



AUTHOR PROFILE

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A table set in the dark

Asya's story began in a grey house where colors remained silent. In this house, everything was scarce: bread, warmth, and above all, time. As the youngest of six children, Asya grew up like an invisible child in the shadows of poverty. Yet, amidst this grey misery, one single thing shone brightly: Asya's red hair. That hair was like a small torch, accidentally lit in the dark hallways.

In this house, silence took the place of speech. Every sentence led either to debt or to her father's rage. Asya learned to be silent before she could even walk. She moved like a shadow in the corners where no one noticed her. The house she was born into was not a home, but a voiceless world in which she was trapped. Waking up every morning in a cold stillness, the little red spark inside her began to dream of one day breaking that silence.

Asya's house was never quiet, yet in all that noise, no one truly listened to one another. Being the youngest of six siblings meant being the last to receive anything and always being the least noticed. At the kitchen table, plates were cleared in a flash, and her older brothers' hand-me-downs hung off Asya like a burden. As her mother rushed between endless chores and the demands of five sons, she hadn't a single minute left for Asya.

Sometimes, Asya would stand in the middle of the room, waiting for someone to catch her eye. But everyone was consumed by their own worries, trapped within their own worlds. Being part of a large family was sometimes harder than walking alone through a vast desert. She lived on the fine line between presence and

absence. No one ever asked how her day had been. Although this “invisibility” left a heavy ache in Asya’s heart, it also granted her a gift: the power of observation. She sensed the tiny details that everyone else was blind to—her mother’s weary glances and the approaching storm of her father’s rage—better than anyone. To survive in that loud house, Asya learned to watch in silence and retreat into a world of her own.

In Asya’s world, there were two kinds of silence: her mother’s weary quiet and her father’s frightening stillness. Her mother, Meryem, was like a wheel in the house that never stopped turning. From the first rays of morning light until midnight, her hands were always busy. The wrinkles on her face told stories not just of her age, but of sleepless nights and sacrificed dreams. Whenever Asya tried to help, her mother would only look at her with an exhausted smile, as if to say, “Don’t you get tired too.” Meryem’s fatigue hung everywhere in the kitchen air like heavy smoke.

Her father, on the other hand, was as heavy and dark as a shadow. The moment he stepped through the door in the evening, the atmosphere in the house shifted instantly. Her father’s love was like a rare sun, seen only when everything had gone well that day. Most of the time, he used his silence like a weapon, and whenever a mistake was made, that stillness gave way to harsh words and punishments. To him, discipline was more important than love. When his heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway, the siblings’ joking would stop and their games were cut short. To escape her father’s stern gaze, Asya would always make herself smaller.

In that house, no one could take Asya by the hand—her mother was too exhausted, and her father was too hardened.

For Asya, her father was not just a tired man who came home in the evening; he was the enforcer of the house’s unshakeable and harsh laws. In that home, even the smallest mistake a child could make had the potential to trigger a great storm. One winter evening, Asya accidentally dropped an old glass that had been sitting on the kitchen table. The shrill sound of the shattering glass seemed to bring all life in the house to a momentary standstill. Asya’s heart pounded so hard it felt too large for her chest, and fear spread from her hands throughout her entire body. As her father’s heavy footsteps approached the kitchen, the innocent joy of childhood gave way to an ice-cold silence.

Her father did not shout when he entered. Yet, the cold hardness in his gaze was more piercing than any scream. As a punishment, Asya was not allowed to join the family for dinner that evening and was condemned to wait in the dark, cold pantry. While Asya sat in that dark corner for hours, pulling her knees to her chest, she learned for the first time the color of “fear.” There, weeping among the dusty shelves, she understood: in this house, love was a reward, granted only as long as one made no mistakes. The loneliness she felt in the

pantry that night, coupled with her father's unjust severity, left a lasting wound on Asya's soul. From then on, she was no longer just invisible; she was like a timid bird, constantly living in dread of the next storm breaking loose.

In that silent and cold house, the only place where Asya could truly breathe was by her sister Zehra's side. Whenever she fled from her father's punishments or her mother's endlessly weary gaze, she always sought refuge in the safe harbor of her sister. To Asya, Zehra was more than just a sibling; she was the one who finished her unspoken sentences and the guardian of her deepest secrets. While the other siblings forgot Asya in the crowd, Zehra always noticed the quiet sadness in her eyes. At night, when everyone else was asleep, the dreams they whispered under the old blanket warmed the ice-cold air of the room just a little. It was to her alone that Asya first whispered her secret passion for the kitchen and her longing to one day leave this house.

Zehra was the only person who made Asya feel she wasn't alone in this world, simply by stroking her hair. Without her sister, Asya would have long ago crumbled under the heavy silence of that home. This secret bond between them was the only fortress that poverty and fear could not breach. Sometimes her sister would read her fairy tales from an old book or shield her from their father's rage. In Zehra's voice, Asya found hope; in her hands, she found compassion. While love was hidden away like a forbidden emotion in that house, the two sisters discovered how to survive by holding onto one another. Zehra was the only breeze that kept the small red spark inside Asya from going out. Their silent solidarity was the first secret foundation for the great escape and the success that lay in the future.

While every corner of the house was cold and haunting, the kitchen remained the safest fortress in the world for Asya. The bubbling of the pot on the stove drowned out the sound of the storm outside and her father's heavy footsteps. Watching her mother bring ingredients together to work wonders, Asya felt her own inner emptiness fill with the aromas of the food. One evening, as her mother collapsed into a chair from sheer exhaustion, Asya quietly stepped up to the counter and picked up the wooden spoon. The sizzle of onions in oil whispered to her that despite all of life's hardships, something beautiful could still be created. In that moment, she discovered that cooking meant more than just nourishment; it was a way to heal the wounds in her soul. When her sister Zehra walked into the kitchen, she immediately noticed an unfamiliar glint in Asya's eyes.

Zehra approached her sister, placed a hand on her shoulder, and whispered softly, "There's more than just food in that pot, isn't there, Asya?" Asya continued to stir slowly and replied with a smile, "No one scolds me here, sister; here, it's just me and my dreams." With that answer, Zehra saw the first seeds of the great talent

growing within her sister. To Asya, the kitchen was no longer just a room, but the only place where she could truly exist in a house where she was otherwise invisible. The sharp scent of spices made her forget the heavy, dusty smell of poverty. Asya learned to weave a story of hope out of whatever few ingredients were available, no matter how meager. The flame of the stove merged with the small red spark inside her, preparing the great chef of the future.

Asya's mind was like a secret cookbook, filled with the scents of ingredients she could not reach. One day, she was dying to try a recipe for a spiced cake she had seen on an old scrap of newspaper. But when she opened the kitchen cupboards, she found only a little flour at the bottom and empty jars. There was no fresh milk, nor the cinnamon that formed the very soul of that recipe. As she looked at the stale bread, she felt that her dreams were becoming as dried out as that crust. The lack of ingredients wasn't just a problem with the food; it was a heavy chain that poverty had wrapped around Asya's creativity. In that moment, she realized for the first time, with painful clarity, that her dreams were crashing against the walls of this kitchen and bouncing back.

When Zehra walked in, she found Asya standing before an empty pot and asked softly, "What are you missing this time, little chef?" With eyes full of tears, Asya replied, "It's not just sugar or flour that's missing, sister; in this house, there is nothing in which I could bake my dreams." Zehra took her sister's hand, placed it on the cold marble of the kitchen counter, and said, "One day, all the spices of the world will be in your hands—just have patience." Even if those words didn't satisfy her hunger at that moment, they reignited the fire that had almost gone out inside Asya. That evening, there were once again only olives and bread on the table, but in her head, Asya continued to set the most magnificent feasts. Scarcity taught her not to give up, but rather to find ways to work a miracle with even the smallest crumb. In this house, dinner was not a joyful gathering, but a heavy ritual where everyone sank into their own silence. Eight people sat around the old table in the center of the kitchen, filling the emptiness before them not just with a bowl of soup, but with endless disappointments. As soon as her father took his seat at the table, even the softest voices fell silent, leaving only the cold, metallic sound of spoons striking the plates. Asya was the one who felt the loneliest at this crowded table; it was as if her body were there, but her soul was in an entirely different world. Every bite served by her mother's weary hands left a bitter taste, like the untold stories stuck in Asya's throat. No one looked each other in the eye, no one asked how their day had been; for everyone knew the answers were always the same, and always dark.

When Asya squeezed her sister Zehra's hand under the table, that small touch was her only anchor in this wordless world. One evening, as if wanting to dispel the heavy air at the table, she tentatively looked at her father and asked, "Father, will we ever see a day when everyone at this table is truly laughing?" Her father

paused his spoon for a moment and shot her a look so harsh that Asya felt herself crumble under the weight of her own question. He simply said, "Eat your food and stop dreaming, Asya"; his voice was like a sharp frost that killed all hope. From that moment on, Asya learned not just how to eat, but how to build vast walls within herself. These dark tables would become the greatest fuel for the bright and peaceful future she would create in her mind. Perhaps today there was only scarcity at this table, but Asya swore that one day, at her own table, she would serve not only delicacies but love as well.

That evening, the tension in the kitchen escalated when Asya's secret notebook of recipes fell into her father's hands. When he saw her dreams and lists of ingredients, he furiously tore the book in two. "We can barely fill our stomachs, and you're here dreaming of princess feasts?" he screamed, throwing the book into the burning stove. As Asya watched her labor and her dreams turn to ash in the flames, she felt the little girl inside her die once and for all. Her father's harsh intervention was the final straw. She wiped away her tears, raised her head, and for the first time, looked her father directly in the eye—not with fear, but with hatred. She would no longer be just a silent shadow in this house; fleeing and building a life of her own was now more than a dream—it had become a necessity.

Asya locked herself in her room that night and did not come out for hours. When her sister Zehra came to comfort her, Asya pulled away; she no longer needed pity, only a plan. During those hours of isolation, she calculated her next move over and over in her head. When she woke up the next morning, the suffocating atmosphere of the house no longer affected her, for her soul had already walked out the door. She remembered a "Dishwasher Wanted" sign in the window of a local restaurant and began secretly packing her bag. Without telling anyone, she would take the first step toward escaping the shadow of her father and the helplessness of her mother. Asya was no longer the little girl who dreamed, but an angry and determined young woman taking her destiny into her own hands.

Before the sun had even risen, Asya crept into the kitchen, trying her best not to step on the creaking floorboards. Just as she was about to slip out the door, she heard a whisper behind her: "Where are you going, Asya?" It was her sister, Zehra. Asya paused but didn't turn around; her shoulders were tense, her voice ice-cold: "I don't want to die here, sister. I burned right along with that notebook." Zehra rushed toward her and grabbed her arm, her eyes filled with terror: "If Father finds out, he'll kill you—you know that, don't you?" Asya slowly pushed her sister's hand away, looked her in the eye, and said: "I'm already dying every day, so I might as well take the risk to actually live, just this once." Zehra hesitated for a moment, then pulled a few coins wrapped in a handkerchief from her pocket and pressed them into Asya's palm.

Weeping, her sister whispered, "Then go, but don't look back," and quietly opened the door. Breathing in the

cool morning air, Asya bolted toward the small restaurant in town. She was out of breath by the time she reached the door; she tore the sign from the window and stepped inside. To the stern-looking chef, she said: "I'll wash the dishes, I'll mop the floors, I'll even sleep here if I have to, but I must have this job." The chef looked at the thin girl whose eyes were burning with fire and tossed her an apron. "The kitchen is in the back; start immediately. There's no room for laziness here," he said, and with that, the greatest battle of Asya's life had officially begun. As she washed her very first plate, her hands were trembling, but she smiled for the first time; for that plate was not part of her father's world, but a part of her own destiny.

The restaurant kitchen was a much harsher and more merciless place than Asya had ever imagined. Between the hot steam, the clatter of sharp knives, and the loud shouting, she felt as though she were on a battlefield. The head chef slammed dirty pots onto the counter in front of her and roared, "There's no time for crying here! If your hands don't move faster, there's the door!" Asya ignored the burning of her hands in the hot water and worked with every ounce of her strength. As she scrubbed every single plate, she was actually trying to wash away the oppressive shadow of her father. The other workers looked at her mockingly, whispering that this frail girl wouldn't last even a single day. But Asya's stubbornness was hotter than the kitchen fire; she had walked through that door once, and she wouldn't dream of turning back.

When the lunch rush ended, Asya could barely stand from exhaustion, yet her eyes remained glued to the chef's hands at the counter. As the chef chopped vegetables with great mastery, Asya forgot the dishes for a moment and watched him, fascinated. The chef suddenly turned around and snapped at her, "What are you staring at? Are the dishes done?" Asya didn't back down an inch and said, "They are finished, sir, but I wanted to see how you thicken the sauce." A look of slight surprise flickered across the chef's stern face; it was the first time a dishwasher had shown more interest in the contents of the pots than in her own chores. "Dry your hands first, then come over here and get the onions out of the sack," he said, and Asya realized she was beginning to become a part of the kitchen. In that moment, even the ache in her back felt like the sweetest reward in the world.

For Asya, the days had turned into an endless, exhausting marathon. In the mornings at home, she acted as if nothing had happened, dodging her father's harsh glares, while in the evenings, she kept herself alive in the steaming kitchen of the restaurant. Slipping out of the house unnoticed and returning secretly at midnight became more dangerous with each passing day. When she arrived home one night to find her father sitting at the kitchen table, her heart leapt into her throat. When he roared, "Where have you been until now?", Asya tried to maintain her composure and lied to him. "I was in the garden with my sister Zehra, getting some fresh air," she said, though she couldn't stop the tremor in her voice. Although her father seemed to believe her, Asya knew all too well that these lies would eventually catch up with her.

Every hour spent at the restaurant made Asya's hands more calloused, but it strengthened her soul even more. She was no longer just washing dishes; she was peeling onions at the counter beside the chef and dicing potatoes with millimeter precision. The more the chef saw her eagerness, the more responsibility he gave her, sometimes even whispering the recipes of his most secret sauces into her ear. When Asya returned home utterly exhausted, she would touch the warmth of the few coins she had saved and breathe in the scent of her own future. Sometimes, when Zehra came to her at midnight and asked, "Is all this fatigue worth it, Asya?", Asya would answer with shining eyes. "I'm not just getting tired, sister; for the first time, I feel like I have a place in this world." She had now set out on a path from which there was no turning back, and this path would lead either to a grand victory or an irreversible collapse.

The evening service at the restaurant was more frantic and louder than ever. As the chef struggled to get the orders out on time, he barked commands at everyone in the kitchen. At that moment, the sauce for the main course scorched, and a brief panic broke out. While the chef furiously threw his utensils aside, Asya stepped up to the counter without being asked and began to quickly recreate the sauce with the ingredients at hand. In the middle of the kitchen, everyone watched in astonishment as this thin girl handled the ladle with such mastery. When the consistency of the sauce was just right, the chef took a spoon, tasted it, and looked Asya long in the eye. "You," the chef said, his voice thick with emotion, "you are not just a dishwasher; you have magic in your hands." For the first time, Asya felt truly valued, but that joy was cut short, as if by a knife, by the familiar shadow appearing at the kitchen door.

Asya's brother stood at the entrance, watching his sister with eyes full of hate. While Asya's heart trembled with fear, her brother marched toward her with heavy steps and gripped her arm tightly. "So, this is where you've been sneaking off to! What are you going to say when Father asks where you've been?" he hissed. Though Asya groaned in pain, she did not back down; she looked her brother in the eye and shouted, "I am earning my own money! I'm not a burden to anyone!" As her brother tried to drag her out of the kitchen, the chef stepped in and held the man's hand firm. "This is my kitchen; no one is taken from here against their will," he said, and the air in the room turned to ice.

In that moment, Asya realized once again how high the price for her dreams would be. As her brother stormed out, he said, "When you come home tonight, no one will be able to save you," and the fear inside Asya transformed into deep determination. There was no turning back; she would either win this fight or perish forever in the darkness of that house. The moment Asya stepped into the house, the heavy, suffocating silence in the kitchen told her that a violent storm had broken loose. Her father, transformed into a monster by her brother's news, waited at the table, consumed by rage. As soon as Asya entered, his booming voice echoed

off the walls: "What business do you have in those filthy kitchens? Do you intend to drag our honor through the dirt?" But this time, Asya did not shrink away; the old fear within her had given way to ice-cold determination. "I am not saving your honor, Father, I am saving my own future!" she shouted back, and everyone in the room stared at her in horror. When her father lunged up and raised his hand, Asya didn't take a single step back, defying his wrath without even blinking.

That night, every tie in that house was severed; while her father screamed that he was disowning her, her mother shed silent tears in a corner. When Asya was cast out with her few belongings packed into a small bag, the deep darkness outside seemed safer to her than the misery within those walls. Her sister Zehra ran after her, pressed an old cardigan into her hand, and asked through her sobs: "What will you do now, Asya? Where will you go?" With tearful eyes but a steady gaze, Asya replied: "I have a kitchen to go to, sister. I won't just be cooking there anymore; I will be building my own life." As she walked toward the restaurant in the cold of the night, the lights in the windows of that dark house she left behind went out one by one. From now on, the only sanctuary Asya could find was that small restaurant kitchen where the stove fire never died; there, her life would begin anew.

As Asya spent her first night in the small, damp storage room behind the restaurant, she realized that freedom wasn't as warm as she had imagined. Lying on a thin mattress on the floor, she didn't smell the familiar scent of the old kitchen at home; instead, she was met only with the odor of cleaning supplies and cold metal. When she got up early the next morning to take out the trash, a poster with colors faded by the rain caught her eye on an old notice board at the street corner. The poster announced a scholarship exam for the city's most prestigious culinary academy; this was the wonderful door Asya had been waiting for her entire life. However, the registration fee and the necessary kitchen equipment required a considerable sum of money. As she looked at her few coins and sighed deeply, she made a promise to herself: "No matter what it costs, I will raise this money and pass this exam."

Asya began to work harder than anyone else at the restaurant, taking on extra shifts and saving every penny. But while she fought this battle, things in the house she had left behind were not going well at all.

After her daughter's departure, her mother, Meryem, had almost entirely withdrawn from the world; she had stopped eating and drinking and became bedridden. Her father, as angry and harsh as he was, could not bear to see his wife wasting away before his eyes. One evening, as he sat alone in the kitchen and heard Meryem's mumbling, he felt his stony pride crack for the first time. He knew that the only way for his wife to recover was Asya's return, but he didn't yet know how to make that happen. Asya, meanwhile, was secretly practicing in the dim light of the restaurant with whatever ingredients she could find, preparing for the grand dish she

intended to cook for the exam.

As Asya worked feverishly in the restaurant kitchen, a shadow appeared at the door. When she looked up, she saw her father—the man she had spent her entire life fleeing from—standing before her; yet this time, he no longer seemed so towering and terrifying. Her father turned his cap over in his hands and remained silent for a while, then said in a thick voice, “Your mother...” Asya’s heart ached, but without setting down her knife, she replied with an ice-cold tone, “What about my mother, Father? Did you cast her out of the house just like you did me?” Her father lowered his head, and for the first time, the shadow of a defeated man lay in his eyes. “She won’t eat, she won’t drink... She murmurs your name every night. If you don’t come home, the burden of her condition will be on your conscience, Asya, he said, and even the other workers in the kitchen held their breath to watch the scene unfold.

Asya leaned against the counter and looked her father directly in the eye; she was no longer the frightened child she once was. “I will return to that house only for my mother’s sake, but I have a condition, Father.” she said in a determined tone. Her father raised his eyebrows in astonishment. “A condition? You are setting conditions for your father?” he roared, but his voice no longer carried its old power. Asya pulled the crumpled exam poster from her pocket and slammed it onto the table: “I am going to take this exam. No one will stop me, and no one will interfere in my kitchen. If you want me to walk through that door, you must swear that you will not put my dreams in chains.” Her father stared silently at the piece of paper for a while, then grit his teeth and said, “Fine, as long as your mother gets back on her feet, do what you want.” In that moment, Asya realized she had won her first major victory, but she did not yet know the price that victory would command.

As Asya stood before the very door she had spent years longing to escape, her hands were trembling; yet this time, she did not enter as a prisoner, but as a victor whose terms had been accepted. Zehra opened the door and immediately threw her arms around her sister’s neck, weeping. “You’re here; it’s as if Mother has started breathing again “Asya” her sister whispered. When Asya entered the room where her mother lay and saw that the woman was now little more than skin and bones, she felt all her anger melt away. Meryem reached out with great effort to take her daughter’s hand and said in a fragile voice, “Forgive me, my daughter, I could not protect you.” Asya kissed her mother’s hand, pressed it to her forehead, and said, “It’s over, Mother. Now it’s your turn to get well; I am here and I’m not going anywhere.”

When she left the room, she found her father sitting in the darkness in his usual chair in the kitchen. Without raising his head, he said in a cold voice, “I kept my word, you have returned; but know this, I will not provide the money for those exam fees.” Asya was prepared for this move; she stepped up to the table and replied with a steady posture, “No one asked you for money, Father. I will continue working at the restaurant.” Her

father looked up in surprise and asked, "You intend to stay in this house and work at that shop at the same time?" Asya said firmly, "Yes. During the day I will be at home, as you wish, but at night, I will be in that kitchen, sweating for my dreams." This new and strained agreement between them had completely altered the atmosphere of the house; no one looked at each other the way they used to.

For Asya, time was split in two: by day, she was the housemaid living in her father's shadow; by night, she was a warrior in the steaming restaurant kitchen. While the dark circles under her eyes grew deeper from exhaustion, her success in the kitchen and every penny saved gave her new strength. One afternoon, Hans came into the kitchen and caught Asya with the recipes she was secretly working on; a condescending smile appeared on his face. "Do you really think you'll be accepted into that fancy academy?" Hans asked, waving the recipe sheet in the air. Asya set her cloth aside and looked her brother directly in the eye: "If I didn't believe it, Hans, I wouldn't be scrubbing pots until dawn every night." Hans laughed loudly, tossed the paper onto the table, and said, "You're just a dishwasher, Asya—they won't even let a village girl like you through the door!" Asya did not allow those poisonous words to pierce her heart; she had become immune to such destructive remarks. "You may not have any dreams, but that doesn't mean I'll allow you to belittle mine," she replied, causing Hans to scowl. Watching the argument from a corner, her sister Zehra was both astonished and secretly delighted by how upright Asya remained. As Hans left the kitchen, he slammed the door and shouted, "Even if you raise the money, do you think Father will let you out of the house on exam day?" This threat reignited a spark of fear in Asya, but she didn't think of giving up. When she went to the restaurant that night, she turned to the chef: "Teach me the most difficult recipes, Chef. I don't just want to wash dishes; I want to work miracles." These barricades against her dreams only drove Asya to run even faster.

Asya had hidden the money she saved for the exam fee under a loose floorboard beneath her bed; that small metal tin was her only key to freedom. When she came home from work one evening and saw that her room had been ransacked, her heart froze with fear. She ran into the kitchen and found Hans sitting at the table, counting the money with the metal tin in his hand. "Where did you get this much money, Asya? You couldn't have saved this much just by washing dishes at the restaurant," Hans said, stuffing the cash into his pocket. Asya's eyes darkened with rage; she lunged at Hans, trying to snatch the tin back. "That is my hard-earned money, Hans! I've sweated for months for that! Give it back right now!"

Hans pushed his sister away with one hand, laughing loudly as he hissed, "Does Father know about this secret treasure? Or were you planning to use this money to run away to those ridiculous dreams of yours?"

Asya felt her knees give way at her brother's cruelty, but she did not surrender. "That money isn't just paper,

it's my ticket out of this house! If you don't give it back, I really will go to the police this time!" she screamed. The smile on Hans' face froze for a moment; he hadn't expected his sister to go that far. "The police? You'd report your own brother? You really have lost your mind," he said, tossing half the money onto the table, keeping the rest in his pocket, and heading for the door. As Asya stared at the meager amount of money left on the table, she felt another piece of her soul break away. When her sister Zehra appeared in the doorway and took her by the shoulders, Asya spoke through her sobs: "They won't be able to stop me, sister. Hans can take my money, but he will never be able to extinguish the fire inside me."

Under the dim light of the streetlamp at the corner, the young girl's footsteps felt heavier than usual. The intense aroma of food from the restaurant clung to her cardigan, and the ache in her back had long since become a permanent part of her. As she approached the house, the sound of boisterous laughter and the noise of a crowd inside reached the street. The moment she opened the door, her eyes lit up at the familiar scent of soap and mint; her grandmother had arrived. But her joy was dampened by the sharp, judgmental glares of her aunts sitting at the table. Aunt Helga looked her niece up and down and laughed mockingly: "Well look at that, our great chef finally graces us with her presence."

The young girl didn't answer anyone as she stepped to the sink to wash her hands; she sought refuge only in her grandmother's gentle gaze. The other aunt added, while chewing her food: "Her hands constantly smell of dish soap, yet she still dreams of that luxury school—how sad!" Sensing the tension at the table, the grandmother struck her walking stick firmly against the floor and admonished them: "Be quiet, you all walked the same path once, have you forgotten?" While the aunts continued to whisper among themselves, the old woman stepped toward Asya and stroked her hair. The stinging atmosphere in the room softened slightly with the grandmother's presence, but the aunts' whispering still echoed in her ears. While everyone else was busy eating, the old woman leaned in and whispered into the girl's ear: "Come outside, my child, let's talk for a bit."

As they took refuge in the shadows of the old apple tree in the backyard, the grandmother pulled a small cloth from her belt with trembling hands. "In our time, women's dreams only fit between the kitchen walls, my child, but you must tear those walls down," she said, placing a few crumpled bills into Asya's palm. While the young girl looked at the money in astonishment, the old woman continued with a smile: "We are staying here for five days; do not listen to your aunts' chatter during this time. Go and pass that exam." At that moment, a figure approached from the darkness; it was Elif, Aunt Helga's daughter.

Elif looked at her cousin with admiring eyes and whispered, "I heard what you were talking about, Asya. I want to be like you and earn my own money too." When Asya took her cousin's hand and said, "Then come to

the restaurant with me tomorrow, the chef needs an assistant," a hopeful glow lit up Elif's face.

While the two young girls excitedly made plans, Elif paused for a moment and looked worriedly toward the lights of the house. "If my mother finds out, she'll never let me go; she only wants me to get married and move away," she said with a trembling voice. Asya straightened her cousin's shoulders and encouraged her: "If you aren't brave, you'll never leave this kitchen, Elif. It's worth a try." Elif took a deep breath and nodded: "Agreed, I'll be with you tomorrow morning." But just at that moment, the kitchen window was hastily flung open, and Aunt Helga's sharp voice pierced the night: "Elif! What are you doing out there with that dreamer? Come inside right now!" As the two girls looked at each other, making a silent pact, the oppressive atmosphere of the house was already spilling out into the garden. The grandmother leaned on her walking stick and prayed in silence that the spark in her granddaughters' eyes would not go out.

Even before the sun dared to peek out from behind the gray clouds, the two young girls reached the kitchen door on tiptoes. At the very moment Elif's hand, trembling with excitement, reached for the doorknob, the kitchen light suddenly flicked on, and Aunt Helga stood before them, waiting with crossed arms. Helga gripped her daughter's arm tightly and roared, "Where do you two think you're going? Do you intend to follow this dreamer?" Although Asya tried to intervene, the strange determination on the faces of her own parents, who had just entered the kitchen, held her back. With a triumphant expression, Helga pulled Elif toward her and said, "Don't get your hopes up, Elif. Your place is not in a restaurant kitchen, but in the room where you will be the bride of this house." While Asya stared in disbelief, her mother Meryem whispered the bitter truth in a low voice: "It is decided, Asya. Elif and Hans will be married."

The fresh light of hope in Elif's eyes extinguished instantly at her mother's words, replaced by deep helplessness. The young girl couldn't utter a single word to her mother; she only lowered her head and began to weep silently. Asya, however, turned to her father, trembling with rage: "How can you do this? Hans and Elif don't even love each other; it would be nothing but a life in prison!" Her father slammed the table hard, ending the discussion: "Silence, Asya! You will respect the family's decision. From now on, a new order will reign in this house." As Elif was dragged into the room by her mother, she looked at Asya with pleading eyes, but her hands were tied. Asya was left alone in the middle of the kitchen, beginning to wonder how she would fight against this new darkness descending upon their dreams. Every step she took that morning on the way to the restaurant echoed like the sound of a chain binding Elif's freedom.

When Asya entered the restaurant kitchen, her sorrowful expression did not escape the chef's notice; however, knowing there was no room for emotion in a kitchen, he simply said, "The vegetables are waiting for you; let your hands be fast, not full of grief." The young girl hid the tears she shed while chopping onions

within the kitchen's steam; with every stroke of the knife, she thought of how the white wedding dress being sewn at home was like a shroud for Elif. At home, Aunt Helga and her mother had already begun a feverish preparation using old fabrics from the trunks. Hans walked around proud and satisfied with this marriage, not caring in the least that Elif was crying silently in a corner. Elif's silence was drowned out by the feigned joy echoing within the walls of the house and the mechanical hum of the sewing machine. When Asya returned home in the evening, she went to her cousin hiding in her room, hugged her tightly, and whispered in her ear: "This wedding will not happen, Elif; we will find a way."

Despite her cousin's words, Elif did not raise her head; it was as if her soul had given up the moment they were caught at the kitchen door. "Mother is preparing my dowry chest, Asya; with every lace knot, I feel a little more breathless," she said, and the air in the room froze. Asya took her cousin's hands and tried to give her hope: "The chef spoke of my talent today; if I win this scholarship, I can get us both out of here." But the coarse laughter of Hans drifting in from outside was enough to strain that delicate bond of hope. When Hans knocked on the door and shouted, "Come on, bride, we're going shopping tomorrow, stop making such a long face!", Asya's patience reached its end. In that moment, she realized that the exam day was not just a rescue for herself, but the only chance to shatter all the chains of slavery in that house. The young girl, who did not sleep all night, listened to Elif's sobs on one hand while forging escape plans in her mind that seemed impossible on the other.

The atmosphere in the house grew even heavier with Hans' big news, but this time it was his arrogance, rather than his anger, that took center stage. At dinner, he struck the table and said, "After the wedding, we won't be staying here; I'm taking Elif and moving to Germany to build a new life there," causing the fork to fall from Elif's hand. Hans had stopped bullying Asya, now entirely focused on his own ostentatious future. Aunt Helga seized the moment, turning to Asya with a poisonous laugh: "You see? My daughter will be carried on their shoulders and move far away, while you grow old here over these pots." While Meryem Hanım looked at her daughter in silence, Helga didn't stop: "My daughter is marrying so beautifully, and you'll stay here with your impossible dream of school and serve us."

The next day, the whole family set off for the city's largest market for the wedding shopping as if nothing were wrong. The interior of the fabric shop was filled with rolls of white cloth, lace, and heavy silk; yet for Elif, this was not a shop, but a prison. Aunt Helga picked out the most expensive fabrics, holding them up to Elif and tugging at her daughter: "Look, this is just right for you; at the Turkish weddings in Germany, everyone will be talking about you." Asya stood to the side, watching with great pain as her cousin moved like a lifeless mannequin.

Hans tried on shoes and talked everyone's ear off, boasting about the wealth he expected in his new home. Amidst this crowd and noise, the young girl whispered to herself: "Go ahead and choose your fabrics, but I will be the one cooking the dish that breaks these chains." When they returned from the market, every corner of the house was filled with packages, fabrics, and Hans' endless dreams of Germany. As soon as Elif entered her room, she locked the door; the sound of scissors drifting in from outside felt like the footsteps of an executioner cutting her future to pieces. While Aunt Helga sipped her coffee in the kitchen, she looked at Asya and continued with her stinging words: "You see, that's just how it goes; one leaves, one stays and serves." While Asya bit her lip to keep from answering her aunt, she could only think of her grandmother's crumpled bills and the disciplined voice of the chef in the kitchen. As evening fell, Hans walked in with a passport and placed it on the table as if hoisting a victory flag. "Get ready," Hans said proudly, "tickets will be bought next week; I will be the first to escape this house."

While Asya watched Hans show off power, her gaze met that of her grandmother, who stood silently in a corner of the kitchen. The old woman gave her a discreet wink, signaling to Asya that she must be patient. When everyone had fallen asleep that night, Asya crept secretly into the kitchen and checked, for one last time, the ingredients for the dish she planned to prepare at the exam. The quiet sobbing from Elif's room reached the kitchen, fueling Asya's ambition to pass this exam at any cost. She swore to herself: "This is not just a dish; it will be the manifesto of freedom for Elif and me." When Aunt Helga got up early with the first rays of sun to prepare lists for the wedding invitations, it served as a reminder that they were drawing closer to the inevitable end with every passing moment.

On the wedding morning, when the ceiling of the house should have echoed with joyful songs, the entire neighborhood was startled by Aunt Helga's deafening scream. As Asya ran from the kitchen into the room, she saw that Elif's bed was untouched and the snow-white wedding dress lay there like a ghost. The only thing on the table was a short note that simply read: "I am going to find my own path; do not look for me." Hans threw his passport to the ground in a rage and bellowed, "How can this be? Everything was ready, the tickets were bought, Germany was waiting for us!" While the father and uncles ran back and forth through the house, Aunt Helga struck her knees and shrieked, "She followed that dreamer; she has brought shame upon us!" as she pointed her finger at Asya. Although Asya was inwardly proud of her cousin's brave decision, she knew that the bill for this chaos would be presented to her.

As the crowd in the kitchen grew by the minute, Hans could not contain his fury, shouting, "That girl will be found; this wedding will happen one way or another!" But when his father tore the letter and said, "It's over, Hans. Even if we bring back a runaway girl, this stain will not be washed away; she is no longer part of this family," the air in the room froze. Hans, consumed by the ambition of his failed plans, grabbed his suitcase

and slammed the door behind him: "I'm leaving; I won't stay another day in this wretched house. I'm getting on that plane even without Elif!" The grandmother sat silently in a corner, praying with secret joy for Elif's rescue and holding Asya's hand tightly. The wedding bustle in the house had suddenly turned into a mood of mourning, and all the prepared food remained abandoned in the kitchen. In the midst of this grand chaos, Asya felt in every cell of her being that it was now her turn, and the upcoming exam was her only chance to leave this house.

After Hans slammed the door behind him, the silence reigning over the house felt like the herald of an approaching storm. Aunt Helga crashed every plate in the kitchen onto the table like a weapon, venting all her rage over Elif's flight and Hans' departure onto Asya. "This is all your fault," Helga hissed, "your poisonous dreams turned Elif's head too. Now you're happy, aren't you?" Asya did not respond to her aunt's unjust accusations; her mind was occupied only with the rehearsal for the grand exam just a few days away. Her father had visibly slumped in his armchair, staring silently at the wall while a rattling sound issued from his chest with every breath. As the wedding decorations in the house were torn down one by one, the most critical turning point of Asya's life stood at the door.

When she went to the restaurant that evening, the chef took Asya aside and handed her the special set of knives he had prepared for the exam. "This exam is not just about cooking, Asya; it is the art of putting your soul on the plate. Do not let your hands tremble," he said, and the young girl's eyes filled with tears. When she returned home, she placed her exam permit under her pillow and tried to sleep, but she was startled awake by the violent coughing coming from her father's room. As Meryem Hanım rushed into the room, Asya caught a glimpse of her father's chalk-white face through the crack in the door. A great fear began to loom like a giant wall before her dreams: either the exam or her father... As she prayed throughout the night, she had no idea that she would wake up to the most difficult choice fate had ever prepared for her.

On the morning of the exam, as Asya put on her cleanest apron and packed her knives into her bag, she paused at a faint groan coming from her father's room. When she entered, she found him struggling to sit up in bed; his gaze this time was not full of rage, but a strange helplessness. "Asya, my daughter... do not leave me alone in this state," her father said with a trembling voice, reaching out his hand to her. In astonishment, Asya took his hand and whispered, "Father, today is the most important day of my life. I have my exam; I'll be back soon." But her father gripped her hand even tighter and said, "I thought that when I died, you would be the only one by my side; do you want to sacrifice me for a plate of food?" These words settled like a heavy stone on Asya's heart. Her father's sudden gentleness and affectionate words tore down all her defensive walls in a single stroke.

As Asya wiped the sweat from her father's forehead, she noticed time slipping away relentlessly, yet her conscience wrapped around her feet like a shackle. "It's alright, Father, I am here, I'm not going," she said, and a barely perceptible, triumphant smile appeared on her father's lips. Miss Meryem watched the scene from the doorway; she knew her husband was only playing this game to tame his daughter, yet she chose to remain silent. Every passing minute fell into the void like a piece breaking off from Asya's dreams. "You are my most precious treasure; exams come and go, but family remains," her father said. For a moment, his voice sounded like genuine love, but in truth, these words were the heaviest blow against her future. Once the exam time had passed, her father's breathing suddenly improved, and his voice returned to its old harshness. As Asya slowly set her knife bag on the floor, she realized with horror how the feigned affection in her father's eyes had once again given way to that familiar, ice-cold authority.

Once the exam time had passed irrevocably, her father climbed out of bed as briskly as if he had never been ill and walked into the kitchen. As Asya stood at the kitchen door with the crumpled exam permit in her hand, her father turned around and said in a mocking voice: "Look, I'm still here, I'm not dead; but your ridiculous exam is over." At that moment, Aunt Helga, who was packing her suitcases, struck Asya's shoulder hard as she brushed past, delivering the final blow: "You couldn't even fool your own father, yet you wanted to make your food palatable to strangers, is that it?" The other aunt added with a laugh: "You wouldn't have passed anyway, Asya; your father did you the greatest favor and saved you from the shame." Faced with these heavy words, Asya could not utter a single syllable; her entire world had been crumpled like a piece of paper and fallen to the floor.

Just before leaving, her grandmother came to Asya, seizing a moment while everyone was busy, and looked at her granddaughter with tear-filled eyes. "Forgive us, my child; my strength was not enough to tear down the walls of this house," she whispered, secretly slipping a small note into Asya's pocket. When Aunt Helga called from outside, "Come on, Mother, the car is waiting, stop saying goodbye to that failure!", the last spark of compassion left the house. As Asya remained alone in the kitchen, she stared at the empty plates on the table and into her father's hardened eyes. Now, she had neither an exam nor a family that believed in her; all that remained was disappointment and the suffocating silence of the kitchen. "I am at an end," she whispered to herself. "This house truly has swallowed me whole." As the silence of the house settled over her like a prison, Asya shouldered her knife bag and went out into the street. But even the air outside did not offer the comfort she had hoped for; the neighbors on the corner, whispering about Elif's escape and the cancellation of the wedding, raised their voices when they saw Asya. "Look here, there comes the mentor," a woman said with a stinging voice, "her cousin is gone, and she is still here, chasing vain dreams with her knives." While Asya lowered her head and walked quickly toward the restaurant, the cry behind her— "You have brought your father's curse upon yourself, you will never find peace!"—pierced her heart like an arrow. When she opened

the door of the restaurant, even the familiar smell of the kitchen felt foreign to her; it felt as if she no longer belonged there, as if all doors had been slammed shut in her face.

The chef stood at the sideboard, silently observing her exhausted entrance, and approached her. "Tell me, red-haired girl, why do your eyes look like a wildfire?" he asked, and in Asya, the dam broke. Sobbing, she told him everything, her father's game and the missed exam. The chef remained silent for a while and then said with a heavy voice: "You are not the first to fail, Asya; the important thing is to find the courage to rekindle the fire under the pot." He took her by the shoulders, looked her in the eyes, and added: "This exam was only a piece of paper, but your talent is right here, in your fingertips; now tie on your apron and show those who have given up how to truly cook." The chef's unwavering faith reignited the almost extinguished fire in Asya; from now on, she would not only fight for herself, but also for the only person who believed in her.

The noise of the pots in the kitchen was not enough to drown out the storm in Asya's head; on that day, she was more ambitious and angrier than ever before. At that moment, the chef came in excitedly and said, "Asya, the stranger at the table outside doesn't want anything from the menu; he wants to taste what the cook prepares for themselves." Asya gripped the ladle tightly and began to prepare that special dish with the particular sauce—the one she hadn't been able to make at the exam—as if she were challenging the entire world. When she handed the plate to the chef, she felt a flicker of fear; but minutes later, that stranger appeared at the kitchen door—tall, with a deep gaze and a smile that inspired confidence. When the chef introduced the young man as Mika and pointed to the young girl, Asya's heart began to beat in a rhythm she had never felt before.

Mika took a step forward and admiringly observed Asya's flour-covered hands and her red hair; it was as if an artist, not just a cook, stood before him. "There is a story in this food," Mika said, his voice echoing like a cool breeze in the heat of the kitchen, "it is as if you have cooked a story of liberation." For the first time in her life, Asya felt that someone saw her not just as a servant or a simple housemaid, but as a person with a soul. When she asked in wonder, "Did you not just eat to be full?", Mika smiled slightly, looked into her eyes, and replied, "I didn't just eat this food; I got to know the brave girl within it."

At that moment, it wasn't the fire of the stoves glowing in the kitchen, but a spark of new life in Asya's heart; could this stranger be the key to the door she had been waiting for all these years?

The next day, Mika had settled at the corner table as if the entire restaurant belonged to him, making sketches in an old notebook. Every time Asya came out of the kitchen, she noticed Mika running his hand

through his curly hair and looking at her with a mischievous smile. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore; she placed a glass of water on the table and snapped at him, "This isn't a study; you can't just sit here all the time and disturb people." Mika remained completely calm and winked at her, "Disturbing people? I'm just trying to figure out whose brilliant hands these wonderful scents come from, Chef." Asya was visibly annoyed by his easygoing manner, which made it seem like he came from a wealthy family; this stranger, who apparently had no idea about the realities of life, seemed to be making fun of her pain.

As she returned to the kitchen counter, Mika's laughter from outside only increased her anger. "Obviously, life is good for him, and he's just killing time here with his father's money," she muttered to herself while letting the knife come down hard on the vegetables. But Mika wasn't just eating; he followed every one of Asya's movements in the kitchen as if he were observing a work of art. When he once stepped up to the kitchen door and said, "You're cutting the carrots a bit too fast today; someone must have upset you again." Asya paused. The fact that this stranger recognized her state of mind just by the sound of the knife surprised the young girl and drove her to strengthen her defensive mechanisms even further. When she turned to him and said, "People like you, who get everything they want, cannot understand the storms in the lives of others," a deep sadness flashed in Mika's eyes for a second, but he immediately put his joking mask back on.

Mika laughed out loud at Asya's accusation regarding his "wealth" and pulled his chair a bit closer to the kitchen door. "Oh Chef, you've completely misjudged me; if you saw the money in my pocket, you'd probably feel pity and give me an extra ladle of soup," he said mischievously. He held up his old notebook and added, "My entire fortune consists of these papers and the useless knowledge inside my curly head; my father doesn't own any factories, I only have bills waiting to be paid." Asya paused, laid her cloth on the counter, and looked at him with squinted eyes. Mika pulled a few coins from his pocket, let them jingle on the table, and said, "As you can see, I don't live like a king, but I can dream like one; that is exactly what we have in common."

Although Asya felt her defensive walls yield a little for the first time, she remained cautious and tried to understand the depth behind Mika's joking manner. "Why are you here every day then, and why are you constantly smiling?" she asked, her voice sounding less angry this time. Mika leaned back in his chair, stared at the ceiling, and replied, "Because I have too many reasons to cry, and I prefer to choose the opposite; besides, softening your grumpy face is like working on a difficult piece of art." When the curious gazes of passing neighbors lingered at the kitchen window, Mika immediately stood up and waved to them as if tipping an imaginary hat in greeting. When Asya reacted to his fearless and free demeanor with a slight smile she couldn't suppress, Mika sat back down with the expression of a victorious commander and said, "That's it! The greatest victory of the day was that little smile."

Mika stared lost in thought into his notebook and, for the first time, took off his playful mask. "You know, Asya, it's no coincidence that I was chosen to restore the old library in this town; years ago, when I was still an architecture student, I spent all my money to save rare drawings that were lost in a fire," he said, and his voice was like a candle flame flickering in the wind. His eyes grew cloudy as he shared that although his family lived far away and were honest, loving people, he had walked this path alone—sometimes hungry, and sometimes drawing on the streets. Asya paused, plate in hand, and realized for a moment how great the soul of this man was, whom she had deemed "privileged." But immediately, her defense mechanism kicked in, and as if she wanted to disrupt Mika's emotional moment, she said, "And why are you telling me all this? Your life story won't make my pots boil."

Mika was not surprised by Asya's abrupt manner; instead, he smiled slightly and stood up. "You are listening because you are like one of those rare works that survived the fire, Asya; you seem hard on the outside, but inside there is a massive story waiting to be restored," he said, and the young girl froze at the kitchen threshold. The fact that Mika spoke such a deep realization so simply caused a small crack in Asya's heart. "My story burned down long ago; there is nothing left to repair," she muttered, but her voice did not sound as determined as usual this time. As Mika slung his bag over his shoulder, he said, "I'll be back tomorrow; maybe then we'll pull a new recipe out of those extinguished ashes," and left the restaurant. When Asya cleaned the kitchen that evening, she felt, for the first time, not quite so alone. It was as if the hope left behind at that table was suddenly eclipsed by the shadow her father cast into the restaurant the next day. When Asya peeked out from the kitchen, she saw her father standing at the door, his gaze fixed sternly on Mika's usual table. Her father approached Asya with heavy steps and thundered, "Who is this snob sitting here every day? Do you want to embarrass us again after someone else's head?", causing everyone in the restaurant to freeze. Asya tried to hide her trembling hands under her apron and defend herself: "Father, he is just a customer, there is nothing between us, we aren't even friends." Mika, however, stood up unimpressed, looked the father directly in the eyes and said, "For now we are not friends, sir, but none of us knows what the future brings; sometimes the firmest friendships begin without even being able to say 'hello'."

Mika's fearless and clever answer drove her father into a complete rage; he shook his finger in Asya's face and threatened, "If I see you talking to this stranger one more time, I will tear down this restaurant and your dreams over your head!", before storming out. As Asya tried to hold back her tears and huddled in the darkest corner of the kitchen, Mika slowly approached her and stood silently. "Why did you do that? You only provoked him more," Asya whispered, her voice drowning in sobs. Mika smiled slightly and said, "Sometimes you have to turn the light up a bit brighter to drive away the darkness, Chef; don't be afraid, no wall has yet been built strong enough to tear down your dreams," and placed a small note on the counter. The single

sentence written on that note was strong enough to soothe all the pain Asya felt that day.

She was strong because exactly this was written on the note: "If you think I would write pages of comfort here, you are mistaken; all I have to say is: I trust you and you can do it." As Asya crushed the paper in her palm, she watched Mika walk away from the kitchen door with heavy steps. In that moment, for the first time, she felt a hand reaching out to her through the thick fog of fear of her father and the pressure of the small town. Without thinking, she rushed out of the kitchen and called after the young man walking down the corridor: "Mika!" Mika stopped, hearing his name from her mouth for the first time, and turned around slowly, with his usual mischievous but this time somewhat gentler smile on his face.

The glint in Mika's eyes, paired with the tremor in Asya's voice, made time in the restaurant stand still for a moment. Asya took a few steps toward him and said in a voice hardly louder than a whisper: "Why do you trust me? You don't even know me." Mika put his hand in his pocket, shrugged, and replied: "I know your ambition at the stove, your respect for the ingredients, and the light within you that does not go out even in your father's shadow; sometimes you don't need years to get to know someone, a glimpse of the soul inside a plate of food is enough." For the first time, Asya thought that this stranger before her might not just be a joking architect, but a companion who saw her wounds. When she left the restaurant and went home that day, her steps were lighter than usual; for she knew that from now on, she had to remain steadfast not only for herself, but also for the voice that said, "you can do it."

She knew it, but she had no idea that upon her arrival home, she would be thrown into a completely new kind of chaos. Standing at the door was her sister Elif in a wretched state, holding her young son Mixi in her arms; her eyes were swollen from crying and she was completely out of breath. "Asya, I beg you, help me, I have a very urgent matter and no one I can leave Mixi with. Can you look after him for just a few hours at the restaurant?" she asked, and pressed the child into Asya's arms without waiting for an answer. As Asya stood there with her little nephew, not knowing what to do, the fear of her father and the bustle of the restaurant blurred in her mind; nevertheless, she could not resist her sister's desperate gaze, took Mixi by the hand, and set off for the restaurant.

When she entered the restaurant kitchen, Mixi's curious eyes wandered over the pots while Asya tried to finish the food and keep the young child in check at the same time. At that moment, Mika appeared at the kitchen door, and when he saw Mixi, a huge, boyish smile spread across his face.

"Oho Chef, have you hired a new kitchen assistant today?" he called out, coming in, stooping down to Mixi's height, and reaching out his hand. Asya was about to say, "Please Mika, I'm already in enough trouble, don't

you start too," but Mixi's shyness instantly gave way to cheerful laughter at Mika's funny faces. As Mika pulled an architect's ruler from his pocket and swung it like a magic wand to capture Mixi's full attention, Asya watched for the first time with admiration how naturally and warmly a man could build a connection with a child.

This sight, which she watched with admiration, tore down the defensive walls in Asya's heart piece by piece, while Mika and Mixi created a true fairy-tale world amidst the flour sacks in the kitchen. Mika dabbed a pinch of flour on Mixi's nose, making the little boy laugh: "Look, this is magic dust; if we bake a cookie with it, everyone who tastes it will start to laugh!" While Asya stirred the sauce on the stove, she looked at them and teased, "Mika, you've ruined the kitchen; if the chef sees you, he'll lock you both in those flour sacks," but there was no trace left of the old hardness in her voice. As Mika lifted Mixi and spun him around, he looked Asya directly in the eyes with his joking but deep gaze: "The chef's heart has softened today, Mixi; look, even the stormy sea in her eyes has calmed down." When evening came and the shop's shutters were lowered, Mixi clung to Mika's neck and shouted, "Come back tomorrow, Line-Brother, let's build planes again!" Asya was afraid, but she also felt inner peace because, for the first time, she had allowed a stranger to enter her life so quickly and deeply. Yet when they arrived home, Mixi's pure and unstoppable childhood excitement was to be the spark that ignited the dark storm waiting for them at the door.

As soon as Mixi stepped through the door, he jumped from her arms, threw himself onto his grandfather's knees in the living room, and cried out with all his innocence: "Grandpa, we had so much fun with Brother Mika at the restaurant today; he built me a castle out of flour and drew a giant airplane!" In that same moment, the air in the house froze. Her father's face turned crimson with rage, and he slammed the glass in his hand onto the table so violently that the shards flew across the room; "Did I not tell you not to speak to that bringer of misfortune, Asya!" he roared, jumping up. Her mother tried to intervene: "Husband, don't do it, the child is just making it up, don't hit the girl!" and tried to stand protectively in front of Asya, but her father was completely out of his mind. In that terrifying moment, as he screamed, "I will level your dreams, that restaurant, and that stranger to the ground!" and raised his hand, her mother suddenly clutched her chest, lost her breath, and collapsed. As her mother fell onto the marble floor like a lifeless doll, Mixi's screams echoed through the empty room, and in that second, Asya's world finally came crashing down around her.

Under the rubble of that world that had collapsed over her, Asya suddenly found herself in the cold, medicine-scented corridors of the hospital. While her mother fought for her life inside, her father crouched in a corner, almost suffocated by the silence his own anger had created; Mixi clung to his sister's knees in fear, constantly asking, "When will Mommy get up again?"

Asya's tears flowed inward as she whispered, "She will get up, sweetheart, she's just a little tired," while for the first time, she felt deeply how tired her own heart truly was. As she spent that night on a hospital chair, her thoughts revolved not only around her mother's lifeless fall but also around the endless debts waiting for her upon her return and the pain of unfinished dreams. With the first rays of sunlight, she stood up with the painful strength of necessity; for whatever happened, the stove had to burn, and a way had to be found for the hospital bills.

When she entered the restaurant with weary steps, the chef immediately recognized from her expression that something was wrong and rushed to her. "Asya, my daughter, what is wrong with you? Your eyes are bloodshot," he said, and through sobs, Asya told him everything: her mother's condition, that she wouldn't be able to come to work for a few days, but that she needed the money more urgently than ever. While the chef held her tightly and tried to comfort her, Mika, who stood behind the kitchen door and overheard everything, felt his heart nearly tear apart. The more Mika saw Asya's helplessness, the more he felt the joking man within him give way to a determined warrior; in that moment, a plan took shape in his mind. When Asya left the shop to return to the hospital, Mika went to the chef and said resolutely, "I will work in Asya's place, I will wear her apron, but do not tell her under any circumstances; every penny I earn, we will set aside for her exam and her mother's expenses."

From the moment he proved his determination, the town's small restaurant became the scene of a struggle unlike any seen before. As Mika took off his stylish architect's shirt and tied Asya's flour-scented apron around his waist, he understood for the first time the heavy responsibility of holding a ladle instead of a ruler. As orders piled up in the kitchen and the heat of the stoves hit his face, he wasn't just cooking; in every plate, he searched for Asya's stolen dreams and the healing for her mother waiting in the hospital room. The chef supported Mika's clumsy but ambitious efforts and set aside the secretly collected money. When Mika collapsed onto a kitchen chair at the end of the day, exhausted, he looked at the cuts on his hands and the traces of flour on his face and smiled; for in that moment, he felt with his heart for the first time how sacred the silent struggle was that Asya led in this kitchen every day.

At the same hour, in the dimly lit corridor of the hospital, Asya—waiting outside her mother's door with a glass of water—had no idea at all that Mika was sweating in her place at the restaurant. While her little nephew Mixi slept huddled by his mother's bed, Asya watched her sister's exhausted state and felt crushed under the weight on her shoulders. "What will we do when our money runs out, sister?" she whispered, her voice sounding like pure helplessness echoing off the hospital walls. While her father leaned guiltily against the wall outside, offering her no hope at all, Asya's only anchor was Mika's sentence on that note: "I trust you." She did not know that on that night, in that tiny kitchen, Mika was not just cooking, but opening the door to a

surprising exam registration and a recovering mother by calculating every penny precisely to rebuild Asya's life.

He opened it, but Asya had no idea of this secret heroism; she carried only the weight of that uncertain morning that would follow the sunset. As she slipped through the back door of the restaurant with the first rays of sunlight to get fresh clothes and explain the seriousness of the situation to the chef, she was startled by a clattering from the kitchen. Assuming a thief had broken in, she picked up a rolling pin and cautiously opened the door; but at the sight before her, she only just managed to keep from dropping the wood. Mika was standing at the stove in a stained apron, his hair full of flour and his hands covered in small wounds, feverishly trying to cook something. When Asya called out in amazement, "Mika? What are you doing here, why do you look like that?", Mika swung the ladle in the air and said in his usual joking way: "As you can see, Chef, I've set my sights on your throne, but I must confess that dealing with these pots is much harder than restoring a library!"

Mika's cheerful but tired voice was enough to melt even the hardest block of ice in Asya's heart; for in that moment, she realized that Mika was not just helping, he was protecting her life. With tears in her eyes, Asya walked toward Mika, took his hands marked by cuts, and whispered: "Why did you do this? Why did you put yourself through this?" Mika turned serious, looked into Asya's eyes, and replied: "Because your dreams don't deserve a break, Asya; you need to be with your mother, and I need to stand guard here for you." At that moment, the chef walked in, handed Asya a small envelope, and said: "This boy didn't sleep a minute last night, Asya; he has already gathered your exam fee and part of the hospital bills." For the first time in her life, Asya felt she could trust someone that deeply. Wanting to lighten the emotional situation, Mika immediately chimed in again: "Of course, in return for this help, I expect your special dish when you pass the exam—otherwise, I'll pour all this flour over your head!" and managed to make her smile again.

He managed to make her smile, but immediately after this joyful moment, Elif appeared at the door, visibly relieved to have finished her urgent business and ready to pick up Mixi. Mixi paused while taking his mother's hand and said, "Before I go, I want to say goodbye to Line-Brother!" and ran into the kitchen to Mika. After the little boy gave Mika a tight goodbye hug, he left Asya and Mika alone in the kitchen and retreated to that secluded corner just outside the door from which he could secretly eavesdrop on them. Mika slowly untied his apron, stepped in front of Asya, and said in a voice more serious than ever before: "I want you to put everything aside now and focus only on this exam, Asya; this time you will make it, because your talent goes far beyond this small town." While Asya didn't know what to say in the face of his unwavering trust, Mika took a step closer, looked into her eyes, and said: "And I want you to know... I love you"; these three words blew like a romantic breeze through the heat of the kitchen. Asya felt her heart racing, as she was confronted for

the first time with such a direct and sincere confession; but instead of words that would not pass her lips, only a slight, meaningful smile settled on her face.

She couldn't say "me too" yet, but she felt the ice inside her melting and turning into a warm river; Mika accepted her silent response like a victory and returned her smile. At that moment, Mixi, who had been lurking behind the door, came in after hurriedly scribbling something on a piece of paper, pressed the paper into Asya's hand, and insisted: "Don't you dare open this now, Auntie, look at it when you get home!" before running to his mother. As Asya left the restaurant with the weight of the paper in her hand and the new confession in her heart, she felt Mika's loving eyes watching her go. When she reached home, locked herself in her room, and opened Mixi's crooked but loving drawing, she saw a man, a woman, and a child holding hands, and underneath it was written "Happy End"—which caused a tear of happiness to run down Asya's face. Asya, who left the restaurant with the weight of the paper in her hand and the new confession in her heart, felt Mika's loving eyes following her; yet, besides a kitchen she had to leave behind, there was also a hospital she had to rush to. In return for Mika's smile, she gave a slight nod and practically flew to the hospital. No sooner had she entered than she was greeted by Elif's tired but happy expression: "Asya! The doctor has good news, Mom is doing better; we can be discharged tomorrow!" These words lifted the ton-heavy burden from Asya's shoulders and brought tears of joy to her eyes. The news of her mother's recovery, Mika's trust, and Mixi's "Happy End" drawing merged in her mind, and Asya felt truly strong for the first time in her life.

As she ran home, she closed the door behind her and immediately turned to her library and study materials. She knew her foundation was solid, as she had worked very hard in previous years; now she only had to refresh her knowledge and feel mentally prepared. She sat over her study notes for hours, going through all the details once more, her mind clearer and more determined than ever. Despite all her exhaustion, she felt an indescribable lightness. As she lay in bed, she stared at the ceiling and thought about everything she had experienced: her father's pressure, her mother's illness, Mixi's innocence, and... Mika. The image of Mika, smiling and drenched in sweat while cooking in the kitchen, came to her mind. In that moment, she understood that Mika had begun to heal not only her dreams but also her heart; what she felt for him now was not just gratitude—this new feeling was much deeper and more exciting. With an indescribable smile on her face, she surrendered to sleep; tomorrow she would wake up to a new day, a new exam, and a brand-new beginning.

Asya, who woke up with the first rays of sunlight, quickly prepared herself with a strange excitement and immediately ran to the restaurant to Mika. She found him in the kitchen, where he was waiting for her with a cup of tea; in his eyes lay that unwavering faith once again. Asya took a deep breath and said, "I am going to

the exam, Mika, and I will not return without that master certificate.” Mika took a step toward her, placed his hand on her shoulder, and whispered, “I have always trusted you, Asya, and I still do; you are the queen of this kitchen.” Asya looked him in the eyes for the first time with such an upright posture and said, “As long as you trust me, there is nothing I cannot achieve.” These words were the declaration that their bond consisted not only of mutual help but had become a force that created one another.

When she entered the exam hall, the materials before her and the required recipes appeared easier than ever; it was as if the pots and spices were speaking to her. She worked wonders by thinking of the knowledge she had refreshed at night and the ambitious traces Mika had left in the kitchen. When the exam was over, she had not only passed but learned that she had taken second place among a huge group of candidates. Her heart no longer fit in her chest, and it felt as if her feet were not touching the ground. She didn’t even remember how she had run to the restaurant in excitement; as she burst through the door, she saw Mika in his usual spot. Without thinking, she left all her shyness and fears behind and threw herself around Mika’s neck with a sob full of gratitude and love.

While Mika returned this miracle in his arms, surprised but with great tenderness, the flour-scented air of the restaurant bore witness to the most beautiful moment of their lives.

As Asya slowly pulled her arms back, she felt her cheeks glowing; “Forgive me, it was just the excitement of the moment, I couldn’t help myself...” she said, avoiding his gaze. Mika immediately chimed in with his usual crooked but warm smile: “Come on Chef, if you hug me like this after every second-place finish, I’m ready to send you to an exam every day—but I warn you, I’ll probably never get rid of this smell of flour!” As they both laughed at the same time, the tense air in the kitchen vanished. As they left the restaurant and took a walk along the quiet paths in the evening sun, Mika became serious. “Asya, actually, I didn’t just come here for the library,” he said. “I was fed up with the cold buildings of modern architecture and fake friendships. My mother always said: ‘The place where you find your soul is where the bread is warmest and the people are most honest.’ I saw this place on a map and came here. Apparently, I found the honesty and warmth my mother spoke of in your kitchen.”

Asya admired the deep love that appeared on Mika’s face when he spoke of his mother. When Mika said, “My mother loves strong women like you, Asya; I really want you to meet her, she is the sweetest woman in the world. One day, we will definitely visit her,” Asya’s heart beat so fast for the first time. She stopped, looked Mika in the eyes, and said, “I love you too, Mika... Not just because you trusted me, but because you helped me find myself.” In that moment, on a dusty small-town street, not just a love but the foundation for a shared dream was laid. As they both imagined the boutique restaurant where they would work side by side in the

future, Asya knew she was no longer looking at a stranger, but at the rest of her life. Now they had two big goals ahead of them: first, to celebrate her mother's discharge from the hospital, and then to go to Mika's mother to share this great love with her.

While Asya dreamed of introducing Mika to her family, she brought up the subject as soon as she was alone in the kitchen with her sister Zehra. After Zehra heard everything, she grabbed her sister's hands with fear in her face: "Asya, don't do it! You know Father; if he finds out that Mika is a stranger and what all has happened, he will lose his mind. He'll throw you out of this house and never look at you again!" Zehra's voice trembled. "Instead of staying here and burning in our father's wrath, you should flee to Mika's family. You have no other choice." A deep sadness washed over Asya at what she heard; her heart was torn between her home and the man she loved. When she went to the restaurant in tears and told Mika everything, he put on his joking mask again to comfort her: "So, life on the run begins now, huh? Don't worry, Chef, when my mother sees you, she'll say, 'Son, where did you find this girl? You're so lucky!' Our dreams will not go unfulfilled; we will open the most beautiful restaurant there together."

When Asya returned home that night, she sat on the edge of her bed in her dark room and brooded for hours; she wavered between her memories and the future.

At that moment, the door opened quietly and Zehra slipped in. "Asya, aren't you asleep yet?" her sister whispered as she sat down beside her and placed her hand on her shoulder. After a long silence, Zehra looked her sister resolutely in the eyes: "Listen, my dear sister, you don't need to overthink it. If you want to build your own life, you know you won't find happiness in this house. It's best if you leave this place—if you flee. I will always stand behind you." Asya felt she could breathe a little sigh of relief through her sister's support; escape was no longer a fear, but the name of the first step toward freedom.

After Zehra had pulled the door shut behind her, Asya fell into a deep, heavy sleep, unable to silence the noise in her head. In her dream, she saw herself sitting at a large, empty table in the midst of an infinite, pitch-black void. Around her, there was neither a window nor a sound; only absolute loneliness could be felt. Then, Mika's silhouette emerged from the darkness. His hands were full of burning candles. Mika began to walk silently around the table; with every candle he set down, the room slowly filled with a golden-yellow light, and the darkness retreated into the corners. Mika stopped directly in front of her and whispered: "I have brought the light, Asya; I have extinguished the darkness. Now it's your turn—fill this table with your dreams." When Asya woke up drenched in sweat, her heart was still beating to the rhythm of that dream. "What was that?" she muttered, trying to interpret what she had seen, but as the morning rush took over her mind, she forgot the mysterious table for a while.

She jumped quickly out of bed, put on her everyday clothes, and went into the kitchen. Without letting her mother or father notice her, she slipped out the door; she breathed in the cool street air and began to walk with quick steps toward the restaurant. With every step, the idea of escape became more tangible. When she opened the restaurant door, she found Mika behind the counter as usual. As soon as Mika saw her, he teased: "Oho, Chef, you're early today; were you dreaming of my famous dishes?" Asya smiled and went to him, but her voice was serious: "Mika, let's go. Let's really flee from here." The joking glint in Mika's eyes gave way to determination for a moment. "Alright," he said, immediately spreading a map under the counter and beginning to plan. "I have an old friend who works here; he'll be coming by with his car tomorrow evening. We can go with him. When we get there, we'll use the saved money to first rent a small shop and then open the most beautiful restaurant in the world. With your art and my architecture, no one will be able to stop us."

Mika slowly folded the map and held Asya's hands firmly; his gaze was sharper than ever before. "Asya, we aren't joking anymore. By this time tomorrow night, we must be on our way. Go home and take only the essentials; everything else we leave behind in this dusty town," he said. Asya nodded and left the restaurant to go home, her feet feeling as though they were resisting. When she entered, she found Zehra waiting for her in the kitchen. The two sisters embraced without a word; it was a silent farewell for which words were not enough. At midnight, as a heavy silence settled over the house, Asya tiptoed into her mother's room.

Listening to her mother's steady breathing, a lump formed in her throat. "Mama... forgive me. I have to go, but my heart will stay here, by your side," she whispered into the darkness. As tears ran down her cheeks, she returned to her room and began to pack a suitcase, but she knew that sleep would not find her. She sat at her desk, took the pen with trembling hands, and began to write the most difficult lines of her life.

"My dear mother, when you read this letter, I will be far away, perhaps under a sky I don't even know. Since I was little, I have mixed my dreams into the scent of flour at your side in the kitchen. You always said to me: 'Be the hero of your own fairy tale'; now I am embarking on the most difficult journey of that tale. I am not fleeing from my father's wrath, but from being a burden on your shoulders and breaking under my own wings. Do you remember? When I fell as a child, you didn't kiss my knee, but my heart, so that it would heal. Now I go with a pain in my heart that will never fade. Leaving you in that hospital room was like leaving my soul there; but I know that you will get well and that I will set the most beautiful tables in the world for your proud smile. Mika has given me not only love, but also the hope that you taught me. Forgive me, Mama, I am not running away; I am only going to find myself and build a life worthy of you. I kiss you with infinite love, your little daughter Asya." As she finished the letter, morning was approaching. Quietly, she returned to her mother's room, placed the paper on the edge of her pillow, and retreated to her room to wait—not for the

sunrise, but for the greatest change of her life. Asya's tense waiting in her room, combined with sudden exhaustion, turned into a heavy sleep lasting several hours. When she looked at the clock, she startled, realizing it was time. Quickly, she grabbed her suitcase and tiptoed out of the house. As the cold night air hit her face, she saw a shadow under the faint light of the streetlamp. Mika was waiting right there, in front of the house. As soon as he saw Asya, he opened his arms and hugged her tightly; as their heartbeats merged, Mika whispered into her ear: "My dear love, are you ready for the greatest journey of our lives?" Asya wiped the tears from her eyes, smiled broadly, and said, "Yes." Without a second thought, they began to run together into the darkness of the night, leaving the entire weight of the past behind them.

At the next street corner, an old car was waiting for them with its engine running. Mika's friend Leo greeted them jokingly from the driver's seat: "Oho, the fugitives are finally here! Are you ready to conquer the world with this rust bucket?" Energized by Leo's spirit, they climbed into the car, and the vehicle quickly began to speed away from the town. While Asya held Mika's hand in the passenger seat, she felt deeply happy at first, as if she had finally begun to breathe. But as she watched the streets of her childhood and the fading lights of the houses through the window, she suddenly got lost in thought; remembering the past years, the smell of flour in the kitchen, and her mother, sadness clouded her face. Mika noticed her silent farewell immediately; he gripped her hand tighter and said: "Look, Asya, those streets are your memories, but the road ahead is your future. You aren't just leaving a town behind, but everything that tethered your wings. Your mother will be proud of you, believe me." Sensing things were getting emotional, Leo immediately reached for the radio; "No emotional talk, only music!" he shouted and turned the song "Lovers Rock" up to full volume. All three began to sing along at once, with a joy that tore through the silence of the night. During the song, Mika looked at Leo and joked: "Leo, if we're still here after this song, we're lucky—the wheels of your car are dancing faster than the notes!" making everyone laugh again.

After the fatigue of the road, the rhythmic sound of the wheels, and the dusty memories had merged behind them, Leo's car finally pulled up in front of a charming house nestled amidst green gardens. They had reached the end of their journey. As the sun was just rising, Sofya, who was watering her flowers in front of the house, straightened up when she heard the sound of the car. Mika excitedly opened the car door, jumped out, and shouted, "Mother!" When Sofya looked in the direction of the voice and saw Mika, a smile lit up her face that was worth the whole world; she left her watering can and ran toward her son. Mother and son held each other in a tight embrace, as if trying to satisfy the longing of years. Asya stepped hesitantly out of the car, feeling her heart soften as she watched this warm reunion. Mika slowly released his mother, took Asya's hand, and introduced her to Sofya. "Mother, this is Asya... the unique woman with whom I want to build the rest of my life, and whose heart is just as great as her talent," he said, describing her with the most beautiful words. Although Sofya was seeing Asya for the first time, she opened her arms as if she had known her for

years and said, "Welcome, my beautiful daughter; this is now your home too," as she embraced her. In Sofya's arms, Asya felt the heavy fear she had carried for months dissolve and give way to an unwavering sense of trust; she was finally truly "home."

After the warm embrace in the garden, Sofya invited Asya and Mika into the house; every corner of the home smelled of fresh flowers and cookies. As she showed Asya the room where she would stay, her eyes shone: "I know you are tired from the journey, but tomorrow I will invite the whole neighborhood to our house. Everyone here is a very good person; they would be happy to meet such a special chef like you." Asya took a deep breath and felt, for the first time in her life, that someone accepted and embraced her exactly as she was; the old weight on her had given way to a peaceful trust. When Sofya went into the kitchen to prepare the food, Mika and Asya were left alone. Mika took Asya's hands, looked into her eyes, and said: "Asya, we aren't running anymore; we are living. After meeting the neighbors, I want to have a wedding in the middle of the neighborhood where everyone can bear witness. Are you ready to walk hand in hand with me for a lifetime?" For the first time, Asya felt not like an innocent child, but like a strong adult making her own decisions, and said with a smile: "Yes."

A little later, Sofya cheerfully called them to breakfast. While the peaceful silence at the table continued, Asya succumbed to her curiosity and turned to Mika: "I never saw your father, Mika; you never told me about him.

Where is he?" Mika's usual joking expression faded for a moment, his gaze sinking into his plate: "Actually, there wasn't much difference between my father and your father, Asya. He was also a very angry, very hard man. One day he married another woman, left us alone, and disappeared. I haven't seen or heard from him since that day." To dispel the heavy sadness that had settled over the table, Mika immediately winked at Asya and cracked another joke: "But don't worry, I only inherited his good looks; I left his anger on the street!" Exactly at that moment, there was a loud knock at the door, and two young girls burst in cheerfully. They were Mika's sisters, Leni and Minna, coming home from school. Mika called his sisters over and enthusiastically introduced them to Asya.

While the cheerful chirping of Mika's sisters, Leni and Minna, echoed in every corner of the house, Asya found herself in a picture of a real family for which she had longed for so long. After Mika and the girls went out into the garden after breakfast, Asya and Sofya remained alone in the kitchen to clean up. As they put away the plates and polished the countertop, a conversation began that flowed like water between them. As Sofya told Asya about her own youth and Mika's childhood pranks, even the last of the ice in Asya's heart melted. Sofya's gentle voice and her affectionate touches reminded Asya of her own mother's warmth; in that moment, she realized that this was not just a place she had fled to, but her home, where she was being

reborn. As soon as they were finished, Sofya grabbed her bag and called everyone outside: "Let's go, the wedding preparations cannot wait!"

Wedding shopping was like a dream and incredibly entertaining for Asya, who had lived her whole life under pressure. While Leni and Minna tried on dresses, Mika made jokes at every opportunity to make Asya laugh. When they returned home with bags full of colorful fabrics, floral decorations, and glittering details, they were tired but very happy. When evening came, they gathered around the table and began to design the wedding invitations; they painted and decorated every single card with their own hands. As soon as the cards were ready, Leni and Minna rushed onto the street full of joy, knocking on every neighbor's door and handing out the invitations. Only two days remained until the wedding, and there was much to do. The biggest surprise was on the menu: instead of classic wedding cakes, pizzas were to be prepared—Asya's favorite food. With the excitement of preparing the most delicious pizzas with her own hands at her wedding, Asya closed her eyes peacefully that night.

No one had noticed how time had flown by amidst the hustle and bustle of the preparations. When Sofya noticed Asya's hesitation about meeting the neighbors, she gently took her hands and said: "My beautiful daughter, time has grown short; you will meet everyone at the wedding all at once, it will be much more exciting." Asya panicked for a moment; the thought of being among dozens of strangers at her own wedding frightened her. But Mika immediately came to her side and told such funny and warm stories about the fatherly nature of the uncles in the neighborhood and the motherly care of the aunts that the wall of fear inside Asya suddenly collapsed, giving way to a sweet sense of security. When evening came and everyone had retired to their rooms, Asya sat on the edge of her bed and watched the world outside through the window. Her mind suddenly wandered back to that dusty town, to her old home. She thought about how different this wedding would be if her mother and her sister Zehra were by her side; she felt their absence in the middle of her heart.

At that moment, the door opened quietly and Leni and Minna slipped in on tiptoe. With great admiration in their little eyes, they looked at Asya and asked: "Can we sleep with you tonight?" Asya set her sadness aside and took them into her arms. Before they fell asleep, she told them the fairy tale of a cook who had stayed far away but whom she always carried in her heart, and an architect who brought her the light. The three of them held each other tightly and, through the healing warmth of love, fell into a deep sleep. The next morning, even before the sun touched the windows, Mika's cheerful voice echoed through the hallways of the house. Mika had come to the bedroom door with a tray and woke them with a vibrant song. As Asya opened her eyes, with the two little angels by her side and the voice of the man she loved at the door, she knew that the great and unforgettable day of the wedding had arrived.

For the inhabitants of the house, awakened by Mika's cheerful song, the big day had now officially begun. To avoid getting her snow-white wedding dress dirty, Asya first put on her kitchen apron and, full of anticipation, prepared the pizza dough and sauces with Mika. Exactly at that moment, a bakery truck appeared at the beginning of the street; the community baker, with whom Mika had made a special arrangement, had come to set up the giant stone oven right in the middle of the wedding area. As the unique smell of wood-fired pizza began to spread through the neighborhood, neighbors came out of their houses one by one to help. Some carried tables, others hung colorful lanterns between the trees, and still others decorated the bride's path with fresh flowers from their gardens. Tears came to Asya's eyes as she watched how these people, whom she did not know, mobilized as if they were her own family; Mika was right—in this neighborhood, no one remained a stranger.

As the sun slowly sank, the preparations were completed and the family began to prepare together for the great moment. As Asya looked at herself in the mirror in her simple but enchanting wedding dress, she saw that no trace of the old, frightened girl remained; she was now a woman who chased her dreams, was loved, and was self-confident. With the first lights of evening, the neighborhood residents gathered in the square, the music rose softly, and the wedding officially began. When Mika, in his stylish suit, took Asya's hand and led her to the crowd, the applause and joyful voices of hundreds of people reached the sky. The steam from the hot pizzas in the oven mingled with the laughter of the people. As Asya looked into Mika's eyes and they began their first dance, she knew she was standing right at the heart of the most delicious and happiest table of her life.

The wedding night continued like a dream under the lanterns burning in the middle of the neighborhood. While Mika's sisters, Leni and Minna, danced joyfully to the music, the entire neighborhood shared in this happiness. At a special moment during the night, Mika stopped Asya in the midst of the crowd and pulled out that crumpled paper—the drawing Mixi had made. As he took Asya's hands and held the picture high, the crowd around them saw the red-haired bride and the curly-haired groom hand in hand, exactly as in the drawing. Mixi's dream had stepped off the paper and become a living reality; it was the first true "Happy End" of her life. As the wedding concluded with laughter etched into everyone's memory and the scent of the most delicious pizzas, the real adventure for Asya and Mika was only just beginning.

Days passed, and they became the happiest couple in the world, firmly bound to one another. Now they had shaken off the weariness from their shoulders and felt the time had come to turn their dreams into a physical building. One morning, as the sun rose, they went out into the street hand in hand; their goal was to find the shop where they would open their famous restaurant. For hours they roamed the streets, looking at dozens of

empty storefronts, but in none did they find the “warmth” they expected. Just as their hope threatened to fade, they saw a shop on the corner with large windows and a small garden in front. The moment they stepped inside, Mika’s architectural genius and Asya’s love for cooking merged at the same point. The money they had saved was exactly enough for the price of the shop; it was like a gift from the universe to them. When they returned home with the deep peace of having bought the shop, they announced the happy news to Sofya at dinner: “Tomorrow we strike the first blow, Mother; we begin building the restaurant of our dreams!” While Sofya’s eyes filled with tears of pride, Leni and Minna began jumping around the table with joy.

As the first rays of sun pierced through the large windows of the shop the next morning, Asya and Mika were already at work. For two days, Mika built shelves and painted walls, unable to resist teasing Asya: “Chef, should I build these shelves to your height, or do we need a stool? If you can’t reach the pizza oven, I guess we’ll have to sell the customers ‘Flying Pizza Art!’” Asya responded to his endless jokes with a laugh, pressing her flour-covered hands against Mika’s nose to quiet him. At the end of the two days, the shop was exactly as they had dreamed: with brilliant white walls and the scent of fresh flowers. On the morning of the opening, the whole family rose early and put on their finest clothes; Asya’s hands trembled with excitement as they hung the sign “The Kitchen of the Sun” above the door.

When the opening began, the neighbors came flocking in. As the first pizza was delivered to a table, Mr. Hans, the eldest in the neighborhood, took a bite and closed his eyes. Mika went to him immediately and asked, “Well, Mr. Hans, how is it? Do you like Asya’s pizza more, or the view of this shop I built?” Mr. Hans laughed and replied, “Mika, your view is beautiful, but this pizza nourishes the soul, my boy!” While Sofya served the drinks, Leni and Minna practically flew between the tables.

Minna smiled at a customer as she set down a plate: “This is the most delicious pizza in the world because it contains a sauce of happiness!” Asya looked out from the oven at the crowd; everyone was eating and smiling. Mika came up from behind, put his arm around her waist, and whispered, “Look, Chef, the dark table from your dream is now full of light. I brought the light, but you turned this table into a masterpiece.” Asya couldn’t hold back her tears and whispered, “We did it together, Mika; this table belongs to us now.” As they prepared to turn off the last lights of the shop with the sweet exhaustion of the opening, Asya paused for a moment, and the dream she had seen months ago came alive in her mind. She remembered how Mika had illuminated the pitch-black table with the candles in his hands. She turned to Mika and, with moist eyes, told him about her dream for the first time: “That night, there was only darkness at that table, Mika. When you brought the light, you said it was my turn. Look, now this table is just like in the dream, but this time it is real and full of thousands of lights.” Mika smiled and held Asya’s hand firmly; this dream was now their shared

reality. Just as they were about to lock the door, they saw someone approaching the shop excitedly. It was a reporter from the local newspaper. He handed them the freshly printed paper and shouted cheerfully: "Hey! You've become legends on your very first day, look at this!"

On the front page of the newspaper was a glossy photo of the shop, and underneath, in large letters, the headline read: "FROM THE TABLE SET IN DARKNESS TO THE BRIGHTEST DELICACIES IN THE WORLD!" The article described how the dishes from Asya's artistic hands had breathed a new soul into this city. Asya and Mika looked at each other as they read the news. The table of hope, once set in the deep darkness of fatherly pressure and helplessness, now illuminated the entire city with the lights of love and courage. They stepped out of the shop and looked back one last time. Mika and Asya held hands and gazed at that warm home, which was the physical form of their dreams: their own restaurant. The darkness was finally behind them; the path ahead was the fruitful future of that glowing table they had set together.

The end...