctor was on duty.

"I've got an emergency" I told the nurse at the front desk.

She barely glanced up. "So does everyone else here. Name?"

The kid gave his details, and the nurse added him to the bottom of the list. I couldn't believe it. We waited for over an hour, the kid holding on, but I was freaking out. What if the scorpion was poisonous? I called Anna to vent.

"Anna, this is insane. Juan didn't have insurance for his workers, and this kid's been bitten by a scorpion! We're at the hospital, but no one is seeing him."

"Oh my God" Anna gasped. "How is the boy? Do you need me to come?"

Suddenly, I saw a doctor pass by. "I'll call you back. The doctor's here."

I sprinted after him. "Excuse me, are you the doctor for the emergency room?"

"Yes" he said, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Look, this kid was bitten by a scorpion. Should he be seen right away?”

“A scorpion?” His eyes widened as I showed him the jar. “Why didn’t you tell the nurse?”

“I did!” I snapped, furious.

“Bring him in right away” the doctor ordered, waving us forward.

We hurried into the exam room, and my heart was racing. For a moment, I saw my life flash before my eyes—jail, lawsuits, headlines. If anything happened to this kid, I’d be ruined.

But after a tense few minutes, the doctor came out.

“He’s fine”, a nurse told me. “You can take him home. He won’t be able to work for a day or two, though.”

“Don’t worry” I muttered under my breath, “he won’t be working for me again.”

Chapter 26

24 hours service

Anna and I were juggling two worlds: the pub on one side and the restaurant on the other. Time was slipping through our fingers. I was running around taking care of details—buying merchandise, securing licenses—while Anna was handling the remodeling and the girls. It was too much. So, I made the decision to bring in some help to manage the pub. I hired Pamela, who was doing a fantastic job managing the bands, and I trusted her to take on the role of manager. Sure, it meant paying another salary, which meant less savings, but we needed the breathing room.

At the restaurant, however, things weren't moving forward. The progress was almost nonexistent, and every visit just frustrated me more.

One day, I finally snapped.

"Anna, what's going on here? Why aren't these guys working?" I asked.

"They're on a break" she replied, sounding a bit defensive.

"A break? This place looks like a cigarette dumping ground. All I see are butts everywhere—like they're building a social club instead of a restaurant."

She sighed, unsure how to respond.

"And the deadlines?" I pressed. "I told you to set deadlines. If they don't deliver, they don't get paid."

"I did... but—"

"No more excuses. I want these guys out. Today."

"But who will finish the work if we kick them out? Who will do it for the money we're paying them?"

"I don't care. This is not working. Every day it looks the same."

That afternoon, I kicked them out. They weren't happy, of course. They tried to argue, and one even called Juan, their boss, to intervene. But I was firm. I wasn't running a charity. They could make their calls from the sidewalk, not inside my restaurant.

Later that evening, Juan showed up at my house with his right-hand man, trying to smooth things over.

"Andy, what happened? We're working hard over there" Juan said, feigning innocence. "The boys said you kicked them out, but we've been making progress."

"Progress?" I couldn't help but laugh bitterly. "Juan, the place looks exactly the same. Every day. We're paying them to smoke cigarettes and do nothing."

"Well, you know it's a lot of work, right? The building is old and damaged. These things take time."

"I get that" I replied, trying to stay calm, "but I've already made a deal with someone else. They're starting tomorrow."

And just like that, we moved on. Anna and I hired another contractor, someone she knew from before. We couldn't use him initially because he

was tied up with other projects, but now he was free, and most importantly, he was trustworthy. He was the kind of guy who worked with integrity, which is rare in this country.

The progress wasn't lightning fast, but it was real. The walls were fixed, and the painting was coming along nicely. To save some money and speed things up, Anna and I even pitched in with the painting. It was a massive space, but it felt good to see tangible changes at last.

The real challenge was staffing. We had the kitchen staff in place: Mary, our experienced chef, and two assistants—Lucas, a 25-year-old student from the local culinary school who, despite being talented, had an arrogant streak I wasn't fond of; and Leon, an odd but brilliant sandwich-maker who had a knack for baking our daily bread.

For the waitstaff, we hired four young women: Maira, Agustina, Clare, and Micaela. They were between 22 and 26 years old, and I planned to run three shifts—morning, afternoon, and night. Yes, that's right. The restaurant would be open 24 hours.

It sounded insane—opening a 24-hour restaurant in a small town—but I wanted to elevate this place. I wanted to create something the town had never seen. Something they would never forget.

To make the 24-hour operation work, I needed reliable managers. I couldn't be there all the time. I hired three: Dale, who had worked as the barman at the pub and knew the ins and outs of running a shift; and two new guys, John and Matias, both recommended as solid workers. But who knows? You can never trust recommendations fully in this town. I installed cameras throughout the place, but the tech wasn't the best. I'd have to rely on the managers and staff to report any issues.

Anna wasn't thrilled with one decision I made: paying the staff before the restaurant even opened.

“You’re telling me you’re paying them before they’ve worked a day?” she asked, raising an eyebrow when she found out.

“Yeah...” I admitted sheepishly, knowing it was a bad move. “I had to lock them in. If we don’t guarantee their pay, they’ll take off and find work elsewhere. We need to keep them in place or we’ll be scrambling for help at the last minute.”

“Andy, that was a mistake. You know how people are here. They’ll take advantage of that.”

“I know, I know. But look, maybe we can ask them to help with the final touches on the remodeling. They’re getting paid—they should contribute, right?”

“Of course they should”, she said, shaking her head. “It’s the least they can do.”

She was right, as always. I called a meeting and gathered the staff at the restaurant for the first time.

“Good morning, everyone. I just wanted to show you the progress we’ve made so far and explain what’s coming next. I know the place doesn’t look ready, but we’re getting close. However, we’re going to need your help with the finishing touches.”

A few of them grumbled under their breath, but most seemed willing to pitch in.

Mary, our chef, had already prepared the menu. It wasn’t exactly what I had envisioned, but it was safe. She included classic dishes that people in town loved, along with a few original options. I asked her to add more vegetarian and vegan options to keep up with the trends. Lucas and Leon were ready to go into the kitchen.

We were making progress, but I still had that lingering feeling of uncertainty. Opening a 24-hour restaurant in this small town was ambitious, maybe too ambitious, but I was determined to pull it off.

This was the next step—a leap from the pub, from the noise and the chaos, into something more stable. Something that could be ours for the long run.

But I knew one thing for sure: I couldn't trust anyone fully in this business. Not the staff, not the suppliers, and definitely not the new managers. I had to stay sharp.

With the whole team pitching in, things started moving faster. Everyone helped with the painting and cleaning, and given the sheer size of the restaurant, their assistance was more than welcome.

This time, we decided to keep the furniture-making local. We hired Emiliano, our trusty carpenter. We were lucky to catch him between jobs. He had always done right by us, and while his rates weren't cheap, his work was impeccable. Emiliano took great pride in what he did, ensuring everything was done with care and precision. The tables he made for the restaurant were beautiful, crafted to perfection, and ready on time.

Anna and I designed every element of the restaurant ourselves. Even the picture frames and the art we hung on the walls were meaningful. We had a vision for this place, and though it would cost a lot to frame all 40 of the pieces, we decided to do it ourselves. I remember staying up for three straight nights, cutting plastic sheets by hand to make the frames. Sure, it sounds like plastic would make them look cheap, but the end result was surprisingly professional. Our clients often commented on how stylish the decor was. We'd turned a modest budget into something truly special.

By the time we finished decorating, the place had the feel of a Hard Rock Cafe or Planet Hollywood, just without the extravagant price tags. We wanted it to be immersive and eye-catching, so we decided to install large TV screens around the restaurant, looping videos and local shows for entertainment.

The patio, however, was our masterpiece. It started out as a complete disaster—overgrown grass, piles of trash, and broken pavement. After

cleaning out about ten containers of debris, we saw how bad the floor truly was. We couldn't place tables on such an uneven surface, but we also couldn't afford to pour a new floor. So, Anna came up with a brilliant solution. She covered the broken ground with small decorative garden stones. The result was not only visually appealing but also gave the patio a luxurious feel, especially with the pleasant sound of the stones crunching underfoot, like walking through a garden.

To hide the ugly, dilapidated walls, Anna covered them with greenery. She bought inexpensive climbing plants and lined the walls with green lights, which gave the patio a magical atmosphere in the evening. We added strings of small white bulbs across the space to provide enough light for customers to comfortably read the menu. The patio quickly became the highlight of the restaurant—a cozy, inviting space perfect for summer dining.

The kitchen, however, was a huge drain on our budget. The painting was simple, but the equipment? That was a different story. We had to buy everything new—ovens, microwaves, even basic tools. The costs were astronomical. We salvaged an old fridge we found there and repaired it, but we still needed more funds. We were forced to take out another loan. I knew Anna wouldn't be happy about it, but we had no other choice.

“Another loan?” she asked, the stress and worry clear in her voice.

“Yes, but look, the monthly payments are manageable” I said, showing her the numbers. “I’ve already done the math. We can’t open without this money.”

“I know, but we’re already deep in debt, Andy” she said, her voice tinged with fear. “What if something goes wrong?”

“I get it” I said, trying to calm her nerves. “But we either take this step, or we might as well give up now. And I don’t have any other ideas unless you do.”

In a country like ours, there aren't many options for financing. Venture capital, like in the U.S. or Europe, doesn't exist here. Investors, if you can find one, demand their money back in a matter of months. Long-term deals are a rarity.

So, we took the second loan, and it was just enough to finish the job. Anna and I are perfectionists, always chasing that last detail, never satisfied with "good enough." But our family stepped in, reminding us to stop tweaking and just open the place already.

"This place looks amazing. You don't need to do anything else" Anna's sister Susan would say, trying to bring us back to reality.

"Yeah, I know, but it's hard to let go" I'd reply. "We just want it to be perfect."

But she was right. We needed to stop fussing and start serving. We couldn't afford to run out of money before we even opened.

Finally, after three more intense days of preparation, we felt ready. We set the grand opening for Friday night. This time, we didn't spend money on ads or promotions. Instead, we used the pub's social media accounts to spread the word. We didn't have the budget for TV or radio yet, but I planned to go big once we had some cash flow.

We were excited, nervous, and proud all at once. This wasn't just another business—it was a new chapter, a leap forward for the town. We were ready to serve something fresh, something that would leave a lasting mark.

And let me tell you, we did just that.

Chapter 27

Opening day

The pub was running smoothly with Pamela as manager, freeing Anna and me to focus entirely on the new restaurant. This was a big leap for me; I wasn't aiming to be just another hands-on owner anymore—I wanted to transition into a real businessman, someone who could oversee things from a distance. I was determined to make this work.

Opening day at the restaurant was a huge success. We'd worked ourselves to the bone getting everything ready, and it showed. The line of people outside stretched for 30 meters, as everyone in town wanted to be part of this new thing we'd built. It was the talk of the town, the place to be.

To keep things safe, especially at night, I hired private security. It's ironic—we pay taxes to fund the police, but in this country, where things are far from ideal, you have to pay for private protection too. It was a good decision. Businesses around us were getting robbed left and right, some even with violent assaults. But our place remained untouched. The security gave us peace of mind and shielded us from potential tragedies.

However, with all the attention came the critics, and they were brutal. It felt like we'd walked straight into a Stephen King novel—small-town life filled with gossip and petty grudges. People would smile at you in the morning and then tear you down on social media by night. It didn't

take long before we found ourselves at the center of a targeted smear campaign.

One group, in particular, called *Defending Gastronomy* seemed especially committed to making us look bad. They were relentless, posting negative comments and reviews online. Even when friends and family tried to counter with positive feedback, their posts were mysteriously deleted.

I couldn't figure out why this was happening. I racked my brain, wondering if I'd made an enemy in the group without realizing it. Then one day, a man walked into the restaurant and asked for me.

"So, you're the owner?" he said.

"That's right", I replied, not sure what to expect.

"Perfect. I'm with the *Defending Gastronomy* group. Would you be interested in joining?"

I was stunned. The very group that had been trashing us for months was now extending an invitation?

"What do you mean?" I asked, still trying to make sense of it all.

"If you pay a small monthly fee, you'll get great benefits. We'll advertise your restaurant, post positive reviews, and remove any negative comments."

It took everything in me to stay calm. I was furious. This wasn't about defending gastronomy; it was about blackmail. They wanted me to pay for protection. Social networking protection. From their own attacks. I declined, politely, though I wanted nothing more than to throw the man out.

The restaurant did well despite the negativity. We had random live shows, mostly smaller acts—just enough to keep things lively without going overboard. But like with the pub, we had to deal with local authority inspections.

I learned from the pub and it was no different for a restaurant: inspectors don't care about rules; they care about what you can give them. Instead of checking to see if the restaurant meets regulations, they come looking for free meals, drinks, and perks for themselves and their side partners. If you don't play along, they'll find a way to shut you down.

The first time I refused, I learned the hard way. One of these so-called inspectors came to the pub, and I said no to his demands. The next weekend, we were hit with a full inspection. They found every tiny fault they could, and we were forced to close for three days, especially because it was over the weekend when we made the most money.

I was furious and wanted to fight back. I went to the biggest newspaper in town, hoping to expose what had happened. I knew one of the journalists there, Bob, from when I'd advertised the pub in their paper.

"Mr. Penia? Yeah, he's in the office at the end of the hall" a secretary told me.

I knocked and went in, explaining everything to Bob. I hoped he could help me write a formal complaint and get it printed.

"I'd be careful", Bob said after hearing my story. "This is risky."

"I want to file a complaint, make this public."

"You can try", he said, leaning back in his chair. "But it won't get printed. The authorities control what goes out. Even if I sneak it past the editors, it'll get pulled before it hits the newsstands."

"Seriously? This is the press. You're telling me they censor the news?"

“It’s worse than that”, Bob said. “The articles about local authorities? They’re written by the authorities themselves. Our journalists aren’t even allowed to touch those stories.”

I was speechless. It was like the local government ran the newspaper as a personal PR machine.

Bob shook his head. “The guys who write those pieces can barely string a sentence together, but they make sure the right narrative gets out. It’s sickening.”

It was a wake-up call. I realized how deep the corruption ran, and it made me wonder how far I was willing to go to protect the business I’d worked so hard to build.

Chapter 28

Crisis is knocking at the door

That December remains vivid in my memory. We had a wonderful Christmas and New Year's party, simple but united, with both families gathered together. The restaurant and the pub were closed for the holidays, and though the staff didn't work those nights, I paid them as if they had. That was my choice. I still remembered being 19, working at a hotel on Christmas Eve and New Year's. It felt awful. Missing out on Anna's graduation party and those special nights with family was something that stuck with me. I didn't want my employees to feel that same emptiness, missing moments with the people they love.

But during Christmas dinner, I was only half-present. I couldn't switch off my brain. While everyone laughed and shared stories, my mind kept spinning around the business. I was itching to step back from the day-to-day grind and view things from a distance, from a more strategic perspective. I no longer wanted to deal with staff problems or constantly be on-site. I knew it was possible to transition into a more managerial role, but I wasn't sure if it was feasible in this country. Running a business here meant expenses were always high, and it felt like every week something broke that required more money to fix. I wanted to hire a manager, someone who could handle the day-to-day, freeing me up to think about growth, expansion, and possibly opening a second location. But our budget didn't allow for it.

There was also a nagging feeling in the back of my mind. Something bad was coming. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I'd started paying more attention to the news since we opened the business. I was absorbing everything—economics, politics, all that “boring” stuff that suddenly mattered when you were responsible for keeping a business afloat. The numbers weren't looking good. Sales were slowing down, and at first, I thought it was something we were doing wrong. Maybe we had miscalculated; after all, I was a software developer, and Anna an architect. Neither of us had a background in running a business. So, I decided to talk to the people who knew the business best—our suppliers.

"Andy! My man. Long time no see!" Mark, my sales representative, greeted me with his usual energy as I walked into their warehouse.

“Hey, Mark. Yeah, it's been a while. Been busy playing boss” I joked.

He laughed. “I know the drill. You make the money and vanish. So, what can I get you today? Not too many customers lately, as you can see.”

I looked around. The place was practically empty, which was strange for a Saturday. “Yeah, I was about to say. This place is usually packed on weekends.”

"Not anymore, Andy" he said, shaking his head. "Administration asked us to work weekends to handle the rush, but there's no rush anymore. We're just sitting here, staring at each other."

That hit me hard. If even the big suppliers were seeing a downturn, then it wasn't just me. The whole economy was headed for a slump. It was like the calm before a storm. In my country, this wasn't news. We've been through this before—every 10 years, like clockwork, the economy collapses. And we all know the feeling. You can sense it, like the heavy air before a thunderstorm. The instinct kicks in: make sure your house is secure, your family is safe, and hope you can ride out the worst of it.

As I left the warehouse, a sense of dread washed over me. I knew then why things had felt off for months. We were about to enter another economic crisis, and this time, it was coming straight for my business.

I wanted to be an entrepreneur. By the time I turned 42, the idea of working for someone else no longer appealed to me. After 15 years of computer development and working for a salary, I was ready to take the plunge into something bigger. My life felt like it had been divided into chapters, each decade serving a distinct purpose.

I never saw myself staying in my small hometown. There, opportunities were limited—small jobs, small lives, small ambitions. But I wanted more. I was hungry for it. So, when that consultancy offered me a chance to work on a massive project in Mexico when I was just 25, I didn't think twice. I said *yes* before they could even finish the sentence. The money was in the banking sector, and everything revolved around cutting-edge technology. I barely knew half of what I was supposed to, but that didn't matter. I spent the entire flight there studying what I needed to do once I arrived in the foreign country. I was young and wild.

The tricky part wasn't just learning on the fly; it was teaching others to do the same. But as the saying goes, you only need to know a little more than your student to be the teacher. So I held my ground.

I remember this guy, Oscar, who came up to me after class.

“Good morning, Andy. It's an honor to be learning this new technology from you. Please forgive us if we don't get it right away, but this is our first time working with this you are teaching us.”

I smiled, thinking to myself, *It's my first time, too, Oscar. Don't worry.*

In hindsight, maybe Oscar was poking fun at me, but I was too caught up in the moment to notice.

Life in Mexico was exhilarating. Nine months after I moved, Anna joined me, and together we started a new chapter of our lives. It was an incredible time, filled with personal growth, adventure, and the kind of experiences that shape you forever. Looking back, I feel like every young person should travel before settling down. It changes you, makes you see the world from different angles. It definitely brought Anna and me closer. We made lifelong friends from all over the world and have stayed in touch with them ever since. It feels like we just got back yesterday, even though it was four years later when we finally returned home.

When I hit my thirties, life changed again. We became parents. Our two daughters arrived, and our world was filled with new adventures. Through all of that, Anna and I managed to stick together. We still love each other deeply, and I think that says a lot about the journey we've been on.

Then came my forties. This was supposed to be the decade where I took control, where I became the entrepreneur I'd always dreamed of being. The only problem? I had chosen the wrong country for it.

The economic crisis was now looming over us like a dark cloud. I couldn't ignore the signs anymore. It wasn't just my business slowing down—everyone was feeling the squeeze. Providers, customers, and employees were all caught in the same sinking ship. And the storm was just beginning.

But I couldn't go back to the way things were. I'd made the leap from salaried worker to business owner, and I was determined to make it work. No matter how tough it got. I had built something with Anna, and we weren't about to give up now.

We had come too far.

Armando and I had known each other since we were kids. We grew up on the same street, riding our bikes and kicking around a soccer ball every afternoon until the sun dipped behind the houses. Back then, our biggest concern was how to sneak in an extra hour of play before our parents called us in for dinner. Life was simple, and our neighborhood was our entire world.

Armando was always the smooth-talker, the kid who could talk his way out of any trouble. It was no surprise to anyone when he became a lawyer. He knew how to navigate the system and find loopholes where others saw dead ends. I, on the other hand, had always been the curious, analytical one—more comfortable with computers than people, more interested in solving problems than avoiding them. We made a good team growing up.

Even as adults, we stayed close. When I first opened the pub, Armando helped draft the contracts, and now, he was going to help me figure out how to close it down without losing everything. He'd always had a practical approach to life, knowing how to bend with the wind rather than fight it. I wasn't built that way, but I respected him for it.

As I walked into his office, the familiar scent of old books and leather chairs brought back memories of those afternoons spent in his room as kids, making plans for adventures we never quite pulled off.

“Andy! So long! How are you, my friend?” Armando greeted me, his voice warm as he got up from behind his desk.

“Hi, Armando. All good, thanks” I said, shaking his hand.

We caught up a bit, reminiscing about the old days when life was much simpler. It was always like that with us. No matter how bad things were, we found a way to laugh about the past before diving into the problems of the present.

“So, what brings you here today? Let me guess—crisis talk?” Armando said, leaning back in his chair, his expression turning serious.

“You see how things are, right? The country is falling apart” I started.

“I don’t need to be reminded, dude”, Armando replied, shaking his head. “I’ve got clients left and right coming in with the same problem. The economy is in freefall.”

I explained the situation with the pub—how sales were dropping, how Anna and I couldn’t keep it going, and how we didn’t have the money to pay off the staff if we closed.

Armando nodded along, his face showing no surprise. He’d heard it all before.

“Here’s the thing, Andy. You’re not alone in this. Businesses are closing left and right. Hell, even companies that have been around for decades are going under. It’s bad, but you know that. What are you thinking?”

“I think we need to close the pub” I said, knowing full well what that meant. “The problem is the employees. If we fire them, we’ll owe them a fortune in severance. Money we don’t have.”

Armando thought for a moment before speaking, his eyes narrowing slightly as he considered the options.

“Well, you could try selling it” he said, though we both knew that was a long shot. “But, if no one’s buying, there’s another option—transfer the

business to the employees. They take over, you avoid the severance, and they get a shot at keeping the place alive.”

It was a radical idea, but in this economy, radical was all we had left. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than sinking with the ship. We talked through the details, and Armando assured me it was all legal, though tricky.

As I walked out of Armando's office, I knew it wasn't going to be easy. The decision to close the pub felt like a weight had been lifted, but the idea of transferring it to the employees was risky. I didn't have much of a choice though. The thought of selling the pub for a decent price in the middle of a crisis was laughable. Who would buy a bar with no clients in an economy that was tanking?

The situation with the economy had been getting worse. Month by month, sales at both the pub and the restaurant were dropping, and people were tightening their belts. Anna's architecture work had all but dried up, and our personal expenses kept piling up as clients disappeared. Everything seemed to be spiraling downward.

When I got back home, I sat down with Anna to discuss the conversation I'd had with Armando.

“We need to close the pub” I said again, this time with more certainty.

“I know”, Anna replied softly. “But what about the employees?”

We both knew what that meant—firing staff meant paying out a hefty severance. In our country, labor laws are strict when it comes to layoffs, and the costs could easily bury us. But giving the pub to the employees seemed like the best option, even if it wasn't a perfect solution. It felt like a fair exchange—they get the business and its potential, and we get out from under the weight of the severance.

The next day, I called a meeting with the four employees working at the pub. They knew things weren't going well, but I didn't want to surprise them.

"Listen, guys" I started. "You all know the situation. The economy is in the gutter, and sales have been dropping for months. Anna and I can't keep the pub open any longer."

The room was silent. They were expecting bad news, but I could see the anxiety on their faces.

"But" I continued, "I'm not here to fire you. Instead, we want to offer you the chance to take over the pub."

They looked at me in disbelief. I explained how we could transfer ownership to them, and that the money we would have paid in severance could be the capital they needed to run it.

"You'd be your own bosses. You know the place, you know the clientele. Maybe, with some fresh ideas, you can make it work where we couldn't" I said, trying to give them some hope.

After a long pause, they started asking questions—about logistics, about ownership, about what it would mean to run a business in such tough times. I answered them as best as I could, and we agreed to meet again after they had some time to think it over.

That night, Anna and I talked it through once more. We both knew the reality—this wasn't just about the pub or the restaurant anymore. This was about survival. The economy was unraveling, and we had to focus on securing our future and the future of our girls.

"If they take the pub, at least we can focus on the restaurant" I said, trying to reassure myself.

“Yeah, but we need to prepare for the worst”, Anna replied, her eyes tired but determined. “If the economy keeps crashing, we might have to let go of the restaurant too.”

We didn’t want to think that far ahead, but the truth was hard to ignore. The crisis was knocking at our door, and we didn’t know how long we could keep it out.

We both knew we had to be ready for anything.

That night, I explained everything to Anna. We both knew the time had come for a big decision, and we had to do it right.

"So, I went to Armando's again today" I started, hoping the news wouldn't be too overwhelming.

"How was it?" Anna asked, her voice carrying the weight of weeks of worry. "I'm so tired of all of this—hearing about the crisis, dealing with the restaurant and pub."

I could feel her exhaustion. We were barely managing the restaurant, which had seen better days. I was covering extra shifts since one of the managers quit. Ironically, that ended up being one of the best things that could have happened. Sadly, we had to abandon the 24-hour schedule. When we started staying open around the clock, it inspired other places in town to extend their hours. It felt like we were doing something good for the community. But as the crisis deepened, fewer and fewer people came. We couldn't afford to keep things running like that anymore.

Anna, meanwhile, was doing the cleaning at the restaurant, something we used to have staff for but now couldn't afford. It was chaotic. Just a year earlier, we had a solid structure of employees, and we were proud of how well we treated them. Now, everything was unraveling.

"So, what did Armando say?" Anna asked with excitement.

"He basically advised us to transfer the pub to the employees. If we try to sell it, we'd need to use that money to pay them their severance. So, why not just give it to them?" I explained.

Anna wasn't thrilled with the idea, and for good reason. We spent the next few days planning, talking it through from every angle. We even did rehearsals, practicing how we'd break the news to the employees.

"We can't do that" Anna said suddenly one night after a long conversation.

"Leave the place to the employees?" I asked, a little taken aback. "Why not? I thought you were okay with the idea."

"Pamela is the only one capable of running a place like the pub" Anna replied. "Do you think Geoffrey can handle that?"

Geoffrey was our new barman, a replacement for Dale. We had even paid for his training, but he never seemed grateful. He was good at the job but lacked initiative.

"That asshole can barely handle mixing drinks", Anna continued. "He's a complete disaster."

I couldn't argue. Geoffrey didn't have the drive to run a business.

"What about Rodi?" I suggested.

"Rodi? He's more interested in video games than anything else" Anna replied, shaking her head. "He's not cut out for managing a bar."

She was right. Rodi was loyal, but he wasn't someone who could take on the responsibility of ownership. And Bobby, our DJ, was a wild card—he couldn't even keep track of himself, let alone a business.

"Okay, so we push for Pamela to take over, with the condition that she keeps the others employed" I suggested.

Anna sighed. "It's a crazy idea, but it might be our only option."

We were both wary of Pamela. She had done a good job managing the bands, but we'd discovered that the staff often talked behind our backs—Pamela included. I'd installed a camera without them knowing, and what we saw and heard wasn't pretty. They all complained about us, and even worse, about each other. It was a toxic environment.

Finally, the day came for the meeting with the staff. The pub was practically empty these days, with only the worst of the town's crowd still coming in. We had lost our key security team—Little Boy and his wife had quit long ago, replaced by temporary hires. It was clear that the pub's best days were behind it.

"Thanks for coming, everyone" I started, trying to sound more upbeat than I felt. "We're facing a difficult moment. As you know, the business isn't making any money, and we're barely covering your salaries."

Rodi, ever the optimist, chimed in. "The pub gave a lot to this town, Andy. It's a shame to see it struggling."

"We've given this town more than just a place to drink" I added. "More than 150 bands have played here, many of them local talents who wouldn't have had a chance otherwise. We've done good things."

Bobby, the DJ, always straightforward, cut in. "So, what's the plan?"

"Well, the situation is tough. We've been over this before, but there aren't any easy fixes" I said. "So, Anna and I have decided that we can't continue with the pub."

I paused to let it sink in. Everyone looked down, not saying a word.

"But that doesn't mean we're closing it down" I quickly added. "What we're offering is the chance for you to take over. All of you, together, as co-owners."

The silence grew heavier, as if no one quite knew how to react.

"You mean, all of us... we'd be the owners?" Geoffrey asked, his voice filled with doubt.

"Yes, exactly. You'd be in charge, and we'd transfer ownership to you."

Pamela looked thoughtful. "We'll need to think about it."

We left that meeting feeling like we'd made some progress. But a couple of days later, Rodi pulled me aside.

"Andy, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, Rodi. What's on your mind?"

"I'm not really interested in being an owner", he said, his tone a little sheepish. "I just want to work."

I nodded, understanding. "Okay. What about the others?"

"Bobby's not happy", Rodi continued. "He thinks Pamela's going to take over and fire him. He's even talking about suing you."

"Seriously?" I asked, a bit surprised but not entirely shocked.

"And Geoffrey? He wants to be an owner, but he doesn't have the money to invest."

It became clear that Pamela was the only one serious about running the place, but it was also clear that things were far from harmonious between the staff.

Pamela called me the next day to confirm she was willing to take over, and I agreed to the transfer. We drew up a list of what we were leaving behind and what we were taking with us. Anna and I spent an afternoon at the pub, gathering our things and reminiscing about the good times.

Despite everything, I loved that place. The bad moments seemed to fade away, leaving only the good memories. We had worked hard, made a decent profit, and learned a lot. Now, it was time to move on.

Pamela eventually rebranded the pub, but we lost contact with her after a while. We sold off the remaining equipment we took with us and closed that chapter of our lives. The pub had been an adventure, full of highs and lows, but it was time for a new journey.

And we were ready.

After we finalized the pub transfer, I found myself back in Armando's office, feeling more uncertain than ever.

"Congrats dude on handing over the pub. You made it" Armando greeted me with his usual enthusiasm.

"Yeah, it wasn't easy", I replied, still processing everything. "Telling people we're closing down was tough, but they took it well, and now I hope they do even better with it."

Armando's tone shifted, his expression more serious. "Did you make them sign an agreement?"

I sighed. "We tried. Anna and I had everything prepared, but they wanted to show the papers to a lawyer first."

"That's not good, Andy. You need them to sign off, or you're still responsible."

"I actually came to see you for something else, Armando." I pulled out a letter I had received and handed it to him.

Armando's eyes scanned the paper. "Sergio?" he asked, confused. "Who's this guy?"

"Let me tell you the full story" I replied, already feeling the frustration rise. "Sergio showed up when I was looking for kitchen help. One of Mary's assistants quit, so I needed a replacement. He seemed desperate,

living on a piece of stolen land in one of those makeshift houses people build from whatever they can find."

Armando nodded, knowing the story all too well—it's a common reality in this country.

"He was supposed to be on trial hours", I continued, "but I paid him anyway, just to help him out. But then, one day, he threatened a customer. He got angry when a client returned a dish he made, marched out from the kitchen, and confronted them."

"Right there, in front of everyone?" Armando asked, eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, right there in the dining area. The manager tried to handle it, but Sergio wasn't having it. He stormed back into the kitchen, grabbed a butcher's knife, and came back out."

"No way..." Armando muttered, shaking his head in disbelief.

"The client was terrified. The manager called the police, and I had to rush to the restaurant like a madman. Sergio just disappeared after that, but now, he's suing us, claiming I left him out of work."

"My Lord. And I thought I heard everything". Armando frowned as he read further. "I see here on the letter that he's represented by Carlevaro."

"And who's that?" I asked, confused.

"She's as dangerous as they come", Armando explained. "She's been doing this for years, exploiting the dysfunctional legal system here. She knows all the judges. They'll drag this case out for months, maybe years, but they'll make sure Sergio wins in the end."

I was speechless. "I have security footage of him waving a knife at a client, Armando. I have a police report. What more do they need?"

Armando sighed deeply. "This is how things work here, Andy. It doesn't matter if you're right. The legal system always favors the employee, even if the employee is a criminal."

"But this guy threatened someone's life!"

"Doesn't matter. Judges don't care about justice, only about avoiding bad press. The last thing they want is a crying Sergio on TV, claiming he was mistreated by his cruel employer."

I could barely wrap my head around it. "Even when they're criminals?" I asked, incredulous.

"Even then" Armando said flatly. "Judges here are more interested in keeping things quiet, avoiding any scandal"

In the end, I had no choice but to make a deal with Sergio. I paid him as though he had worked for us for a year, despite the fact that he had only been there a few weeks—and nearly got us all killed in the process. To add insult to injury, I also had to cover his lawyer's fees.

As I walked out of Armando's office that day, I couldn't help but feel disillusioned. Running a business here was like trying to swim against a tide that never stops pulling you under. But we didn't have the luxury of stopping. We had the restaurant, our family, and a future we still believed in.

And that's all that mattered in the end.

Chapter 29

Planning the escape

Anna and I were still reeling from the whole Sergio situation. The stress was unbearable, and it showed. Our arguments became sharper, louder, and more frequent. We were frustrated with each other, with ourselves, and with the whole crumbling system around us. Crises like these don't just destroy businesses—they tear at the very core of relationships.

Economic crises don't just hit wallets; they hit hearts. It's not just the financial instability that gets to you. It's the emotional toll, the sense of helplessness. When the money dries up, so does the patience. You start hearing phrases like, "You should've done this" or "We wouldn't be here if you had done that." Blame becomes a substitute for solutions. It's an endless cycle of finger-pointing, but deep down, we both knew it wasn't our fault. It was the country. The politicians. The system. But knowing that didn't stop the arguments.

For Armando, dealing with cases like Sergio's was part of the job, but for us, it felt like living in a Kafkaesque nightmare. Every move we made was under scrutiny. Every action could be used against us. It wasn't just about running a business anymore; it was about survival in a system rigged against anyone who tried to play by the rules.

And we weren't alone in this. Sarah, one of Anna's closest friends, shared stories that echoed our frustrations. She and her husband ran a factory, and like us, they'd been burned by the same broken system.

They'd hired a woman a few years ago, only to discover she had been stealing from them. So they did what any sensible business owner would do: they installed security cameras, caught her in the act, and asked her to resign. The woman, visibly pregnant, signed her resignation and left without protest.

But in this country, no good deed goes unpunished. A month later, Sarah and her husband were served with legal papers. The woman was suing them, claiming she'd been forced to quit because of her pregnancy. The media jumped on the story, painting them as heartless business owners. "Factory Owners Force Pregnant Worker to Quit—Abuse or Business Strategy?" the headlines screamed.

Sarah's voice was heavy with bitterness when she told us about it. "We had to take out a loan just to pay her off", she said, shaking her head. "It wasn't about the money, though. It was the public humiliation. Local news reporters showing up at our door, treating us like we were monsters. My business, my brand, was tainted. All those years of hard work, and in an instant, we were the villains."

Her story wasn't unique. It was the reality of doing business here, where the rules seemed designed to punish the honest while rewarding the opportunistic. It made us realize that we weren't just battling the economy or the competition—we were fighting the very environment we lived in.

Hearing stories like Sarah's made us realize that no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't escape the system. We had entered a warzone the day we opened our business, and the casualties weren't just financial—they were personal. It was becoming clear that if we wanted to survive, we'd have to find a way out, just like Sarah did. We couldn't keep pouring everything into a sinking ship. The exit plan wasn't just about saving the business—it was about saving ourselves.

That weekend, we decided to take a break from everything. We invited Anna's family for a short trip—something simple, just to calm down and try to think positively.

“Hi, Susan? It's me, Anna.”

“Hello, sister. How are you?”

“You know... trying to stay positive. I'm calling to invite you, the girls, and Dad to go somewhere with us.”

“I know it must be hard for you, sis. And how did everything end?”

“Susan, I don't really want to talk about it right now. I'm frustrated. I feel powerless. It's like being violated...”

“Oh, don't say that! My goodness.”

“Well, if you don't want to hear things like that, don't ask me about it. Just say yes to the trip.”

Susan hesitated, but then agreed. “Sure, of course. What do you have in mind?”

“I was thinking we could visit that shopping mall we like?”

“That sounds nice. It's been a while since we were there. Why not?”

So, we packed up and headed to a nearby city. We borrowed Anna's dad's car and took the eight of us—Anna, Susan, Lucho, their girls, and our daughters—for a short escape. I drove, with Lucho seated next to me, while Anna, Susan, and their daughters sat in the middle row, and our girls took the back.

“Any news from you girls?” Anna asked her nieces, Flor and Alice.

Flor, 25, was studying tourism, and Alice, 20, was still trying to figure out her next steps with college. They lived with Susan and Lucho.

“I'm almost done with all the family's documents”, Flor said.

“What documents?” Anna asked, a bit distracted.

“For the Italian citizenship. I've been telling you about this!”

“Oh yes! I remember now” Anna said, trying to focus. “How could I forget?”

“You've got a lot on your mind these days” Susan said, concerned for her younger sister.

“Did that lawyer manage to put everything together?” Anna asked, referring to the one Susan had hired to help with the process.

“Ugh, that lawyer was a waste of money”, Flor said, frustrated. “We ended up finding all the documents ourselves. The hardest part was tracking down Lucho's grandfather's birth certificate.”

Most people here are descendants of immigrants from Europe—Italians, Spaniards, Germans—who came here after the world wars. If you can prove your Italian heritage, you're eligible for citizenship. But that's easier said than done. It involves finding birth, marriage, and death certificates from generations back, often buried in archives or lost to time.

“And now what?” Anna asked.

“Well, now we take everything to the embassy. But here’s the thing: If I submit the papers through our town, the embassy is so slow it could take ten years or so to process.”

“Ten years? That’s insane!”

“It’s true”, Flor said. “If I go through another city, it might be a little faster. But I might be stuck anyway. Here it simply doesn’t work”

“Is there a way to do it faster?” I chimed in.

“I could speed it up by going to Italy directly”, Flor continued. “If I go there in person, it only takes about three or four months.”

“Four months compared to ten years?” Anna asked, amazed.

“Yeah, but the trip costs money. And you have to stay there, in a house” Susan interjected, with a knowing smile. “You’d need a lot to stay in Italy for three months.”

“I know, Mom. I’ll work and save up.”

“Sure” Susan said, her skepticism clear. “I’m just saying, don’t count on me. I don’t have that kind of money.”

“It’s always the same with you, Mom.”

“Or ask your father” Susan continued, as if she hadn’t heard Flor’s comment. “He can help you too.”

Susan’s history with Flor and Alice’s father, Fred, was complicated. They had divorced when the girls were young, and Susan had moved back to our town to start over. With no professional experience, she had returned to live with her dad, Lucho, and slowly built a new life. She opened a

small psychology practice, took a job with the government, and made a steady recovery.

But her love life was a different story. She'd had a few relationships since her divorce, but none of them had lasted. For some people, rebuilding after divorce is harder than starting from scratch. Perhaps the fear of failure, of suffering again, keeps them from taking risks with love.

As we drove, I couldn't help but reflect on how different our lives had become. Here we were, trying to distract ourselves with a family trip, while in the background, the struggles of daily life—bureaucracy, money problems, and emotional scars—never really went away.

Later that day, after we returned from our family trip, the conversation about getting Italian citizenship kept swirling in my mind. Both Anna and I had always dreamed of living in Europe. I remembered when we were in Mexico, our next destination had been set for France, but the lack of legal papers to live and work there held us back. It wasn't the language that stopped us—it was the fear of ending up in trouble because we weren't legally allowed to stay.

The following morning, I woke up early. I couldn't sleep. My mind was racing, and I needed to sort out our next move. I opened my laptop and started a spreadsheet. I listed everything we owned, calculating how much we could make by selling everything quickly. I wrote down half the value for each item, thinking that selling used things fast meant accepting a loss. I totaled up the potential earnings from selling everything we had. It wasn't a fortune, but it was enough to keep us afloat for a few months abroad, giving us the breathing room we needed to figure out the next steps.

If the Italian citizenship process took three or four months, we could live on that amount abroad comfortably. I realized we had options. I could keep freelancing as a developer. It wasn't what I wanted to do long-term, but it was a way out. Anything was better than staying in this chaotic environment.

Anna woke up and noticed the glow of my screen in the early morning light.

“Were you awake all night?” she asked, her voice flat.

We had been distant lately. The strain of the fights, the constant pressure—it was driving a wedge between us. Our relationship was under siege. The fights had become loud enough for the girls to hear, and that was the worst part of it all. It felt like we were breaking apart over things beyond our control, and that helplessness made everything worse.

“No, I just couldn’t sleep”, I replied, closing my laptop. “I’m working on something I’d like to show you, but—”

“We received another letter yesterday”, Anna interrupted, her voice tinged with frustration.

“Another letter? What now?” I asked, my stomach tightening. I knew it couldn’t be good.

“Pamela closed the pub. It didn’t work for her” Anna said, putting a slice of bread into the toaster. Normally, months ago, she would have asked if I wanted toast too, but now she just went about the routine in silence.

“I heard”, I said, remembering the night of Pamela’s reopening. “I was there that night. They changed a few things, but it never took off. They had clients, just not enough to cover the costs and make a profit.”

“Well, now they’re trying to get their profit from us. Nice people. Beautiful people” Anna said with biting sarcasm.

I could feel the anger in her words. Anna had always been expressive, her emotions spilling out when she couldn’t hold them in anymore. I understood her frustration. I felt it too, but her bitterness wasn’t helping. Still, I couldn’t blame her for being upset. The whole situation was wearing on us both.

“Can I see the letter, please?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm. “I’ll take it to Armando today. Maybe he can help us figure out how to deal with this.”

I wanted to show her my plan—the exit strategy I’d been working on all night—but I could see it wasn’t the right time. The tension between us was too thick. Instead, I grabbed my laptop and headed to the studio, hoping to clear my head and refine the plan a bit more before presenting it to her. The dream of starting over in Europe seemed like the only lifeline, but convincing Anna would be another battle.

That weekend, I found myself back at Armando's office, and honestly, I had come to hate the place. It was like going to the dentist—one of those offices I wish I could avoid forever.

"Another letter, Armando."

"Damn it" Armando muttered, trying to sound empathetic.

"Remember the employees from the pub? I gave them the place for free. Well, they closed it down, and now they're arguing that we fired them, demanding severance as if they were former employees."

Saying it out loud felt surreal, like I was trapped in some bizarre dream or a bad movie plot. But no, this was my real life—another casualty of the "Trial Industry" that preyed on small businesses in my country.

Politicians had tried to prevent this kind of abuse before, but people like Moyano, a powerful labor leader, made sure it thrived. Moyano claimed to defend workers' rights, but it was all a front. He used workers as pawns to pressure the government, getting what he wanted by any means necessary. People like this say they're for the people, but that's a lie.

In our country, Moyano could call a nationwide strike if he didn't get his way, paralyzing the economy. Roads would be blocked, cities would grind to a halt, and the justice system? Useless. The judges had long-standing agreements with guys like him.

I remembered a story from my beer supplier, Oscar, an old truck driver who'd delivered to my pub for years. One morning, he showed up looking worn out.

"Nice morning today" Oscar said, handing me the invoice.

"Oscar! It's been a while. You weren't working?"

"Had back surgery. Been out for a bit."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Feeling better?"

"Slowly getting there. After this, we're heading to the strike Moyano called."

I nodded. "I heard. Are you not getting paid?"

"You're our last delivery today", Oscar said. "We should've gone on strike hours ago, but we didn't want to leave you hanging. You've always treated us well."

I thanked him, relieved. Getting my supplies on a Friday, with the weekend rush ahead, was crucial. I couldn't imagine how other businesses were scrambling without their deliveries.

"So you're striking, even though you're getting paid?"

Oscar shrugged. "Moyano wants us there for the TV cameras. We have to show numbers, you know."

"Ah, I see. Support for the cause" I said, trying to mask my frustration.

So here I was, watching the chaos unfold, knowing full well that Moyano's "cause" was nothing more than a power play. Meanwhile, small businesses like mine were being bled dry.

Armando snapped me back to reality. "Andy, remember I told you to get them to sign a document when you handed over the pub?"

"I remember. They refused. I thought about holding a gun to their heads to make them sign, but that didn't seem like a good idea."

"You're going to have to settle. There's no way around it. If this goes to trial, they'll win."

"But we have witnesses who saw them running the pub, as the owners! We can prove it" I argued.

Armando shook his head. "It won't matter. That's just how things work here, Andy. It's simple: you either live with it or you leave. I told you this before..."

"Enough" I said to myself. I had already made my decision. I wasn't going to live like this any longer. It was time to leave.

After leaving Armando's office and getting back home, I was seething with anger. I needed an outlet, something to clear my head. Running usually did the trick, so I laced up my shoes, ready to hit the streets.

"Anna, I was at Armando's. Let me handle the situation with Pamela and the pub."

She was pacing in the kitchen, tension written all over her face. "We also need to deal with the rent and the owner of the pub's building."

"What? Why?" I asked, startled.

"Pamela didn't contact him to return the key. She's just disappeared."

"Damn it" I snapped, unable to hold back. "That..."

"Let me handle it", Anna interrupted, trying to keep her composure. "I don't want any trouble with him. He was good to us. Besides, I can't handle another legal headache. Please, are we ever going to catch a break?"

She was on the edge of breaking down, and I knew exactly how she felt. It wasn't like we'd been reckless or irresponsible. We didn't gamble or make wild investments. We worked hard, treated everyone with respect, and still, we were drowning in this mess. It was soul-crushing.

Anna managed everything with the landlord perfectly, of course. She cleaned up Pamela's mess, arranged repairs, returned the keys, and even

paid off the remaining debt that Pamela had left behind. It was all settled, thanks to her. She couldn't walk away from a debt.

Meanwhile, I needed my run. I craved the escape, the rhythm of my feet pounding the pavement, the city buzzing around me. I didn't go to parks or trails. I preferred running through the streets, weaving among pedestrians and dodging cars and trucks. Watching kids spill out of school, seeing people hustle through their day—it gave me a sense of connection, even when I felt so disconnected from the place I should call home.

As I ran, I thought about leaving. It wasn't just an idea anymore; it was becoming a plan. The thought of it swirled in my mind as I calculated everything over and over. Sure, the money we could put together might not be a fortune, but it was enough to make a fresh start somewhere. I could work freelance, keep us afloat, and maybe, just maybe, we could find some peace.

Then, I caught a glimpse of myself in a shop window as I passed by. For a second, I saw myself not just running through the city, but running away from everything—this chaotic, dysfunctional society. I wasn't just tired of the corruption and injustice; I was exhausted by the entire system, a system where politicians robbed the country blind and walked away untouched.

People here might have accepted that fate, but not me. I couldn't take it anymore. I wasn't going to swallow that bitter pill of complacency. I was ready to leave. Ready to find somewhere that made sense. Ready to stop running.

Chapter 30

We all agree

"Anna, do you have a minute?"

"Yes. What is it?" she replied, her voice flat, her mind clearly elsewhere.

I knew right then this wasn't the best moment to talk. I could tell she was still frustrated with me, maybe even exhausted. But I had to push through—it was important. I needed her attention fully on this, so I tried to ease into the conversation.

"Wait. I know you're mad at me, but can we talk about solutions? Please."

She sighed, wiping her hands down her face in that familiar way she does when she's stressed. "I'm trying to solve a big problem right now, Andy. I just finished closing the pub. I did everything. I fixed the broken things that your friend Pamela, that... well, she left behind. I made sure the owner was happy with it all."

"I know. And I'm really sorry I put you through all of that" I said, trying to defuse her frustration. "But remember, I gave you the chance to do something related to architecture too."

"Oh, please don't go there", she cut in sharply. "I don't need that right now. Besides, I still don't understand why you, a developer, thought opening a damn bar was a good idea in the first place."

"Oh, yeah? And do you remember how hard it was for me to keep working while I was helping change diapers?"

We were sliding back into old arguments, and I could feel the tension tightening between us. This wasn't what I wanted. We couldn't keep going down that road—it wasn't going to help. I needed to shift the conversation before we were too far gone.

"Anna, I don't want to fight", I said, taking a deep breath. "We've been through so much together. We need to focus on what comes next. On finding a solution that gives us a future. And honestly, I don't think we'll ever find that here, not in this country."

"We shouldn't have opened a pub and a restaurant if we didn't have the money to support them properly" she shot back, clearly still frustrated.

"Anna, we were making decent money. Don't forget that."

"Yes, but to run a business, you need enough capital to survive moments of crisis", she insisted.

"I'm sorry, but that's wrong. This crisis isn't on us."

"Oh, no? Whose fault is it then?"

"Look around, Anna. Every business, big or small, is going under. Even those with plenty of money saved up are struggling. It's not just us. It's the government—those corrupt assholes who've been stealing everything. They've wrecked the economy, not us!"

She paused, staring at me for a moment, her anger simmering down just a little. "I don't know what to say, Andy..."

We clearly weren't on the same page. Anna saw this crisis as our failure, a consequence of our choices. But I didn't. I saw it as the result of political corruption, of a broken system that had been failing us for years. I couldn't understand why no one was rebelling, why there weren't protests in the streets. Where were the voices of dissent? Where was our Bob Dylan, singing about the truth?

"Let's just take a breath, okay?" I said, hoping to redirect things. "I have something I want to show you."

I pulled out the plan I had been working on, detailing how we could leave the country and start over somewhere better. We sat down, and I explained it all. We talked for hours, going over every little detail. She asked questions—some I had answers for, and some I didn't. I tried to be as honest as I could, giving her straight answers based on what I knew. I didn't want to paint a picture that was rosier than reality.

In the end, she agreed. She didn't fight it. I couldn't tell if she was genuinely on board, or just exhausted from all the chaos we had been through, tired of battling me over every crazy decision. Either way, I was relieved. We were on the same page again, and that was enough for now.

We were going to start over, somewhere new, with a clean slate.

Chapter 31

Meeting Paul

The original idea was simple: gather the money, find a temporary place in Italy, stay for three or four months while I was working as a freelance developer, then, once we were financially stable, move to Spain and settle down. Valencia seemed like the perfect place to live. It wasn't as hectic as Madrid or Barcelona but was still a major city. I spent days researching the cost of living and rent prices, and it turned out to be quite affordable. With the income from freelancing, we could live comfortably, though it would be tight initially. It was a far better prospect than staying in our current situation.

Anna and I divided our responsibilities for the next big step. She started selling our belongings, starting with our car—a vital asset for the business but now just a piece of our past. It had low mileage, and people quickly showed interest. Within days, we had a buyer. It felt like we were off to a good start. Meanwhile, I focused on securing freelance work. I dusted off my CV, revamped it, and even made tutorial videos showcasing my skills on YouTube. It generated some buzz, and soon, I had several job offers.

One job post, however, stood out. It was different. Paul, a guy from San Francisco, was looking for developers to help build an application. The catch? He was offering equity instead of cash—a 10% stake in the profits. It was risky, unconventional, and honestly, kind of crazy. But

something about it intrigued me. I had a knack for diving into the unknown, so I reached out, telling him I was interested.

Even though Paul's offer was exciting, I knew we needed real money in the bank. Over the next few weeks, I went through the usual grind of job applications and interviews, the tedious dance of trying to stand out among countless developers. Finally, after what felt like a marathon, I got a solid offer from an English company. They needed someone to develop plugins for Illustrator and Photoshop. The pay wasn't exceptional, but it was enough to fund our move to Spain.

"Anna!" I shouted, bursting out of my studio into the living room, excitement buzzing through me.

She was busy selling one of my guitars to a buyer and didn't seem to share my enthusiasm just yet. "Oh, sorry, I didn't realize you were with someone."

"No problem" the guy said as he got ready to leave with the guitar in hand.

"That's a good guitar you're buying. It's almost new" I said, trying to fill the silence.

"Can I ask you something?" the guy said, pausing at the door.

"Sure."

"You're from that pub downtown, right?"

It caught me off guard. I knew we'd made an impact with the pub, but it wasn't often that people recognized us.

"Yeah, that's us. I'm Andy, and this is Anna."

"I knew it! You guys are great. You don't realize what you did for this town."

His words surprised me. We knew we brought something unique to the community, but hearing it like this was surreal.

"We actually played at your pub" he continued. "Back then, we couldn't find anywhere to perform. No one wanted live music. But you gave us a chance, and it changed everything for us. After that, we started getting gigs all over. You don't know how much you helped."

It was humbling. Anna and I stood there, not sure what to say.

"Thank you" I finally managed. "The crisis forced us to close, but we're glad we made a difference."

The man glanced at the guitar in his hands. "I didn't buy this guitar because I needed one. I bought it because it's a piece of history—a piece of your history and the pub's. I'll treasure it forever."

After he left, I turned to Anna. "I got the job with the English company as a freelancer" I said, the excitement back in my voice.

Anna's face lit up, her tiredness giving way to a flicker of hope. "That's amazing, Andy. Finally, some good news. When do you start?"

"Tomorrow", I replied. "This job means we can start planning for our future in Europe. We can count on this income now. Isn't that great?"

I decided not to mention Paul's equity-based offer just yet. There was no guarantee, and like my nanny always said

"Don't spend money unless it's already in your pocket."

Chapter 32

Choosing our Italian destination

Who doesn't like good news? Of course, everyone does. But even good news can be tricky, not because of the news itself, but because of how our brains process it. Even when you get used to a beautiful smell, the smell seems to fade. But it hasn't really disappeared. Your brain just decides it's no longer relevant. The same thing can happen with good news. You get used to it, and suddenly, it doesn't feel like news at all.

I didn't care about all of that. For us, good news was starting to flow. We were selling our stuff, and I landed a freelance job. And then Anna brought even more good news.

"We have the papers!" she said, her excitement cutting through my concentration as I worked.

"What papers?" I asked, focused on my computer.

"I'm talking about our Italian citizenship. We have everything ready for me, you, and the girls!"

"That's amazing! Now we just need to figure out the best place in Italy to do the paperwork, right?"

Anna nodded, already deep into planning. "Yes, Flor has been researching. She's in these online groups, talking to people who are

doing the same thing. It seems the best option is in small towns, not too small, but small enough where they don't ask too many questions. Since they don't get many requests, the paperwork moves faster."

"That's perfect. And where are we thinking?"

"There's a place called Sardinia. It's an island."

"Sardinia?" I said, as if I were an expert on Italian geography. Truth was, I hadn't heard much about it before.

Sardinia, it turns out, is the second-largest island in the Mediterranean, after Sicily. It has this vast, serene landscape with an area of over 24,000 square kilometers. You land at Alghero Airport, and unlike the chaotic airports of tourist-heavy cities, this one is peaceful. You don't see taxis flooding the entrance; instead, it feels calm, almost like the island is preparing you for the laid-back experience that awaits.

Our apartment in Sardinia was booked through a local named Barbara, and from the very start, she was more than just a host. When Anna, Flor, and the girls arrived, Barbara personally picked them up from the airport. After a rough experience with our last rental, Barbara's warm welcome was a breath of fresh air. It wasn't just the act of picking them up; it was the feeling of being welcomed into a new place by someone who truly cared. It was one of the many reasons we quickly fell in love with the country.

Settling into a new place is never easy. It's scary, really. Everything is unfamiliar, and that fear can stop most people from ever making a change, even when they're unhappy. But for us, the fear was worth it. We believed our future would be better if we just embraced the unknown.

Barbara's hospitality wasn't unique. The Sardinians—known as Sardos—were gentle and welcoming. They struck the perfect balance between cautious trust and warm hospitality. We never felt like intruders. They loved their land but were also willing to share it with those who

respected it. It was easy to blend in without feeling like we were imposing on their way of life.

One of the reasons Sardinia remains so untouched is its careful balance between tourism and preservation. The only place that's seen significant change is Porto Cervo at Costa Smeralda, a playground for the rich and famous. But the rest of the island? It's pristine. You can find untouched beaches, like Berchida, where the white sand feels like something out of a dream. The island is vast enough that you couldn't see all of its beaches in just a month. Every morning, the city council clears the trash left by tourists, restoring the areas to their untouched beauty by sunrise.

We arrived during the colder season, but the weather didn't dampen the charm of the island. Cagliari, the capital of Sardinia, became our base of operations. It was the perfect place to handle the bureaucracy for our citizenship. Our apartment was nestled in the heart of the historic center, surrounded by the beauty and history of the city. Every walk through those narrow, cobbled streets felt like stepping into another era.

Cagliari wasn't just a city—it was an experience. Whether sitting at a café for breakfast or enjoying a drink in the evening, there was a timeless charm in the air. At first, navigating the maze of streets was overwhelming. We were constantly relying on technology to find our way. But after two weeks, we felt like locals, weaving through the streets effortlessly, breathing in the city's history with every step.

Sardinia had a way of making us feel like we belonged, even though we were just visitors. It was more than just a temporary stop for paperwork—it was a glimpse of the life we wanted.

Chapter 33

More about Paul

After all the ugly moments we lived, this was exactly what we needed—more good news. Anna and I stopped fighting. We’ve been together for many years, ever since we met right before college. A relationship, of course, isn’t easy. Fights happen, but it’s important that they lead to solutions. I believe our secret to staying together so long is simple: the will to continue. If both people want the relationship to work, that’s all you need. Nothing can tear you apart.

The second lesson we’ve learned is that you can’t always win. We often think we’re right, but we’re not perfect. You can’t change the other person, just like they can’t change you. If you want to solve a problem, start by accepting the fact that your partner won’t change. Then ask yourself: What can we do together to fix this issue?

That day, I wasn’t just in the mood to reflect on our relationship—I was also thinking about Paul’s interesting proposal. Even though I had already secured freelance work with a company from England, Paul’s project had something new and exciting about it. And at a time when our country was crumbling, when the restaurant was only just managing to cover its expenses, this felt like a lifeline.

Paul reached out to me directly:

“Hello, Andy. This is Paul. How are you?”

“Hello, Paul. Very nice to meet you.”

“Great to meet you too. I love connecting with new people.”

“Same here” I replied.

“Did you have a chance to read through the idea I sent?”

“Yes, very interesting. And unique. I haven’t seen anything like this before.”

“You’re right!” Paul said, his voice full of excitement. “I think it’s very new. And it’s the future.”

“Of course.”

“Look, what I need right now is the entire website developed. I don’t know much about the technical side, so you’d be in charge of that.”

“Got it. No problem. Is there anyone else involved in the project?”

“Well, besides you and me, there’s Rolland, a publicist friend of mine. Another developer sent his CV, but honestly, I haven’t heard from him since our first call. I don’t think he’s interested anymore.”

“I see.”

“So” Paul continued, “I initially offered you 10% equity, but since the other developer isn’t around, you’ll get his share too. That’s 20% equity for you.”

“That’s even better.”

“Yeah. So, do you think you can handle the development of the website?”

“Absolutely! I’ve built all kinds of websites, so I can take this on. I’m working with another company at the moment, but I’ll dedicate as much time as I can to this.”

“No worries. I understand” Paul said. “And what about the design of the website?”

“You mean the look and feel?”

“Yes, exactly. I’m a designer myself, so I can handle that. Let me send you some examples of my work.”

Paul shared links to his previous companies—an insurance business and a design firm. He mentioned that he had recently sold his largest company, making a solid profit. After taking a year off, he was ready to jump back in and start something new. It’s common practice when a company is sold that the original founder agrees not to immediately re-enter the same market, giving the buyer time to stabilize without fear of fresh competition.

I could feel the excitement growing inside me. This project could be my way into becoming an entrepreneur in my forties. I’d have to juggle two jobs, but it was worth it. After all, I hadn’t taken a proper vacation in years. The idea of being a part-owner of a business in the USA, even if it meant working harder, felt like a ticket to a new chapter.

In every successful company, you need two key roles: the technical expert and the salesperson. One can’t function without the other. A technician can’t sell, and a salesperson can’t build the product. Together, they form the backbone of a company. And once you have both parts in place, the real challenge begins: getting your product in front of people and convincing them it’s worth their attention.

I wondered—could Paul be the sales partner I’d been searching for all this time?

Chapter 34

We have an Italian apartment

For our Italian citizenship, we needed more than just a place to stay—it had to be a rented apartment or house with a formal contract. According to Italian law, this proves you're genuinely living there, not just using the country for paperwork. In some cases, they even require you to know the language.

When we first learned this, we were shocked. How on earth were we supposed to secure a rental contract from afar? And how much was this going to cost us?

"The only option I see is to go online, look for places, and explain our situation", Anna said. "Maybe we can make a deal."

"That looks like our best bet", I agreed. "But if they want payment upfront, it could be for six months or even a year. And we're not staying that long."

"We definitely can't afford six months of rent, Andy."

"You're right... Are we sure about this? Do they really require a rental contract?"

"Totally" Anna confirmed. "It's what everyone in the online groups has been saying."

“And how did they manage? Did they say?”

“Some stay with family in Italy. Others share a place. But with our two daughters, sharing won’t work for us. It’s different when it’s just one person.”

Anna started contacting people online. The internet makes things easier, even if it creates its own problems. After three days of relentless searching, she had a promising lead.

“We have an apartment!” Anna shouted with excitement.

“Really? Tell me more...”

“There’s this woman, Antonella. She has an apartment that her daughter used to live in, but she’s away studying in Paris now. They’re looking to rent it out for some extra income. Here, look at the pictures.”

She showed me the photos. The apartment was spacious and nicely furnished, though the décor was a bit dated—very 1980s.

“That looks great. How much is it?”

Anna hesitated, putting her phone down. “It’s expensive.”

“How much over our budget?”

“If we take this place, we’ll have to be very tight with our spending.”

It was a beautiful apartment, and I didn’t want to end up in a terrible place, especially with the girls adjusting to a whole new environment. The last thing we needed was a cramped or uncomfortable living situation.

“This would definitely make things tighter”, I said. “But if we budget carefully, we could make it work. What do you think?”

“I think we might be able to pull it off. But I haven’t mentioned the contract or citizenship yet. I’m scared she’ll say no.”

“Okay, take it slow. Bring it up casually when the moment feels right.”

Anna was doing a great job handling the communication with Antonella, despite the language barrier. We’d only been learning Italian for a month using a mobile App, and translating everything online was challenging.

Then came the bad news.

“Antonella said no”, Anna told me. “She got scared when I mentioned the contract and citizenship. It’s not happening.”

“Damn. I thought we were close with her.”

“I feel so stupid. If only I were better at Italian...”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Anna. We’ve been studying for just a month. You’re doing great. And remember, you’ve got that other contact, right? This lady Barbara is her name?”

“Yes. I’ll reach out to her now.”

The next apartment Anna found was much more affordable—half the price. It was smaller but modern and well-equipped inside, though the building had the classic old-world charm of Italian architecture. I advised her to be more subtle about the contract this time. The key was to be honest but not overwhelm the owner with too many details at once.

“Guess what? We have the apartment!” Anna announced again, this time beaming with joy.

“Really? What happened? Tell me everything!”

“I was so nervous because Barbara wanted to talk on the phone. But we spoke, and I told her everything—the girls, our situation, the contract—and she said yes!”

“She’s okay with the contract?”

“Yes! She’s fine with it. I can’t believe it!”

“That’s amazing! When can we pay to secure the place?”

“She said we can make a deposit online for the first month, and we’ll handle the rest in person.”

“That’s perfect! We’ll just need to make a transfer to lock it down. No problem—we’ve made enough from the sales.”

With the rent secured, the biggest item on our list was checked off. Everything seemed to be falling into place. We were finally seeing a clear path to our future, and I felt unstoppable.

What could possibly go wrong now?

Chapter 35

Crisis in its highest level

My parents have always believed in fortune tellers, black magic, and curses. I've never said much about it, out of respect for their beliefs, but I have to admit, some of the stories my dad shared are quite funny. One of the most memorable involved a gypsy woman who read his fortune when I was a teenager.

"Incredible" my dad said when he came home. "She's right. She described my life perfectly."

"What did she say?" my mom asked, intrigued.

"She said my life is like a rollercoaster."

"A rollercoaster?"

"Yeah. It goes up, then down, then up again, and down once more."

Even as a teenager, I knew he was being scammed. Life as a rollercoaster? That has been written as song lyrics a thousand times. And also it applies to everyone, especially in a country like ours, where unpredictability is the norm. That's the trick fortune tellers use, offering vague predictions that apply to anyone. Over time, these fortune tellers were replaced by various religious leaders who thrive on the hope people

cling to in times of despair. In my country, faith is a necessity, often the only thing keeping people going amidst the chaos.

One preacher I remember had a falling out with the Church my parents attended, so he started his own religion. Before long, he had followers of his own, and like many others, his “help” came at a price—donations of money, houses, even cars. It’s a scam on a large scale.

I often think of my dad’s rollercoaster analogy when life takes a downward turn. Just last week, things were looking up, and now we’re plummeting again, thanks to another crisis at the restaurant.

The latest demand came from Maira, one of our longest-serving waitresses. She had left the job willingly—she and Dale, our barman, had been dating, and things went south, making it hard for her to continue working with him. We understood and were sorry to see her go. But now, thanks to one of these parasitic lawyers, she’s demanding compensation as though we fired her. It’s infuriating. She doesn’t deserve a cent, and we don’t have the money to pay.

How can anyone run a business in a country with laws like this? I had no idea this was the reality when I started. Even if I had, I might still have taken the plunge—lessons can only be learned through experience. But if foreign investors knew about this, they’d never put their money here.

Anna and I had another fight. These legal demands always bring tension, and it’s hard to deal with the unfairness of it all. I know we’re right, and Maira is wrong, but in this country, it doesn’t matter. The law will always side with the employee, even when the employer has done nothing wrong.

"I don’t know about you, Andy, but I just want to leave this place and start over somewhere normal" Anna said.

“I’m tired too. But we need to be patient.”

“And this? What do we do about Maira’s claim? Should we talk to Armando?”

“No”, I said firmly. “Let’s do nothing. Once we’re out of here, they won’t have an address to find us. After two years, they’ll expire, I’m pretty sure of that. I’ve read it somewhere. If they can’t find us, the claim becomes void.”

“I don’t know, Andy. I’m scared” Anna said, her voice filled with worry.

“Scared of what? I’m telling you, the law is on our side here. After two years, these papers will be worthless.”

Chapter 36

Juicy Offer to Continue

I was beyond furious in those days. It wasn't just the mess with Maira or Anna's constant fears—it was everything. We're so different, Anna and I. I'm not afraid of anything, while she seems to be afraid of everything. But maybe that's what makes us work. Two people exactly alike might never thrive. You need balance, the Yin and Yang thing.

I needed space, so I decided to visit my mom and check in on my brother, Marvin. We hadn't spoken since we closed the pub, and something had been left hanging between us. A month after the pub opened, we had an argument, and it never got resolved. It went something like:

"Hi, Marvin? It's Andy" I called him on a Sunday morning.

The weekend had been chaotic due to a bank holiday, which meant no one was working, but they were all out drinking. The problem was, our beer stock was running low, and our supplier didn't deliver on Sundays or holidays. We had to go and fetch the beer ourselves, and my car was too small to handle the load, so we usually used our dad's car as well. Marvin was supposed to help me with that.

"Look, man, we need to get more beer, urgently" I said over the phone.

"What? Now? I just went to bed an hour ago" he groaned.

“I know, me too. But if we don’t get it now, we’ll be in trouble tonight.”

“Give me a second... I need a beer" he muttered, clearly hungover.

Marvin had spent the night with his latest girlfriend—a policewoman who was at least ten or fifteen years older than him. Anna and I had talked about it, wondering why he had chosen someone so much older. Later, we realized he was looking for security, someone to give him a sense of stability, like a gigolo finding a more settled life. He wasn’t the carefree 20-something Casanova anymore, and age had caught up with him.

“Look, bro, I can’t right now. And honestly, I don’t think you should either" Marvin finally said.

I was taken aback. His tone was different. I could sense something was off.

“What do you mean? We need to open tonight. If we don’t get more beer, we can’t.”

“I don’t know. Maybe you shouldn’t open. I’m not the owner.”

“Are you mad about something? Do you want to talk? I can come over" I offered.

“We’re talking now", he said flatly.

“It’s obvious something’s bothering you. I’m not a mind reader.”

“I just thought things would be different, you know? It’s not what I expected.”

“How so?”

“I figured we’d be enjoying the pub, not doing all the heavy lifting. I didn’t sign up to be a delivery boy.”

“And who do you think is going to do the work then?” I asked, feeling the frustration rise.

“Hire some kids. I can find you ten guys right now.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me” I said. “We’ve barely been open a month, and you already don’t want to work?”

The conversation went downhill from there. It was clear we had different expectations, and neither of us was willing to budge. He didn’t come back to the pub after that day, claiming he had “no regrets.” That was the end of it.

Now, as I stood outside my parents' house, thinking back on that conversation, I couldn’t help but feel sad. Marvin had wanted to be part of the pub, part of something big with me, but it all fell apart over a few cases of beer. It made me realize how fragile things are—family, business, everything. And at that moment, I started to question whether all of this was worth it.

So there I was, standing in front of my parents' house, ready to have a long-overdue conversation with Marvin. It had been a while since our last proper talk. Marvin never really left our parents' place, and honestly, they never pushed him to. As the youngest, eight years my junior, and the "unexpected child" he had always been their baby. Mom, especially, had a hard time letting him go. I guess she saw the "empty nest" coming and tried to hold onto him as long as she could.

"Oh! Look who's at the door. Do we have the honor of your presence?" my dad teased as he opened the door.

My dad was an interesting character. All those memories of growing up. Parents tend to pass their frustrations onto their kids, and mine certainly did, but I still had a good childhood. They did a great job hiding their problems from us, and I appreciated that.

My mom, though, had gone through a lot, living with my grandmother and her sister under the same roof. I couldn't imagine the strain that put on her—three kids, a husband, and in-laws in a small apartment. As a kid, I loved it, but for her, it must have been hell.

"How are you, Dad? Is Marvin home?"

"The King? Of course, he's upstairs" my dad replied.

I made my way upstairs. Marvin had always been the "golden boy" treated like royalty. But that wasn't why I was here. I needed to talk to him, clear the air.

"Hey, kid. How are you?" I greeted him as I walked in.

"Hey, bro" he said, not looking up from his computer. He was busy writing on his blog, listening to music, and his Saturday cleaning was already done. His place was spotless, smelling fresh. It was always a bit surprising to see him so organized. Marvin had an artistic mind but wasn't the messy, disorganized type. I, on the other hand, was the complete opposite.

"I just wanted to come by and say hi" I said.

"So, the pub is over, huh? Who'd have thought?"

"Yeah. Not sure whether to say fortunately or unfortunately, but yeah. The crisis killed us. And now the employees are hitting us with legal demands. I treated them like royalty, and this is how they repay me."

"That sucks", Marvin muttered.

Just then, mom came in. She'd just returned from church.

"Hello, my darling. How are you? So long. You never come to see me."

"Hi, Mom."

"How are Anna and the girls?"

"They're good. You know... planning the big exit."

"You two are both crazy, you know that?" she said, her tone half-joking.

"Yeah, I know. I'm the crazy one with all the crazy ideas."

"Yes, but Anna follows you", she said before heading downstairs. "Don't leave without saying goodbye!"

With her gone, Marvin and I continued our conversation. He didn't waste time getting to the point.

"So, Italy, huh? You're really going?"

"Not to live. We're going to get the Italian citizenship sorted, and then we plan to move to Spain."

"Spain, huh? Sounds good... but about the money you owe me."

"Right. The money..." I said, feeling guilty.

"Yeah. My money."

"Could you give me a little more time? We're selling everything, trying to save for the trip and our stay."

"Sure. We can talk in a few weeks or so. But... I might have something interesting for you. Something lucrative."

"Really? What is it?"

"You have time now? We need to go somewhere" he said, getting up from his chair.

"Yeah, I do."

I quickly apologized to my mom, took a bite of the cake she made for me and left the house with Marvin. I was curious but also skeptical. Mostly because Marvin's ideas were never strictly legal.

We took our dad's car, with Marvin driving, and I couldn't shake the feeling that he was still mad at me. It was awkward, and I tried to fill the silence with small talk. Eventually, we arrived at a rundown warehouse, far from downtown, in the countryside. The place looked like it had seen better days.

"What is this?" I asked.

"We're almost there. It's closed now, but we'll see if we can get someone's attention."

Marvin got out of the car and spoke to a worker in overalls who had appeared near the gate. After a few minutes of conversation, the worker opened the gate and let us drive in.

Inside, Marvin parked the car, and we walked into an office. To my surprise, the man who walked in a minute later was none other than Martin Lee—the mob guy, known for laundering money.

As Marvin and I stood in that dilapidated warehouse office, listening to Martin lay out his twisted philosophy, I couldn't help but feel a surge of disbelief. The audacity of this guy was mind-boggling. I had always known that the business world here wasn't clean, but Martin made it sound like a game where you either cheated or lost.

"You see, kid" Martin continued, puffing on his cigar, "in this country, if you're playing by the rules, you're playing to lose. And you... you played by the rules."

I was starting to understand where he was going with this, but I didn't want to accept it. Marvin stood by, arms crossed, as if he was hearing this for the first time too. But I knew better—he'd already bought into this corrupt ideology.

"So" Martin said, leaning back in his chair, "if you want to succeed here, you have to learn how to bend the rules. Or better yet, break 'em. That's where I come in."

He was calm, almost fatherly in the way he spoke, but his words were full of poison. He wasn't offering a solution; he was offering a ticket into the very system that had broken me down.

"I get it", I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "You've got the connections, the muscle. And if I stay in line, things might start to go my way, right?"

"Exactly" Martin said, a grin forming on his lips. "You finally get it. This could be the start of something big for you, Andy. You don't have to be stuck in this hole forever."

I glanced at Marvin, who gave me a small nod, as if to say, "This is how things work, bro. You better get on board." But I wasn't ready to cross that line.

"I appreciate the offer, Martin", I said, choosing my words carefully. "But I'm not sure this is the kind of deal I want to make."

Martin's expression hardened, the friendly façade fading quickly. He exhaled a long puff of smoke and leaned forward.

"Don't be stupid, boy" he said, his voice low and menacing. "You think you're better than this? You think playing by the rules will get you anywhere? Look where it's gotten you so far. You're broke, your employees are suing you, and your business is on the ground. I'm offering you a way out."

I didn't respond right away. My mind was racing. There was a part of me that wanted to take the deal, to finally get ahead in a system that had been rigged against me from the start. But another part of me—the part that still believed in doing things the right way—knew that if I took this path, there would be no turning back.

"You don't have to decide now", Martin said, sensing my hesitation. "Think about it. But don't take too long. Opportunities like this don't come around every day."

He stood up, signaling the end of the conversation. I nodded, thanked him for his time, and followed Marvin back to the car. The silence between us was heavy as we drove back to the city. I could tell Marvin was disappointed, but he didn't say anything.

After what felt like an eternity, I broke the silence.

"Why didn't you tell me it was Martin we were meeting?"

Marvin sighed, keeping his eyes on the road. "I knew you wouldn't come if I told you. And look, he's right, Andy. This is how things work here. You need to stop pretending like there's another way."

I shook my head, frustrated. "I get it, Marv, but I'm not ready to give up everything I believe in. I'm not like you."

"Maybe you should be", he shot back. "At least then you wouldn't be drowning in problems. At least then, you'd have a fighting chance."

I didn't respond. Marvin didn't understand, and maybe he never would. But I knew one thing: I wasn't going to let this country, this system, break me any more than it already had. I wasn't going to become another cog in the corrupt machine. I still had my dignity, even if it was all I had left.

As we pulled up to my parents' house, I thanked Marvin for the ride and got out of the car. Before he drove away, he leaned out the window.

"Think about it, Andy. You can't fight this forever."

I watched him drive off, the weight of everything sinking in. Martin's offer hung over me like a dark cloud, but deep down, I knew I couldn't take it. I had to find another way—my way. Even if it meant walking alone.

The next morning, I went for a run, trying to clear my head. The streets were quiet, the world still waking up. As I ran, I thought about Anna, the girls, and the future we were trying to build. Italy was still on the horizon, but the road there was filled with obstacles.

I wasn't going to let Martin or anyone else dictate how I lived my life. But I also knew that the fight was far from over.

I couldn't believe what had just happened. The entire drive back home, I was fuming. Marvin had set me up, and now Martin Lee, a man I owed money to, was dangling a shady deal in front of me like some kind of lifeline. But the lifeline came with chains—heavy, dangerous chains that could drag me down into something I would never escape from. My own brother, dragging me into the lion's den.

As we drove through the quiet streets, my mind raced with anger and frustration. I knew Marvin didn't understand. He thought this was just business—just survival in a corrupt system. But to me, it was a betrayal. He had pushed me toward the very thing I was trying to escape from: the dirty, underhanded world of corruption and crime.

By the time Marvin dropped me off at my apartment, I didn't even want to speak to him. Without saying a word, I got out of the car, slammed the door behind me, and walked away. My head was pounding. I needed space, time to think.

When I walked into the apartment, Anna was there, preparing food for the girls. The smell filled the air, but I didn't feel like eating. I still had the taste of Martin's cigar smoke in my mouth, and it disgusted me.

"Hey" she said, turning around to look at me. "How was it? You talked to your brother?"

I sighed, rubbing my temples. "Yeah, I did. And I wish I hadn't."

Anna immediately sensed something was wrong. She put down the kitchen towel she was holding and walked over to me.

"What happened?" she asked softly.

I looked into her eyes and felt a wave of exhaustion wash over me. I wanted to protect her from this, to shield her from all the madness, but we had never kept secrets from each other.

"Martin Lee" I said, my voice low. "Marvin took me to see him. Apparently, he's trying to collect the rent I owe. And now... he's offering me a deal."

Anna's face fell. "What kind of deal?"

I hesitated for a moment. I didn't want to worry her more than she already was, but I couldn't lie.

"A money laundering scheme. He wants me to help clean some dirty money through the restaurant, make it look legitimate. He says it'll solve all our problems—quick money, fast results."

Anna's expression changed to one of shock and anger. "Are you serious? Andy, you can't be considering this!"

"I'm not!" I said quickly, shaking my head. "I'm not considering it. I told him I needed time to think, but I'm not doing it. I just... I don't know how we're going to get out of this mess. And Marvin... he's no help. He's practically working for Martin at this point."

Anna's face softened. She could see how torn I was, how much pressure I was under. She took my hand, her touch grounding me in that moment.

"We'll figure it out", she said firmly. "We've always figured things out, no matter how bad they've gotten. We're not going down this road, Andy. We're not going to let them pull us into their world."

Her words brought a sense of calm that I desperately needed. I knew she was right. We weren't like them. We had worked hard to build something honest, even if it wasn't perfect. We couldn't throw all of that away now, no matter how tempting the offer might seem in our darkest moments.

"We'll find another way" I said, squeezing her hand. "We're leaving soon. Italy is still on the horizon. We just have to survive until then."

Anna smiled weakly, her eyes reflecting the weariness we both felt. "We'll get through this. Together."

I nodded, feeling a small spark of hope reignite in my chest. We had been through so much already—facing financial ruin, dishonest employees, a broken system. But we were still standing. And as long as we had each other, we could keep going.

That night, I stayed up late, lying awake next to Anna, my mind buzzing with everything that had happened. Martin's words played over and over in my head, but I knew they were poison. I couldn't let them sink in. I couldn't let them change who I was.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges, but I had made my decision. I wasn't going to sell my soul for a quick fix. I wasn't going to become another cog in the corrupt machine that had already chewed up so many others. We would leave this country with our heads held high, no matter how long it took.

With that resolve, I finally drifted off to sleep, knowing that the road ahead wouldn't be easy—but it was the only road I could walk.

Chapter 37

The end is here

The auction day arrived with a strange mix of anxiety and hope. Anna and I stood near the back, watching as the auctioneer started the bidding on the first few items. That was our biggest moment. We were about to sell everything we had.

The crowd was small but serious, a handful of restaurant and bar owners who recognized the opportunity to get good equipment at a fraction of the price. The auctioneer's rhythmic chant echoed through the room, and item by item, things began to sell.

It was a strange feeling, watching everything we had worked so hard for being picked apart and sold to the highest bidder. The stainless-steel countertops, the industrial-grade ovens, and the massive fridges that once represented our future, were now just inventory on the auction floor. I tried to detach myself from the emotion of it all, but every time I saw someone raise their hand to bid, a little piece of me went with it.

"Going once, going twice, sold!"

The auctioneer's voice kept the pace. Anna squeezed my hand tightly, her knuckles white from the pressure. We both knew this was the last chapter for the restaurant and for our lives in this country. The quicker we sold everything, the sooner we could move on.

"Next item up" the auctioneer said, "a professional-grade espresso machine. Starting at five hundred."

I glanced around, recognizing a couple of familiar faces in the crowd. People who had come to our restaurant, maybe even admired it at some point. Now they were here, taking what remained of it.

The espresso machine didn't get much interest. The bid stalled at six hundred, and that was it. Sold for less than half of what we had paid for it.

As the auction continued, I kept checking my phone, waiting for any updates. I had sent out messages to a couple of buyers who had shown interest in the larger items, hoping we could make a deal outside of the auction if needed. No responses yet. The auction was moving faster than I'd expected, and we hadn't even sold the most expensive items.

I stepped outside for a breather, the weight of everything pressing down on me. That's when my phone buzzed. Martin Lee. His name flashed on the screen, and for a moment, I considered ignoring it. But I knew I couldn't avoid him forever.

"Hey, Martin" I answered, trying to sound calm.

"So, how's the auction going, kid?" His voice had that familiar edge to it, casual but with an undertone that always felt like a threat.

"It's going okay", I replied. "Selling most of the smaller stuff. The bigger items are still here, though."

"Yeah, I figured as much. That's why I'm calling. I think it's time we have a little chat. Why don't you come by the club tonight?"

"Your club?" I asked, knowing full well what he meant. Captain Hook. The nightclub where anything could happen behind closed doors. It was

his turf, his playground, and an invitation there wasn't just a friendly gesture.

"Yeah, the club. Ten o'clock. Be there."

He hung up before I could respond, leaving me standing there, phone in hand, wondering what was next. I had a feeling this wasn't going to be a friendly conversation. But I couldn't afford to piss him off, not when I still owed him money. I slid my phone back into my pocket and took a deep breath.

When I went back inside, the auction was almost done. A couple of bidders were still eyeing the larger equipment, but it didn't look promising. Anna caught my eye, a question written on her face, and I gave her a reassuring nod.

"Let's see how this plays out" I whispered to myself.

That evening, after the auction, I was still buzzing with adrenaline. We had sold enough to cover some costs, but it wasn't going to be enough to pay off Martin. And now, with his invitation hanging over me, I knew I couldn't avoid the inevitable.

I took a quick shower and got dressed, leaving the house without telling Anna too much. I didn't want to worry her with the details until I knew exactly what Martin wanted. Walking through the dimly lit streets toward Captain Hook, I tried to shake off the anxiety creeping in. I was heading into the lion's den, and I had no idea what kind of offer or ultimatum would be waiting for me there.

When I arrived at the club, Tony, Martin's usual right-hand man, was stationed at the door. He gave me a grunt of acknowledgement and waved me inside. The familiar thrum of bass echoed from inside, but tonight it felt more ominous than inviting.

Martin was sitting behind his desk, puffing on a cigar like he owned the world, which in some ways he did. The office smelled faintly of smoke and leather, with dim lighting that added an ominous weight to the air. He gestured for me to sit down without even looking up, his eyes fixed on some papers in front of him.

“So, you’re selling off the last of the restaurant, huh?” he said finally, breaking the silence.

“Yeah. We sold most of the small stuff, but the big-ticket items are still there” I said cautiously, unsure where this was heading.

He leaned back in his chair, taking a long drag from his cigar, and eyed me up like he was sizing me up for something bigger. “That place of yours... used to be a real dump before you and your wife got in there” he began, almost casually.

I didn’t say anything, just nodded. He was right. Anna had worked wonders with the renovation. Before, the building was falling apart. Now, it had become one of the most talked-about spots in town—at least until the economy dragged us under.

Martin leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “You see, kid, you may not know this, but I’ve had my eye on that place for a while. Your wife did a damn fine job with the remodeling. Hell, I was impressed, and not much impresses me these days. I’ve seen my fair share of bars and restaurants come and go, but you turned that dump into something people noticed.”

I was unsure where he was leading. Martin wasn’t the kind of guy who gave out compliments unless there was something in it for him.

“Now, I know you’re in a tight spot, and you’ve been paying me late, which doesn’t make me happy. But here’s the thing—I’ve been thinking. That restaurant of yours, all that gear, it’s a good setup. If I take it off your hands, I can turn it into something else, something profitable.”

I raised an eyebrow. "You want to buy the equipment?"

"Not just the equipment" he corrected, leaning forward. "The whole setup. Tables, chairs, kitchen—everything. I can put someone else in there who knows how to run a joint without getting into trouble. You're selling at auction for peanuts, but I'm offering to take it all off your hands right now."

"But why?" I asked, still trying to wrap my head around it. "You could wait until the auction and probably get it for less."

Martin shook his head, tapping the cigar out. "I don't wait. I make moves. And that place, after what you and Anna did to it, is worth more than what you'll get in an auction. Plus, I know it's clean. That's worth a lot to me. I don't want to deal with some idiot buying it and running it into the ground. I've got plans, and I need it now."

I was stunned. I had never imagined Martin would see value in what we built, but the more he talked, the more sense it made. The place had become a neighborhood gem.

Martin leaned back again, his eyes locking with mine. "So, here's the deal. I buy everything. No haggling, no negotiations. I wipe out what you owe me, and I'll throw in extra cash for your trip.

I couldn't believe it. Martin Lee, the man who I thought would be my biggest problem, had just handed me a way out on a silver platter. He was going to buy the remaining equipment from the restaurant, wipe out my debt, and even give me extra cash for our trip to Europe. It felt surreal, almost too good to be true. But for the first time in a long while, I felt a huge weight lifting off my shoulders.

As Martin poured us both a drink, I couldn't help but replay the conversation in my head. How had things turned around so quickly? Just when I thought I was done for, a lifeline appeared—though from the most unlikely person. Maybe I was lucky after all, or maybe Martin just had more layers to him than I thought.

"To good business, kid", Martin said, raising his glass. I nodded and clinked my glass against his, sipping the strong whiskey, which burned on its way down.

"To good business" I echoed, though I knew in the back of my mind that this was no ordinary business. But I wasn't in a position to refuse. This deal was my ticket out of the mess I'd been drowning in.

"Now, about your trip", Martin began, leaning back in his chair. "You're really doing this, huh? Packing up, leaving it all behind?"

"Yeah" I said. "We're heading to Italy first to get our citizenship sorted, and then we'll go to Spain. We just need a fresh start, you know?"

He looked at me for a moment, a smirk on his face. "I told you before, kid. You'll never be one of them. You're a survivor from here. But... I respect it. You're doing what you gotta do. Just make sure you're ready for whatever Europe throws at you."

I nodded, unsure of how to respond. Martin had a point—there were no guarantees that life would be perfect in Europe. But at least it would be a chance, a fresh opportunity far from the corruption and chaos of our current life.

We drank in silence for a few moments, the noise of the band tuning their instruments in the background. I was already planning the next steps in my mind. With the extra cash from Martin, we'd be able to leave sooner. We wouldn't have to wait around, hoping for someone else to buy the remaining restaurant equipment.

After a while, I finished my drink and stood up. "I should head out. Got to tell Anna the good news."

Martin nodded. "Sure thing, kid. You let me know when you're ready for me to pick up the stuff."

I thanked him again, genuinely relieved, and left the club. As I walked out into the night, the noise of the Cumbia band starting their set faded into the distance. My heart was lighter, my steps quicker. This was it—the real beginning of our exit from this life.

I took the bus home, my mind buzzing with excitement. For the first time in months, I was actually looking forward to talking to Anna. I wanted to tell her everything—about how the auction went, how Martin's unexpected deal had come through, and how we were now even closer to leaving this town behind for good.

When I finally got home, Anna was waiting for me, sitting on the couch with a glass of wine in her hand. She looked tired, but there was a soft smile on her face.

"Hey" I said as I walked in. "I've got some good news."

Her eyes lit up. "Tell me."

"Martin's going to buy the rest of the stuff from the restaurant. We don't have to worry about the rent anymore. He's even giving us extra cash for the trip."

Anna's jaw dropped. "Wait, what? Are you serious?"

I nodded, grinning. "Yeah. I thought it was going to be a disaster, but it turned out better than I could've imagined."

Anna stood up and hugged me, a wave of relief washing over both of us. "I can't believe it" she whispered. "We're really going to do this, aren't we?"

"We are", I said, holding her close. "We're really going to leave this country."

For the first time in a long while, I felt like we were on the right path. It wouldn't be easy—nothing ever was—but we had a way out now. We had a plan, the money, and the will to see it through.

And that night, as we lay in bed, I couldn't help but think about the strange twists and turns that had brought us here. From the chaos of running a pub, a restaurant, the stress of closing both, the threats from Martin, and now, this unexpected lifeline. Life truly was a rollercoaster, just like that fortune teller had told my father all those years ago.

But for now, at least, the ride was going up. And I was ready for whatever came next.

Chapter 38

Change of plans

I was really happy. The rollercoaster seemed to be climbing up now. Even with demands from ex-employees piling up and no money left besides what we'd saved for our new life in Europe, I couldn't shake the feeling that things were finally turning around. The job with the English guys was good, but I hadn't received my paycheck yet. I still needed to wait until the end of the month.

Meanwhile, I was talking more and more with Paul. San Francisco and the prospect of owning my own company there was suddenly very real. Paul wasn't just someone with an idea, he was becoming the partner I'd always wanted to meet—smart, driven, and genuinely nice to me.

One morning, I got a message from him that would change everything.

"Hey dude. How are you this morning! I have great news for us."

I dropped everything I was doing and responded right away.

"Hey dude. Glad to hear! What is it?" I typed back, feeling the excitement build.

"Look. I've got this proposal for funding. I pitched the project to them and they went crazy for it!"

I couldn't believe it. It was perfect—too perfect, even.

"No way! Really? Excellent, dude! I'll try to put more hours into the project. I know I'm doing two or three now, but I think I can push for four..."

"No, dude. Listen. I've got something even better. I got the money to bring you here."

"To take me there? But why?" I asked, my heart racing.

"Look, we need to work side by side with these people. I talked to them, and they're willing to pay for everything!"

This was incredible, but also terrifying. How could I possibly go to Italy and San Francisco at the same time? I felt trapped by an opportunity that I couldn't afford to miss.

"Once you're here, you can stay in my place" Paul continued. "We've got a spare room. It's just me and my wife, and she's pregnant, but the baby won't come for another four months. Once you're settled, we can find you an apartment. I'm sure in a couple of weeks, you'll be living in a beautiful flat nearby. Let me send you my address..."

I had to tell Anna, but I knew this wasn't going to be easy. I couldn't miss the chance of being a partner in a tech company in San Francisco—it was a dream come true. But I needed to tread carefully. I had to present this in the right way.

I took a deep breath and went to find her.

"Anna, I have great news..."

"What is it?" she asked, sensing my excitement.

"Remember Paul, the guy from San Francisco? The one I've been working with?"

"Yes, what about him?"

"He just made me a partner in his company!" I said, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"A partner? Wow, that's amazing, babe." She smiled, but I could see the confusion settling in.

"Yeah, but there's more. We need to change our plans a little."

"What do you mean?" She was no longer smiling.

"I'll have to go to San Francisco. I can't go to Italy right now."

"What?" she blinked, taken aback. I could feel the tension rising.

"Look, it's a huge opportunity", I explained quickly. "Paul has the funding, the company will pay for everything—rent, a new computer, all the expenses. It's the big break I've been waiting for."

Anna was stunned, trying to process everything. I knew she wasn't prepared for this curveball. She had been so focused on Europe, and now I was throwing the USA into the mix.

"Okay... yes, it sounds like a great opportunity" she said slowly, but I could hear the worry in her voice.

I rushed to reassure her. "We'll split the money so you and the girls have more than enough for the four months in Italy. I don't think the process will take that long, and once you're done, you can fly to San Francisco and we'll be together again."

"So, no Spain then? What about our European citizenship? What's the point of all this?"

"What do you mean? We're still going to get the Italian passports" I said, trying to keep up. "It's much better to enter the USA as Europeans. It'll make things so much easier, and I'll have a green card through the business."

She shook her head. "I just don't understand... We've been planning this move for months. Now, you're saying we're switching to the US? What if things don't work out there?"

I sighed, knowing she was right to be concerned. "It's a risk, I know. But it's a calculated one. Paul believes in this project, and I trust him. We can still go to Italy first, get the citizenship, and then move to the US. We'll have options, Anna. And options are what we need right now."

Anna sat there quietly, processing everything. I could see the wheels turning in her head. She wasn't just thinking about the logistics—she was thinking about our family, our future, and the uncertainty of leaving one plan for another. But I could tell she wasn't going to stand in my way. She trusted me, even if she didn't fully understand the decision.

Finally, she spoke, her voice calm but steady. "Okay, Andy. Let's do it. We'll make it work."

The U.S. embassy building loomed before me like a monster, its cold, towering walls casting a shadow over the sea of anxious faces waiting to be called. It was massive, intimidating, and felt as though it could devour me whole along with the hundreds of others who had gathered there, hopeful for their chance to cross its gates and enter the land of dreams—America. But I knew that getting a U.S. visa, especially as someone from my country, was nothing short of a lottery.

People talked about the visa process like it was an urban legend, filled with unpredictability. You might hear of a kid being granted a visa for a Disney trip while the father, with the same documents, was denied. There were endless stories—some got lucky, while others, despite having no reason for rejection, were turned away without explanation. My chances were no better, and I knew it.

I had been tipped off by my brother Marvin about a trick that supposedly worked wonders: applying for a visa as if I was planning a vacation to Miami or DisneyWorld. Apparently, it was something that the embassy loved. Showing that you were going for fun, spending money, and planning to return to your country almost guaranteed a visa. I was skeptical, but I needed to get into the U.S. for my big opportunity with Paul. I was willing to try anything.

After some research and several recommendations, I went ahead and bought a complete Disney package—plane tickets, hotel reservations, and even a few tickets to the parks. I spent a small fortune, a sum that made me wince as I swiped my card, but it felt like a necessary evil.

"Better spend now than miss the chance later" I told myself. If there was any chance of making a good impression at the embassy, this was it.

But that wasn't all. Applying for the U.S. visa was expensive by itself. The embassy charged over \$100 US Dollars, non-refundable, whether you were approved or denied. I knew the risk, yes: I could walk out with nothing except a lighter wallet. I remembered the sting from the last time I had tried applying for a visa, back when I was living in Mexico. I was rejected, no real explanation given, just a simple "No." This time, though, I left that part out of the form I was submitting. I figured, if they didn't ask directly, why offer information that could work against me? Hopefully, they wouldn't go digging that far into my past.

The process was intense. Travel agents were involved, helping me arrange everything for the so-called "Disney trip" and I made sure the fake vacation looked as real as possible. There were calls, emails, payments, confirmations—it felt like a project in itself. Two weeks of constant sweat, anxiety, and careful planning followed. Every day, I woke up thinking about the visa, waiting for that embassy appointment, praying that I wouldn't blow my only shot.

Finally, the day of my appointment arrived. As I stepped into the embassy, I looked around at the nervous faces. I knew they were all thinking the same thing: "Will they let me in?" It was a gamble, and everyone there had a lot riding on the outcome.

When my number was called, my heart pounded in my chest. I stepped forward, handed over the documents, and put on my best "tourist face." I spoke confidently about my "upcoming Disney vacation" keeping the story consistent. The interview was brief, with the consulate officer asking a few routine questions. I answered as calmly as I could, even though sweat was forming on my back.

A few tense moments passed before the officer nodded, stamped something on the paper, and told me the result would be mailed to my

address soon. I left the building not knowing how to feel. Was that good news? Was it bad for my future? Only time would tell.

When the envelope finally arrived in the mail a week later, with my visa finally approved and ready to use, I jumped around the room, my heart was soaring with joy. I had done it. After weeks of stress, uncertainty, and mountains of paperwork, I had the visa in my hands.

I knew I had spent a fortune on a trip to DisneyWorld that I would never actually take. But to me, that stamped visa was priceless. It meant my dreams of heading to San Francisco and starting a new life were within reach. It had all been worth it.

Chapter 39

Now, we need tickets to Europe

After the visa and the fake tickets to DisneyWorld, we were very tight on money. The only money left to pay for the plane tickets was the money we made selling the car. The best places to buy them were the online travel websites. But to do that, we needed a credit card. Ours had been canceled because we owed a lot of money to the bank.

They were trying to chase us down, but we didn't have anything left in our name they could seize to settle the debts. And we were about to leave the country, so I didn't feel too bad about it. That's just how business works sometimes. I'm a man with principles, but I'm not stupid.

We weren't alone in this. That year, banks recorded the highest unpaid loans in the country's history.

Thankfully, Anna's sister let us use her credit card to pay for the plane tickets, and we gave her the cash in return.

"We have the tickets!" I said, relief in my voice as soon as the online transaction was approved. It was real. We were one step away from changing our lives forever.

"It's so exciting!" Anna said, her happiness clear. "We're going to Italy! Well, not you... Oh, Andy, babe, I'm going to miss you so much." She kissed me gently.

"Yeah, me too, honey. But this is the best thing for our future, for the girls. These tickets aren't just for a flight. They're our way to a better life."

"Yes. I know. It's impossible to live here."

We sat together in the living room, reminiscing about everything we had been through. I started as a freelance developer, then we had our first daughter, and suddenly, life got more complicated. Once you become a father, time splits in half, and so does the responsibility. You need steady income, money for all the new expenses that come with having kids.

Then we had another daughter. Life became even tougher. We jumped into the adventure of running our own business, and eventually two businesses.

But we ended up drowning in debt, unable to pay what we owed—not because we were irresponsible, but because of the government. These corrupt idiots couldn't stop stealing and ruining everything for everyone else. It's not just here, either. Go to any country like this one and you'll find the same rotten situation, the same incompetence.

But all of that was behind us now. We had what we needed to escape and start over. We hoped we'd never have to come back.

"And your ticket to San Francisco, Andy?" Anna asked. "When are you going to buy it?"

"I did it already. To DisneyWorld. I can move destinations easily now that I have the visa and all."

"Where are you staying until your trip? We'll be leaving this apartment soon."

"I was thinking about my parents."

“Are you sure?” she asked, knowing how strained things were sometimes between my family and me.

“I don’t have much choice.”

“You can stay with my dad and sister if you want.”

“You know how my mom is. She’d kill me if I didn’t stay with them.”

Anna nodded. “Okay, sure. Do what you think is best. But just remember, my family would love to have you.”

We had sold everything in the apartment. Whatever little we had left—mostly papers and some magazines—we stashed at Lucho’s house.

“Did you know Paola might be moving in here?” Anna asked.

“Paola, our friend?”

“Yeah, she loved this apartment. She asked the owner if it would be available after we leave, and he said yes. They’re even going to fix the water problem in the studio.”

“They’re going to fix that now? We asked the guy to fix it all this time... What a jerk”

We both laughed at the absurdity of it.

As we prepared to leave, I couldn’t help but reflect on everything we were leaving behind—memories, stories, family gatherings. It’s never easy to leave. No one wants to walk away from their country, their past, their home. It’s impossible to let go completely. What we want is to live with the people we love, with our families. But when the system fails you, when your government breaks its part of the deal, you’re left with no choice.

Our society is strange when you really think about it. I imagine the early days of civilization were something like this:

“Very well, citizens. You were born here, so from now on, your duty is to work, to make money, and to pay us.”

“And why should I pay you?” you might ask.

“Well, dear citizen, in return for your money, we’ll provide you a place to live, food to eat, security, and health care.”

But somewhere along the line, one part of the deal fell apart. We don’t all have homes. Families even build houses on stolen land with stolen materials. There’s hunger everywhere, despite the promises. Security? People die in the streets from robberies. Health care? Don’t even get me started.

Yet, despite all this, the system stops you from escaping. The borders, the bureaucracy, the obstacles—they’re there to keep us trapped.

In a few words: we are prisoners in our own countries, living under a deal they broke long ago.

Chapter 40

See you later

The day we had been anticipating finally arrived: departure day. Anna, Flor, and the girls were all packed and ready. The house felt heavy with emotion, and soon, we were all in tears. On one side, we were excited for what lay ahead, but on the other, we were weighed down by sadness. You imagine you'll be strong when the moment comes, that you'll hold it together. But when reality hits, all that imagined strength crumbles.

A couple of nights before, we had thrown a goodbye party. Everyone was invited, and the atmosphere was both amazing and heart-wrenching. It was a night filled with laughter and sadness, the bittersweet feeling of closing a chapter. We took tons of pictures that I know I'll hardly ever look at again. Not because they weren't good, but because of the overwhelming nostalgia they'd stir up. Photos of the past do that to me—they instantly flood my mind with beautiful memories, and it's hard to hold back the tears.

That night, we saved in our minds the last looks exchanged with the people we love. And an unsettling feeling settled in, a weird sense that this might be the last time we'd see some of our closest friends.

As I watched the plane take off, carrying the three most important people in my life, it hit me like a tidal wave. I had shared every single day with them for years, and now they were gone. I knew how much they meant to me, but that moment brought a new level of awareness. The saying "You

don't really know how much you love someone until you lose them" echoed in my mind. It's a phrase often used when someone dies, but that day, I understood the depth of its meaning in a different way.

No one was dying, but it sure felt like a part of me was. If I could, I would've chased after that plane, caught up to it, and taken them all back with me. But I couldn't. That wasn't the plan. This was our path now.

Reality was sinking in: my new destination wasn't Italy with my family—it was back to my father's house, where my dad, mom, and brother still lived on the second floor. I had been moving toward my dreams, but in the meantime, I was heading into a temporary pause. I just wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. I knew I'd need all the patience in the world to make it through until it was time for me to head to San Francisco and follow my dreams.

It's been 20 years since I left my father's house to live on my own. It feels like it was just yesterday. Incredible how time flies. So many things have happened since then, and none of us are the same people we were. People often say that we don't really change, but I think that's far from true.

In my case, returning to my parents' house isn't like those movies where the main character walks back into their childhood home, where everything is still the same— the old bed, the familiar toys, the same wallpaper from when they were kids. No, in my case, it's nothing like that. My parents moved around a lot, from house to house. Just like me. I can't stay in one place for too long either.

“Hey Dad. How are you?” “Oh, hello, kid. Did everything go okay? Anna and the girls, they left for Italy?” “Yeah, yeah. All good. All went well. And Mom?” “She’s at the Church, you know. But she said you can make yourself at home. Come on, let me show you what we prepared for you.”

They're good people. Of course, they love me, and I love them back. There's no doubt about that. Their intentions are always good, but sometimes those good intentions clash with what I want for myself. That's when the friction starts.

They had a spare room for me, in this new apartment they were renting. It was a cozy place, close to the center of town. Once I settled in, I found myself staying inside all day. I didn't want to go out. Instead, I spent my days coding, working on the project with Paul. I had already quit my job with the English guys. They were kind enough to pay me for the work I

had done that month, and I told them I was moving on to another project in another city. It wasn't easy to walk away—I'd put in a lot of effort to get that job, and they'd treated me well. But business is business. Just as I was saying goodbye to them now, they would've done the same to me if I had stopped being useful.

Despite everything, I had some really nice moments with my parents. We'd have lunch and dinner together, then sit and watch TV at night before heading to bed. It felt like being a kid again, back in their protective bubble. I'd lie in bed at night, thinking about how comforting it was. A part of me wondered if I had ever really wanted to leave at all. Who truly wants to leave the comfort of their parents' home? All those good memories, the safety, the warmth—it was all still there with them.

Yes, I might still be mad about certain things. They weren't perfect parents. But they're my parents, the most important people in my life. And being with them now, after everything, made me realize how much that really meant.

One month passed, and I was still coding night and day like a madman. My project with Paul had become my entire world. Every waking hour was spent trying to make it perfect. Meanwhile, Anna and the girls were more than fine. In fact, they were thriving. It was like a long vacation for them in Italy, and they needed that break, especially Anna. She had gone through so much, and seeing them enjoying the beach every day brought me immense joy.

Of course, I needed a vacation too, but I was okay waiting for it. I've always been the one chasing after things, making sacrifices. Anna, on the other hand, is the one who follows me out of love, trusting in my decisions. So, knowing they were safe and happy was enough for me. For now, I was content to wait and keep pushing forward.

The paperwork for their Italian citizenship was progressing smoothly. Italy may not be the ideal place for everyone, but it's a thousand times better than my country. Anna told me how secure she felt there. The first time she walked through a dark alley, she hesitated. But then she remembered—this wasn't our country. It wasn't the same danger lurking around every corner. She relaxed and kept going, feeling fine.

Back home you avoid dark places. You avoid any area you're unfamiliar with. The fear never leaves. Even parking your car inside your own house is dangerous. You open the garage, and that's when they strike. Once they're inside, they take everything. Nobody ever gets arrested. You're lucky if everyone in your family survives the ordeal. It's a completely different world.

Two months passed, and my family kept asking when I was finally leaving for San Francisco. I didn't know what to say other than, "I just have to be patient." In the US, things move differently.

"They take their time to do everything" I would explain. "They don't live with the same pressures we do here. Our inflation is out of control. We have to act now before prices skyrocket again tomorrow. But over there, everything stays the same. They don't need to rush because their world is stable."

I kept repeating those reasons to everyone. Were they valid? Or were they just excuses I invented to keep myself from losing my mind?

I remember that Saturday perfectly because it was the day I received the news I had been waiting for. After two months (which felt like two years), Paul finally connected to the chat.

"Hey, dude. Morning!"

"Hi, Paul. How's everything?"

"More than good, dude. Look, I had a call from the investors. They think you're already here."

"Okay... So?"

"They want us for a meeting."

"A meeting there?"

"Yeah. I know it's a drag, but how can we get you here ASAP?"

What? How could this be happening? I hate last-minute moves. I always say things done quickly tend to go badly. But what the hell—quick was my normal back then.

"I don't know", I said, scrambling for a plan. "I have a ticket to DisneyWorld I was thinking of changing, but... I don't know if that will work for such short notice. Maybe I'll just buy a new one online."

"Sure, dude. Let me know the site so I can pay for it."

"Okay, I'll get on it."

I started searching for options to change my Disney ticket for the next day. It was already Saturday, which meant I needed to leave by Sunday, fly 12 hours, and land in time for a meeting on Tuesday, pretending I had been in San Francisco all along. A completely insane plan.

I didn't have time to tell Anna or my parents. My focus was on securing a flight using Susan's credit card. But it wasn't possible. The system wouldn't let me change my ticket on such short notice. Airlines needed at least three days' notice.

What should I do now? This was my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. After selling everything and waiting at my parents' house for two long months, was I going to lose it because of airline policies?

I grabbed all my cash—everything I had saved for my stay in San Francisco until my first paycheck—and shoved it into my secure wallet. I had to solve this.

My dad was in the living room, watching some action movie he loves so much and my mom hates.

"Dad, great news, but I've got a problem."

"What is it?"

"They need me in San Francisco by Monday. The time has finally come." I said, hastily throwing on my jacket.

"By Monday!?"

"Yeah, but I can't change my tickets online. It's too soon. I don't have access to any credit cards. Any ideas? I'm heading to the travel agencies nearby."

"Well, there are a couple close by. Don't forget the one two blocks down."

"Thanks dad. See you soon."

The first agency I went to was tiny, with just two people inside. I explained my situation, sat down, and tried to keep calm as they started searching. "Oh dear God, they're so slow" I thought. This was probably the highlight of their day. I couldn't rush them, but I was burning with anxiety.

Tourism was dead in my country at the time. The only people traveling were businessmen and wealthy retirees. Everyone else booked online, which meant agencies like this one were struggling. When the agent finally found a ticket, the price was outrageous—twice the online price. No way. I politely declined and left, heading to the second option.

I was more desperate now. "Am I going to be stuck here forever?" I thought. "Do I go back to following the original plan to Italy?" I felt like I was losing control, and I hated it.

The second agency was bigger and more organized, but still eerily empty.

"Good morning. How can I help you today?"

"I need a plane ticket to San Francisco for tomorrow" I blurted out, wasting no time.

"Let me check the system."

It felt like an eternity as he clicked away. When he finally found a ticket, it was the same price as the last place. "Shit." I was ready to pay, but before doing so, I had to ask:

"Why are tickets so expensive here? Online they're half the price."

"Ah, that's because we have to pay local business taxes."

Of course, I thought. Local businesses were drowning in taxes. I felt a pang of sympathy for the agency owner. I'd been in their shoes before.

"That's insane."

"Yeah, it is. Politicians assume anyone flying abroad can afford to be bled dry. They even invented a global warming tax for flights."

"Global warming?"

"Yeah. They claim airplane fuel pollutes, so they tax the hell out of it."

"We have money to spend, but not to give away."

The agent leaned in and whispered, "Between us, they think we're idiots."

I must have made a face or moved my hand toward my wallet because the agent suddenly asked:

"Wait. Do I know you from somewhere?"

"I don't think so."

"Were you the owner of that pub?"

"Yeah, actually."

"I knew it! I was there every weekend! I loved that place. Why'd you close?"

"This country happened."

"Yeah, I get it. It sucks." He paused, then added, "I think I can help you. Be right back."

Things were finally looking up. A girl offered me coffee, and I gladly accepted. I was in desperate need of caffeine.

The agent returned after a few minutes and said, "Sir". I interrupted saying "Please call me Andy"

"Of course, Andy. Please follow me."

He led me through a heavy, buzzer-locked door and down a corridor lined with small offices where people were making calls. It felt like a low-key trading floor.

We reached a larger office at the end of the hall. Inside was a man in his forties sitting in a luxurious chair. "Andy, meet John, the director of the agency."

"Nice to meet you, Andy", John said. "I was also a big fan of your pub. Shame it closed."

Apparently, everyone in this office had been a regular.

"Thanks. I appreciate that. Unfortunately, it wasn't my choice to close. But now, I just need a good price for a ticket to San Francisco."

"Oh, we can help with that. You gave us a great time with your pub, so let us return the favor."

"I'm listening."

"Here's the deal. This place costs a fortune to run. If we relied solely on selling vacation packages to a few retirees, we'd be bankrupt in six months. So, we've got a little side business."

He leaned in, lowering his voice.

"In this country, you can't survive with a purely legal business. We sell tickets under the table—no taxes, no invoices. Cash only."

This felt like *déjà vu*. I'd already heard something similar from Martin Lee. Was this true, or just a shared delusion?

John turned his screen toward me. "Here's the price with taxes."

"Okay."

"Now, without taxes."

The difference was staggering. The taxes nearly doubled the ticket price.

"And what do they do with all that tax money?" John scoffed. "Do you think it goes back to the people? No, it lines the pockets of corrupt politicians and the lazy."

John was seething. I got it. I felt the same way, but I wasn't about to get into a rant about it.

"Fine. Let's do this." I just wanted to get it over with.

"You've got cash, right?"

"Yeah."

"American dollars, not local currency. We don't take that here."

"Got it."

I waited for an hour. Even in the underground world of tax-free tickets, bureaucracy still found a way to drag things out. There were no guarantees, of course. The ticket could fall through, but at that point, I didn't care. It couldn't get any worse.

Finally, I had the ticket in hand. I thanked everyone at the agency and headed back to my dad's place, sharing the good news with him and the rest of the family. I called Anna to fill her in, too.

That was it for me in my hometown. I had tried to build a future there and failed. I gave everything, and they gave me nothing in return. They drained my pockets and left me buried in debt.

That night, as I lay in bed for the last time in my father's house, I wondered: Am I doing the right thing?

I always considered myself confident and fearless, but I knew I had moments of doubt. Would I make it? What adventures lay ahead?

Only time would tell.

Chapter 41

Meeting Paul in person

Oh dear, it had been a while since I'd taken an international flight. Most of the process was still the same. I was expecting more advanced technology or new procedures, but everything seemed unchanged. Even the flight attendants doing their safety dance alongside the video on the screen—always something amusing to watch—was exactly as I remembered.

Saying goodbye to my parents that morning was harder than I expected. My mom had been holding back tears all week, trying to stay strong for me, but I could see them welling up in her eyes. She held on until the very last moment, but as soon as she wrapped me in that final hug, the tears came. She tried to hide her face, but I could feel her shoulders shaking. My dad, quieter as always, gave me a firm handshake, his way of saying everything he couldn't put into words.

It was a tough moment, no doubt, but it was also full of excitement. As I boarded the bus, I realized this was the beginning of something huge, something we had all worked toward. Still, there was this nagging feeling of how unfair life can be. Families are meant to stay together, not live half a world apart. I felt that deeply as the bus pulled away.

The commute to the airport was long—six hours through winding roads and small towns before finally reaching the city. I spent most of the ride trying to sleep, dozing off with my head resting against the cold window.

It wasn't exactly comfortable, but I welcomed the quiet. It gave me time to think about what was coming next and reflect on what I was leaving behind.

By the time we reached the airport, the exhaustion hadn't hit me yet. If anything, the adrenaline kept me going. It was a six-hour bus ride, followed by a long-haul flight, but I didn't mind. I was moving forward, leaving behind the struggles, the failed businesses, and the mounting debts.

This was the beginning of a new chapter.

I browsed through the in-flight entertainment, those little screens in front of your seat. None of the movies caught my attention, so I switched my focus to the people around me. Most of them were from my country—I could tell by their accents. For fun, I started guessing their destinations and trying to figure out their social or economic situations.

It was strange. Here I was, sitting on a plane full of people from a country drowning in economic crisis, where everyone constantly complained about having no money. Yet, where were all these people going? Were they escaping, like me? Or was I surrounded by rich tourists? The thought made me feel insecure, like maybe I was the only one who had to close his business?

The flight took hours, but it felt like minutes. As we began our descent, I looked out the window for my first glimpse of San Francisco, the city I had longed to visit—and now, where I would be living. Funny how life works: one day you're dreaming about a place, and the next, it's your reality.

From the plane, I saw a vast stretch of water, and then, the iconic Golden Gate Bridge came into view, linking the city to the mountains. In the distance, I spotted the Oakland Bay Bridge, next to the towering buildings of downtown, connecting the city to Yerba Buena Island and

Treasure Island. San Francisco was huge, much bigger than I had imagined. From above, it was a sea of houses, and I could already feel the thrill of being part of it, even before I landed.

Customs and immigration in the U.S. are always a hassle. I was nervous they wouldn't let me in, but thankfully, everything went smoothly. I collected my medium-sized suitcase and backpack, feeling a bit like a nomad with my whole life packed into these two bags. My mom had helped me pack, as moms do, managing to fit more clothes into that suitcase than I thought possible. I had t-shirts, underwear, socks, a suit, two pairs of shoes, and a couple of shirts. I planned to buy sneakers when I arrived since I had thrown out my old pair before leaving.

As I made my way to the exit, I was struck by a sense of calm and security that I hadn't felt in a long time. Sure, the U.S. isn't perfect, but compared to my country, it felt like paradise. The first thing I did was text Paul.

"Hey dude, I'm here. Just landed. Are you coming to pick me up?"

It took him a couple of minutes to reply:

"Hey dude, great to hear! We've got everything set for you here. Can you wait at the airport for a bit? I'm about 20 minutes away, but I need to wrap up something first. I'll be there in about an hour."

His response felt oddly cold. I knew people from the U.S. were more reserved than we Latinos, who are all about hugs and kisses, but still, I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed.

I didn't mind, though. I wanted to explore the city, and I wasn't in a rush.

"No worries, dude" I texted back. "I can head to your place on my own. I'd like to see the city a bit."

"Really? You sure?"

"Yeah, just send me your address."

"Okay, cool. You can take the BART—it's our metro system."

"BART? What's that?"

"Bay Area Rapid Transit. It's a train that'll take you into the city quickly."

"Got it. No worries, I'll figure it out."

"Alright, buddy. Don't worry. You'll have plenty of time to explore the city—and the country!"

Paul lived in a neighborhood called Cole Valley. A very charming area, full of those iconic wooden-style houses you see in the movies, with hilly streets that go up and down like a rollercoaster. From the ground, the city felt even more magical than it had from the air. You could look up and see rows of houses stacked along the hills, all with their own character.

Cole Valley had everything—universities, hospitals, schools, and a sense of community. I quickly learned it was also home to some amazing coffee shops, like "Zazie" which had a nice patio in the back where people gathered on weekends. Other places I fell in love with were "Reverie" and "La Boulange de Cole." The neighborhood had a mix of intellectual vibrancy and laid-back charm that instantly won me over.

The weather here was unique. Unlike the rest of sunny California, San Francisco was often cloaked in fog because of its proximity to the water. It could be chilly and damp one minute, then warm and clear the next, depending on where you were. But for someone coming from the oppressive humidity, even the fog felt like a refreshing break.

One place I was particularly eager to visit was Silicon Valley, located in the southern part of the San Francisco Bay Area. It's home to the tech giants—Apple, HP, Intel, Oracle, Cisco, and more. Although it was a bit far from Paul's neighborhood, I had plans to see it. I was eager to see where the future of technology was being shaped.

I remember Paul asking me once, "Do you know what they called Silicon Valley before it got its name?"

“No”, I answered.

“The Valley of Death.”

“Why?” I asked, surprised.

“People were afraid personal computers would take away their jobs.”

That made me think about how things change. People once feared the very technology that’s now everything for the world.

I remember I was always walking and snapping pictures of the city. The architecture here is what I love most—not because it’s complex or modern—most of the houses are in the classic Victorian style—but because it reminds me of all the movies my family and I used to watch when I was a kid. There’s something nostalgic about it, like bringing back those small, beautiful moments from my past life.

The first thing I always notice in a new place is the smell. Every city, every neighborhood has its own distinct scent, and my brain instantly registers it, like an alert: “Hey, this place is new for you.” But that feeling fades quickly. Eventually, those unfamiliar smells become part of you, and that’s when you know you can call a place “home.”

I realized it was too far to walk to Paul’s house. Twenty minutes by car translated to about five hours on foot, so I checked the local transportation options and found my way. After nearly an hour on public transport, I finally arrived at Paul’s place.

After a while, I figured out the BART system. It was nothing too complex, and after getting on the train, I enjoyed the ride into the city. I felt a surge of excitement as I saw the vibrant neighborhoods zip by. This was it—the start of a new chapter, one I had been waiting for.

I arrived in Cole Valley in no time, and as I walked through the charming streets to Paul’s place, I couldn’t stop smiling. The houses, the hills, the quiet energy—it all felt surreal. I texted Paul to let him know I was close, and he buzzed me in when I reached his door.

Paul's house was just as I imagined—spacious, modern, and brimming with energy. He greeted me with a handshake, looking genuinely pleased to see me.

“Welcome, buddy! Glad you made it. Come on in, let’s get you settled.”

I finally felt the weight of the journey lifting off my shoulders. After months of preparation, stress, and uncertainty, I had made it. I was in San Francisco, ready to start a new life, with opportunities ahead that I couldn’t have dreamed of just a few years ago.

The future felt wide open, and I was ready for whatever came next.

Paul looked different from what I had imagined. On his social media profiles, he had a thick beard, but in person, he was clean-shaven and bald—he looked almost like a different guy. Now that I think about it, it was a pretty wild move to come all the way here and live with someone whose face I hadn't even properly seen before.

"Come in, dude. Make yourself at home" Paul said, grabbing my suitcase and backpack to take them upstairs to what would be my room. The house was really nice. Honestly, I thought it would be bigger, given the money Paul made from selling his company, but even here, in San Francisco, space doesn't come cheap.

"This is Kim, my wife" Paul introduced me to a smiling woman standing by the kitchen.

"Very nice to meet you, Andy", Kim said warmly. She seemed just as friendly and welcoming as Paul.

Paul and Kim were in their late-thirties. Kim worked as a teacher at a nearby school, while Paul stayed home, always scheming and planning his next big venture. The atmosphere was relaxed, almost too perfect. It was more than I had expected.

Later that night, after a vegetarian meal and a long, engaging conversation, I finally went to my room. I lay down on the bed, feeling like I had landed in a dream. This was my first sleep in a new country, a new home, a new life. I was amazed at how right everything felt. I told myself I'd do whatever it took to keep it that way.

Chapter 42

New App

My life at Paul's house was all about coding, day in and day out. In the beginning, we had several meetings, so I got the chance to explore different parts of the city. Meanwhile, Anna and the girls were doing great in Italy, enjoying their vacation on the beach. As for me, I had to be careful with my money until we got the funding, but that was okay. Paul never let me spend a dime on food, and he made sure everything was covered. He even lent me his phone and bought a new one for himself, so I had a local number. I immediately shared my new U.S. number with my family and close friends.

For the first few months, I was tempted to go online and read the news about my country, but everything I saw was bad news, so I eventually stopped. I just didn't care anymore.

About two weeks into my stay, Paul came to me with some news.

"Hey, dude. I need to ask you a favor..."

"Sure, Paul. What is it?"

"Well, my parents are coming to town. They want to see how Kim's doing with the baby and all that. It's been a while since their last visit."

“That’s nice” I said, not yet realizing what he was getting at—until it hit me. “Oh! So, they’ll stay here, right? In the room I’m using?”

“Yeah” Paul said apologetically. “They always stay here when they visit. I’m really sorry, dude. But hey, I found some Airbnb options. We can check them out, yeah?”

So we browsed through some apartments in the area. I picked one, paid for it, and went off to live my first weekend alone in the city. It struck me as odd that I had to cover the cost myself, considering I’d been clear with Paul that money was tight and I wasn’t bringing in any real income yet. It surprised me, but I let it go. I was motivated, and the excitement of a new beginning kept me moving forward.

For the next three days, I had the chance to be by myself. While living with Paul and Kim was fine, there’s nothing quite like having your own space. I forgot the money thing for a while.

I called Anna for the first time that day. I missed them more than I thought I would.

“Hi, honey. How are you today?” I asked, eager to hear her voice.

“Hi, babe. I’m so happy we can talk! Listen, what’s this about you renting an Airbnb?”

“Yeah, Paul’s parents are visiting this weekend, so I had to vacate my room.”

“Oh, I see”, she said. “So, tell me some good news.”

“Well, here in Cagliari, everything is amazing. The beaches are gorgeous. You have to come here!” she said, her voice bubbling with excitement.

“And how are the girls?” I asked.

“They’re loving it. Lara sometimes misses her friends from school, but it’s nothing serious. She’ll be a bit sad for an hour and then finds something fun to do and forgets about it.”

“Good, that’s great. Just make sure they’re enjoying every moment.”

“Don’t worry, they’re living like queens here. But hey, remember Paola, our friend?”

“Of course. What’s up?”

“Well, she rented our old apartment and they are already living there now. Of course the landlord fixed the water issue in the studio”

I groaned. “Of course, they fix it now. Sons of bitches.”

“But there’s more. Paola says she’s been getting a lot of letters for us—from our ex-employees. Legal notices. Even the police showed up, Andy! Can you believe that?”

“What?” I was shocked.

Anna was understandably upset, and I was starting to feel the pressure again. Hearing that the police were involved was a blow, but we had to stay calm.

“Listen” I said, trying to sound reassuring. “Tell Paola to go to the council and explain that she’s living there now. She needs to make it clear that we’ve moved out. Legally, everything will fizzle out after two years.”

That call ruined my weekend. The bitterness in my mouth lingered, but I knew I had to shake it off. Something fun and spontaneous would help—maybe walking around or checking out something local, like the cable cars.

The cable cars! I'd always wanted to ride one ever since I saw them in movies as a kid. These iconic cars have been running since 1873, and I had to experience them for myself.

I grabbed seven dollars—way too expensive in my opinion—and hopped on at Powell Street. The bell rang, signaling the start of the trip. It was a bright, sunny day. With half my body hanging outside the cable car, I could see tourists snapping photos of the shops and buildings around us.

I didn't have a destination in mind. I just wanted to get lost in the city and let it surprise me.

We slowly made our way north on Powell Street. Cable cars aren't fast—they max out at about 10 miles per hour and stop at nearly every block. It was a leisurely ride, definitely not something you'd want to take if you were running late for a meeting.

We passed Union Square, an open space surrounded by buildings, bustling with tourists. The weather was perfect, even with a touch of the city's signature fog.

As we climbed Nob Hill, I watched people struggle with their luggage, trying to make it up the steep sidewalks to their hotels. Cyclists had to get off and walk their bikes because the hill was just too tough to ride.

The crowd on the cable car was festive. Everyone was either taking pictures or recording the ride with their phones. Laughter and excitement filled the air—it was contagious. To my right, I could see the financial district, a collection of modern skyscrapers, standing in contrast to the older, more charming parts of the city.

As we descended, the ocean suddenly came into view between the buildings. It was stunning—just a perfect glimpse of the blue water at the horizon.

I got off at Beach Street, where the real fun began. I wandered around for about an hour before making my way back. The ride may have been slow, but the experience was unforgettable.

Paul's parents returned home after three days. I had enjoyed myself, and now I was back at the house, settling into the same routine—coding all day and making steady progress. Two months had passed with pretty much nothing new happening, but I was happy. Doing what I love, working hard and making honest decisions, kept me motivated.

One morning, as I was grabbing coffee, I casually asked, "Hey, Paul. Any news from the investors?"

He seemed a bit distracted but responded, "The investors? Oh, no, dude. Not yet."

I nodded, but I needed to ask something else that had been on my mind. "You know, Anna and the girls are coming soon, so I was thinking about getting an apartment?"

Paul perked up. "Sure, dude! The gang is finally coming, huh? Exciting times!"

We started browsing for apartments online, with me still holding a tourist visa. I had six months left before I would technically become an illegal alien, and the last thing I wanted was to run into visa issues. The US is strict about that, and I wasn't going to risk deportation or getting banned from re-entering for years. I wanted to make sure I had my status sorted before Anna and the girls arrived.

On the way to one of the places we had found online, I decided to bring up something else. "Hey, dude. There's something else I wanted to talk about."

"Sure, buddy. What is it?" Paul replied.

"I've got six months here as a tourist, but what about getting a green card through this company we've created? Can we work on that?" I asked, trying to keep things light, though I was really anxious about it.

"Yeah, I see... It's possible to do that" Paul said. "I need to get the company on the list of businesses offering sponsorships. Let me take care of that, buddy."

"Okay, fantastic", I said, relieved. "I can cover the expenses for it, of course."

"Sure, dude. Don't worry. We've got time. I'll get that sorted."

Paul was always so laid back, which was both comforting and frustrating. He was so calm, it was as if he didn't grasp how crucial this was for me. Meanwhile, I was trying to find the balance between sounding desperate and trusting that everything would work out.

We started visiting some apartments, and man, the houses in this area were gorgeous—though that might've just been my awe at everything being new. For Paul, it was everyday stuff, but I was constantly impressed by the Victorian-style architecture. The first apartment we saw was too small. That's one thing about San Francisco: it's compact. The lack of land means everything is tiny and expensive.

After seeing a few places, I ended up renting from a guy named Tas. He used to be a contractor and had now shifted to real estate. He seemed cool. I paid for the first month and the security deposit, and we put the lease under Paul's name. Tas had originally wanted a six-month deposit, but Paul worked some of his sales magic, talking him down to a more

manageable deal. I didn't have the cash, and honestly, Paul's recommendation letter probably saved me.

"Looks nice, right, dude?" Paul asked, brimming with excitement as usual.

The place wasn't bad, but it wasn't great either. It was small, with a cramped living room that led straight into a tiny dining area, followed by the kitchen at the back. The strangest part was the bathroom being right next to the kitchen. Who designs these things?

Upstairs were two small bedrooms. One for Anna and me, and the other for the girls. It wasn't my dream home, but it would do.

"Yeah... well, I guess this will do the job" I said, trying to stay optimistic.

"You'll see, dude" Paul said, picking up on my less-than-thrilled tone. He clapped me on the back like a good friend. "Once we finish the app, the funding will come, and you can get a much bigger place. Trust me on that."

I tried to believe him. As I snapped some photos of the apartment to send to Anna, I couldn't help but think of all the other places we'd visited, wondering if they were all like this or if I'd somehow chosen the worst one. But I wanted to put on a brave face for my family. I edited the photos to make the place look as cozy as possible before sending them off. I wanted Anna and the girls to know that I was happy, that I was building something for us here.

I was motivated, working hard, and optimistic about the future. It felt good to finally have a purpose after months of uncertainty. Things were going well, or at least, they felt like they were. I even managed to get an internet connection set up, despite still being on a tourist visa. It was tough, but money talks, and companies here will sell you anything if you've got the cash.

I bought some basic furniture—a dining table, chairs, a king-size bed for Anna and me, and two singles for the girls. It took a couple of weeks to settle everything, but once I did, I felt proud of my little space. It wasn't perfect, but it was my first home in the US, and I was determined to make it work.

Chapter 43

Money running out

Another week was about to begin, and the initial excitement I had felt since arriving in San Francisco was slowly wearing off. My biggest worry was creeping in—money. I took stock of everything I had spent so far: my new computer, multiple Airbnb stays due to Paul's frequent visitors, rent, furniture, and other items I bought to settle into my new place. None of that had been part of my original plan. Life here was incredibly expensive, and I was burning through my savings faster than I'd anticipated.

That Sunday, we had a video call with Anna and the girls. I didn't want them to worry about the money situation, so I tried to keep my tone upbeat and casual. But I knew deep down that it was going to be hard to hide anything from Anna—she could always tell when something was off.

"Hey, honey! So nice you called!" I started, putting on my best cheerful voice.

"Hello, baby! I love you, I love you!" she replied, full of energy.

"You sound very happy today. I like it" I said, relieved to hear her in such good spirits.

"Of course I'm happy! We only have a few days left here in Italy. I mean, I love it here, the people are amazing, but I just want us to be together."

"Me too, honey. Me too" I trailed off, trying to keep the enthusiasm in my voice.

"You okay? You sound weird. Worried" she asked, cutting right through my act.

Of course, I couldn't hide anything from Anna. I had no choice but to tell her the truth about my dwindling funds and all the extra expenses I hadn't planned for. To my relief, she didn't freak out or get upset. Instead, she tried to lift my spirits.

"All is going to be fine, babe. Don't worry now" she said soothingly. "Just focus on us living there together, having a beautiful time as a family."

"You're right, honey" I agreed, though part of me was still anxious about how things would unfold.

"Listen, I have something to tell you" Anna said, changing the subject. "Remember Antonella?"

"Antonella?" I repeated, the name sounding vaguely familiar but not fully clicking.

"Yes, the lady we first tried to rent the apartment from here in Cagliari."

"Oh, right! The one who backed out because the whole process seemed too complicated and mysterious?"

"Exactly", Anna confirmed. "Well, I sent her a message just to let her know we found another place and that she shouldn't worry about anything. You know, being polite and understanding about the whole thing."

"That was nice of you. Did she respond?"

"She called me back! Right after she got my message."

"No way, really?" I said, genuinely surprised.

"Yeah, and she invited us to her house for coffee. We just got back. She and her husband are really nice people. We had a great time, tried some local food, and oh my god, the cheese here! Way better than back home. The food is incredible."

"That's great, honey" I said, happy to hear they were enjoying themselves. "You'll love it here too. Everything's beautiful."

"Antonella also said that if we ever want to visit the island again, we just have to call them. They'd be delighted to be our guides."

I smiled, grateful that despite everything, things seemed to be working out on Anna's end. Her positivity was exactly what I needed to hear. But as soon as the call ended, the weight of my financial situation settled back in. The clock was ticking, and I knew I needed to find a solution before it was too late.

Chapter 44

New girls in town

I woke up early that morning, feeling more energized than usual. The night before, I had gone to bed early because I knew today would be a big day. I brewed myself a coffee and sat down to read the news when my phone rang—it was Paul.

"Morning, dude! I suppose you're more than happy today, right? Anna and the gang are coming. Exciting!" he said, his voice as upbeat as ever.

"Hi, Paul. Yeah! Very exciting. I bought a few things—some minor stuff for the kitchen and bedrooms."

"Listen, dude. We can go and pick them up at the airport" Paul offered.

"Oh, good. Yes, that sounds amazing. Thanks, dude."

"No problem, my man. You're the best and deserve the best!" Paul added.

We agreed to leave at 4 p.m. to make it to the airport in time. Flights here are almost always on time, and weather delays are rare, so I wasn't worried. Honestly, I was a bit surprised Paul was following through on his offer to help, given his track record with promises, especially when it came to the investors and the money that never seemed to materialize.

But, like in a bad comedy, things took a turn. At 3 p.m., Paul called me, apologetic but firm: “Hey, dude, I’m so sorry, but I can’t make it. Kim’s in pain from the pregnancy, and I need to take her to the hospital.”

I wanted to scream. My frustration boiled over, but I forced myself to stay calm. I knew it wasn’t his fault, but his last-minute cancellations were becoming a pattern. I called for an Uber, but the traffic didn’t help. I arrived at the airport late, and there they were—Anna and the girls, already waiting.

I tried to shake off the anger, putting on my best smile despite feeling like I could burst. But the moment we hugged, everything else faded away. The joy of seeing my family, after months apart, made everything else irrelevant.

We couldn’t stop hugging and kissing each other. It felt surreal. Finally reunited, I didn’t care about anything else anymore. We found a café at the airport, ordered coffee and some food, and sat down to talk. The time we spent apart seemed to melt away as we shared stories—Anna’s were much more exciting, filled with tales of sunny beaches and exploring Italy. Mine were mostly about working all day, stuck in front of a screen.

They showed me photos from their time in Italy, and we laughed about the flight. The girls had a blast, and even the plane ride seemed like an adventure for them. Anna, of course, had quite the story to tell about the trip.

"Julia puked the entire meal" Anna said, laughing, “Half of it on the floor and half of it all over me. I was a mess!” She rolled her eyes playfully, clearly amused now but no doubt less thrilled in the moment.

“And then there was Lara”, she continued. “She didn’t sleep for the entire trip. The whole time, she was glued to the TV, watching movie after movie.”

Lara, overhearing this, giggled but didn’t deny it.

"When we finally landed, she was completely knocked out. I couldn't get her to wake up, and she refused to walk. There I was, carrying Julia and dragging our luggage, trying to wake up Lara. She was like a tiny, stubborn rock, dead asleep!"

Anna shook her head, smiling at the memory. "I don't know how I was able to handle all that by myself" she added with a small chuckle, almost as if speaking to herself. But she did handle it, and she handled it beautifully, just like she always does.

The girls, not realizing the chaos they caused, beamed as if they had been on the smoothest trip ever. Hearing the story, I couldn't help but feel even more grateful and impressed with Anna's strength and patience.

We took the train back to the apartment, struggling with the suitcases but laughing all the way. They loved the city at first glance, just like I had when I arrived, and they immediately warmed to the cool breeze and the laid-back atmosphere.

As we traveled back, I gave them a heads-up about the apartment. "It's not the best place, not what I'd imagined for us, but it's temporary. We'll find something better—bigger, without a bathroom next to the kitchen" I said, trying to manage their expectations.

But Anna and the girls didn't care. They smiled and reassured me, "We love it already, and anything will be great as long as we're together." Their words instantly melted away any lingering frustration. After all, the real victory was finally being together again.

Chapter 45

Always almost there

The first week after Anna and the girls arrived felt different, like a shift in the rhythm of my life. Before, I had all the time to focus on coding, working late into the night, pushing forward on the app with Paul. Now, my routine was interrupted by family walks, exploring the city together, and making time for things other than work. It was a welcome change, but it also meant I couldn't keep the same pace with my project.

Of course, the girls were thrilled. They were enjoying an extended break, having had the longest school vacation any kid could dream of—four months, plus however long it would take until they started school here. Anna's first priority was to register them for school, and she found a welcoming place not far from our apartment. The principal was incredibly understanding and assured her that paperwork could wait. "The most important thing is to get your daughters back into education now" he said. That was a huge relief.

I kept working from home, but money was always tight, which meant we couldn't do much outside of the apartment.

"Things will change soon, Anna. I promise" I said one evening, trying to sound more optimistic than I felt.

"I know, babe. We'll be fine. I still have some Euros left over from Italy, and we can use that. We'll manage." Anna's voice was steady, but I could hear the concern underneath.

"Paul is still working on the funding. He keeps saying it's close, but I don't know how much longer it's going to take. Honestly? I'm getting tired of his promises" I admitted, feeling frustrated.

"And what about him? He's still living off his savings, right?" Anna asked.

"Yeah, he's not in any rush. He has money and can wait. But we can't. He keeps meeting with investors, but I don't know if he's telling the truth or just throwing out ideas to buy time."

Paul's constant changes to the app weren't helping either. Every time I thought we were close to finishing, he'd have a new idea or tweak, pushing the timeline further back. He was aware of it, but that didn't stop him.

"I know, dude" Paul would say. "I shouldn't keep changing the app, but we need to impress these investors. We need to look professional, dude! This is our big shot."

"I get it, Paul" I'd reply, feeling my patience thinning. "But if we keep changing things, we're looking at months, not weeks, before we're done."

"This is the last change, I promise" he'd say, but I had my doubts.

I needed to talk to someone, to get it all off my chest, like a therapy session. But instead of a therapist, I called my sister, Carina. She's brutally honest, which is sometimes exactly what I need.

"Hi, sis. How are you?" I asked, hoping for a calm conversation.

"Hi, brother. Deciding whether to murder my husband or put my kids in a cage" she responded in her usual no-nonsense way.

"Why? What happened?" I laughed, though I could feel her frustration.

"They're driving me crazy... Anyway, how's life in the US?"

That question hit me harder than I expected. Life here was different, strange in a way that made me feel both excited and frustrated. And I knew Carina couldn't understand what it felt like to be so far from home, trying to build something new in a foreign place. She'd never leave, and there was a part of me that envied her for that—her ability to stay and fight, to plant roots while I was always on the move, trying to find solid ground.

"It's... different" I said, my voice trailing off as I tried to sum up all the mixed emotions I was feeling.

"Why? What's going on?"

I poured it all out. Everything with Paul, the money running out, the endless waiting for investors, and the fear that I was just chasing a dream that might never come true.

"What would you do if you were in my position?" I finally asked.

"But this guy is an asshole!"

"Yeah, kind of..."

"Don't do anything else with this guy. Go and get a job or something" Carina said with her usual bluntness.

"You think so? After all I've done? It's going to be like throwing everything away."

"He's crazy, Andy. Nothing good will come from this. Do it for Anna and the girls. Anna is a sweetheart, and that's why she follows you, but if I were her, I'd have kicked you in the nuts a long time ago."

I laughed. Carina could always make me laugh, even when she was telling me hard truths.

"I love you, sis. You don't keep anything to yourself."

"Go and do something, brother. You've got a chance to make a fresh start in a new country. I don't because I may sound brave, but inside, I'm scared. You're not. Take this chance and build something real. You've got the skills to do it."

Maybe she was right. Maybe it was time to stop waiting for Paul's promises to come true. I had to do something for myself, for Anna and the girls.

But it wasn't going to be easy.

Chapter 46

Rent due

Monday morning arrived, and the entire weekend had passed indoors. The girls managed to keep themselves entertained by playing with each other and watching movies on their phones. I continued coding, my escape from everything. For me, staying inside wasn't a big deal. But Anna was different. She spent the whole weekend messaging her sister and friends back home, barely talking to me, which drove me crazy. The silence between us felt thick with tension, and I hated it. I didn't want things to go wrong between us, especially now.

"Andy, listen. It's the end of the month" Anna started, her voice strained with worry. "We need to pay the rent to Tas."

"I know, honey. I know" I responded, feeling the weight of her words settle in.

"So? We don't have the money for that. We don't even have money to pay for food!" Her voice rose, filled with the anxiety we both shared but tried to suppress.

"Can you please calm down? I don't want the girls to hear us fighting" I said, trying to keep my tone even, though I was just as panicked.

"You need to do something, Andy. Ask Paul for money or get income from another source. I don't know, but we must do something!" Anna's

frustration boiled over, and I knew she was right. We couldn't keep going like this.

It felt like a nightmare, the same arguments we had back in our country, the ones I thought I'd left behind when we moved. I came here to start fresh, not to carry the same burdens with me. Reluctantly, I called Paul. My mind raced with what to say, how to explain that everything was crumbling.

"Hey, dude. How are you?" I tried to start casually.

"Hey, my man! All good, all good. How's the gang over there?" Paul responded, upbeat as ever, oblivious to the storm on my end.

"All good here, thanks, dude. Listen, any news from the investors?" I asked, trying to sound hopeful.

"Yes! I had a terrific meeting last Friday. They're very happy with the progress. I've put some changes on the list, just minor things we need to tweak" Paul said.

The word *changes* hit me like a punch in the gut. Every change felt like a delay, a setback that pushed my future further away. A small change at management level is a lot of coding consideration for a developer. Not mentioning I was alone to build the entire system. This is normally done by several people in a team.

"Listen, Paul. I have a problem. A serious one" I finally admitted.

"What is it, dude? Tell me" Paul said, sounding genuinely concerned.

"Rent. We need to pay it by tomorrow, but we don't have any money left. I spent it all" I confessed, feeling a knot in my stomach tighten.

"Oh. I see" Paul paused, probably thinking of a way to help.

"Look, dude" he continued, "I can transfer some money to help you out. But let me explain how it works for me. I transfer money from my savings to a daily account for payments and groceries. I need to go to the bank in person to do it; I can't make the transfer electronically."

"Alright, thanks, man" I said, grateful but also stressed that he couldn't just fix things immediately. "Because if I don't pay the rent, we're in serious trouble."

"Don't worry, buddy. Here in the US, it's very difficult for them to kick you out just because rent is due. We've got laws protecting you" Paul reassured me.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Maybe things worked differently in the US, but I wasn't the kind of person to let bills go unpaid and pretend everything was fine. That kind of behavior reminded me of the lazy, unreliable people back in our country, the ones I always complained about.

"Yes, but we must pay for other stuff too" I added, "We've got local taxes and food."

"Local taxes can wait, dude. Seriously, you can re-arrange payments for the future. They won't cause any trouble. About the food, just let me know every time you need money for groceries, and I'll transfer it to you. I'll send you fifty bucks now, give me a minute."

Paul sent me the money, and while it was enough to buy groceries for the week, it wasn't enough to ease the bigger financial strain. We were living on those fifty dollars a week. The girls struggled at school because we couldn't afford the books, clothes, and extracurricular activities that cost more than we had.

"Andy, you have to ask Paul for more money" Anna said, her voice carrying a sense of urgency that felt like pressure mounting in my chest.

"I spent those fifty dollars already, but it's not enough", she pressed.

"Anna, you're putting a lot of pressure on me" I replied, feeling cornered.

"I'm doing this on purpose, Andy! You need to wake up. Do something. Paul is nothing but promises!" she exclaimed, her frustration boiling over.

I didn't want to fight. I hated asking for money, especially when it felt like I was begging. It was humiliating, even though I was working tirelessly, coding day and night. I was burning out, and the weight of the situation was pushing me closer to the edge.

But I had no choice. I called Paul again, asked for more money, and hoped that, somehow, things would turn around. The stress of not knowing how we would get through the month was suffocating. The dream that had brought us here felt like it was slipping further and further out of reach.

One week had passed since I asked Paul for the money to cover our rent, and there was still no sign of his promised bank transfer. Every day felt like an eternity, and with each passing day, Tas, our landlord, was calling more frequently, growing more impatient. I was cornered. I couldn't tell Tas the real story, the chaos behind the scenes:

“Listen, Tas. I'm sorry, but I can't pay rent right now because Paul, my business partner, is still playing around with the app, making endless changes instead of focusing on getting investors to fund us so I can finally get paid.”

No, I couldn't say that. Not only because it was humiliating, but because I wasn't the kind of person who would ever make excuses. I made a deal, and I had to live up to my end. It's black and white for me—there's no room for half-truths or excuses.

But the pressure at home was mounting. Anna was more furious than ever, and I couldn't blame her. We were both trapped in this situation, suffocated by Paul's empty promises. The daily arguments returned like clockwork, and the tension in the apartment was unbearable. The girls, though young, were starting to pick up on the stress. I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to get out.

It was already dark when I left the apartment. I started walking aimlessly, hoping to find a bar where I could sit for a while, gather my thoughts, and maybe, just maybe, find some calm amid the storm. But as I walked, my mind raced.

What should I do? If I quit now, I'd lose all the money I had invested. Paul certainly wasn't going to give me my money back, and I knew he'd be furious if I walked away, leaving him without a developer. And yet, if I stayed, nothing was changing. He held the majority shares in the company, so ultimately, it was his decisions that mattered, not mine.

After what felt like hours of wandering, I found a small bar. It was a dingy, dimly lit place that looked like it hadn't changed in decades. The kind of place where the regulars knew each other's names and anyone new was looked at with suspicion. But I didn't care. I needed a moment to breathe. I walked in and made my way to the bar, scanning the room as I did. The bartender noticed me and asked what I wanted to drink.

And then it hit me—I didn't have any money to pay for a drink. Not even enough for a cheap beer.

I felt my pride burn inside me. What could I do? I could lower myself to begging for a drink or confessing my situation, but that wasn't me. I'd never let myself fall that low. So, instead, I pulled the oldest trick in the book: I pretended my phone was vibrating.

“Hello?” I said, bringing my phone to my ear. “Yes, this is Andy.”

I acted like I was receiving an important call, one that required privacy, and slowly made my way out of the bar, making sure the bartender couldn't see me anymore. Once I was outside and out of his view, I slipped my phone back into my pocket and continued walking.

It struck me then how limited my options really were. There are very few things in life that are truly free. Even my escape to the bar had turned into another dead-end. Everything costs money. Everything was a reminder of how little I had.

I walked for hours that night, weighed down by the burden of our situation. There was no simple way out.

Chapter 47

First breaking point

We all have a breaking point. In my case, there are several stages of breaking points, and this was number one.

At this stage, I do something strange—I forget about everything. I forgot about the letters piling up from the electricity company, local authorities, and rent. I forgot about Anna yelling at me every day, her frustration hitting me like waves. I forgot that I wasn't even sleeping in the same bed as Anna anymore; I was crashing on the sofa every night. Our communication had fractured.

I needed this first breaking point to survive because the application I was developing for our company still needed more work. Even though we were in the final stages, Paul kept asking for more changes, dragging the process out. I let go of the anger and frustration and decided to push through until the end.

What was I supposed to do, anyway? It was painfully clear that Paul didn't care if I had money or not. Sure, he would send us some cash whenever I asked him, but it was barely enough to scrape by. We were surviving, not living.

But I needed more than just survival. I needed a proper salary. I needed stability, a real job, and a path forward.

So, this was my breaking point, a kind of mental shutdown that let me focus solely on finishing the project. I was the only person working on something that needed at least four full-time employees. The pressure was immense. But quitting and finding another job? That would take weeks—weeks I didn't have. I didn't have a green card, I didn't know anyone in this city, and I was still just a tourist.

"No", I finally told myself. "It's crazy. Let's wait."

As hard as it was, waiting and pushing through was still my best option.

Chapter 48

The App finally goes live

I couldn't believe it. We were finally ready to go live. After months of changes, late nights, and a mountain of stress, we had made it. The app was done. The investors had stepped in at the last moment to remove a part of Paul's grand vision that wasn't suitable for this stage of the project. Ironically, it was something I had flagged months ago. But hey, who listens to the developer, right? I should have felt vindicated, maybe even a little triumphant, but all I felt was exhaustion.

I thought back to all the times I tried to reason with Paul, suggesting we cut certain features, streamline the design, or stick to a more practical timeline. But no, he had always wanted more. Now, the investors—the same people who were financing this whole thing—were the ones to finally put a stop to his over-ambition. If I weren't such a patient and passive guy, I would have lost it by now. Anyone else would have probably told Paul off, or at least walked away.

But that wasn't me. I kept quiet, doing what needed to be done, all while my personal life was in a tailspin.

“This is Anna. Please leave a message.” That's what greeted me when I called my wife to share the news. I left her a quick voicemail.

“Anna, honey. Just calling to say that I finally did it. I finished the app. We're going live this week. Love you.”

I hung up the phone, and not two minutes later, it rang. It was Anna.

“Where are you?” she asked, no “hello” no warm greeting. It stung, but I tried to brush it off.

“I’m at Paul’s”, I replied.

“Can you ask him for more money? We need to buy food.”

“Will do, don’t worry” I said quickly.

She hung up without another word. She was pissed, and rightfully so. I was pissed too. But despite everything, I held onto a fragile hope that things would turn around soon. I kept telling myself we just needed a little more patience, a little more time. But deep down, it was becoming harder to ignore the crushing reality. For the first time in my life, I couldn’t afford to take care of my family. My daughters, who always had what they needed, were now living day to day with us barely scraping by.

And the irony of it all? I had made it work back in my country, a place with so many disadvantages, and here I was in the so-called First World, unable to provide for my family.

Paul broke into my thoughts. “Dude, we have to celebrate!” he said, almost gleefully.

I stared at him for a moment, trying to process what he had just said. Did he not hear me talk about our financial struggles? My family couldn’t afford food, and he wanted to celebrate?

“Sure, dude” I finally replied, forcing a smile. “Let’s go for a beer. After all, I finished the app. All’s up and working.”

“Excellent! You’re the best, dude. You’re my hero!” Paul beamed, clearly unaware—or uninterested—in the real state of my life.

We went out and grabbed a beer. As usual, Paul was buzzing with energy, talking about the next steps for the company. The future, according to him, was bright. First, we'd sign the contract with the investors. Then, we'd hire more people and start ramping up the commercial side of things. Advertising campaigns, social media blitzes—the works.

“We'll use the investors' money to support the first users creating listings” Paul explained, his voice full of excitement.

“How's that going to work?” I asked, curious but cautious.

“You know, we're a new company. We need to give the impression that our platform is already successful, right? So, we'll create a bunch of fake user profiles—people who will post listings. Then, we'll create other fake users to buy those listings. It'll look like we have a bustling marketplace, but it's all virtual. Once we get real users posting, we'll use the investors' money to buy their products and services. That way, those users will go tell others that the platform actually works. It's genius!”

As Paul laid out this plan, my mind drifted. His words felt like a punch to the gut. I thought about all the startup founders I had once admired, the ones who said things like “We're here to make the world a better place” with such conviction. Paul's plan made me realize that wasn't what we were doing at all. Instead of building something authentic, something that would genuinely help people, we were gaming the system, creating a false narrative.

The world I had entered was more about smoke and mirrors than actual substance.

Life had a weird way of showing you things. Paul's excitement, his belief in this underhanded plan—it left a bad taste in my mouth. But what was I supposed to do? Walk away now, after all the time and energy I had put in? After sacrificing so much?

No, not yet. But something inside me had shifted. I wasn't sure if I could keep pretending everything was fine.

Chapter 49

New member

We got the funding. Well, sort of. It wasn't the full amount we had been hoping for, but it was enough to cover salaries and secure the first year's rent for an office space. It was progress, at least. But I couldn't shake the feeling that we were still far from stability.

Paul called me that morning, his voice practically bursting with excitement. He couldn't contain himself.

"Dude! I can't believe we finally did it! What did Anna and the girls say? Are they happy?"

"To be honest" I began, trying to find the right words, "we're more focused on what's happening right now... you know, funds for rent, food. That kind of stuff."

"I know, I know" Paul replied, clearly not picking up on my tone. "Don't worry. All that's coming now that we've got the first batch of money!"

"That's good news, man" I said, but my voice was flat. The excitement I had always felt for this project wasn't there anymore. I wasn't sure if Paul noticed, or if he was just too absorbed in his own enthusiasm to care.

"I just wanted to thank you, buddy", Paul continued. "I know I've been difficult—asking for all those changes, pushing back on ideas. A lot of

the advice you gave me... it's finally in the project now. If only I had listened sooner.”

That was good to hear. At least there was some recognition, though it felt more like a footnote than a celebration.

“And that’s why I’m sure” Paul went on, “things are going to be much, much better now. I’m talking about our pockets, dude! Seriously, we’re going to be rolling in it.”

“Yeah. I hope so. We really need it” I said, my tone heavier than I intended. We *really* needed it. Rent was two months overdue, and the landlord was becoming relentless with his calls and notifications. I was dodging every unknown number, avoiding the inevitable conversation that I couldn’t keep postponing much longer.

"Listen" Paul said, breaking my thoughts, "come over to my place. I've got some stuff for you and the family."

My heart lifted slightly. Was this it? Was Paul finally going to give me some money to help cover the rent, even if just a loan? At this point, I'd take anything. I was starting to panic about how far behind we were with Tas, our landlord. He was calling almost daily, probably worried about being stuck with tenants who couldn't pay. I didn't know enough about tenant laws in the US, but I feared we could be kicked out or worse—deported for unpaid bills. Every envelope that came through the mail slot felt like a ticking time bomb, and I was too afraid to open most of them.

I headed to Paul’s place. He greeted me at the door, arms wide open like he’d just won the lottery. His excitement was contagious, but not enough to pull me out of my anxiety.

“My Latin best friend!” Paul exclaimed, pulling me into a hug. “Congratulations, dude. We did it!”

“Yeah, man, we did”, I said, trying to match his enthusiasm but falling short.

“Come on in, quick! I’ve got something for you.”

Inside, we talked a bit about the next steps: the servers, expansion plans, marketing. But I wasn’t fully there. My mind was elsewhere, preoccupied with the bills piling up, the conversations with Anna that were growing colder, and the gnawing hunger that seemed to follow me everywhere lately.

Then, just as I was about to leave, Paul said, “Wait, before you go, I’ve got something for you.” He rifled through a cabinet, pulling out a large box. He looked at it for a second as if confirming it was the right gift.

“Yes, here it is” he said, handing it to me with a wide grin. “A big box of chocolates for the girls and a bottle of the finest champagne for you and your lady. You know, for that romantic night, right?”

I stood there holding the box, staring at it like it was a joke I wasn’t quite getting. Chocolates? Champagne? Did I *not* just tell him that we were struggling to pay rent? That we could barely afford food?

On my walk home, I had to stop for a minute. I found a bench and just sat there, trying to process what had just happened. I couldn’t help but think, *Is this guy for real?* Chocolates and champagne? I didn’t need luxuries, I needed cash. I needed a way to keep my family afloat.

I realized in that moment that something had shifted between me and Paul. It wasn’t just about the money, although that was a big part of it. It was about how out of touch he was with my reality. He was still living in this bubble, where things were going to get better because he *said* they were going to get better. Meanwhile, I was barely holding everything together.

As I stood up to continue my walk, it hit me: maybe Paul wasn't going to come through for me after all. Not in the way that mattered.

Weekend. I started to hate weekends. The way you start to hate something you used to love because circumstances ruin it for you. It reminded me of how I began hating rain back in my home country—not because of the rain itself, but because of the leaking roof in our house. I loved rain, it was always romantic to me, but when you have water dripping through holes in the ceiling, ruining everything inside, the charm fades quickly. We had to fight tooth and nail just to get the landlord to fix it, and his solution was to tell us to pay for it ourselves and send him the bill. Classic.

Now, here I was hating weekends again, but for a different reason: I didn't have the money to do anything fun. It wasn't like before when I had to deal with problems like a leaky roof, but the suffocating feeling was the same. The tension in the house was unbearable. I was still sleeping on the sofa, and my back ached constantly. Anna and I barely spoke, and when we did, it was just about necessities, never about us. We were like strangers in the same house, and I felt powerless to fix it.

But then Monday came, and with it, a glimmer of something different. Paul and I were going to check out the new office space, the one that symbolized the progress we were supposed to be making. The office was located in Hayes Valley, a beautiful neighborhood right in the heart of the city. The whole area felt upscale and trendy, like the kind of place I used to dream about working in.

When I got there, I had to wait a bit for Paul. The building was sleek and modern, one of those start-ups that rented out office spaces to other start-ups. It's apparently a booming business here, but something like

that would be nearly impossible back home in my country—too expensive, too impractical. But here, everything seemed possible.

The entrance alone was impressive, all glass and sharp angles, with people buzzing in and out like they belonged to some exclusive club. I couldn't help but admire the décor. Everything was designed to inspire creativity. People were working in every corner of the building, from open spaces with comfortable sofas to private little cabins with phones inside for confidential calls. There were bars scattered around the place, offering snacks and coffee—free of charge. It felt like an entirely different world from the one my father knew when he was young, where workspaces were gray, cramped, and lifeless.

Paul arrived, bouncing with energy. “Dude! I'm great! You should be too! Look at this place, man. It's amazing!”

His excitement was contagious, and despite my worries about money, I couldn't help but smile.

“Yeah, it's pretty cool”, I said, trying to match his enthusiasm.

We did the usual registration at the front desk and got our credentials for future visits. The plan was to rent this space until we had enough money to buy our own office. But that felt like a far-off dream.

“Our office is on the first floor”, Paul said, checking his phone for the details. While he was distracted, I took in more of my surroundings. There was such a vibrant mix of people—young, old, dressed in suits or hoodies. It was refreshing and a little surreal. I thought about how different this was from back home. This kind of place would be a luxury for any small business in my country.

When we reached the first floor and walked into our office, I had to admit, it was beautiful. Natural light flooded the room, bouncing off the modern furniture. The whole space felt warm and welcoming. There was a common reception area for all the companies on our floor, and just

beyond that were more sofas, a bar area, and quiet corners for private work.

“Take a look here, dude” Paul said, pointing to the main open space. “You’ll have your developers here.”

The desks were arranged with enough space between them, not cramped like in some of the old-fashioned offices I’d worked in. The colors were warm and calming, and the walls were lined with soundproof panels to reduce noise. Everything had been thoughtfully designed. I could actually picture myself working here every day.

“And here’s your office!” Paul said, leading me to a corner room.

“*My* office?” I asked, surprised.

Sure enough, it was real. I had my own office. A big desk, a large window behind it, modern furniture, and a computer already set up. I didn’t know if the computer was actually mine to use or just placed there for decoration, but I didn’t ask. I preferred to dream that it was mine.

After the grand tour, we checked out the meeting room—long table, sleek chairs, a big screen for presentations—and then Paul’s office, which was similar to mine.

“What do you think?” Paul asked.

“It’s gorgeous” I said, honestly. “It’ll be great to come to work here every day.”

“Of course, dude! This is just the beginning. We’re gonna grow out of this place soon enough!” he said, ever the optimist.

Then, in typical Paul fashion, he added, “Let’s grab something to eat. My treat.”

I tried not to let it show, but inside, I was relieved. I hadn't had a decent meal in weeks. I'd been giving the girls most of the food we had at home, eating just enough to get by. The thought of getting a proper meal—and not having to pay for it—was a gift.

But as excited as I was for this new office and for the future, there was still a voice in the back of my mind, reminding me of the bills that were piling up, the landlord that was growing impatient, and the thin thread my family and I were hanging by.

I followed Paul to the restaurant, trying to push those thoughts aside. If I had to, I'd take the leftovers home for dinner.

Chapter 50

New staff

The very next day, we were both back at the office, settling into what felt like the rhythm of a normal working day. But in the back of my mind, the rent issue was still looming, casting a shadow over everything. The third month was approaching, and my landlord's persistent calls were coming in like clockwork. I wasn't picking up anymore—there was no point without a solution to offer.

I tried bringing it up with Paul, hoping for some kind of relief or even a loan to tide me over. After all, the investors' money had come through, and we were now in this sleek office space. But Paul's reaction was... unexpected.

“Dude, you're stressing too much”, he said, almost amused. “Listen, I've got the perfect solution for you and your landlord calls—just block him! Look, on iPhones, you can set it up so that only the people you *want* to talk to can get through.”

He showed me his phone, how he only responded to a select list of contacts. It was completely insane, but then again, this whole situation was insane. I was drowning in rent issues, and Paul's answer was to avoid the problem.

But at that moment, I didn't care. We had investors, a gorgeous office, and I just kept telling myself: payday is coming. It's going to be fine.

Then, a call from Paul interrupted my thoughts as I sat at my new desk, basking in the sunlight pouring through the window.

“Hey, dude” Paul said, his voice cheerful as ever. “Come to my office, I want to introduce you to someone.”

Leaving my MacBook on the desk, I made my way to Paul’s office. The MacBook was still mine, it seemed. That was a relief. I loved being surrounded by technology—it gave me a sense of control, like I was actively doing something important with my life, even when things felt chaotic.

When I stepped into Paul’s office, he was already beaming.

“Morning!” I greeted, trying to channel some of his boundless enthusiasm. “Morning, my good friend!” Paul replied. “Meet Giuseppe.”

I turned to see Giuseppe standing there, hand outstretched. We shook hands, and in that moment, Paul explained that Giuseppe would be our new Human Relations manager. Apparently, we’d be hiring a lot of employees soon, and Giuseppe was supposed to be the one to help with that transition.

“I know Giuseppe from my old company”, Paul said. “He’s awesome. That desk in front of my office? That’ll be his.”

Giuseppe was a middle-aged Italian who had been in the U.S. for fifteen years. He told me he’d moved here for love—real love, as he emphasized—and not just for the green card, as many people assume when they hear about marriages between foreigners and U.S. citizens. He had married, started a family, and even divorced after five years. His daughter, who was now twelve, was the light of his life, even though he didn’t see her every day.

Giuseppe was bald, not particularly tall, and carried some extra weight. But his demeanor was spot on for HR—friendly but with an edge of

seriousness when necessary. He had that perfect blend of social ease and cold-blooded practicality. Exactly the kind of person you'd want in charge of managing new hires and handling the inevitable office drama.

It felt like things were moving forward. A new office, a new HR manager, and plans for expanding the team. But even with all these outward signs of progress, I couldn't shake the gnawing worry about the rent and everything else looming in the background.

I started with my daily work. The new office felt very good—comfortable, spacious, and filled with light. But before I could even start hitting the keys on my computer, my stomach growled, reminding me that I had only had a cup of black coffee for breakfast for the past month.

It was time to take advantage of the perks of the new place and finally have a decent morning meal. Maybe even get a little extra in a doggy-bag to take home.

"Hey, morning there" I said to the bartender, trying to sound friendly.

"Morning, sir. How can I help you?"

"You serve coffee and something for breakfast, right?"

"Sure, I'll show you the options here."

"Yes, sorry, just checking. This is free, right?"

"Completely free. Yes."

"Of course, it's free, idiot" I thought to myself, feeling a mix of pride and embarrassment. "You're the owner. You're penniless, hungry, and three months late on rent, but technically, you own 20% of all this."

I ordered a big coffee with cream, a mountain of croissants and muffins, and the biggest orange juice they could make. As I sat eating, I couldn't help but think about the tension back home. Anna and I were barely

talking, and I knew she was angry, but what could I do? I had to make this work, and we were finally on the cusp of getting the funds we needed. But how do you explain that when the bills are piling up, and you're barely holding things together?

Still, the breakfast tasted incredible, and I savored every bite, especially after months of scrimping. I had lost weight, which wasn't all bad—I hadn't been able to diet properly in years. It's funny how your brain tries to find silver linings when you're cornered.

"Hey, dude! There you are" Paul's voice interrupted my thoughts as he walked up with his usual excitement.

"Oh, you're having breakfast" he said, noticing my feast. "After you finish, come to my office, buddy. There's someone I want you to meet."

"Sure" I responded, my mouth full. "New people, huh?"

"Indeed, dude. And more to come!"

I wrapped up my breakfast, got a doggy-bag with some croissants for later, and headed to Paul's office, curious about who the new person was.

When I entered, Paul was already deep in conversation with a tall, young guy who looked like he was in his mid-twenties.

"There you are! Come in, dude" Paul said with enthusiasm. "Let me introduce you to Pawel."

Pawel was a developer like me, but with less experience. Born in the U.S. to Polish immigrants, his story wasn't too different from mine—a kid son of immigrant parents looking for opportunities in a country that promised so much.

"Hi, Pawel. Nice to meet you. I'm Andy" I said, offering my hand.

"Andy's the best" Paul interjected, as if I needed to be sold to my new teammate. "You'll learn a lot from him, trust me."

We talked tech for a while, going over the project, the tools we were using, and what needed to be done next. I assigned him some online courses to get up to speed with our technology stack, figuring he'd be busy with that for the next few days. It was nice to have help, but it was also strange—everything felt like it was moving forward, yet I still had this gnawing uncertainty.

By the time the day was over, I returned home with a bag of croissants in hand, hoping for a change in the mood with Anna. We needed to talk, but I wasn't sure how to start. The tension between us had been growing for weeks.

"Hey, honey. How was your day?" I asked as I walked in.

"Fine", she answered curtly. One-word replies were never a good sign.

"Okay, you're still mad, aren't you?"

"Yes, Andy. I'm still upset. What do you think?"

"Listen, I'll get the money soon. We'll be able to pay everything off—rent, utilities, groceries, all of it."

"Are you sure?" she asked, her voice filled with frustration. "How much are you getting? We're three months behind on rent. I have taxes to pay, gas, electricity... I've been trying to keep the service from being cut off. And the local authorities? They're putting a lawyer on us. Did you know that? They're going to take us to court. That means the police, Andy. The police!"

"I know, I know. But we'll be fine once—"

"I didn't come here to live like this!" she interrupted, her voice cutting through the room. "We left our country to escape this kind of struggle. We left our families, and the girls are starting all over again. And for what? For this?"

"You're right", I said, trying to calm her down. "But now, it's going to be different, honey."

"Let me tell you something" she said, her voice soft but ominous. "I know this is going to sound harsh, but I don't trust Paul. I don't think he's going to do anything for you—or for me or the girls."

"How can you say that, Anna? You'll see. We're just days away from payday."

She stared at me for a moment, her eyes filled with doubt, and for the first time, I began to doubt too. But what could I do? I had to believe it would all work out. It had to.

The next day started much the same as the previous ones. I went to the office, grabbed my breakfast, packed a doggy-bag, and settled into my work routine. But on the way there, all I could think about was Anna. I had never seen her like that before. Even in the toughest times back in our country, she had never been this angry or disappointed. The thing is, she wasn't just angry—she was right. And that stung the most. I was desperate to show her how things were changing, to prove that we were moving forward. But deep down, I had this gnawing feeling that things were about to get worse.

"Morning, Andy" said Pawel, breaking my train of thought as he arrived at the office.

"Morning, Pawel. How was the course yesterday?" I asked, trying to shift focus.

"Oh, very well. I guess I'll be finishing all the videos this week" he responded, sounding eager.

"Perfect. Once you're done with those, we'll start looking at the application together. Baby steps at first, but you'll get the hang of it."

Pawel was a hard worker, punctual and eager to learn. That gave me some relief, at least in terms of the project moving forward. But I couldn't shake the heaviness in my chest from the situation at home.

Paul showed up around ten, his usual time. I watched him casually settle in, preparing for his day. I waited a bit, knowing I had to do something I absolutely dreaded—ask him for money again.

"Hey, Paul. Morning. Do you have a minute?" I asked, trying to sound casual, but my voice betrayed my discomfort.

"Morning, dude. Sure. What's up?" he replied, always upbeat, oblivious to my growing frustration.

"Look, sorry to ask, but I need more money for groceries this week."

Paul didn't even flinch. "Of course, dude. You know you can ask me. How much are you thinking?"

"I don't know, just enough for the week, I guess."

"Look, I have 40 bucks right now, cash. Is that enough? I can transfer more later if you need it."

"Sure, that'll do. Don't worry" I said, trying to hide my embarrassment, though inside I felt like an idiot. "I'll let you know if we need more."

As I took the cash from Paul, a familiar wave of humiliation washed over me. I hated asking him for money. Maybe in the U.S., asking for help like this is normal, but it wasn't normal for me. It felt like I was losing control over my own life. Back in my country, the people I despised the most were those who didn't work and just waited for government handouts or charity. And now, here I was, asking for scraps like one of them.

But the worst part was knowing that, in reality, this wasn't the same. I wasn't some freeloader, relying on handouts. I was working hard—harder than I ever had—pouring my blood, sweat, and time into this project. Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was failing. Every time I asked Paul for money, it chipped away at my pride. It didn't matter

that I was owed that money, or that I was working for it. The act of asking, of needing to rely on someone else for basic necessities, made me feel small and powerless.

The gap between where I was and where I thought I should be had never felt wider. And every day that passed, that gap seemed to stretch further.

Chapter 51

Second breaking point

That morning had all the signs of a bad day from the very beginning. It's hard to explain, but sometimes you just wake up knowing that everything is about to go wrong. I had stayed up late the night before, caught up in research, trying to stay ahead in my work, knowing I had no other distractions to turn to anymore. I used to have hobbies like running, playing guitar, or even drawing—things that gave me a break from work. But now, everything was focused on survival. I didn't even have the energy to go for a run anymore. My mind was exhausted.

Waking up late wasn't too big of a deal since I didn't have strict office hours. But spilling coffee all over myself definitely was. The coffee was scalding hot, and in my rush to avoid the spill, I knocked over a couple of picture frames. Glass shattered on the floor. Great. Now I had to clean up, change, and salvage whatever was left of my already disastrous morning. By the time I got to the office, it was 10:30. Pawel was already there, smiling and walking to his desk with his usual happiness. I wasn't really in the mood for his enthusiasm, but then something caught my eye—what was he holding?

"Hey, Pawel" I said, jumping out of my chair and catching him before he disappeared to his desk. "How are you?"

"Morning, Andy. Didn't see you there" he replied, holding up something in his hand.

“Is that a check?” I asked, my eyes narrowing on the slip of paper.

“Oh, yeah! Payment day, right?”

“Right. Payment day” I repeated, though my stomach churned at the words.

“Thanks a lot!” Pawel said, completely oblivious to my rising anxiety. After all, I was his 20% boss. He had every reason to be happy.

“No problem. Thank you for your hard work” I said, but my mind was racing.

Payment day? How had two weeks passed already? How was Pawel receiving his salary, and I had nothing? I tried to stay calm, but I could feel the anger bubbling up. I rushed to Giuseppe’s office, hoping this was some kind of misunderstanding. Maybe the partners get paid differently. I needed answers, but I knew I had to play it cool.

“Hi, Giuseppe. How’s it going today?” I asked, trying to keep my voice level.

“Oh, hi Andy” he said, not sensing anything wrong.

“I noticed you gave Pawel his payment today”, I said.

“Yes, we both got our checks. We’re on a biweekly payroll now. It’s Giuseppe’s call, actually” he explained, as if this were the most normal thing in the world.

“Right. That makes sense. So, any other payments going out today?” I asked, fishing for answers.

“No, it’s just Pawel and me receiving salaries right now.”

I nodded, trying to hide my frustration. I didn't want to ask about my payment directly. Being a partner, I didn't want to look like an idiot. Maybe there was some different process for board members, something I wasn't aware of. I just needed to be patient, right?

I headed to the cafeteria, trying to calm myself down. I ordered tea and some of those incredible croissants that I'd come to rely on for comfort. I was the breakfast champion by now, and it was one of the few pleasures left in my life. But even with the delicious food, I couldn't shake the frustration. I was supposed to be inspired, working on a project I believed in, but instead, I was suffocating under pressure.

I needed to talk to Paul.

"Hey, Paul" I said, entering his office as casually as I could manage.

"Hey, dude. What's up?" he said, already distracted, preparing for his day.

"I need to talk to you about something important."

"Can it wait? I have a meeting with potential clients in about an hour. We can chat later."

"No, Paul. Now" I said firmly.

It was the first time he saw me this upset. He noticed the tension in my voice, the look in my eyes.

"Okay, let's talk" he said, sitting down, crossing his arms like this was some casual discussion.

I shut the door behind me, trying to stay calm, but I could feel myself unraveling.

"So, I noticed you've started issuing payments" I began.

“Yeah, we’re on a biweekly schedule now. It’s working out well” Paul said, still acting like everything was fine.

“And what about my payment, Paul? I haven’t received a cent since I arrived. I’m three months behind on rent. The council taxes are piling up. Anna’s doing everything she can to hold off the gas and electricity companies, but they’re threatening to cut us off. I need the money. I’m desperate.”

Paul just sat there, looking at me, calm as ever. “Our money is bigger, Andy”, he finally said. “There’s going to be a delay. I’ve spoken with the investors about this.”

“I’m tired of waiting, Paul”, I snapped. “I’ve been here for months, working day and night, spending every cent I have on this project, and I’ve received nothing in return. I’m out of money. Do you understand that? I can’t keep doing this.”

“I gave you money, didn’t I?” Paul said defensively.

“No, Paul, you didn’t give me anything. You gave me just enough to keep me going so I could finish your project. You knew without me, there’s no product to show the investors. If you actually cared, you’d be helping me and my family get by.”

Paul leaned back in his chair, a cold look crossing his face. “Look, it was your decision to come here, wasn’t it?”

“Of course it was my decision” I fired back, “but now I want what I’m owed. And I still don’t even have my paperwork. I’m working here illegally, and you haven’t done a thing to fix that.”

Paul stood up, clearly irritated. “This is how it’s going to be, Andy. Like it or leave it.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Oh yeah? Fine. I'll take my work with me then" I said, my anger boiling over.

Paul smirked. "Take it, if you can."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

"You know why I hired Pawel?" he asked.

"To help me with the app" I said, still confused by the change in tone.

"Sure, but also to access your code" Paul said, his voice dripping with smugness.

"You're bluffing" I shot back. "There's no way Pawel has access to the code. I never gave him access."

Paul's grin widened. "Remember that nice, shiny computer on your desk?"

No. No way. I couldn't believe it. That brand-new computer I was so excited about—it had been a trap. A keylogger. Paul had been watching me the whole time, tracking every move I made.

"You son of a bitch" I muttered.

Paul leaned in closer, lowering his voice. "One more thing before you go, Andy. Don't ever forget—you don't belong here. You, Brazilians, Argentinians, Mexicans... all of you. You're nothing but Third World trash, and you'll always be our backyard."

As I stood there, stunned, two security guards appeared outside the office door, ready to escort me out. I was doomed.

I couldn't believe what had just happened. As I was escorted out of the office by those two towering security guards, my mind was racing. Who was Paul, really? Had he planned this from the start? Was I nothing more than a puppet in his game? I wanted to tell the guards I needed to collect my things from the office, but then it hit me—nothing in that office was actually mine. It was all just an illusion, like everything else that had happened since I arrived.

As I walked out, I saw Pawel. His eyes were cast down, filled with guilt. He knew his role in this. Maybe, in some way, he was silently apologizing. But it didn't matter now. The damage was done.

I walked back home in a daze, my feet dragging with every step. I couldn't process everything that had happened. My mind was flooded with thoughts, questions, anger. I had no papers to work in this country, no job, no money, no future. I had left a broken country only to end up broken myself.

By the time I got home, I had no plan. I just stood there for a moment, staring at the door, hoping for some kind of sign. When I finally walked in, I was met with a scene that shattered me even more. Anna and the girls were standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by suitcases.

"What is this, Anna?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

"We're leaving, Andy" she replied, her voice firm but tired.

"What? Are you crazy? Wait, wait... we need to talk" I pleaded, trying to grasp at any chance to stop this.

She shook her head. "Please, Andy. Don't make this harder than it already is."

"Let's talk outside, please" I said, trying to contain my panic. "Let's do this in private, okay?"

We stepped outside, and I could feel the weight of everything crashing down on me. This couldn't be happening. It felt like a nightmare I was going to wake up from any second.

"Look, Anna, please stay. I'm not working with Paul anymore. I'll find another job. Just give me a chance!" I begged, my voice shaking.

"I'm sorry, Andy", she said calmly, though I could see the sadness in her eyes. "We already have the plane tickets. The taxi is coming any minute now."

"Where are you going?" I asked, trying to comprehend what was happening.

"Where do you think we're going? Back to our country" she said, her tone filled with finality.

"But who gave you the money?" I asked, my heart sinking even further.

"My dad. Lucho sent it to me" she said, her voice quiet but steady. "Andy, I'm not well. We can't keep living like this."

"Just give me one more chance" I pleaded desperately.

"I've given you so many chances already", she replied. "We have no papers, no money. We're days away from being homeless. The bills are piling up, and now you're telling me you want to start over from scratch?"

We're not young adventurers anymore, Andy. We have two daughters. We have to be responsible."

At that moment, I heard the honk of the taxi outside. It was the sound of the final nail in the coffin.

"I'm sorry" she said, her voice softening. "I have to go. Come on, girls."

I was shattered. I hugged my daughters as tightly as I could, holding back the tears that were threatening to spill over. "I'll be with you soon, I promise" I said, my voice cracking.

"We'll miss you, Daddy. Come back quickly" Lara said, her eyes full of sadness.

"I will, darling. I'll be with you in no time. Just go with Mommy and be careful, okay?"

I watched as the taxi pulled away, carrying my entire world with it. My heart felt like it was being torn from my chest as I stood there, powerless. I'd been through tough times before, but nothing compared to this. This was the ultimate low point. This time, I wasn't just losing a job or a home—I was losing my family.

As the taxi disappeared down the street, I stood there, staring after it, feeling completely and utterly lost. "What the hell am I going to do now?" I whispered to myself, knowing there were no easy answers.

Chapter 52

Nothing left

There I was, seated in my nearly empty dining room, staring at the few pieces of furniture left. A table, a sofa—both not even mine. Neither was the fridge. Upstairs, the only things I truly owned were the beds. I could sell those, I thought, and maybe buy a plane ticket back to my country. The internet would last for another week before they disconnected it. My thoughts kept circling back to the landlord, Tas, and the inevitable moment when he'd arrive, demanding the rent or kicking me out.

But before that happened, I told myself, I had to try one more thing. Paul and the company had fallen apart, but there had to be something else out there. I was in the land of opportunities, right? There had to be a way to make this work.

"I'll find a job" I muttered under my breath, trying to convince myself. Sure, my visa situation wasn't ideal, but there had to be someone out there who wouldn't ask too many questions. A gardener, construction worker—anything that paid me for a month or two. Just enough to get back on my feet. And then I could leave.

"Yeah, that's the best plan" I reassured myself, pushing back the rising panic.

As I paced around the room, a sudden thought hit me: maybe I should write to mom and dad. Ask them for money. They weren't rich by any

means, but they'd help me out if I asked. But then again... better not. I knew them too well, especially mom. She wouldn't take this lightly. I could already hear her voice on the other end, panicked and heartbroken, knowing her son was struggling far from home. She was probably already suffering, just thinking about me being so far away. The last thing I wanted to do was make her worry more.

I felt torn. Part of me felt like a coward for not fighting harder against Paul, for letting it all fall apart. I should've fought him longer. Hell, I should have gone crazy in that office. What kind of man just walks out like I did? Why didn't I start a fight with those security guards? Break something. Anything. For Christ's sake, I should've done more. I felt like a big pussy for letting it happen the way it did, but then again, would that have solved anything?

I couldn't help but feel ashamed.

I was about to step outside and grab a newspaper when I caught sight of Tas through the window.

"Oh shit, the owner", I whispered. My heart raced as I instinctively closed the window quietly, locked the door, and remained hidden.

I could hear him outside, knocking loudly on the door, ringing the bell over and over again. My breath caught in my throat as I imagined him just a few feet away. What if one of the neighbors had seen the girls leave, seen the taxi? They could mention to Tas that someone was still inside the house, and if he involved the police... I didn't even want to think about it. But thankfully, the neighborhood stayed quiet.

After what felt like hours but was probably only five minutes, the knocking stopped. I waited, counting to a hundred in my head, before peeking through the blinds. Tas was finally walking back to his car, frustrated but gone. I exhaled, my chest tightening as I watched him drive away.

Once I was sure he was gone, I cautiously opened the door. There, in the mailbox, was the paper I dreaded seeing. Another warning from Tas. This time, it wasn't just a reminder. It was the final notice before he came back with the police.

"Damn it" I muttered, crushing the letter in my hand. I needed to sell these things now. No more waiting. No more delays. Time was running out.

I took my computer and started listing everything for sale. Half price, no time for negotiations. It had to go, and fast. I couldn't afford to wait for offers or haggle over a few extra dollars. The urgency was real, and every item represented a piece of the life that was crumbling around me.

I was hungry, tired, and running low on ideas, but there was no time to wallow in that. I had to act, and fast. I opened my laptop and began searching for the quickest, most reliable platforms to sell as much as possible. I scrolled through different websites and apps, figuring out where I could get rid of things with minimal hassle. Some items I listed belonged to the apartment, but honestly, I didn't care anymore. I needed cash, and I needed it now. Morality had little room in this situation.

I took photos of everything. Furniture, appliances, random knick-knacks—anything that looked remotely valuable. It felt mechanical at first, just snapping pictures and uploading them, but with each click, I felt like I was losing another part of what little dignity I had left. The urgency was overwhelming. It consumed me. The idea of failure haunted my every action. The faster I got things listed, the faster I could get cash and figure out my next move.

It took me the rest of the day, well into the night. Post after post, all under different names, on every popular site I could think of. I didn't care if people recognized the same items listed multiple times. I just wanted the best chance to sell as fast as possible.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I was done. I stared at the screen, dazed and exhausted, before eventually closing the laptop. The weight of

everything hit me all at once. I didn't even have the energy to change clothes. I just lay down on the sofa, still fully dressed, and passed out.

I slept like a baby that night. Out cold, as if the exhaustion had finally taken control and forced me into a deep, dreamless sleep. It was a temporary escape from the nightmare my life had become. At least for a few hours, I didn't have to think about tomorrow.

To my surprise, messages flooded in. Some things, I even reduced further if no one was biting. By 7 p.m., I had already lined up three visits for the next day. Every time the doorbell rang, or I heard a knock, I had to rush upstairs to check who it was. I couldn't risk Tas showing up unannounced, putting me out before I had the chance to sell everything. It was a strange feeling, half hoping it was a buyer and half dreading that it might be the landlord coming to kick me out.

The warning Tas left was clear: if I didn't pay, he'd be back with the police the following week. No more chances. But my plan—if you could even call it a plan—was working. I sold everything in just three days. It felt unreal, but it gave me a small sense of accomplishment in a sea of defeat. I even bought some food. I figured I might as well have one decent meal before plunging into the unknown. The horizon was murky, full of uncertainties. Jail? Deportation? God knows what could happen next.

I made \$800 from selling all our stuff. Not bad. Enough for a plane ticket, maybe a bit extra, but I wasn't about to get reckless. That money had to last me. I tucked it all away in the secret little bag I brought with me to this country. The same one I'd tied to my belt when we first arrived full of hope and dreams. Now, it was all I had left—physically and symbolically.

My plan was simple, though far from ideal: live on the streets. Maybe I'd find a job. Maybe I'd lose my mind. Who knew? At that point, anything seemed possible, and not in a good way.

As I locked the door for the last time, I felt the weight of everything I was leaving behind. I turned to face the empty house. The silence inside echoed with memories of when we first came here, full of excitement and ambition. We were supposed to build a new life, a better life. Now, all that was left was the ghost of those dreams. I stood there for what felt like hours, crying silently. The questions swirled in my head, but none of them had answers: *What went wrong? What happens to people like me? Will I ever belong anywhere? Is this how my life will be from now on?*

But I couldn't think like that, not if I wanted to survive. I knew if I let those thoughts consume me, I'd fall into a depression so deep I might never come out. "Come on, pal, do something" I muttered to myself, trying to shake off the darkness creeping in. But it was too much. The weight of everything hit me like a wave, and I collapsed onto the floor, crying harder than I had in years. I was overwhelmed, empty, and lost.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up, it was already dark outside. The exhaustion had taken over without me realizing it. I washed my face, checked my bag to make sure the money was still there, and slowly stood up. It was time to go. I left the keys under the carpet. I felt a pang of guilt for Tas—this wasn't his fault. He'd trusted me, and now he'd probably never rent to a foreigner again. It wasn't fair that my failure should make him or anyone else mistrust strangers. But in the end, this was just business. For him, for me. All business.

The night air was crisp as I stepped out onto the street. It was nice, in a way, to walk under the cover of darkness. I didn't want anyone seeing me like this—defeated, empty, broken. Where was I going? I didn't know. I had no plan, no direction, just a vague hope that something might turn up.

"Let's try finding a job" I muttered, though I wasn't even sure where to start.

Chapter 53

Surfin' USA

"No way. Not another country" I muttered under my breath. I had spent so long hating my own country, blaming it for all the bad luck, the hardships, the missed opportunities, that it felt like déjà vu. Now here I was, in a different country, facing the same kind of disaster. I couldn't keep running and blaming entire nations for my bad decisions and rotten luck. It hit me like a punch to the gut—was it really the country? Or was it just me?

I kept walking, my feet carrying me through the city, though I hardly knew where I was anymore. I must have walked all night, and yet, exhaustion hadn't caught up with me. Hunger, though—that was clawing at me. My stomach growled angrily, reminding me that I hadn't eaten anything substantial in what felt like days.

As I wandered the streets, my mind buzzed with thoughts of Anna and the girls. I wanted to see them, to hear their voices, to know they were okay. Would Anna ever come back? She was the only woman I had ever truly loved, and despite everything, a small part of me still believed she loved me too. But did she love me enough to forgive me for dragging us all into this mess? That, I didn't know.

I found myself in a part of the city that seemed different. The air felt heavier, grittier. The neighborhood was "Tenderloin." I knew the reputation—it wasn't exactly the safest place in San Francisco. Trash

littered the sidewalks, broken bottles glinted under the flickering streetlights, and homeless people huddled in makeshift shelters made from cardboard. I passed a group of guys hanging on a corner, their eyes tracking me as I hurried past, trying to avoid trouble.

My savings—what little I had left—were strapped tightly between my stomach and my belt, and I wasn't about to let it go. If someone jumped me now, I couldn't even call the police. I was a tourist, technically illegal at this point, and my landlord was likely hunting me down, too.

I turned the corner, desperate for something—anything—that could offer hope. That's when I saw it. A nightclub. The kind of place where I thought I might find some luck, or at least some information. The black-painted exterior stood out, even in the dim light of the early morning. It had no sign, no flashy lights, but I figured it was worth a shot. I knocked hard on the door. No answer. I circled around back, down a narrow, sketchy alley that I wouldn't have dared step into back home—prime territory for getting robbed or worse. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

A guy emerged from the back, hauling a garbage bag over his shoulder. Kitchen staff, by the looks of him.

"Hey!" I called out, startling him. "Do you know where I can find the owner or manager?"

He barely looked up as he responded in a gruff voice, "He's not here."

"Okay, but do you know when I could find him? Maybe later?"

"At seven" he said, giving me just enough to work with before disappearing back inside.

Before he could shut the door, I shouted, "Hey, do you know if they need anyone?"

"They're looking for a security guy. The last one quit. You could try your luck. Ask for Federico"

Perfect. It wasn't glamorous, but I could do security work. At least I thought I could. I had watched enough people do it in my pub to fake my way through. Now I had a chance, and I couldn't screw this up. I had to look the part, though. There's no way the guy in a cardigan and red New Balance sneakers could intimidate anyone. I needed the right clothes, the right attitude. I needed to be like Little Boy, the giant security guard I had once hired—cold, silent, and, above all, menacing.

I started searching for a store—someplace I could get a cheap black shirt, pants, and maybe some knockoff sunglasses to complete the look. After walking for what felt like forever, I finally stumbled on a second-hand shop. It was like a gift from above. I rushed inside, combing through the racks, picking out two black shirts (one for later when the other needed a wash), black trousers, and some cheap sunglasses. I even grabbed a pair of used dress shoes.

I bought it all with what little cash I had left. The knot in my stomach tightened—it was painful spending money when I knew it was the last of what I had. But this was my shot, and I couldn't afford to blow it.

With the clothes in hand, I found a quiet bench in a small park nearby. I sat down to eat the granola bars I had bought at a convenience store earlier. They tasted like cardboard, but at least they kept me full. I closed my eyes, leaning back against the bench, and tried to forget everything for a while. The weight of the world pressed down on me, and all I wanted was to escape for just a couple of hours. My brain buzzed with plans for the night, but exhaustion was creeping up on me. I drifted off to sleep, the sounds of the city fading into the background.

I woke up with a start, someone shaking me roughly by the shoulder. I blinked into the harsh light, disoriented, only to find a police officer looming over me.

“Get up!” he barked. “You can’t sleep here.”

Before I could gather my thoughts or say anything, two more officers appeared, flanking me on either side. They grabbed me by the arms, pulling me to my feet and marching me toward a squad car that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“Wait—what’s happening?” I stammered. “I was just sleeping on a bench!”

“That’s not all you’ve been doing”, one officer said ominously.

In a flash, I found myself in a sterile, blindingly white interrogation room. Two officers sat across from me, their faces as cold and serious as the furniture in the room. One of them flipped open a thick file, dramatically clearing his throat.

“So” he began slowly, as though savoring every word. “Andy, right? You want to explain yourself?”

“What? Explain what? I didn’t do anything wrong!” I said, panic rising in my chest.

The officer tapped the file with his pen. “Oh, you did something alright. According to our records, you’ve been violating several serious statutes.”

“What statutes?” I asked, completely baffled.

The other officer, who had been silent until now, leaned forward. “Asking for money without a permit.”

I blinked, my brain struggling to process what I’d just heard. “What? Money? Who did I ask for money?”

“Don’t play dumb with us” the first officer said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “You asked Paul for money, didn’t you?”

I stared at him, dumbfounded. “Paul? My business partner? Yeah, I asked him for money. So what?”

The officer smirked, leaning back in his chair. “In this city, you can’t just go around asking people for money without the proper permit. Did you file a Form 843-B? Didn’t think so.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I said, my heart pounding faster. “A permit to ask for money? That’s insane!”

The second officer pulled out a thick booklet, slamming it onto the table. “This is the legal code, buddy. Read it. Section 504 clearly states: ‘No individual may request financial aid, loans, or monetary assistance without obtaining the appropriate permit from local authorities.’ And as for you, well...you violated that law when you asked Paul for money. Twice.”

My mouth fell open. “But...he’s my business partner! We were working on a project together!”

“That doesn’t matter”, the first officer said, shaking his head. “Whether it’s a business loan, a friendly favor, or even asking for gas money—you need a permit.”

I felt like I was trapped in some kind of twisted nightmare. “So what happens now? Am I going to jail for this?”

“Oh, you wish it were that simple” the second officer said, smiling grimly. “First, we’ll fine you for every unauthorized request for funds. Then, you’ll need to attend a mandatory ‘Financial Request Etiquette’ class. And finally, we’ll have to put you on probation.”

“Probation?” I gasped. “For asking Paul for help?”

“Without the proper paperwork, yes” the officer confirmed, closing the file with a loud snap. “Consider yourself lucky we caught you before you escalated to asking for groceries. That’s a much bigger offense.”

“But this is ridiculous!” I protested. “I didn’t know I needed a permit for that. Who would even think to apply for something like that?”

The officer leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. “Ignorance of the law is no excuse, Andy. This city doesn’t tolerate financial anarchy.”

Before I could respond, the door behind me opened with a loud creak. Two more officers entered, holding a thick stack of forms. They dropped them onto the table in front of me, each page marked with a dense wall of text.

“What...what is all this?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

“Those are the forms you need to fill out to retroactively apply for the money request permit” one of the new officers said. “You’ll need three copies of each, notarized, and filed by tomorrow morning.”

“By tomorrow?” I echoed, staring in disbelief at the mountain of paperwork. “There’s no way I can get all of this done in one night!”

The officer shrugged. “That’s not our problem. It’s your responsibility to follow the law.”

My head was spinning. I couldn’t believe any of this. Asking for money without a permit? Forms? Fines? It was like common sense had been banned.

I sighed, knowing there was no way out. The weight of the pen felt heavy in my hand as I reached for the first form. Slowly, I began to write my name.

But then something strange happened. The paper beneath my hand began to move. At first, it was a subtle, almost imperceptible ripple, as if the ink were alive. Then, the page started to curl inward, wrapping around my fingers like a snake.

“What the hell?” I muttered, trying to pull my hand back.

But it was too late. The paper held tight. I tugged harder, panic bubbling up in my chest as I realized my hand was sinking into the form itself. It was as though the paper had turned into some kind of quicksand. I watched in horror as it swallowed my wrist, then my forearm.

“Help! What is this?!” I shouted, but the officers just stared at me, unmoved.

“Keep filling out the forms” one of them said calmly, as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

My arm was now halfway submerged in the stack of paperwork. I pulled with all my strength, but the harder I struggled, the deeper I sank. The paper was devouring me, layer by layer, sheet by sheet, like some monstrous bureaucracy with an insatiable appetite.

“I said: Keep filling out the forms, Andy” the same officer shouted me in anger.

My elbow vanished, then my shoulder. I screamed, feeling the cold, suffocating grip of the paper pulling me down into its depths. The walls of the room faded away as my body was consumed. I could feel the paper wrapping around my chest, my neck—

And then everything went black.

I jolted awake, gasping for air.

I was still on the park bench. My heart pounded in my chest as I frantically looked around, disoriented and terrified. The early morning light filtered through the trees. No officers, no interrogation room, no forms eating me alive.

It was just a dream. A bizarre, nightmarish dream.

I sat up, rubbing my face, my hands still shaking. "A permit to ask Paul for money? What the hell is wrong with me?"

I looked around, checking to make sure no one was actually watching me from the shadows. I felt my heart slow down, the panic ebbing away. It was just a dream. But still, the thought of asking Paul for money again made me feel sick.

I guess when fear takes over, your brain simulates the worst-case scenario, like a sick rehearsal for what might happen if you don't get it right. I've heard people say dreams help us process reality. Maybe they're right. My nightmares were always trying to figure out how to navigate through this mess.

It was dark when I finally came to my senses. Must've been around eight or nine. Perfect timing for a nightclub to start getting busy. I had hours before this, and I spent them prepping for my new role. I'd found some

gel at a pharmacy earlier, and now I slicked my hair back, giving it that just-showered look. It wasn't much, but it had to do. After all, appearances were half the battle when trying to fit into a new skin, a new persona. I also had a small mirror and comb I bought in a rush—tools of survival. I needed to look like I had it all together, even when I didn't.

Walking toward the nightclub felt like walking into an audition, except failure wasn't an option. I couldn't afford it. My mind swirled with thoughts I didn't want—like Anna and the girls. Thinking about them would only make me weak, and right now, I needed to be anything but. But God, how I missed them. If I thought too much about what might happen next, I'd collapse. I had to focus on the task ahead: impress Federico, get the job, and survive.

When I arrived, the nightclub was lit up with bright colors, the kind of lights that scream "come lose yourself inside." A guy stood at the door, and before I could get two steps closer, he barked, "Ten bucks."

"Sorry?" I responded, confused.

"Ten bucks for the ticket"

Right. No free entry, even for those looking for work. "Look, I'm here to talk to Federico about a job. Can I skip the ticket for a second?"

He eyed me up and down, then reluctantly waved me through. "Fine. But talk fast. He's at the bar. And you better make this quick, or you'll be out of here... in small pieces."

I nodded, suppressing the urge to thank him. As much as my instinct told me to be polite, I was supposed to be a hardass security guy. No thank-yous, no pleasantries. I kept it cold.

Inside, the club was a revelation. From the outside, it looked like a small dive, but once you were in, it opened up like a secret world—two floors, big enough to pack in over 300 people. Booths lined the walls, giving the

place an air of exclusivity. The bar sat in the center, round and sleek, like a centerpiece of booze and neon lights. I scanned the bottles—some of the same brands I used to stock at my pub. A wave of nostalgia hit me hard. For a moment, I missed my old life so badly, it almost crushed me.

Federico stood at the bar, talking to one of the bartenders, probably instructing him on stock or something to do with the drinks. He was exactly what I expected: short, impeccably dressed in a dark blue suit, with a red handkerchief tucked into his pocket, making him look every bit the classic Italian businessman. I put on my shades, remembering my role, and walked straight up to him.

"Are you Federico?" I asked, trying my best to channel that cold, tough persona.

"Nice hair" he said, eyeing my gelled locks. "Who's asking?"

"Andy. I heard you're looking for a security guy."

"Yeah? How'd you hear that?"

"I know things." God, I felt like an idiot as soon as the words left my mouth. What was I, some secret agent? But before I could backpedal, he smirked.

"You know things, huh? Okay, pal. You've got my attention. What's your angle?"

I dropped the tough act for a moment, realizing I needed to level with him if I was going to get anywhere. "Look, I need a job. I used to run a pub. I know security. You won't regret hiring me."

He studied me for a beat. "Tall, not too bulky, but you could work. Alright, I'll give you a trial. Go help Johnny at the door. If you can handle it, you're in. Just don't fuck it up."

Relief washed over me. "You won't regret it." I wanted to sound more confident than I felt. This was my chance, and I couldn't blow it.

"Grab some food first. You look like you haven't eaten in weeks. Micaela over there will sort you out" he said, pointing to the bartender, who nodded in acknowledgment.

Micaela was young, probably in her mid-twenties, with long dark hair streaked with aqua blue. She wore black eyeliner that made her eyes look intense, along with a nose ring that probably hurt like hell going in. She handed me a plate without saying much, and I devoured it like it was my last meal. Maybe it was. For the first time in a long time, the food tasted good. And while the club buzzed with activity, I thought about how, for the first time in months, I wasn't a total failure. There was hope. Slim, but hope.

By 3 a.m., the club was finally winding down. The band had been amazing—smooth rock with a soulful lead singer who captivated the crowd. There were no major incidents, just the usual drunk patrons who needed a gentle nudge toward the exit. I was relieved. This wasn't like the chaotic nights back at my pub. This was... manageable.

As the last of the crowd trickled out, Federico came over. "Not bad, Andy. You've got the job."

"Thanks, dude. I appreciate it."

"Don't get too comfortable", he warned. "Some of these guys aren't as harmless as they seem. We'll talk about the troublemakers tomorrow."

I nodded, grateful for the warning, but in the back of my mind, I was thinking about something else: where was I going to sleep? As if reading my thoughts, Federico stopped and turned to me.

"You got a place to stay?"

"No", I admitted. "I'm working on it."

"Kevin, the cook, is looking for a roommate. Talk to him. He might have a spare room for you."

I couldn't believe my luck. "Thank you, Federico. Seriously."

"Don't thank me yet" he smirked. "Let's see if you survive the week."

I went outside, retrieving my bag from the dark alley. Kevin was waiting, taking out the last of the trash from the kitchen. We struck up a conversation as we walked back into the kitchen. I couldn't help but feel a weird sense of camaraderie with him. He'd been through hell in his life, too, and as he shared his story, I realized how universal struggle was.

"So, what's your name?" Kevin asked, giving me a once-over like he was trying to figure out if I was worth the conversation.

"I'm Andy" I said, a bit cautiously, then added, "Nice to meet you, Kevin."

He raised an eyebrow and smirked slightly. "What brings you here?"

I sighed. "Long story, but let's just say... looking for better opportunities. It's not easy back there."

Kevin nodded knowingly. "Yeah, I get that. Same reason most of us end up in places like this. Figured the US was the land of opportunity, huh?"

I chuckled dryly. "Something like that. Still waiting on that opportunity to show up, though."

Kevin leaned against the counter, crossing his arms. "Trust me, you're not the first. I've seen people come and go, all chasing something better. Some find it, some don't. But we all have a story, right?"

It wasn't just small talk anymore. It was like he was opening the door for something deeper. And that's when I realized he probably had a story too.

"I'm not originally from here. I've had a long journey.", he started saying, so I nodded for him to continue.

"I'm from Israel" he began, his voice steady, though a hint of weariness laced his words. "Actually, I was born in Russia, but we moved when my parents divorced. My mother— she got fed up with my father. He was a good-for-nothing drunk, and she finally decided enough was enough. She packed everything she could and took me to my grandfather's house back in Israel."

He paused, leaning against the counter, his eyes distant as if the memories were playing like a film in his mind. "It was a small village, very religious. My mom worked hard—became a store manager, and somehow, she made it work, supporting both me and my grandpa. I grew up surrounded by tradition. You don't question it when it's all you've ever known."

I nodded, understanding a little too well how family expectations can shape you.

"There" Kevin continued, "you don't just pray when things go wrong—you pray for everything. When you wake up, when you eat, before you sleep. It was a strict life. And then, like all Israeli men, I did my mandatory three years of military service. It was tough, but it was expected. Women serve too, unless they're religious. That's the only way out."

He shifted, his voice lowering slightly as if revealing something he didn't often talk about. "But then I met Haim. He was different, a rebel. He wasn't scared of anything. And he had this way of showing me that there

was more out there. More than the rules we grew up with. He questioned everything.”

Kevin’s face softened with a brief smile as he recalled his old friend. “I remember asking him once, ‘Haim, are you telling me that if I don’t wear the kippah, God won’t be mad at me?’ He just laughed. I grew up afraid of breaking any rule—afraid of God’s wrath. It’s drilled into you since you’re a kid. But Haim showed me something else.”

“And then?” I asked, drawn into his story.

“We left”, Kevin said with a sigh, as though the decision had come easily. “One morning, we just packed up and left for Qatar. I wrote a letter to my mom, explaining why I had to go, why I had to see the real world. My family was furious. My grandpa told me if I went there, the Arabs would kill me. But Haim insisted I see life for myself.”

His eyes gleamed with the memory of youthful defiance. “When we got to Qatar, I realized the world was nothing like what I’d been taught. It was luxury, extravagance, and indulgence—all the things they said didn’t exist in the Middle East. It’s all underground, sure, but it’s there if you know where to look.”

“We ended up working for a strip club” Kevin continued, his tone more resigned. “Our job was to plaster stickers with the club’s name on cars. It was a strange, reckless life. I went from being a devout religious kid to indulging in all the sins I had been warned about. Alcohol, women, gambling—you name it. The more I felt like I’d been lied to all my life, the more I threw myself into everything.”

He paused for a moment, his gaze distant. “Now, I know what you’re thinking—Qatar? A place where alcohol is forbidden, and they say it’s a religious country? You’d expect none of this stuff to exist, right? But trust me, it’s all there. Just underground. Hidden from the public eye, sure, but thriving. Strip clubs, bars, gambling—you’d be amazed. All the

things they preach against publicly, they indulge in privately. It's a place of contradictions. On the surface, everything looks strict, clean, and conservative, but beneath it? It's another world entirely."

He gave a wry smile. "It's like ancient Rome. The more things are forbidden, the more they happen in the shadows. And once you're part of that world, it's easy to get lost in it. That's where I found myself—living in a country where all the things they tell you are immoral are happening behind closed doors. And I was right in the middle of it."

He stopped for a moment, then continued, "But that wasn't my calling. I discovered something else there—something I really loved: cooking."

I raised an eyebrow, surprised at the sudden shift in his story.

"Yeah, I know", Kevin chuckled. "We were working in the kitchen, doing all the grunt work, cleaning and chopping. But I loved watching the chefs work. I admired them. So, I started paying attention, trying to learn everything I could. Haim thought I was crazy. He told me to stop dreaming, but I didn't care. One day, when one of the assistants didn't show up, they asked me to step in. That was my break."

His eyes lit up as he recalled that moment. "It was like a dream. I worked my way up, learned as much as I could. Haim, though—he wasn't interested in any of it. He left to find another gig. But I stayed. I'd finally found my passion."

"What happened next?" I asked, intrigued.

Kevin's smile faded slightly. "Well, life happened. I was dating this girl, and she ended up pregnant. I wasn't ready for that. I panicked. We fought, and in the end, I ran. I left her and the baby. That guilt—it ate at me for years."

I could sense the regret in his voice, but he moved past it quickly. "Eventually, Haim and I left Qatar. We tried Morocco for a while, but it

wasn't the same. Then we heard about the 'land of opportunity.' The United States. "We worked on a ship to get here, barely spoke any English, but that didn't matter. Haim had heard that if you can survive in America, you can make it anywhere. We landed, and he stuck by me for a while, but eventually, he got tired of my constant chasing after chef jobs. 'You're crazy,' he'd say every time I turned down something because it wasn't in a kitchen."

Kevin laughed softly, shaking his head at the memory. "He finally settled in a McDonald's, said it was good enough for him. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't let go of the dream. So, I kept moving, applying to restaurants all over the place. Washing dishes at first, but I didn't care. I kept watching, kept learning. And eventually, I got my shot. I became a chef."

He leaned back, his arms crossed, and for a moment, I could see a hint of pride in his expression. "I worked in some great places. Fancy restaurants, important kitchens. But that's where I ran into a different kind of problem."

"What do you mean?" I asked, already knowing there was more to the story.

Kevin sighed. "The money. These guys who open restaurants? They start off with nothing—taking risks, trying new things, pushing the boundaries of what's possible in the kitchen. I loved that. That's the heart of creativity, right? But once the money starts rolling in, they change. They get scared. They stop taking risks because they've got something to lose now. They've built their empires—bought houses, cars, maybe even a second wife. And suddenly, it's all about keeping what they have."

I nodded. It was a familiar story.

"They stop being creative", Kevin continued. "They start playing it safe. Same dishes, no new ideas. It's not about the love of food anymore—it's about protecting the empire. And that's when I lose interest. I don't want

to work for someone who's just protecting their investment. I want to work for someone who's still willing to take risks."

"So that's how you ended up here?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Yeah, in a way. I've bounced around a lot, and now I'm here, cooking what I want, doing things my way. It's not fancy, and it's definitely not luxurious. But at least I don't have someone breathing down my neck, telling me to stick to the same old boring menu."

Kevin's story was both inspiring and cautionary. I admired the way he'd stuck to his passion, even when it meant sacrificing comfort and stability.

"Enough about me", Kevin said, snapping me out of my thoughts. "You hungry? I've got some food left from the kitchen."

I nodded, grateful. "You read my mind, man."

He handed me a plate with some cheese and other stuff that looked very interesting. "Here, eat up. Then we'll figure out where you can crash for the night."

As I took the plate, I couldn't help but feel like, for the first time in a long while, I'd met someone who understood the struggle. Kevin had made it through, against all odds, and somehow, that gave me hope.

From his strict religious upbringing in Israel to the rebellious escape to Qatar, his journey had been one of transformation. Kevin wasn't just a cook; he was a survivor, like me. I listened as he told me about Qatar's underground nightlife, the hypocrisy of a society that preached purity but thrived on vice. His life sounded like a movie, full of exotic locations and dangerous choices.

We stood there, long after the club had shut down, both of us knowing that the road ahead was still full of uncertainty. But for the first time in a

long time, I felt like I wasn't alone in my fight. I had a job. A place to stay. And maybe, just maybe, a second chance.

The next day, I woke up at 10 am, which felt like a luxury. Kevin's place was a simple two-bedroom mini-flat, clean and compact. The bathroom was tiny, but everything worked perfectly. The main area doubled as a kitchen and dining room, with a small table and three mismatched chairs that added a certain charm to the place.

After a quick shower, I realized I had no fresh underwear, so I slipped back into my old trousers, packed up my dirty clothes for later, and made a mental note to find a laundry shop nearby. While I dressed, I glanced around Kevin's kitchen. It was incredible how much equipment he had packed into such a small space—pots, pans, and utensils of every kind. He could cook just about anything here. It was clear that as long as I stayed, this tiny flat would offer more culinary adventures than privacy.

Work as a security guy had become routine. There were a few rowdy patrons here and there, the kind who thought a nightclub was the perfect place to prove how tough they were. But most of them would settle down the moment I gave them my cold, intimidating stare—those dark glasses really helped. Every now and then, I had to step in to prevent a fight, but in general, it wasn't too serious.

I was starting to enjoy this simple life. It was ironic, really. Here I was, living in the epicenter of the tech world, taking a break from the very industry that had brought me to this country. Maybe it was the distance from it all that gave me a clearer head. Or maybe I was just tired of chasing dreams that kept slipping through my fingers.

I had been saving money—enough that the idea of bringing Anna and the girls back crossed my mind more than once. But deep down, I knew that wasn't going to happen. Anna wasn't the type to return to a place once she'd made her mind up, and I didn't blame her. I had made too many mistakes. Still, I couldn't stop myself from hoping that, with time, things might change.

Despite everything, I felt the urge to reach out to her. I missed her and the girls more than I could admit, and not having a phone made it harder to keep the connection. So, I turned to the one thing I had at my disposal—Kevin's laptop. After work, before I collapsed into bed, I sat down and typed her a message.

"Hi Anna, I know you probably don't want to hear from me. You must be disappointed and angry, and I know I deserve it. But please believe me, I never intended for things to end up like this. I trusted the wrong person, but that's not an excuse. I'm fully aware of my own mistakes. You married a crazy person. I'm sorry for everything. I never wanted to hurt you or the girls. I just wanted a new beginning for us, but I went about it all wrong.

Right now, I'm working and saving money, just temporarily at a local place. I want to come see you. I want to talk, if you're willing to hear me out. Please think about it. We've been through so much, and I believe we deserve a second chance.

I love you, I miss you, and I miss the girls more than I can put into words. I've never felt so lost without you all."

I signed my name at the end and hit 'send' without rereading it. I knew it wasn't perfect, but it was honest. Sometimes the right words come when you stop trying too hard and just let your heart speak.

Chapter 54

The bad guy

Let me tell you how my days in San Francisco ended.

It was a Saturday night, one of those nights that felt different from the start. Federico, the club owner, had pulled some strings and arranged for a popular band to perform. The place was set to host some big names—important people with money and influence. The kind of crowd that expected nothing less than perfection. Extra top-shelf liquor was brought in, Kevin had the kitchen on point, and the atmosphere inside the club was electrifying.

We were all called in early that day for a quick briefing. Federico stood in the middle of the circle, and we gathered around him, anticipating what he'd say.

"Thanks for coming in early, guys" Federico began, looking us all over. "As you can see, the place looks sharp tonight, and we've got the good booze. This is our chance to make some serious extra money. So tonight, you'll all be getting a bonus—just don't mess it up. Clear?"

Everyone nodded in agreement. We could all feel the weight of the night ahead. Federico gestured to me and Tommy, the other security guy, signaling that he needed a word with us in private.

"Look, guys" he said in a low voice, glancing over his shoulder. "Kendal's coming tonight."

The way Tommy tensed up immediately told me this wasn't good news.

"Kendal?" Tommy asked, his voice almost a whisper, though he was clearly rattled. "That guy's bad news, Federico. You know it. Every time he comes, something goes wrong."

"I know", Federico sighed. "But what am I supposed to do? The guy's connected. I can't ban him from the place, or I'll be shutting these doors for good. Just... keep your eyes open and stay cool, alright? Andy, Tommy will fill you in on who you're dealing with."

Tommy gave me a look that said it all—this was no ordinary customer. Kendal was a local gangster, the kind who didn't take no for an answer. He ran all sorts of shady operations in the area, and it seemed like trouble followed him wherever he went. There were even rumors he had run from New York, leaving behind a trail of unpaid debts and bodies. And he never went anywhere without packing heat or bringing a few guys who did.

I had a bad feeling, but I kept it together. I'd handled tough situations before, and I had to trust that I could manage this too.

As the night wore on, the club started filling up. The crowd was a mix of high-rollers, locals dressed to impress, and a few regulars who were lucky to be mingling with the elite. The champagne was flowing, and the place had a buzz like it was ready to explode at any moment. The air was thick with the energy of people who were there to see and be seen.

"Andy" Tommy called, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Look over there at the door. That's Kendal."

I turned to see him—a tall, broad-shouldered man in a sharp suit, flanked by two stunning blondes who seemed more like accessories than

company. Everything about him screamed danger, and I could tell from the moment I saw him that he wasn't someone to cross. He had the kind of confidence that comes from knowing you've got power—and the means to back it up.

"Let me handle this", Tommy said quickly. "If he says or asks for anything, just let me know."

"Got it" I replied, though I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling in my gut.

Kendal walked in like he owned the place. Tommy went over to talk to him, and for a while, things seemed normal. But something felt off—Tommy was nervous, more than I'd ever seen him. I kept watching from the shadows, just in case. I couldn't hear their conversation, but I could tell it was getting heated. Suddenly, Tommy turned red, his voice raising enough for me to catch bits and pieces. Kendal remained calm, smiling with the same smug expression he'd had when he walked in.

Then, out of nowhere, one of Kendal's goons stepped forward and punched Tommy hard in the gut. I moved before I could think.

"Hey! What the hell is going on here?" I shouted, pushing my way toward them.

The bodyguard shot me a look that could kill. He was a mountain of a man, built like a tank, and he wasn't in the mood for pleasantries.

"Who the fuck are you?" he growled, stepping toward me.

"Take it easy, alright?" I said, trying to keep my voice calm but firm. "I'm security. You need to leave—now."

Kendal, still standing there with that arrogant smirk, finally spoke up.

"Or what?" he said, his voice slow and deliberate. "You wanna end up like your friend here?"

At that moment, I saw Federico hurrying over, looking pale. He had seen enough to know this was going sideways, fast.

"Whoa, whoa, what's happening here?" Federico said, trying to diffuse the situation. "Andy, help Tommy up. Let's calm this down."

I helped Tommy to his feet, but he was livid, still glaring at Kendal.

"Are you alright?" I asked quietly.

"Leave me the hell alone" Tommy snapped, shrugging off my arm. Something in him had snapped, and before I could stop him, he lunged at Kendal.

"Tommy, no!" Federico shouted, but it was too late.

Chaos erupted. Kendal's men were pulling out guns, the crowd was screaming, chairs were knocked over, and the band stopped playing mid-note. I hit the floor, trying to stay low as the first gunshot rang out. I could see people pushing toward the exits, running, tripping over tables and each other.

Kendal's men dragged him out of the club, one of them firing a shot into the ceiling just to make sure no one followed. By the time they were gone, the place was a wreck. Tommy was out cold on the floor, and Federico was frantically on his phone, probably not calling the police—he didn't need the attention on his club.

As the dust settled, I helped people leave the place. My head was pounding, and as I looked around at the destruction, I thought of Anna and the girls. This wasn't what I'd signed up for. I didn't leave my country, give up everything, just to get caught in this mess.

I knew right then and there that it was time for me to go.

Chapter 55

Going Back is not Easy

There I was, sitting at the airport with no sleep and wearing the same clothes from the night before. I had walked away from the club without saying goodbye to anyone. No parting words for Federico or Kevin, no thank-you to the people who had helped me survive those last few weeks. I didn't have it in me. The rollercoaster that had been my life in San Francisco was on a rapid descent, and I was just too exhausted to do anything but leave.

Looking out through the windows at the city I had tried to make my own, I felt a confusing mix of emotions. Part of me wanted to say, "Thanks for nothing" while another part wanted to whisper, "Thank you for the lessons." Maybe I needed time to sort through all of it, time to decide whether the city had given me more than it had taken.

The trip back home was a blur, but it took about twelve hours after landing to finally reach my hometown. First, a train and then a bus. I slept during the plane ride, and by the time I was on the bus, I had surrendered to exhaustion. I was a mess, physically and emotionally. My hair, stiff from the gel I'd put in the night before, was all over the place. At first, I tried to fix it, but then I just stopped caring. I must have looked like a man who had hit rock bottom. Well, I actually was.

I called my parents because, let's face it, I had nowhere else to go. Despite everything, they were happy to hear I was coming back, like I

was some prodigal son returning home. When my mom opened the door, she was already crying—tears of relief, of joy, of having her son safe again. No matter what had happened, nothing was important now. I knew they would always love me.

So there I was, back at my parents' house. Living day by day. I tried to keep my expenses to a minimum, not wanting to be a burden. My plan was to give myself at least a week before I reached out to Anna. I needed time to think, rest and figure out how to approach her. If she didn't want to see me, fine. But I was sure she would at least let me see the girls.

The first month was rough. What kept me going was spending time with my daughters. I took them out to different places, trying to make up for the lost time. They were back in school, and I felt guilty for everything that had happened. I hadn't intended to hurt anyone; I had just wanted to give us a better future.

Anna, though—she was distant. My calls went unanswered. Emails and chat remained unopened. It hurt more than I could admit. My mom and sister tried to cheer me up, but the country's economic crisis was like a heavy fog over everything. Even if I wanted to work, where would I find a job? Starting a business was out of the question—loans were impossible, and I had debts with the bank that made me an outcast in the financial world. No credit cards, no options.

Two months passed in the same situation. My beard grew long, and I eventually shaved it, hating the gray strands that were starting to show. I didn't feel old. I still had energy inside me, still felt like I had more to offer. I wasn't done yet, not by a long shot.

But as the days went by, Anna's silence weighed on me. I called her almost every day, left her voice messages, sent her emails—nothing. Not a single response. I felt the loneliness gnawing at me like a disease.

It was a Saturday night. My parents were out, and I was on my second bottle of cheap red wine, drinking to forget, to numb myself from the emptiness I was feeling. I'd become good at hiding it, though, drinking only when my parents weren't around. They didn't need to see their son like this.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of the front door opening. I put the bottle down, thinking it was my parents, but instead, I saw a familiar face walk in.

"Hey, bro" Marvin said, his tone casual but carrying an edge of something deeper.

"Hey, kid. What's up?" I said, trying to play it cool, though I felt like I'd been caught.

"Like shit" he replied, shaking his head. "This country's sinking, man."

"Yeah... I see that" I said, reaching for the bottle. "Look, I need to say I'm sorry about your money. I swear, I'll find a way to pay you back. I just need to get back on my feet."

Marvin waved it off, sitting down across from me. "I know, man. Don't worry about it. I heard it was rough for you up there."

"Rough? You don't even know the half of it" I said, pouring him a glass of wine. "I came back broke, my family's gone, and I was part of a nightclub brawl that ended in gunfire with a dead guy in the middle of the place. Hell of a story, right?"

Marvin took the glass but didn't drink right away. He just looked at me, like he was sizing me up. "Listen, man... we need to talk."

There was something in his voice—serious, almost urgent. I braced myself, knowing that whatever was coming next could be just as life-changing as everything I'd already been through.

Chapter 56

Going back to life

Reopening the restaurant was the most beautiful experience I could have imagined. It felt like I had come back to life. Every challenge, every mistake, every success—good or bad—had led me to that moment. I wasn't just a man defined by triumphs but by failures too, and I wore both with a sense of pride. This time, things were different. I had new staff, new resources, and enough cash flow to handle the everyday craziness of living and running a business in this country. When money isn't an issue, everything seems a little easier to manage.

I could already smell the food being prepared in the kitchen, the familiar aromas that once filled my senses with joy. I felt alive in my elegant work attire, walking through the restaurant like I belonged there, because I did. This was my space. I even started brainstorming new dishes, keeping in touch with Kevin in San Francisco, who helped me craft a menu that featured flavors from around the world. I knew it might be too much for some of the locals, but what the hell, I was having fun again.

We began attracting important clients, even local politicians. One Saturday night, I hosted the Mayor and his entourage for what he described as "the best dinner in town."

"Good evening, sir. Welcome!" I said, greeting him, his wife, and his three bodyguards.

"Ah, you must be Andy", the Mayor said with a warm smile.

"Yes, sir. Please, follow me. Your table is ready."

I led them to a private area, away from the bustle of the other diners. The Mayor's bodyguards sat nearby but didn't order any food. They were on duty, after all.

Politicians, local celebrities, and even mob members frequented the restaurant. Yeah, I had them all. Some nights, the place was crawling with a mix of criminals and dignitaries. None of the mobsters ever paid, of course. I had a list of about fifty people—friends of friends—who ate for free. It was just the way things worked.

Four months after reopening, business was booming. I felt like I was on top of the world. That weekend, I drove to Anna's house to pick up the girls for our usual outing. I was in a great mood, genuinely happy, though one of the three most important people in my life wasn't with me yet.

"Hello, my girls!" I exclaimed, scooping them up in a tight hug. I always brought chocolates or toys when I visited, and they loved it. Their smiles made everything worth it.

After a quick chat with Susan, Anna's sister, I got the girls ready for our day out.

"Big day today" I told them. "We're going to the new arcade in town, and then we'll have dinner."

Before I left with the girls, Susan pulled me aside.

"Andy", she said softly, "Anna wants to talk to you."

"She does?" I asked, surprised and hopeful.

"She didn't tell me herself, but I know her. Trust me, she's ready."

I felt my heart swell with excitement but tempered it with caution. "I've tried calling her, messaging her, but nothing."

"I know", Susan replied with a reassuring smile. "But things are different now. Go talk to her. I think it's time."

Hearing those words made my day even better. I spent the entire afternoon spoiling the girls, taking them to the arcade, and later for a nice dinner. It wasn't about the money spent; it was about the time, the laughter, and the memories we were creating. Time with loved ones is priceless.

After a fun-filled day, I took the girls back to my new apartment. It was spacious, with three bedrooms—big enough for all of us. Of course, I had rented it with the hope that someday Anna would be there with us too. I hadn't given up on that dream.

When the weekend ended, I took the girls back to Anna's house. When I rang the bell, there she was—beautiful as ever. It was the first time I'd seen her in six months, and my heart skipped a beat.

"Hi" I managed to say, standing awkwardly at the door.

"Hi" she replied, smiling as she hugged the girls. "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah, we had a great time" I said, feeling my throat tighten with emotion.

Then, to my surprise, she asked, "Can we talk?"

I could barely contain my excitement. "Of course", I said, trying to stay calm.

We left the house and took a walk. It was a peaceful neighborhood, full of green spaces and quiet paths—perfect for a conversation we had both been avoiding for too long.

"Listen" I started, "I just want to say how sorry I am. I never meant to—"

"Andy, please" she interrupted gently. "Just listen for a minute, okay?"

I nodded, falling silent.

"I wasn't avoiding your calls and messages because I was angry", she said. "I wanted you to realize what you had—what you could lose. You've always been a dreamer, but you lost your way for a while. You weren't the same person, and I couldn't stand by and watch you self-destruct."

Her words hit hard, but I knew she was right.

"I know", I replied quietly. "I felt lost. More lost than I've ever been. But I'm back now. I've got the restaurant going again, and I'm here. No more crazy plans. Just us, the girls, and a fresh start."

Anna stopped walking and turned to face me. "I believe you", she said, her voice soft but strong. "That's why I'm talking to you now. I love you, Andy. I always have. But I need to know you're committed to our family."

"More than ever" I said, feeling a wave of relief and gratitude wash over me.

That was it. The conversation I had been dreaming of for months. The rollercoaster was finally going up again, and this time, I knew exactly where I wanted to go.

Chapter 57

Family is everything

A year has passed since everything turned around. We moved into a bigger apartment, and it was great—more than I could have hoped for. Life had finally taken a turn for the better. Anna, the girls, and I were a family again. But this time, I made a decision: I was going to handle the restaurant on my own. I didn't want Anna involved in the business, not anymore. I needed to prove to myself that I could manage things without dragging her into it.

After this full year I still remember that night when Marvin, my brother, showed up. I was at rock bottom, completely without hope or ideas, and I never expected him to be the one to pull me out of that hole. But that's what happened. Marvin looked at me and said:

"I have the solution to your problem" he said, casually leaning back in his chair.

"Yeah? Tell me" I replied, desperate for anything to cling to.

"Before I tell you, you have to promise me three things" he continued, a smirk on his face like he already knew I'd agree.

"Marvin, man, if you can get me out of this misery, I'll promise you whatever you want" I said, not caring what it would take.

“First, you’ll pay me back the money you owe me. Every last cent.”

“Done.”

“Second” he added, leaning in a little closer, “when this business takes off again, I want a cut. A decent one.”

“Fine. How much do you want?”

“We’ll discuss that later. And lastly...” he paused, his eyes locking onto mine, “I don’t want to work. I’m out. You handle everything. I’ll just take my share.”

I laughed, finished the wine in my glass, and put on some decent clothes. A taxi took us to meet the last person I expected to see: Lee Martin.

When we arrived, Lee was sitting there like some old-school mob boss, sipping whiskey, a cigar nestled between his fingers. The guy looked exactly like you’d imagine a gangster would.

“Well, well, well! Look who’s here!” Lee laughed as we walked in. “The globe-trotting businessman!”

He knew everything. Of course, he did. People like Lee always know.

“Hi, Martin” my brother greeted casually, like this was a normal day.

Lee offered me a cigar. I declined. Marvin, on the other hand, eagerly took one, as if relishing the irony of the whole scene.

“Listen, kid” Lee said, leaning forward, “I know what happened to you. Those crazy bastards, right?”

“Yeah... something like that” I replied, feeling a wave of shame and anger hit me.

“Look, I’ve been around long enough to know this game” he continued, not missing a beat. “You want to know the truth? We’ll always be seen as the garbage of this world. No matter how much money you make, no matter how nice you dress, you’ll never be one of them.” He let out a cynical chuckle. “And around here? Forget doing things by the book. It doesn’t work like that. If you want to survive, you’ve got to play dirty. There’s no other way. This country doesn’t let people like us win the ‘right’ way.”

And that was it. That’s how I got the restaurant back. Lee Martin financed the reopening, and in return, I let him use the place for money laundering. It wasn’t a gift—it was a loan. A dangerous loan. But it worked.

I threw myself into the business like never before. This time, I didn’t want to just get by. I wanted the restaurant to thrive, to be something I could be proud of. The food was better, the service was top-notch, and we had an entirely new energy flowing through the place. Kevin was still in touch, sending me recipes and helping me create a global menu, something new and exciting for the town.

The irony wasn’t lost on me, though. While I was serving elegant meals to local politicians and community leaders, I was also running a money-laundering operation. The contrast was stark.

The restaurant was making money—good money. But the question kept gnawing at me: was I going to open a second restaurant in another city? If I did, would it be a legitimate business, or would I fall back into the same illegal operations that had brought me back to life? Could I ever truly succeed here without breaking the rules?

A part of me wanted to secure the future for my girls. Maybe invest in a house, something stable, something real. But I couldn’t stop. I wasn’t wired to just sit still, to think about the future in a normal way. I thrived

on the chaos, the constant motion, and the risk. It's who I was, for better or worse.

I thought about Marvin's words often. He was right—no matter how successful I became, there was always something deep inside me that couldn't sit still, that thrived on that edge between success and disaster.

And then, one day, it happened. I had been planning a surprise for Anna and the girls—a vacation, something special. I'd saved enough money, and I wanted to show them that everything was finally back on track. But as I was about to finalize the details, I got a call from Martin.

"Hey, kid" he said, his voice carrying that usual mix of authority and menace. "We need to talk. Now."

I knew what that meant. Something had gone wrong, and I was about to get dragged back into the darker side of things. My heart sank as I drove over to his office, knowing that whatever it was, it wouldn't be good.

When I arrived, Lee was sitting behind his massive desk, puffing on another cigar. Marvin was there too, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed.

"There's a problem", Lee said bluntly. "The authorities are sniffing around. They've been asking questions about the restaurant, about the money. We need to be careful."

I sat down, feeling the weight of the situation hit me like a ton of bricks. I knew this was the price of dealing with someone like Lee, but I had hoped it wouldn't catch up with me this soon.

"So what do we do?" I asked, trying to stay calm, even though my mind was racing.

“We need to clean things up, tighten the operation”, Lee said. “No more risks. You’re going to lay low for a while. Keep things running smoothly at the restaurant, but don’t draw attention. We’ll handle the rest.”

Marvin chimed in, “Just do what he says, bro. You’ll be fine. We’ve been through worse.”

But I wasn’t so sure. This felt different. I had too much to lose now—my family, my business, everything I had rebuilt. The rollercoaster was about to take another dive, and this time I wasn’t sure if I could hold on.

That night, as I drove back home, I couldn’t help but feel the weight of it all. I sat in my car for a while before driving back home. I thought about the life we were building, the second chance I had been given. And for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t sure if I could hold onto it.

Life had taken on a strange rhythm over the last couple of years. The crisis in the country, while devastating to most, barely touched those with real power and money. The disparity was glaring, and I learned to turn a blind eye to it. News channels had become a theater of misery, and I stopped watching. It was all too much—the endless cycle of complaints and suffering, especially for those in the middle class, like so many of my old friends and even some family members.

Thankfully, my business and connections kept me afloat. I hired Miguel, a trustworthy manager, to take care of day-to-day operations at the restaurant. I still had a tight grip on the financials and overall control, but Miguel was there to handle the chaos. He knew the game—like everyone else who worked for me—but we never talked about the restaurant's darker side. The business was a front for the real money. Everyone knew it, but no one said a word. Too dangerous.

The unspoken rule in this world was fear. It worked like magic. The staff, the suppliers, even clients, were respectful and careful. They never dared cross me or the people I was connected to. Since reopening, I had let go of a few workers, and yet, unlike the old days, no one ever tried to sue or get legal with me. It was clear: messing with me meant dealing with something much bigger than just a restaurant owner.

It was a crazy existence—one foot in the shadows, the other trying to maintain some sense of normalcy.

After all this time of getting the restaurant back on track and feeling the weight of things stabilize, I decided it was time for a break. I needed a

change. I had been thinking of something special for my family, a kind of reward for all the stress we'd endured. So, one evening, I sat down with Anna and the girls to propose a trip.

"I've been thinking", I said over dinner, trying to sound casual, though I had been planning this for a while. "What do you think about a family trip to Italy? We could take some time off, relax, and finally, I can work on getting my citizenship. It would be great for the future."

Anna's eyes lit up at the mention of Italy, but as always, she was the more cautious one.

"But what about the restaurant, Andy? You'd leave it unattended? Is Miguel ready to manage things on his own?" she asked, the concern evident in her voice. She had seen me pour my heart and soul into the place, despite its shady operations.

I smiled, feeling confident for the first time in a while. "Oh, don't worry about that. Miguel has it under control. He's more than capable by now. Plus, it's a quiet time of year."

Anna still seemed hesitant, but I knew the idea of a trip would eventually win her over. She was always excited about the chance to travel, and Italy was close to her heart.

"Okay" she finally said, a smile creeping onto her face. "If you're sure. I'm surprised, but... I'm happy. The girls will love it!"

I leaned back, relieved that she was on board. "Great! Let's buy the tickets and make it happen. And besides, you and the girls have been to Italy before. You can give me a tour this time!" I added, laughing.

The idea of Italy was more than just a vacation. I needed to take care of my citizenship. Maybe Europe could be the future for us—someplace to escape the insanity of my country or the complications of the U.S. I had always been intrigued by the idea of living in London. It seemed like the

perfect place—a mix of history, culture, and opportunity. "Maybe after Italy" I thought to myself, "we could think about Europe as a permanent destination."

But for now, Italy was the next chapter. A step toward something new, something more secure, and hopefully, something better for all of us.

Chapter 58

Can't believe my eyes

The flight to Italy was smooth, and it gave me plenty of time to reflect. Our first stop was Rome, where we caught a connecting flight to Cagliari. As we waited for our connection, I couldn't help but dive into the history of Italy. It's funny how my country and Italy share so many roots. Being here, I felt that connection more than ever. The air, the language, even the way people moved—it all felt oddly familiar.

While waiting, we made a promise. Anna and I vowed to come back as often as we could. This country had a hold on us, and I could see it in the way her eyes lit up when she walked through the streets. The girls, on the other hand, were less enchanted. They wanted to head straight to the beach, unaware that the weather wasn't exactly tropical. We hadn't told them it would be chilly, and their disappointment was almost comedic.

We rented a modest but comfortable apartment. It was offseason, so the price was a steal compared to what we'd pay in our country for something similar. Exhausted from the journey, we didn't venture out that first night. After a quick dinner from the local supermarket, we took long showers, unpacked, and went straight to bed.

The next morning, I was up before dawn. I left the apartment quietly, not wanting to wake Anna or the girls, and headed down to the harbor for a run. The crisp sea breeze, the sound of the waves, and the salty scent of the Mediterranean filled my lungs. It was the kind of perfect morning

that makes you feel alive. I ran along the coast, soaking in every detail. It felt like freedom.

When I returned, I brought back a fresh breakfast for everyone—local cheeses, fruits, and vegetables. Italy’s produce is incredible, and I knew it would brighten their morning.

As we sat around the table, I casually proposed something I’d been thinking about. “What do you think about going to a top restaurant tonight? Let’s make it special.”

Anna’s eyes lit up. “Are you sure? I’d love that. I’ve never been to a fancy restaurant here.”

I smiled. “It’s a date then.” I immediately pulled out my phone to find a place and booked a reservation early. I knew these small Italian restaurants filled up fast, especially in a city like Cagliari.

The day flew by as we explored the city. The girls led me to some historical sites they’d remembered from their last trip, and we shopped for clothes. They each picked out colorful dresses for the evening, and Anna... she looked stunning in a sleek night dress. She was beautiful, and in that moment, I was reminded how deeply in love with her I still was. I couldn’t help but feel grateful.

For myself, I picked out a sharp sport suit—elegant but with a touch of casual flair. As I slipped it on, I felt like a local. For some reason, I couldn’t help but think of Federico back at the nightclub in San Francisco. I hoped he was doing well, despite everything. It was a shame how things had ended.

The restaurant was everything I hoped for. A hidden gem, beautiful and intimate, with just the right amount of elegance. Thankfully, I had made the reservation early because the place was packed.

“Excuse me” I said to the receptionist. After checking his computer, he smiled and escorted us to a lovely table inside. The patio would have been perfect, but it was too cold that night.

As soon as the waiter arrived, Anna switched into full Italian mode, ordering drinks and pizzas for all of us. I watched her, impressed, as she navigated the menu with ease. I leaned in and asked the waiter in my best Italian, “Is it normal to have this many guests at this time of year?”

He smiled politely as he set the glasses down. “No, sir, it’s not usually this busy. But with Christmas and New Year approaching, more tourists are coming early to take advantage of better prices. This is a popular time for deals.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Thank you.”

The waiter nodded and left, leaving me to ponder the growing tourism. “Maybe we should do that too, right, honey? Take advantage of these deals before the holiday rush?” I glanced at Anna, but she was already busy texting her family, sending them pictures of the restaurant and telling them how great the trip was going.

Dinner went perfectly. The pizza was delicious, though I couldn’t help but think about how ours at the restaurant back home was a bit more to my liking. Italian pizza was different—thinner, with the cheese practically baked into the dough. Still, it was an experience.

“Honey, what do you think of the pizza?” I asked, but she didn’t respond. She was staring intently at something across the room.

“Anna? You okay? What are you looking at?” I followed her gaze, turning my head to see what had caught her attention. And then... there he was.

Paul.

I froze. In all the places, in all the countries, he was here. The man who had turned my life upside down. My blood ran cold.

“Is that...?” Anna whispered, her voice barely audible.

“Yes” I said, my voice tight. “It’s Paul.”

Everything in that moment seemed to move in slow motion. All the chaos of our past, the betrayal, the fight for survival... it came flooding back. There he was, sitting a few tables away, casually sipping his wine, as if nothing had ever happened.

I think we did something. Not an action, at least not a physical one, even though every muscle in my body was urging me to stand up, march over to his table, and punch him square in the face. Oh, how badly I wanted to feel my fist connecting with his jaw, to let all the frustration and anger explode in one single, primal moment. But no, we didn't move. Anna didn't move either. We just sat there, frozen, locked in place by the weight of everything unsaid and undone. The air between us seemed to thicken, and for a second, I thought maybe I was imagining it all. But it wasn't just my imagination.

Paul sat only a few tables away from ours, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit. The kind of suit that screamed business, not leisure. This wasn't a vacation for him, I was sure of it. He wasn't here for Christmas shopping or a spontaneous getaway. There was no sign of his wife, no hint of family nearby. The men sitting with him were also in suits, their body language stiff and formal, their conversation subdued but clearly focused. It had to be business, and knowing Paul, it was probably some new scheme or deal, the kind that ruins lives while padding his own bank account.

The moment I laid eyes on him, something inside me shattered. It was as if a floodgate had opened, and in an instant, I was dragged back to the worst moments of my life. My mind didn't just wander down memory lane—it sprinted. A hyper-speed rewind, playing out every agonizing detail of the misery I had gone through because of him. The desperation, the sleepless nights, the fights with Anna, the feeling of failure that clung

to me like a second skin. I could see it all, as clear as if it had just happened yesterday.

Sitting there, I realized just how much power this man still had over me, even now. Even after all the time that had passed, after everything I'd been through to rebuild my life, he still had the ability to take me back to that dark place with just his presence.

But there was something else—something I couldn't quite explain. It was as if the air between us shifted, like we had sent out some invisible signal, some vibration in the atmosphere that only he could pick up on. Because out of nowhere, in the middle of whatever business deal he was discussing with his colleagues, Paul turned his head and looked directly at us.

It wasn't casual. It wasn't a glance. It was as if he knew, instinctively, that we were there. Like he had felt the weight of our gaze on him, even from across the room. His eyes locked onto mine, and for a moment, the entire restaurant seemed to fade into the background. The soft hum of conversation, the clinking of glasses, the shuffling of waiters—it all disappeared. It was just us. Me, Anna, and him.

I could feel the tension radiating from Anna beside me. She didn't need to say a word—I knew exactly what she was feeling because I felt it too. A mixture of shock, anger, and disbelief. How could it be him? Here, in this quiet corner of the world, after everything we'd been through?

Paul's expression was unreadable. His eyes flickered with something, but whether it was surprise, recognition, or indifference, I couldn't tell. For a second, I wondered if he would come over, try to say something, offer some meaningless platitude. I wasn't sure what I'd do if he did. Would I finally let loose the anger I'd been bottling up for so long? Or would I sit there, passive, letting him get the last word like he always did?

But he didn't move. He just stared, his eyes narrowing slightly, as if trying to gauge how much we knew, how much damage we could still do.

Epilogue

I saw Paul there, in that same restaurant, at the same time, choosing the same city to have dinner. Was it some random coincidence? Or was it because, deep down, we were the same kind of person? If I hated him, did that mean I had to hate myself too? These were questions that had no easy answers, and I wasn't sure I even wanted to find them. Maybe therapy could help untangle this mess, but I wasn't sure I had the strength to understand it all, let alone confront it.

What had I become? Was I now the very person I used to despise? Had I, in the end, sacrificed all my principles for some so-called "greater good"? The line between right and wrong, which once felt so clear, was now completely blurred.

From the moment Paul did what he did to me, I knew he was the kind of person who would stop at nothing to succeed, to climb higher no matter who got crushed beneath him. But here I was, looking at my own life, realizing that I had followed the same path. Maybe in different shoes, maybe under different circumstances, but the destination was the same. We were reflections of each other.

Society is a game, and we're all players, whether we like it or not. A game full of rules we keep inventing as we go, rules that shift to fit the needs of the moment. No plan, no real intention to make it work for everyone—just to make it work for *us* at any given time. And when the rules don't serve us anymore? We break them, bend them, change them without a second thought.

It seems we've forgotten how to stop, how to slow down and ask ourselves if any of this makes sense. We started this train, set it in motion long ago, but we didn't think to install brakes. We're speeding forward, all of us, fixing the engine while it's still running, trying to patch up the cracks in a system that was never designed to hold together for this long.

That's dangerous. That's messy. And yet, that's the reality we've built for ourselves.

But now, after everything, I have to ask myself one final question: Is it worth it?

THE END