Through Diana's Eyes:



A Story of Love and Tragedy

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# Introduction: The Day the World Changed

*Age 10*

When I was only ten years old, my best friend was shot in the head.

My best friend was King, a beautiful German Shepherd with glossy fur and eyes that always seemed to understand my every word. King had been my confidant, my protector, and my companion through the lonely days when my siblings were too busy or too preoccupied to notice me. We spent hours playing in the backyard, running through the tall grass, and sharing quiet moments under the shade of the old oak tree.

It was a late afternoon, the kind where the sky blushes into a soft pink and gold. I came home from school and rushed to his pen… but, it was empty.

“Mom?” I had called out, whirling around to run inside. “Have you seen King? He’s not in his pen…”

My mother had been cleaning the kitchen. She stopped what she was doing. As if in slow motion, she knelt down to meet me at eye level. Then, in a voice that still echoes through my mind to this say, she told me, “We got rid of him.”

Hearing this at any age would cause a person’s world to shatter.

Imagine being only a young girl.

I ran to my room that day and cried. Despite the terrible circumstances, neither of my parents came to comfort me or explain the situation. I was left to cope with the loss on my own.

Later on, I learned what happened.

Even though I was not there at the time, I could clearly imagine it in my mind.

My father, usually a man of few words, I could picture him sitting next to King on the porch steps. His rough hands gently petting King’s head, and for a moment, maybe there would have been a rare tenderness in his eyes.

“You're a good boy, King,” he probably whispered, almost as if he didn’t want anyone else to hear. King’s tail might have thumped against the wooden steps, a silent acknowledgment of the affection.

I imagine that it might have felt like a fragile moment, one that would shatter if anyone spoke.

And then, without warning, the moment did shatter.

My father reached behind him, pulled out a small pistol, and shot King in the head.

The sound would have been deafening, an explosion that echoed in the stillness of the evening.

Imagining it later on while crying in my bedroom, I screamed, my voice raw and filled with horror. Just the image of King’s body crumpled, a lifeless heap on the porch… I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe.

King had been my responsibility. I fed him, bathed him, and made sure he had a warm place to sleep. He was more than just a pet; he was a part of me. Losing him felt like losing a piece of my soul.

As the days went on, the subject was never brought up. It was as if King had never existed, as if his life and death were a secret we all silently agreed to forget. My father never mentioned it, and my mother only spoke of it once, in hushed tones, as if the memory itself was too painful to bear.

But I couldn’t forget. The anger simmered inside me, a constant reminder of that terrible day. I stopped trusting my father, seeing only the man who had so coldly taken my best friend from me. My mother’s attempts to console me felt hollow, her words a thin veneer over the reality of my loss.

King’s death marked the beginning of a downward spiral for me. I withdrew from my family, finding solace only in my memories of the times I had spent with King. The world seemed a harsher place, one where love could be snatched away in an instant, and where the ones you trusted could turn into strangers with the pull of a trigger.

Even now, years later, the pain of that day lingers. It shaped who I became, hardening my heart and shadowing my relationships. King was more than just a dog; he was a symbol of innocence lost, a casualty of a world that could be inexplicably cruel.

I’ll never understand why my father did what he did. Perhaps he thought he was sparing King from suffering, or maybe he believed it was his duty to protect us from the sight of a beloved pet in pain. But in trying to shield us, he only brought more hurt.

King’s memory lives on in me, in the lessons I learned about love and loss, trust and betrayal. And though the years have dulled the sharpness of that initial grief, the wound has never fully healed. It’s a part of me, just as King was, and always will be.

# Chapter 1: The Wheels of Youth

*Age 6*

“Wait up, Diana!"

When I heard my brother’s voice from behind me, I whirled my head around. I remember that my short, tomboy hair whipped around my head, almost blocking my view as I pedaled my bike.

“Try and catch me!” I teased, going even faster.

When I was a kid, nothing felt as freeing as riding my bike with my brothers and sisters. I was the second oldest, always leading the pack down our narrow street despite my always-scraped knees. The sun blazed overhead, casting our shadows long and lean on the pavement.

“Oh, come on!” Sal shouted from behind me.

I slowed just enough for him to catch up, grinning as he pulled alongside me. “You’re getting faster, Sal,” I teased, ruffling his hair even though he was the older one. He laughed, his cheeks flushed with the effort of keeping up.

Maria, the oldest of us siblings, kept an eye on the little ones, her bike swaying slightly as she balanced herself.

“Julie, stay closer to Joey,” she called, glancing back to ensure they were following.

“Okay, Maria!” Julie replied, her voice cheerful as she pedaled harder to keep up.

“Don’t go too fast, Joey!” Maria added, her tone gentle but firm.

Behind her, Joey and Julie giggled, their small legs working furiously to keep up.

“Can we go to the park, Maria?” Joey asked, his eyes bright with excitement.

“Maybe later. We need to stick together for now,” she replied, her focus unwavering.

JoAnn, always full of opinions, brought up the rear, shouting encouragement to keep everyone moving.

“Come on, you two! You can pedal faster than that!” she urged, her voice confident and reassuring.

“We’re trying!” Joey responded, a hint of determination in his voice.

“Just keep going, you’re doing great!” JoAnn said, her encouragement pushing them forward.

I watched them, thinking. Maria’s responsible nature and JoAnn’s confidence were always so clear in moments like these. We were a team, each with our own roles, bound by the unspoken understanding that we had to look out for one another.

Finally we all showed up at home, hot and tired, our clothes sticking to our skin, wanting nothing more than a drink of water. Maria was first to the door…but it was locked.

“Oh, man. Again?” Joey moaned.

I crossed my arms. Of course, Mom would do this again.

“Mom, let us in! We’re thirsty!” Maria called through the screen.

Mom, or La as Dad called her, appeared at the window, her face weary but resolved. “Stay outside,” she said, her voice carrying the usual mix of exasperation and resignation. “Go play.”

Her tone wasn’t encouraging, but we were used to it. It was her way of dealing with the chaos of nine kids.

So, we did. What other choice did we have?

We rode our bikes, exploring every inch of our neighborhood, feeling the harsh wind in our hair and the relentless sun on our faces.

Joey groaned, “I’m so thirsty.”

Julie echoed, “Me too, Maria.”

Maria sighed, wiping the sweat from her forehead. “We’ll be fine. Let’s just keep riding.”

JoAnn, always full of opinions, piped up, “We should’ve brought water bottles. I told you we’d get thirsty.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, feeling the dryness in my throat. “Let’s just keep moving. We’ll cool off eventually.”

JoAnn looked at me, her face set in a determined frown. “This isn’t fair,” she said. “We’ve been good all day. Why does Mom have to be so mean?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my voice breaking. “It’s like she’s always angry about something.”

“She’s always on edge,” JoAnn said. “Maybe she just doesn’t know how to deal with all of us.”

“She could at least be nicer,” I said. “We didn’t do anything wrong.”

JoAnn sighed, her eyes scanning the horizon as if hoping to see our father’s car pull up. “Maybe, but it doesn’t change anything right now.”

So, Joey and Julie fell back into their giggles, trying to make the best of it, their small legs pedaling with renewed energy.

Maria glanced back, her eyes softening. “Stick together, okay? We’ll find some shade.”

We continued down the street, the heat pressing down on us. Despite the discomfort, there was something freeing about being outside, away from the confines of the house. We rode on, determined to make the most of our time, knowing that this was our way of coping, just as Mom had hers.

Even as kids, we were expected to be tough, to handle things on our own. There was no room for softness in our house. Mom rarely left, her life confined to the walls of our home. Dad, born in Palermo, Sicily, worked tirelessly at the bakery, speaking broken English and sitting in silence when he wasn’t working.

Our family had its own way of dealing with things. When something bad happened, we brushed it under the mat, never speaking of it again. Like how, many years from this moment, I would come home to find King’s pen empty. I cried alone in my room that night, feeling abandoned and unloved. Neither parent offered comfort or explanation. The thing is… it wasn’t an uncommon practice around our home.

Reflecting on those days, I realized that the way we dealt with King was just a glimpse into the patterns that shaped my life. We were taught to bury our pain, to keep moving forward no matter what. But as I grew older, I began to see the cracks in our facade. The unresolved hurts and unspoken words that festered beneath the surface, shaping our relationships and our lives.

Riding our bikes, we escaped for a while. We forgot about the locked doors and silent dinners, the weight of expectations and the sting of loss. For those fleeting moments, we were just kids, free and wild, with the wind in our hair and the whole world ahead of us.

# Chapter 2: The Pen and the Pain

Age 6

Now, although King was my very best friend, I had many other dogs that I loved and cared for. Unfortunately, King’s story is not one that stands out from the rest. Each and every dog my parents gave me followed a similar, tragic pattern.

See, when I was six years old, my father brought home a puppy. He walked through the front door, holding a small, squirming bundle of fur. My heart skipped a beat.

“Diana, meet Duke,” he said, placing the puppy gently on the floor.

Duke looked up at me with big, brown eyes, his tail wagging furiously. I instantly fell in love. I knelt down and scooped him up, feeling the warmth of his tiny body against my chest. From that moment on, Duke and I were inseparable.

I carried him around the house, hugged and kissed him, played ball with him, and treated him like a baby.

“You’re my little prince, Duke,” I’d whisper into his floppy ears. He’d lick my face in response, his tail thumping with happiness.

While my siblings showed little interest in Duke, I spent hours each day with him after school. Maria, always busy with chores and helping around the house, would just smile at us and shake her head. Joey and Julie were more interested in their toys, and JoAnn was too preoccupied with her opinions about everything under the sun.

One afternoon, as I sat in the backyard with Duke, throwing a ball for him to chase, JoAnn wandered over. “You know, he’s just a dog, Diana,” she said, crossing her arms.

“He’s not just a dog,” I retorted, watching Duke sprint back with the ball in his mouth. “He’s my best friend.”

JoAnn rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. She could see how much Duke meant to me.

Duke brought a new kind of joy into my life. He was my confidant, my playmate, and my source of comfort. With him by my side, I felt a sense of companionship that I hadn’t experienced before. It was as if Duke understood me in a way that no one else did.

As the days turned into weeks, Duke grew bigger and stronger. We continued our routine of playing ball, exploring the backyard, and simply enjoying each other’s company. The bond we shared was unbreakable, and even at such a young age, I knew that Duke was something special.

Looking back, I realize how those early days with Duke shaped my understanding of love and loyalty. He taught me what it meant to care for someone deeply and unconditionally. And though our time together was just beginning, the memories of those first days with Duke remain some of the happiest of my childhood.

Duke quickly grew, becoming strong and rough during play, but I didn’t mind. His strength was a testament to his vitality, and his rambunctious nature just made our time together more exciting. I loved how he would barrel toward me, his big paws thumping on the ground, his tongue lolling out in pure joy.

However, my parents grew concerned about Duke’s roughness and destructive behavior. He’d chewed up Mom’s favorite garden hose and knocked over Dad’s tools more times than I could count. They decided to make him stay outside in a pen.

“Diana, Duke’s getting too rough. He needs to stay outside,” Mom said one evening as we sat down for dinner.

“But Mom, he’s just a puppy! He doesn’t mean any harm,” I protested, my fork clattering onto my plate.

“I know you love him, sweetheart, but he’s too much for the house,” Dad chimed in, his tone gentle but firm. “It’s for his own good.”

I hated seeing him confined, but I still spent every possible moment with him. After school, I’d rush outside to play with Duke, his tail wagging furiously at my approach. His rough play and boundless energy didn’t bother me at all. We were still best friends, and I cherished our time together.

One day, when Duke was about three years old, I came home from school to find his pen empty. Panic surged through me, and I rushed inside, my heart pounding.

“Mom, where’s Duke?” I asked, my voice trembling.

Mom didn’t even look up from the stove. “Your father got rid of him,” she said casually, as if discussing the weather. “He’s no longer our dog.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. “What do you mean? Where did he go?”

She sighed, a touch of exasperation in her tone. “Your father found some folks who could better provide for him.”

I ran to find my father, tears streaming down my face. “Dad, where’s Duke?”

He looked at me, his expression calm but unreadable. “We had to give him away, Diana. He needed more space, more attention than we could give him.”

“But why?” I cried, my young mind unable to grasp the situation fully.

He knelt down, placing a hand on my shoulder. “It was for the best, sweetheart. Duke will be happier where he is now.”

Although my parents weren’t cruel, neither really provided the comfort I needed. They didn’t explain why Duke had to go, why my best friend was taken away. I was left with a gaping hole in my heart, too young to understand the reasons behind their decision.

The loss of Duke was a harsh lesson in love and loss. It was the first time I truly felt abandoned and unloved, crying alone in my room, my tears soaking into my pillow. The family never spoke of Duke again, brushing the tragedy under the mat as they did with so many other painful events. Just as they would later do with King. It was a pattern that would continue throughout my life, shaping my understanding of relationships and trust in ways I wouldn’t fully comprehend until much later.

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# Chapter 3: Locked Out, Locked In

Age 7

After a long day of playing in the summer sun, we finally came home, sticky and sweaty, craving the coolness of the house and a chance to get something to eat. The heat from the asphalt still clung to our legs as we trudged up the steps, the anticipation of snacks and a drink of water the only thing keeping us moving.

But as we reached the front door, I saw the problem immediately. It was still locked.

“Can we really not go inside yet?” Joey asked, his tiny fingers gripping the handle and jiggling it futilely.

I could hear the hum of the fridge from inside, a distant promise of relief. My stomach growled loudly in protest, and Julie’s little face was scrunched up with the same hunger I felt. We banged on the door, calling out for someone to let us in, but there was no answer.

After a few minutes, the door creaked open, and there was Mom, standing in the doorway with a look that said she was not in the mood for any nonsense.

“I *told* you to play outside until your father gets home,” she said, her voice sharp and impatient.

“We just want something to eat,” I said, trying to sound polite but desperate.

“Ma, we’ve been out all day,” Maria said. “We’re really hungry.”

“No snacks,” La snapped back. “Dinner will be ready when your father is home.”

“But we are hungry *now*!” I said, feeling a knot of frustration in my chest.

“Don’t you raise your voice at me,” she said, her eyes flashing with anger. “Go find something to do. I don’t want to hear it.”

“But we—” I started, but Mom cut me off with a wave of her hand.

“Enough!” she yelled, her patience clearly at its limit. “You think you can just come in here and demand things from me? Get back outside and wait for your father.”

Then… we heard the old landline phone ring.

*Ring!*

Mom walked inside, slamming the door behind her. Us siblings glanced at each other uncertainty before following her in, hoping that she might relent and let us have something to eat. I remember watching as she walked over to the phone and picked it up.

“Hello?” she said, her voice not as harsh as it had been with us.

Then, her legs shook slightly as she heard the voice at the other end. I could see the strain in her face as she held the phone to her ear and listened.

“Oh, Carlos. Where are you?” she demanded, her voice a sharp edge. “Why are you so late?”

*Dad!* I remember thinking. *He’ll be home soon, that means dinner…*

Dad’s muffled voice came through the receiver, his tone calm but weary. “I’m just finishing up at the bakery, La. I’ll be home soon.”

“Soon isn’t good enough!” Mom snapped. “I’ve been stuck here all day with these kids. They’ve been nothing but trouble, and you’re out there at the bakery. Why can’t I have a break? You never take me anywhere, not even for dinner.”

The conversation continued, a one-sided argument where Mom aired all her frustrations. “You never give me enough money for anything,” she said. “I can’t even buy decent food for the kids or get clothes for myself.”

I could see her hands trembling as she held the receiver, her face flushed with anger and the strain of being stuck at home. The phone conversation seemed to be a release valve for all the pressures she faced.

Dad’s voice was faint but steady. “I give you what I can. It’s hard to make ends meet.”

Mom’s face contorted in anger. “It’s never enough! I’m stuck here, and I’m not even allowed to work. I’m just here to take care of the kids and listen to them complain while you get to be out and about.”

“I’m doing my best,” Dad said. “But we have to manage with what we have.”

“I know!” Mom shouted. “But it doesn’t change how unfair it is, Carlos! You get to go out, and I’m left here with no help, no break. And you never take me anywhere. Not even for a vacation,” she continued, her voice rising. “It’s like I don’t even exist outside of this house.”

Dad’s reply was subdued. “I’m trying to provide for the family. That’s all I can do right now.”

Mom let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s not enough,” she said, her voice breaking. “You don’t understand how hard it is for me. You never see the kids or deal with the mess they make. I’m left here to manage everything.”

I watched as Mom’s anger turned to tears, her frustrations spilling over. “I just wish I could have a break,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’m so tired.”

As she hung up the phone, her face was a mask of exhaustion. She took a deep breath, trying to compose herself, but her frustration was still evident.

The conversation was a painful reminder of how Mom felt trapped in her role. Her frustration made it clear she felt like a prisoner in her own home. A prisoner… around us. Her own kids. Her shaking legs and the tears that threatened to fall showed just how much pressure she was under.

I could see the anger in Mom’s eyes after she hung up the phone. She seemed to forget about us kids as we quietly made ourselves comfortable inside, hoping she wouldn’t send us back out. I listened as she cooked dinner, slamming cabinets, clanging pots and pans… It was like she was taking out all her frustrations on that poor pasta dish.

Not long after that, Dad’s car pulled up the driveway, and Mom’s face hardened again. “He’s finally here,” she said, her tone cold. “Let’s see what he has to say for himself.”

When Dad walked in, he looked at us with a mix of concern and confusion. “What’s going on?” he asked, his eyes moving from Mom to us.

“Mom wouldn’t let us in all day,” I said, my voice still shaky from the argument.

Dad’s gaze shifted to Mom. “Why didn’t you let them in?”

“They were being unruly,” Mom said, her voice defensive. “I needed some peace.”

Dad’s face softened as he looked at us. “You’ve been out all day. They’re hungry. Come on, let’s eat.”

​​As we sat down at the kitchen table, the scent of the food was almost more than I could bear after the long wait. We were served a simple meal of pasta with tomato sauce and a few slices of bread. It wasn’t fancy, but it was warm and filling.

Dad took his seat at the head of the table, his face still worn from the day’s work at the bakery. He looked at each of us with a tired smile as we took our places.

“How was the bakery today?” Maria asked, trying to make conversation.

Dad sighed and began to serve himself. “Busy as always. We had a big order for a wedding tomorrow.”

“That’s good,” Maria said. “At least you’re staying busy.”

Mom sat at the far end of the table, her face still tight with anger from earlier. She pushed her food around on her plate, barely touching it. “Busy, huh?” she said, her voice laced with bitterness. “Well, you’ve got the easy part. I’m stuck here all day with the kids.”

Dad glanced at her, a flicker of unease in his eyes. “I do what I can.”

Mom snorted, her frustration barely contained. “It’s never enough.”

The room grew tense, the air thick with unspoken resentment. The kids exchanged nervous glances, each of us feeling the weight of the argument even if we didn’t fully understand it.

I asked, “Can I have more bread?”

Mom snapped, “Just eat what you have. We don’t have all night.”

Dad tried to shift the conversation. “Did you get any mail today?” he asked Mom, his voice a bit too eager to change the subject.

Mom ignored him, her eyes focused on the pasta in front of her. “No.”

JoAnn tried to break the silence. “Can we have some of the cookies from the bakery?”

Dad smiled faintly. “I didn’t bring any today, but I’ll try to bring some next time.”

“Yeah, sure,” Mom said dismissively. “If we can afford it.”

The tension at the table was thick as ice. I picked at my food, my appetite lost to the uncomfortable atmosphere. I could see the anger in Mom’s eyes, the way she clenched her fists and glared at Dad. The arguments were becoming a regular part of our dinners, a grim backdrop to our meals.

As we finished eating, Mom cleared the dishes with a clatter, her movements sharp and impatient. “Why don’t you all go play or do something?” she said, her voice strained.

We quickly retreated to the living room, sensing that things were only going to get worse. From there, we could hear Mom’s voice rising again “You think you’re the only one with problems!” she yelled. “I don’t get any time for myself!”

“I know it’s hard,” Dad said, his voice calm but weary. “But we’re in this together.”

“Together?” Mom shouted. “That’s a joke!”

Dad’s voice was low, but there was a note of pleading in it. “I don’t know what more you want from me.”

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the sound of Mom’s muffled sobs.

“You don’t understand,” she cried. “You don’t see what I go through every day.”

Suddenly, there was a sharp sound… the slap of a hand against skin.

My heart raced as I heard Mom’s cry, the sound of her pain echoing through the walls.

“Don’t you dare touch me!” she screamed.

Us kids huddled together in the living room, trying to ignore the sounds coming from the kitchen. I looked at Maria, her face pale and stricken.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Maria whispered. “Just stay quiet.”

The sounds continued… angry voices, the thud of something falling to the floor, and then Mom’s choked sobs. I couldn’t bear to listen, but I couldn’t turn away either.

“I’m scared,” JoAnn whispered.

“Me too,” I admitted.

Dad’s footsteps moved from the kitchen to the hallway, and Mom’s crying grew softer, her sobs turning into quiet whimpers. We stayed huddled together, our faces wet with tears we didn’t fully understand.

After what felt like an eternity, the argument subsided. We heard the soft sound of Mom’s footsteps retreating, and then Dad’s quiet footsteps as he moved away from the kitchen.

Once things settled, Maria, JoAnn, Joey, and I stayed in the living room, too scared to move. I could still hear Mom’s muffled sobs from the other room, a haunting reminder of the fight we had just witnessed.

“Is she okay?” Joey asked.

Maria breathed in. “I hope so. I don’t know what to do.”

I wanted to run to Mom, to comfort her, but I was paralyzed with fear. My little heart ached for her, but I didn’t know how to help.

As the night wore on, Mom’s sobs became occasional hiccups, and Dad’s movements became quieter, more subdued. We sat in silence, the weight of what we had witnessed pressing down on us.

Eventually, we were sent to bed, our dreams haunted by the echoes of the argument. I lay in my bed, my heart racing, unable to escape the images of the day.

*Is this what life is like? Is this what it means to be part of this family?*

I closed my eyes, trying to forget the harsh words and the sounds of pain. But the reality of what had happened stayed with me, a dark shadow over my young heart.

#

# Chapter 4: Dough and Dog Days

Age 9

Sunday mornings always had a special rhythm.

After the church service, my sisters and I would slip out early to help at the bakery. It was our routine, and we had grown accustomed to the sweet smells and bustling activity that greeted us each time we stepped inside.

“Remember, girls,” Maria said as we hurried down the street, “Dad will need us to be quick today. He said there’s a big order coming in.”

JoAnn rolled her eyes, but she quickened her pace. “Yeah, yeah. Let’s just get there.”

We arrived at the bakery, greeted by the familiar scent of freshly baked bread and pastries. Dad was already hard at work, his hands moving with practiced ease as he shaped dough and arranged trays.

“Good morning, Dad,” we chimed together.

He looked up and smiled, a rare moment of warmth breaking through his usual stoic demeanor. “Ah, my girls. Come, there’s much to do.”

As we settled into our tasks, I couldn’t help but think about how much the bakery meant to our family. It wasn’t just a place of work; it was a testament to my father’s journey.

“Dad, tell me again about Sicily?” I asked, shaping dough into rolls beside him.

He paused, a faraway look in his eyes. “I was born in Palermo,” he began, his voice taking on a nostalgic tone. “Came to America when I was 35. Starting this bakery was not easy, but it became a success almost overnight.”

Maria, who was at the cash register, nodded. “We lived upstairs in the apartment above the bakery back then.”

“Until we moved to the bigger house when I was three,” I added, remembering the stories Mom used to tell us.

Dad chuckled softly. “Yes, that little apartment was our home. You girls were so young, but you helped out even then. Diana, you were always eager to lend a hand, even at the age of four.”

I smiled, proud of the role I had played in our family’s history. The bakery had been a constant in our lives, a place where we worked together and shared stories of our heritage.

As the day wore on, the bakery grew busier. Customers streamed in, and we moved in a well-practiced dance, filling orders and keeping the shelves stocked.

“JoAnn, can you grab more flour from the back?” Maria called out.

“On it!” JoAnn replied, darting off.

The pace was relentless, but there was a certain comfort in the routine. The bakery was our anchor, a place where we all came together despite the tensions that sometimes simmered beneath the surface.

After hours of hard work, the rush finally began to die down. Dad wiped his brow and glanced at us with a hint of pride. “You all did good today,” he said simply.

“Thanks, Papa,” we chorused, feeling a shared sense of accomplishment.

As we cleaned up, I thought about how the bakery had shaped our lives. It was more than a business; it was the heart of our family. Through its doors, we learned about our heritage, our father’s journey, and the value of hard work.

The memories of those Sundays in the bakery were bittersweet, a reminder of the bond we shared and the challenges we faced together. And as I helped sweep the floor, I felt a deep connection to the legacy my father had built, knowing that in some small way, I was a part of it too.

…

Even in the midst of hardship and despair, there were always a few glimmers of hope, just like these. One of the happiest things for me was always my dogs. Whenever there was a dog in the house, I had a friend, I was understood, I was not alone. Now, you know now that Duke was sent away. And, you already know that King had passed. But what you don't know is how very important King was to me.

I remember the day my father brought King home, a tiny bundle of fur that quickly grew into a strong, energetic dog. Despite his untrained behavior and the trouble he often caused, King was my world. I took on all the responsibilities of caring for him, and in return, he gave me unconditional love and loyalty.

It was once after a long day at the bakery. I was ready to collapse into bed when my father called me into the living room. I walked in, wiping my flour-covered hands on my apron, and saw him standing with a small bundle of fur in his arms.

“Diana, there’s someone here who wants to meet you!” he said, his eyes twinkling with a rare softness.

I stood there, speechless, as he handed me the wriggling puppy. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I collapsed to the floor, clutching the puppy to my chest.

“Oh, Papa, thank you! Thank you so much!” I whispered, my voice choked with emotion.

The joy I felt in that moment was indescribable. After losing Duke, I never thought I could feel this happy again. Despite the heartache I knew could come, I couldn’t resist the happiness King brought me. I carried him around the house, hugging and kissing him, my heart overflowing with gratitude.

Just like with Duke, my siblings and family members acted the same way with King. When my father brought King home, my siblings gathered around, excited about the new addition to our family. Even JoAnn, who usually had something sarcastic to say, was smiling. But it wasn’t long before their interest waned, and King became my sole responsibility.

From then on, my life revolved around King. I fed him, walked him, cleaned his pen, and spent every possible moment with him. He grew quickly, becoming strong and often dragging me down the street during our walks. I didn’t mind; his strength was just another thing I loved about him.

King’s untrained behavior didn’t bother me either. He barked at everything, chewed on furniture, dug up the yard, and got dirty constantly. My parents were less enthusiastic about his antics, but I was unwavering in my affection.

One afternoon, as I was walking King, he pulled me down the street with his boundless energy. I laughed, trying to keep up with him.

“Slow down, King!” I called out, but he was too excited to listen.

Back home, my mother watched from the kitchen window, shaking her head.

“That dog is going to be the death of you, Diana,” she muttered, but I barely heard her. King’s happiness was all that mattered to me.

King grew into a 100-pound adult with a high prey drive and endless energy. His sharp nails often scratched me, and his size was sometimes overwhelming, but I loved him deeply. His behavior became more problematic over time, with constant barking, chewing, and digging, but I didn’t care.

To me, he was perfect.

One evening, as we sat in the living room, King curled up at my feet, my father looked at me with concern.

“Diana, he’s getting too big and too wild. We need to think about what’s best for him and for us,” he said gently.

I looked down at King, my heart aching at the thought of losing him. “But he’s happy here, Papa. I’ll take better care of him, I promise,” I pleaded.

My father sighed, his expression pained. “We’ll see, Diana. We’ll see.”

Despite the growing challenges with King, I couldn’t imagine life without him. That dog was more than just a dog; he was a lifeline, a source of comfort and joy in an otherwise tumultuous world. His importance in my life cannot be overstated, and even now, thinking about him brings a bittersweet smile to my face. He may be gone now, but the love and happiness he brought into my life will stay with me forever.

#

# Chapter 5: Bonds in Confinement

Age 14

“So, how was school today?”

Dad asked this question as I tossed a ball for King to chase. The pup barked and chased after it, carefree and happy, not knowing the realities of this world.

This was our routine. Each day after coming home from school, I always headed straight to the backyard to play with King. My dad often joined me, and we shared one of those rare, special moments together.

"Honestly Dad, I feel so lost there. The nuns are so strict. I don’t understand half of what they’re teaching," I said, catching the ball as King brought it back to me. “Plus, they’re always smacking my hand with a ruler. It’s… mean.”

He sighed and sat down on the old wooden bench. “I know it’s hard, but it’s for your own good.”

I shook my head, frustration bubbling up. “I get that you want what’s best for me, but I’m struggling. The rules are so harsh, and the other girls don’t seem as interested in the things I love, like art and writing.”

He nodded slowly, trying to find the right words.”It’s a different environment, I admit. But sometimes, you have to endure the difficult parts to get to where you want to be. It’s part of the process.”

I bit my lip, trying to keep my emotions in check. “I know, Dad. It’s just hard to see the big picture when I’m stuck in the day-to-day stuff. I feel like I’m failing at it all.”

Dad patted the seat beside him, inviting me to join him on the bench. “Come sit with me for a minute.”

I sat down beside him, the warmth of the sun on the wooden bench a small comfort. King trotted over and lay at our feet, panting happily.

Dad placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Look, I understand that it’s tough right now. But you’re strong, and you have a lot of potential. Don’t let the challenges make you lose sight of your goals.”

I sighed. Sure, I would only be at St. Mary’s for a little longer… but then what comes next?

“Dad, why do I have to go to Marylawn?”

The idea of going to *another* Catholic school after St. Mary’s was short of unbearable.

“Books come first, Diana. Boys later,” my dad replied, watching King with a small smile. “I don’t want you distracted.”

This was a conversation repeated many, many times as I reached the end of grammar school.

“But Dad…I was thinking,” I continued, keeping my gaze on Duke as he returned, panting happily, “I really want to go to Nutley High. All my friends are going there, and it’s closer to home.”

Dad sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Diana, we’ve talked about this. St. Mary’s is giving you a good education, and Marylawn will too. Why can’t you be more like your sister? She is going there and never complains.”

I frowned. It was *always* about comparing me to my older sister. I threw the ball again, trying to mask my frustration. “I know, but Nutley has a great arts program. I could really focus on my writing and art there. Plus, it's not like public schools are terrible. I just—”

“Diana,” he interrupted, his voice firm, “public schools are different. There are distractions, boys, and who knows what else. You need to focus on your studies.”

"Books come first, boys later," I muttered, echoing his favorite phrase… again.

He chuckled, a hint of softness in his stern demeanor. “Exactly. You’re a bright girl, and you have a future ahead of you. I don’t want you to get sidetracked.”

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions in check. “Dad, I just want to be with my friends. I don’t want to lose them. And I think I’d be really happy there.”

Duke dropped the ball at my feet, looking up expectantly. I picked it up, my hands trembling slightly. “I promise I’ll keep my grades up. I just... I don’t want to be alone.”

Dad watched me for a moment, his expression softening. “I know it’s hard, Diana. But you’ll make new friends. And besides, you can always see your old friends on weekends.”

“It's not the same,” I whispered, my voice cracking.

He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Look, if you go to Marylawn and do well, I promise you can go to any college you want. Anywhere. I’ll support you.”

I met his gaze, searching for any sign of flexibility. “Any college?” I asked, a glimmer of hope lighting up inside me.

“Any college,” he confirmed. “But you have to promise me you'll give St. Catherine’s a real shot.”

I nodded slowly, feeling a mix of relief and lingering sadness. “Okay, Dad. I promise.”

Duke barked, nudging the ball at my feet. I threw it one last time, watching him chase after it with boundless enthusiasm. Maybe, just maybe, I could find my own way to chase after my dreams too.

King ran back to me, dropping the ball at my feet. I knelt down to pet him, feeling a little comforted by his presence. “It’s just...sometimes I feel so alone at school. And when I come home, at least I have King”

My dad nodded. “I understand. King is a good dog. Just like Duke was." He paused, then added, “I know it was hard when we had to let Duke go. But sometimes, we have to make difficult choices.”

I looked at King, his eyes full of unconditional love. “At least with King, I have a friend. I’m understood. I’m not alone.”

My dad reached out and patted my shoulder. “You’re never alone, Diana. Remember that.”

“What on Earth is going on out here?”

Mom stormed out into the yard, her face a storm of irritation.

“Diana! What on earth is that dog doing out here again?” she shouted, her voice cutting through the evening air like a blade.

I flinched, my smile fading as I looked up at her. “We were just playing with him, Mom.”

Mom’s eyes narrowed as she marched over to us. “He’s a mess! All he does is bark and dig up the yard. And let’s not forget the noise complaints we’ve been getting. The neighbors are fed up with him.”

Dad sighed and stood up, looking weary. “We’re just trying to let him have a little time outside, La. He needs it.”

Mom crossed her arms, glaring at King, who had stopped playing to cower beside me. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m this close to calling the shelter and getting rid of him. He’s a nuisance!”

I stood up quickly, trying to shield King from her angry gaze. “Mom, please don’t. He’s just a puppy. He doesn’t know any better.”

Mom’s eyes flashed with impatience. “He’s not just a puppy, Diana. He’s a problem. He’s messy, he’s loud, and he causes nothing but trouble.”

“He’s not a problem,” I insisted, my voice trembling. “He’s just… misunderstood.”

Mom shook her head. “Enough, Diana. He’s going back into the pen, where he belongs. I can’t deal with this chaos anymore.”

Before I could protest further, Mom marched over to King, grabbed his collar, and started dragging him towards the pen at the edge of the yard. King whimpered and resisted, looking back at me with wide, frightened eyes. My heart ached as I watched, feeling utterly helpless.

“Mom, please!” I called out, following her. “It’s so hot today. Can’t we just let him stay out a little longer?”

Mom ignored me, opening the gate to the pen and pushing King inside. He immediately started whining, pawing at the gate as she locked it shut. “If you care so much, you can take care of him in there,” she snapped. “But he’s not coming out until he learns to behave.”

I stared at King, who was now pacing in the small, confined space, his barks echoing through the yard. Tears stung my eyes as I turned to face my parents. “This isn’t fair. He’s just a puppy. He doesn’t deserve this.”

Dad looked at me with a mixture of sympathy and resignation. “Diana, your mom’s right about one thing—King needs to learn. But I know it’s hard for you.”

I wiped my tears angrily. “He’s not learning anything in that pen except how to be miserable.”

*Just like me at the Catholic school*, I remember thinking.

In those moments, the similarities between King and I were as clear as day.

…

Time went by.

King and I remained in our respective confinements. Eventually, I was forced to attend Marylawn. And poor King was subject to the pen, day after day.

Every day, I tried to make King’s confinement more bearable. I brought him blankets to lie on, hoping they would provide some comfort against the cold, hard ground. On hot days, I hosed him down to keep him cool, watching as he lapped up the water with desperate thirst. Despite my efforts, King’s barks and whines never ceased, a constant reminder of his unhappiness.

King would bark and whine for hours, his distress clear. The confinement only made his behavior worse.

Every time we let King out of the pen, he would bolt, his desperation for freedom overriding any sense of caution. He would sprint through the neighborhood, barking joyfully as if tasting liberation for the first time. The exhilaration was short-lived, however. It wasn't long before a stern knock would echo through the house, signaling yet another return.

One evening, the doorbell rang, and I knew immediately what it meant. I hurried to the door, heart pounding, and opened it to find Officer Martinez standing there, holding King by the collar. King looked up at me with guilty eyes, his tail wagging timidly.

“Miss, this is the third time this week,” Officer Martinez said, his voice carrying a tone of weary patience. “We can't keep doing this.”

I nodded, feeling the familiar mix of embarrassment and sorrow. “I know, Officer. I'm really sorry.”

He sighed, handing me the leash. “Diana, you have to keep a closer eye on him. We can't have him running loose like this. It's dangerous for him and a nuisance for the neighbors.”

I took the leash, gently pulling King closer. “I understand. I’ll do my best to keep him under control.”

Officer Martinez looked at me with a mix of sympathy and sternness. “You need to do more than that. If this keeps happening, there could be serious consequences.”

“I promise, Officer,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I'll try harder.”

As I led King back into the house, Mom appeared in the doorway, her expression a mixture of anger and frustration. “Again, Diana? How many times do we have to go through this?”

“I'm sorry, Mom,” I replied, struggling to keep my voice steady. “He just wants to be free. He’s not meant to be locked up.”

Mom shook her head, her lips pressed into a thin line. “Wanting freedom doesn’t excuse bad behavior. This can’t keep happening. Do you understand?”

I nodded, tears welling up in my eyes. “Yes, Mom. I understand.”

Dad stepped in, his voice softer but no less serious. “Diana, you need to be more responsible with King. We all have to work together to make sure he’s safe.”

“I’m trying,” I said, my voice breaking. “I just want him to be happy.”

That night, I sat by King’s pen, stroking his fur as he lay beside me, his eyes closed in weary contentment. The hum of the crickets and the cool night air were the only things comforting us in our shared misery.

“I wish things were different, King,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “I wish you could run free without getting into trouble. But we’ll find a way. I promise.”

King gave a soft whine, as if he understood my frustration. I took a deep breath and leaned against the cold, metal bars of the pen, trying to ignore the chill in the evening air. “I know how you feel, you know. I don’t want to go to Marylawn any more than you want to be in this pen.”

King’s ears perked up as if he was listening intently. I started talking, hoping that sharing my thoughts might help ease the weight of my own worries.

“You see, Marylawn isn’t like St. Mary’s. At least St. Mary’s was familiar, even if it was strict and tough. But Marylawn is a whole different nightmare.” I scratched King’s ears absentmindedly. “I was forced to take this ridiculous exam to get in. I tried my best, but I failed. It’s humiliating enough to be told you’re not smart enough, but then they let me in anyway because my sister is there.”

King looked up at me with his sad eyes, his tail wagging slowly. “They thought having an older sister would make me smart, I guess. But it didn’t work out that way. I’m not a genius. I’m just me. I’m going to this stupid school and I’m already failing before I’ve even started.”

I wiped a tear from my cheek, feeling the sting of disappointment and anger. “I hate waking up at 6:00 a.m. every morning. It’s dark and cold, and we have to catch two buses and a train just to get there. And the neighborhood we have to walk through… oh, King, it’s awful. The smell of urine, the fear of getting mugged. It’s like a daily adventure in the worst possible way.”

King let out a little yawn, and I took that as a sign to keep going. “The train station is so scary, and sometimes I’m so scared I’m shaking. And then there’s the long day at school in those terrible uniforms. We have to wear these long skirts and I’m not allowed to even roll them up a bit, or Dad would have a fit. So I have to wait until I’m away from home to make it look a bit better.”

I sighed deeply, feeling the weight of my grievances. “And the books, King. They’re so heavy. I have to carry them all day, and my arms ache by the time I get home. We don’t have backpacks or anything. Just a pile of books and notepads that I have to lug around.”

King’s head rested gently on my leg, his warm presence a small comfort. “Sometimes I can’t even get all my homework done because we’re always rushing. I have to do it on the bus or the train, and it’s hard to concentrate. And Dad doesn’t let me wear makeup, so I have to sneak it on while we’re traveling. It’s so exhausting.”

King nuzzled closer, sensing my frustration. I continued, almost as if I was speaking to a confidant. “The worst part is that it’s an all-girls school, and I’m just starting to notice boys. I feel like I’m missing out on something big because I’m stuck in a place where there are no boys at all. It’s like being in a prison, King. I’m not allowed to be myself, and I’m always judged for not fitting in.”

I paused, trying to calm the storm of thoughts swirling in my mind. “I don’t even know what’s being taught most of the time. I sit there in class, and it’s like everything goes over my head. I’m failing so many subjects, and I can’t focus because I’m always thinking about how unfair it is. I’m just so angry at Dad for making me go there.”

King licked my hand, his gentle gesture reminding me that I wasn’t alone. “I know I’m being a bit rebellious,” I admitted with a sad smile. “But it’s hard not to be when you’re trapped in a place where you don’t belong. I feel like I’m in a never-ending cycle of disappointment. Dad never asks how I’m doing, and Mom doesn’t care either. It’s like I’m invisible.”

King looked up at me, his eyes full of a simple, unwavering trust. “Maybe I am being a bit like you, King. Maybe I’m trying to find a way to escape, just like you are. I want to be happy, and I want things to change.”

I stroked King’s fur slowly, the softness of his coat a balm for my frazzled nerves. “But I have hope. Maybe things will get better someday. Maybe I’ll find a way out of this mess, just like I hope you will find a way to be happy.”

King’s tail thumped weakly against the ground, as if he was trying to tell me he was there for me too. “We’ll get through this, King,” I said, feeling a small flicker of hope despite my own doubts. “We have to.”

I sat there in the darkness, the cool night air and King’s quiet companionship a gentle reminder that there was still a chance for things to change. We would both find our way out of our troubles, even if the path was hard to see.

#

# Chapter 6: Dancing in the Dark

Age 16

“Are you excited for the Mixer tonight, Diana?” Karen asked me in the cafeteria as I poked at my bland lunch.

I looked at my friend and smiled. While I was at Marylawn, they had this thing called a “Mixer” a few times a year. It was basically a big dance party where all the girls from Marylawn would get together with the boys from Nutley High. The idea was simple: a dance in the gym with music, a few chaperones, and no alcohol—just clean, innocent fun.

“Oh, definitely!” I replied, trying to hide my excitement. “I can’t wait to get out of here for a few hours and just dance.”

Karen smiled, her eyes sparkling with the same anticipation I felt. “I heard there’s a new band playing. I hope they’re good!”

“Me too,” I said, barely able to contain my excitement. “I love dancing to live music.”

When the day of the Mixer came, I’d spend most of my classes daydreaming about it. I would sit there in my Marylawn uniform, scribbling notes on my notepad while my mind wandered to the bright lights of the gym and the thumping beats of the music. I could almost hear the laughter and see the swirl of colorful dresses as I pictured myself on the dance floor.

After school, I’d take two buses and a train, trying to keep my excitement hidden beneath my stern Marylawn uniform. I made sure to time it just right so that I’d get there with plenty of time to enjoy myself.

The day of the first Mixer, I remember sneaking out of the house, hoping my parents wouldn’t notice I was gone. They had no idea where I was going, and I wasn’t about to tell them. They would never have let me go if they knew the truth. Instead, I told them I was hanging out with some friends from school.

“Be home by 10:00!” Mom called after me as I slipped out the door.

“I will!” I replied, trying to sound as cheerful and nonchalant as possible.

I took the bus to the train station, and from there, it was a short walk to the school hosting the Mixer. I would always walk quickly, my heart racing with excitement and a hint of rebellion.

The first Mixer was everything I had hoped it would be. The gym was decorated with twinkling lights, and the smell of popcorn and candy filled the air. I could barely contain my excitement as I stepped through the doors, greeted by the loud, energetic music that immediately made me want to dance.

“Wow, this place looks amazing!” I said to Karen as we walked in together, our eyes wide with awe.

“I know, right?” Karen agreed, her voice filled with excitement. “I can’t wait to get started.”

We quickly found our friends and headed to the dance floor. The music was fantastic—upbeat and catchy. I lost myself in the rhythm, twirling and spinning with the other girls as we waited for the boys to arrive. When they did, I was filled with a giddy thrill. We were all there, dressed in our best outfits, ready to dance the night away.

“Hey, Diana! Do you want to dance?” A boy from Nutley High asked, flashing me a charming smile.

“I’d love to!” I said, trying to sound as enthusiastic as I felt.

I danced with him for a while, and we talked about school, our favorite music, and the silly things that made us laugh. It was innocent and fun, just like it was supposed to be. I didn’t think about the heavy books waiting in my locker or the long bus rides home. All I cared about was the music and the joy of being there.

As the night went on, I found myself dancing with different boys, enjoying each moment as if it were a precious escape from reality.

“This is the best part of being at Marylawn,” I told Karen as we took a break from dancing, our faces flushed and our hair tousled from the excitement.

“I know,” she agreed, her eyes shining. “It’s the only time we really get to be ourselves and have fun.”

The Mixers became my little sanctuary, a place where I could let go of my worries and immerse myself in the joy of dancing. I would look forward to them with a kind of desperate eagerness, using them as a temporary escape from the daily grind of Marylawn and the unhappiness at home.

After each Mixer, I would walk back to the train station with a light heart, even though I was exhausted. I would look forward to the next time I could escape to that magical place where I felt free.

But it was a fleeting freedom. As soon as I got home, the harsh reality of my life at Marylawn and the problems with my parents would hit me all over again.

“How was your day, Diana?” Dad would ask, and I’d respond with a tired smile.

“It was good, Dad. Just hung out with some friends.”

“Good to hear,” he’d say, not knowing the real reason for my smile or the happiness I had found in those stolen hours.

Every time I left the Mixers, I knew I was leaving behind a piece of my happiness, but I clung to those memories like a lifeline, hoping that someday things would change and I would be able to find that joy again.

…

I would always remember my time at the Mixers. But, I’m sad to say that one Mixer in particular will always stand out in my mind.

On that night, the lights of the gymnasium were like a thousand stars twinkling above, and the music pulsed through the room with an energy that made me forget, if only for a few hours, all the things I hated about Marylawn and home. I had spent the night dancing, laughing with friends, and sneaking glances at the boys from Nutley High. It was a precious escape from the monotony of my daily life.

I was in the middle of a dance with a boy I barely knew, swaying to the rhythm of a slow song, when…

*Bang!*

I heard the gym doors slam open. My heart skipped a beat as I turned to see who had barged in.

And there he was.

Dad, standing in the doorway in his white baker’s uniform, his face flushed with anger.

“Diana!” he shouted, his voice cutting through the music like a knife.

I froze, my hand still in the boy’s, my smile fading.

“Dad?” I said, my voice trembling.

He didn’t wait for an answer. He stormed across the gym, his heavy footsteps echoing against the wooden floor. The room seemed to slow down as I watched him approach, my heart pounding in my chest. I could feel the stares of everyone around us, their eyes wide with curiosity and shock.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, his face a mask of fury.

“I—I’m just at the Mixer,” I stammered, trying to keep my voice steady. “It’s a school event.”

Without a word, he grabbed my arm, his grip like iron, and started dragging me toward the exit. I stumbled alongside him, my eyes darting around the room as I tried to avoid the gazes of my classmates. I could feel my cheeks burning with shame, the weight of everyone’s eyes making me want to disappear.

“How dare you disobey me!” he roared, his voice ringing off the walls. “I trusted you, and you lied to me!”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, my voice barely audible over his shouting. “I just wanted to have a good time.”

“A good time?” he spat. “Is this what you call a good time? Dancing with boys, dressing like a streetwalker?”

We made our way through the crowded hallway, the other students looking on in stunned silence as my father dragged me outside. I wanted to hide, to run, but his grip was unyielding. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes, but I forced myself to stay silent, my head hung low as we walked.

When we got to the car, he threw me into the passenger seat and slammed the door behind me. He climbed into the driver’s seat, his knuckles white on the steering wheel as he glared at me.

“Do you have any idea how embarrassed I am?” he shouted. “Do you know what people are saying about you? About me? About our family?”

I looked down at my lap, too afraid to meet his eyes. I knew better than to try to explain myself. “I didn’t mean to cause trouble,” I mumbled.

“Trouble?” he echoed, his voice dripping with contempt. “You call this ‘trouble’? This is disrespect. This is defiance.”

The drive home felt endless. The car seemed to close in on me, suffocating me with the weight of his anger. The streets outside blurred by in a rush of lights and shadows, but I couldn’t focus on anything but the storm of his rage.

When we got home, he dragged me out of the car and into the house, my heart pounding as I braced for what was coming.

“You’re grounded!” he shouted, shoving me into the living room. “You think you can just go to a party like this and get away with it?”

Before I could even respond, he grabbed my arm and yanked me towards the kitchen. “What do you have to say for yourself?” he demanded.

I tried to speak, but as soon as the words started to form, he slapped me hard across the face. The sting was sharp and immediate, and I could only manage to flinch away.

“You think you can lie to me?” he yelled. “You think you can dress like that and get away with it?”

I tried to look him in the eyes, but I couldn’t. I just stared at the floor, trying to make myself as small as possible.

“I wasn’t lying,” I said, my voice trembling. “I just wanted to go to the Mixer. It was just a dance.”

“A dance? You think this is just a dance?” He was in a rage now, his face red and his eyes wild. “You’re out there dancing with boys, looking like you’re asking for trouble!”

He grabbed me by the shoulders, shaking me as if trying to force some sense into me. But all I could do was take the blows, the anger in his eyes reflecting the storm of emotions inside me.

“Why did you lie?” he demanded, his voice breaking. “Why did you think you could get away with this?”

I tried to speak, but the fear in me made it hard to form words. Every time I opened my mouth, I was met with a slap or a harsh accusation.

“You’re grounded!” he shouted again. “No more Mixers! No more dancing with boys!”

“Okay, Dad,” I whispered, tears streaming down my cheeks. “I’m sorry. I won’t go again.”

He didn’t seem to hear me. He just continued to berate me, his anger a torrent that wouldn’t be stopped. I just stood there, my head down, my body trembling.

Finally, he stopped shouting, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He looked at me with a mix of anger and disappointment, his face a mask of hurt and fury.

“You’ve made your bed,” he said, his voice low and cold. “Now you have to lie in it.”

He turned and walked out of the room, leaving me standing there, my body trembling and my heart aching. I didn’t move. I couldn’t. I just stood there in the silence of the kitchen, my mind reeling from the violence of the night.

The days that followed were some of the darkest of my life. I avoided everyone and everything, withdrawing into myself as if I could become invisible. The Mixers, which had been a brief escape from my troubles, were now a distant memory. I spent the next three years at Marylawn in a deep, suffocating depression, barely speaking to anyone and finding solace only in the memories of those fleeting, joyful nights.

I stopped daydreaming about the Mixers. The very thought of dancing with boys became a painful reminder of the night my father had dragged me away from that one bit of happiness I had known. I became a shell of my former self—quiet, withdrawn, and broken.

“How’s school going?” Mom would ask, but I would just shrug, my eyes always on the ground.

“It’s fine,” I’d mumble, not looking up.

My grades slipped, and my spirit waned. I didn’t go to the Mixers anymore, not even when they were held. The thought of facing Dad’s anger again was too terrifying. I was a prisoner in my own life, and the key to my freedom had been thrown away that night.

The Mixer had been a brief interlude of joy in the bleak symphony of my life at Marylawn, and the night Dad found out had been a violent end to that brief escape. Now, all I had left were memories of happier times and a heart heavy with unspoken sorrow.