

Mr. Edwards' Unraveled Life

Chapter 1011

Jimena gritted her teeth against the searing pain. But her gaze was steady.

"This your version of an apology?" she asked, voice sharp despite the sting.

Miranda didn't move.

Hana crossed her arms, bored. "Close enough."

She signed the contract with a flourish, tossed it toward Jimena.

"There. You got what you wanted."

Jimena scooped up the documents with her good hand and stood, refusing to show weakness.

"You can hate me all you want. But Cody and I? That's mutual. Bullying me won't bring him back."

She turned and left without another word.

Behind her, Hana bristled. "She doesn't get to walk away like that."

Miranda's tone was soft, sugar-laced venom. "She got her punishment. Let it go."

Hana rolled her eyes. "You're too soft. Cody should've been yours."

They stewed in bitterness while Jimena sent the signed contract back to her office and headed to the hospital.

Her hand was swelling fast.

—

At the hospital, she spotted Cody in scrubs, mid-prep for surgery.

He noticed her immediately. His eyes widened.

"What happened to your hand?" he asked, rushing over. "Forget it—go get treatment. I'll come find you when I'm done. Don't leave."

She nodded silently.

Once her hand was cleaned and bandaged, Jimena found a quiet corner to wait. Pain pulsed with every heartbeat, but her thoughts hurt more.

Why had it come to this?

Miranda's cruelty today clashed so sharply with her tears last night. Was it heartbreak, or had this always been her true self?

Cody found her post-surgery, eyes zeroing in on her wrapped hand.

"Miranda did this, didn't she?"

Jimena hesitated, then nodded. "Her and Hana."

His expression darkened.

"Why?" he asked.

She told him everything. The meeting. The threats. The stomp.

Cody's anger was cold, focused. "Hana's always been her personal hitman. But this? It's over the line."

"I didn't want to bother you with it," she said quietly. "You just finished surgery."

"Forget that." He grabbed her good hand. "Come on."

He dialed Esteban. "We need to talk about Miranda."

Jimena frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Surgery's done. I'm free. And this? This is mine to deal with, too."

He drove straight to an upscale club.

Jimena sat beside him, uneasy. Her hand ached, but the way Cody moved—the protective set of his jaw—made something twist inside her.

She hadn't expected him to care this much.

Inside, they found Miranda and Ronan in a private lounge, laughing with a table full of people.

The two were wrapped around each other, smiling, nearly kissing.

"Old married couple!" someone teased.

Cody's lip curled in disgust. Last night, Miranda had been crying on his doorstep. Now this?

He walked in and smashed a glass on the floor.

The music cut.

He lifted Jimena's bandaged hand for everyone to see. His eyes locked on Miranda.

"Want to explain this?"

Ronan stood, pulling Miranda closer with a smirk. "She got hurt doing business. Not our fault if she's fragile."

Miranda didn't flinch. "You said you loved me, Cody. What happened?"

He didn't even blink. "This isn't about love. It's about you dragging someone else into your mess. Fight me if you want—but touch her again, and I'll make sure you regret it."

The room went dead quiet.

He turned, grabbed Jimena's hand gently, and walked out.

Outside, she whispered, "I didn't want this."

"It's not your fault," Cody said, eyes distant. "Go home."

As he drove, her phone rang.

She answered quietly, his ears catching just enough.

"...Really? Where? Can you confirm the location?"

Chapter 1012

The voice on the phone was low, steady. Jimena's private investigator.

"It's a mountain area," he said. "Remote. You could check it out yourself, but... we don't have much else yet."

Jimena's brow furrowed. "That's vague. You sure?"

"It's the best lead we've got after digging this deep. Nothing more solid's come up."

She hung up, staring out the car window. Her mind spun with possibilities.

Cody glanced over. "What's going on?"

"My brother," she said quietly. "He's still missing. I hired a private investigator, and they finally found a lead... in some mountain region. I'm thinking of going, but—something feels off."

Cody's brows drew together. "A mountain? That's a little too convenient. You trust this guy?"

"I thought I did," she admitted. "But now... I'm not sure. You're right. It doesn't add up."

Cody nodded. "Smells like a setup. Be careful."

—

Back at the club, Miranda seethed. Her hands clenched into fists.

"Why's Cody acting like this?" she snapped. "He was mine. He never cared about anyone else. Now he's parading Jimena around like some kind of trophy? Just to spite me?"

Ronan leaned back in his chair, grinning like a devil stoking a fire. "Looks like your lapdog grew a backbone. Still—she's just a rebound. She won't last."

Miranda's nails dug into her palms, drawing blood. "He only ever wanted me. Why her now?"

Ronan shrugged. "You've still got his resources. Use them. Don't let her win."

Miranda's phone buzzed—Esteban.

"I've got a plan," Esteban said smoothly. "It'll bury Jimena and bring Cody crawling back."

Miranda hesitated. It sounded harsh. Cruel. But after the public humiliation Cody had served her... she was tempted.

"...Fine. Tell me."

—

Esteban's phone rang. Noor's voice came through, shaky and tense.

"Ivan broke my wrist. He's suspicious. I don't know what to do."

Esteban's voice was ice. "Protect yourself. I don't care how. But don't screw this up."

"I'm trying," she whispered. "But he's... scary. I don't know if I can keep this going."

"You took my money," he snapped. "You don't get to back out now. And I need one more thing."

Her stomach sank. "What?"

"Install surveillance on Ivan. Audio, video—everything. I want proof of what he's doing."

Noor's breath caught. "That's suicide. He's paranoid. If he catches me—he'll kill me."

"You've got a choice," Esteban said coldly. "Do it, or you're on your own. Don't waste my time."

She gritted her teeth. "I'll... try."

"I'll throw in an extra half a million," he added. "But if it's fake, you get nothing."

The line went dead.

Noor stood frozen, staring at her phone. The money wasn't worth dying for—but she was already in too deep.

Ivan's voice startled her from behind. "What're you sneaking around for?"

She spun, masking panic with pain. "Nothing! My hand hurts, that's all. I'd never betray you."

He eyed her carefully, not convinced. But after a long pause, he just said, "Get out of my sight."

Chapter 1013

Ivan's sudden shift in tone caught Noor off guard.

"These are for your wrist," he muttered, tossing her a pack of plasters. "Don't go around saying I'm cruel."

She blinked. **Ivan, considerate?** It didn't track. Was he messing with her? Testing her?

Still, she forced a smile. "Thanks."

Ivan grunted and walked away, visibly annoyed—more with himself than with her.

Her tears earlier had thrown him. They stirred something he didn't like. But that shifty vibe she gave off still nagged at him.

—

Noor headed to a clinic.

The doctor examined her wrist, frowning. "This is serious. No heavy lifting for at least two months. Absolute rest."

She nodded, knowing rest wasn't an option. Not with Ivan's suspicion and Esteban breathing down her neck.

Surveillance on Ivan? It was a death sentence—but she'd already taken the money. Backing out wasn't an option anymore.

Back at the villa, Ivan was pacing.

"You're back," he said, tone unreadable. "Thought you ran."

She laughed weakly. "Where would I go?"

He didn't respond, just watched her a moment longer. Suspicious. Distrustful.

Her pulse picked up. Cameras, microphones... how the hell would she install anything under his nose?

But Esteban's threat echoed again in her head.

She had no choice.

—

Meanwhile, Cody was digging.

And what he found wasn't good.

"This guy's shady," he told Jimena. "Your PI's feeding you half-truths. Could be working for someone else."

Her heart sank. "So the lead on my brother... it's a setup?"

"Could be," he said. "I'm checking deeper. But don't go running off into some mountain by yourself."

Jimena exhaled slowly, absorbing the weight of it. "Thanks, Cody. I know you're trying to help... this is just a lot."

He looked at her hand. Guilt flickered in his eyes. “Your injury—Miranda’s doing. I feel responsible.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said gently. “I don’t hold grudges. I just keep moving.”

Cody stared at her. “Why do you brush it off like that? Am I just another guy to you?”

She blinked in surprise, then laughed softly. “No. You’re different. You’ve helped me more than I can ever repay. But you and Miranda—that’s your history. I’m not here to judge it.”

Her answer disarmed him.

She looked tired. Not just physically, but down to her soul. The bandaged hand was only a fraction of the pain she carried.

He wanted to press further—ask why she acted like she didn’t need anyone—but something about her expression told him to stop.

So he stayed quiet.

And so did she.

A fragile, wordless understanding settled between them.

—

Elsewhere, Miranda smirked as Esteban laid out the plan.

“Cody loves Jimena?” she said coldly. “Then I’ll make sure she has nowhere left to stand. He’ll come back. He always does.”

Esteban nodded. “It’s temporary. With Ronan’s help, she’ll be crushed.”

What they didn’t know was that Jimena had already started to suspect the setup.

And Cody? He was done playing defense.

His assistant called, asking if he should keep Miranda’s ventures running.

“Cut them all off,” Cody said flatly. “She made her choice. I’m not her lapdog anymore.”

The assistant hesitated. “She’s not gonna take that well.”

“Let her be,” Cody said, his voice like stone. “I’m done.”

Chapter 1014

Cody's voice sliced through the manager's stammering.

"Whose card is it—mine or yours?"

The manager froze. "I—I'm sorry, sir. I didn't think it through. My mistake."

Cody didn't waste breath on forgiveness. He ended the call, jaw tight, focus already shifting.

He turned to the case of Jimena's brother, digging deeper, cross-checking everything the private investigator had claimed. Across from him, Jimena sat still, worry shadowing her face. The company's internal storm was bad enough—but the silence surrounding her brother was worse. It ate at her.

"Don't let this eat you alive," Cody said, noticing the tension in her shoulders. "If you don't want to chase that lead, I'll go. But mountain searches aren't cheap."

She nodded slowly. Doubt had already begun festering since Cody flagged the red flags. She pulled out her phone and dialed the detective.

Her voice was sharp. "Why are you so sure my brother's in those mountains? You haven't been there. You've sent no photos, no footage—nothing but words. Do I look like a fool to you?"

The man stumbled over his reply. "Ms. MacLean, I've been thorough, I—"

"Bullshit," she snapped. "We've been working together since my family shattered. I trusted you. But this? This smells like a scam. Either show me something real, or refund the damn money."

She hung up, her hands trembling with rage.

Across town, the rattled detective called Miranda in a panic. "Jimena's onto us. She's demanding proof or a refund. I think we should pull out."

Miranda laughed, icy and unbothered. "You took my money. If you want to grow a conscience now, pay her out of your own pocket. Don't drag me into your regrets."

She ended the call before he could protest.

Backed into a corner, the detective cracked. He refunded Jimena's money and sent over what little he had—most of it borrowed from Cody's earlier sources. There was no brother in the mountains. No real trail. Just a scam to bleed her dry.

Cody broke it to her gently. "It's not good news, but look at it this way—if he was dead, someone would've tried to extort you by now. Silence could mean he's alive... just off the grid."

Jimena's eyes welled up, but she nodded. "Thanks for helping. For not letting me fall for it."

Meanwhile, tension inside Ivan's villa was building.

His eyes lingered on Noor longer than usual, brows furrowed with suspicion. "What's with you lately? You're twitchy."

Noor's grip on her phone tightened. She'd planned to plant Esteban's cameras two days ago, but her injury had slowed her down.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, voice cold. "Or is my broken hand not broken enough for you? Want to finish the job?"

Ivan's mouth twisted. Her defiance threw him. "Watch your tone. I just asked a question. What, now I'm a monster? I didn't mean to hurt you that day."

Noor's chest constricted. "Didn't mean it? We've been together all this time, and I'm still nothing to you. Am I that worthless?"

Her own words surprised her. For once, she didn't choke on fear. His slight gentleness—his guilt after hurting her—had cracked open something dangerous: courage.

She pressed on. "If you hate me, I'll leave. But I've been loyal. Even when you broke me, I stayed. Who else would do that?"

Ivan blinked, silent. Her words hit a nerve. No one else had stayed. No one else had dared.

He turned away with a grunt. "Fine. I'm not arguing." He stormed out.

As the front door slammed, Noor exhaled shakily.

She scanned the room, heart hammering. There—behind the bookshelf, under the desk, near the TV. One by one, she installed the cameras, fingers trembling. If Ivan doubled back now, she was dead.

"Done," she whispered, testing the feed.

She ducked into a corner and sent a message: **"It's set. Can you see it?"**

Esteban _____ replied _____ seconds _____ later.
"Yes. Don't contact me again."

He deleted the message, switching to a secure screen. Noor's image appeared—pacing the villa, muttering anxiously.

"Stop overacting," he texted. **"Ivan'll notice."**

His eyes lingered on Noor longer than usual, brows furrowed with suspicion. “What’s with you lately? You’re twitchy.”

Noor's grip on her phone tightened. She'd planned to plant Esteban's cameras two days ago, but her injury had slowed her down.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, voice cold. "Or is my broken hand not broken enough for you? Want to finish the job?"

Ivan's mouth twisted. Her defiance threw him. "Watch your tone. I just asked a question. What, now I'm a monster? I didn't mean to hurt you that day."

Noor's chest constricted. "Didn't mean it? We've been together all this time, and I'm still nothing to you. Am I that worthless?"

Her own words surprised her. For once, she didn't choke on fear. His slight gentleness—his guilt after hurting her—had cracked open something dangerous: courage.

She pressed on. "If you hate me, I'll leave. But I've been loyal. Even when you broke me, I stayed. Who else would do that?"

Ivan blinked, silent. Her words hit a nerve. No one else had stayed. No one else had dared.

He turned away with a grunt. "Fine. I'm not arguing." He stormed out.

As the front door slammed, Noor exhaled shakily.

She scanned the room, heart hammering. There—behind the bookshelf, under the desk, near the TV. One by one, she installed the cameras, fingers trembling. If Ivan doubled back now, she was dead.

"Done," she whispered, testing the feed.

She ducked into a corner and sent a message: **"It's set. Can you see it?"**

Esteban replied seconds later.
“Yes. Don’t contact me again.”

He deleted the message, switching to a secure screen. Noor's image appeared—pacing the villa, muttering anxiously.

“Stop overacting,” he texted. **“Ivan’ll notice.”**

Noor swallowed her panic and forced herself still. Her life now depended on this lie.

Chapter 1015

Footsteps echoed behind her.

Noor froze, turning slowly. Ivan stood behind her, his smile stretched tight, eyes unreadable.

Her stomach dropped.

“Who were you texting?” he asked softly, stepping closer.

Before she could answer, his hand shot out, grabbing her chin with iron force. Her jaw ached under his grip.

“Just... an old classmate,” she said, voice steady despite her thundering heart. “Ran into her the other day.”

“Oh?” His tone was almost friendly. Too friendly.

Then, in a flash, his hand fisted her hair and yanked hard. Her head snapped back, a scream caught in her throat.

“Lying to me?” he hissed, his breath hot against her face. “You know what disobedient girls get.”

He dragged her by her hair to the bedroom and slammed the door. Noor hit the floor hard, her elbows scraping tile.

Ivan loomed over her, box in hand.

“I’ve got a surprise,” he said.

Inside: leather straps. Blades. Whips. Things that weren’t just for control—they were meant to shatter.

Her stomach turned. “Who... who would want that?”

“Wrong answer.”

The whip cracked across her arm. Fire tore through her skin. Another strike—then another. Blood surfaced in angry welts. She screamed.

“I made this for you,” he said between lashes. “And you don’t even appreciate it? Ungrateful little thing.”

Noor curled in on herself, sobbing. “Please... you said you wouldn’t hurt me again.”

"You lied to me," he snarled. "You texted someone. Don't pretend. I hate liars, Noor. The last one ended up in the river."

She fumbled her phone out with shaking hands. "It was my classmate. Look. Look, I'm not hiding anything."

She'd preloaded the fake logs. Esteban had deleted every trace.

Ivan scrolled through, eyes narrowing. "This doesn't feel right..."

But he kept reading. No evidence.

Still, rage hadn't left him. "You're still lying," he snapped, landing another blow.

Noor lost count of the strikes. Time blurred. Pain became all she knew.

Eventually, the whip dropped.

Ivan knelt beside her, voice suddenly gentle. "I didn't want to do this. You made me break my promise."

She flinched as his hand touched her cheek.

Then he stood. "Wait here. I'll get the medicine."

He returned with a first aid kit and crouched down, dabbing ointment and wrapping gauze around the worst wounds.

"Does it hurt?" he asked softly, like it mattered.

"You almost killed me," she whispered, eyes dull. "Why help now?"

"I was angry," he murmured. "I just want you loyal. That's all."

She shoved the phone toward him. "Check again. I didn't lie. And now I look like this. How can I ever trust *you* again?"

He scrolled through again. Nothing. No sign of deceit. His expression crumpled.

"I messed up," he said, voice raw. "It won't happen again. I swear."

Noor didn't reply.

He left the room.

Only when the door shut did she collapse, trembling. Blood soaked her bandages. The cameras were still rolling.

But now she knew:
Ivan wasn't just dangerous.
He was completely unhinged.

And she was trapped.

Chapter 1016

Noor couldn't pretend to understand Ivan's mind—nor did she want to. Trying to would mean sinking to his level.

She spent the next few days holed up, nursing her wounds. Ivan came by often, playing the doting partner. He brought flowers and snacks, trying to buy his way back into her good graces.

"Honey twists," he said, setting the bag on the table. "Your favorite. Come on, try one."

She recoiled at the sight of him. "Not hungry," she muttered.

His smile faltered. "What, my food's not good enough? I hit you once, and now I'm the villain forever? I patched you up, Noor. Don't act like I'm some monster."

His logic twisted reality—blaming her for the violence like it was a minor spat.

"I'm just full," she said, forcing a steady voice. "Ate earlier. They're a little greasy."

"Eat one," he insisted, pushing a twist to her lips. "For me."

She choked it down, the taste like ash.

"Good?" he asked, eyes bright with expectation.

"Yeah," she lied, managing a nod.

Satisfied, he left. Noor tossed the rest in the trash and vomited, her body rejecting the act as violently as her mind did. That night, she woke screaming—haunted by nightmares of whips and blood.

Still, she dragged herself to her jobs. First, handing out flyers in a suffocating costume at the mall. Then waitressing at the club.

That's where Esteban saw her.

"What's with your arm?" he asked as she poured his drink.

She tugged her sleeve down. "Nothing. Just tired. Enjoy your cocktail."

He reached across the bar and grabbed her wrist, gently but firmly. As he rolled up the sleeve, his expression darkened at the sight of the raw, angry scars.

“Who did this?”

She didn’t answer, but her eyes did.

“Ivan,” Esteban said grimly.

“It’s healing,” she said quickly. “It doesn’t hurt that much anymore.”

“Wait here.” He disappeared and returned with a small bag—ointment, gauze, bandages. He sat her down and opened the kit.

“You’re a girl. Scars matter. Let me help.”

“I don’t care about scars,” she said with a shrug. Survival didn’t leave room for vanity.

Esteban’s gaze softened. Another face flashed through his mind—a woman Ivan had broken before. She hadn’t made it out. Noor still could.

He cleaned and dressed her arm with a surprising gentleness. “Let me see your back too. You can’t reach it.”

She hesitated, but he was right. Reluctantly, she lifted her shirt, revealing a map of bruises and cuts.

His hands shook as he applied the salve. “It’s over,” he murmured, more to himself than to her.

Exhausted and worn raw by sleepless nights, Noor leaned back. For the first time in weeks, she felt something close to safety. She didn’t even realize she had dozed off—curled up on the club’s couch, fast asleep.

Chapter 1017

Noor woke slowly, blinking at the unfamiliar ceiling. This wasn’t the club.

She sat up, pulled on a pair of slippers, and stepped out into the hall. “Where am I?”

Esteban’s voice floated in from the living room. “My place. You crashed hard, and I wasn’t about to leave you there. It was late. I figured you’d stay the night—I’ll drive you back tomorrow.”

She nodded. “Okay. Thanks.”

“There’s food in the fridge. Snacks in the drawer. Help yourself.”

Her stomach growled in response. She grabbed a few slices of bread, scarfed them down, and went back to bed.

By morning, she felt human again. Yesterday, Esteban had treated her wounds, taken her in, even fed her. The least she could do was return the favor.

She crept around the quiet house—he was probably still asleep—and got to work in the kitchen.

An hour later, Esteban followed the smell of food to find Noor plating the last dish.

“You’re up!” she said with a grin. “I made breakfast. Go wash up and eat.”

She set a bowl of porridge in front of him. “Didn’t know what you liked, so I made a bit of everything. I’m a pretty decent cook, actually.”

Esteban sat down, not expecting much. He’d grown up on gourmet food—nothing surprised him anymore.

But one spoonful of porridge gave him pause.

“How is it?” Noor asked, watching him. “Believe it or not, porridge is kind of my specialty. Nobody makes it like I do.” She picked up a small homemade bun with her chopsticks and dropped it into his bowl. “Made those from scratch. No store-bought shortcuts.”

Esteban blinked, then took another spoonful. “What’s in this?”

“Lily slices—for that floral note. And a pinch of sugar. Unique, right?”

Steam rose from the bowl. For a second, he saw another woman in the haze—her face flickering behind Noor’s, ghostlike.

“You’re awfully quiet. Not your thing?” she asked, suddenly unsure. “I can order something else. Don’t skip breakfast—it’s bad for your stomach.”

“No, it’s good. I was just... lost in thought.”

He tried the buns and dumplings. They weren’t fancy, but they had something rarer: warmth. Comfort. A sense of home. He finished every bite.

Meanwhile, Jimena was spiraling. Another lead, another dead end. She turned to leave, then her phone buzzed.

An anonymous message.

She opened it—there it was. A photo of a familiar watch. Her brother's. She zoomed in, heart racing. The engraving was still there—both their initials.

Beneath it, a GPS location. Nearby.

It could be another trick, but she couldn't walk away. Not now. Even if it turned out to be a scam, what if it wasn't?

Jimena followed the coordinates through thick brush. No roads, just weeds and rocks. A snake slithered past her boots. She froze, heart in her throat, and waited for it to vanish before moving forward.

The silence pressed in on her—just her footsteps and the occasional rustle.

She misstepped, twisting her ankle. "Ow!" she hissed, collapsing into the dirt. Her ankle swelled instantly—red, tender, throbbing.

But the pin on the map was close.

No way she was turning back.

She grabbed a thick stick and limped forward, jaw clenched. Eventually, the trees parted—and there it was. A cave.

"Brother? Are you in there? It's Jimena!" she shouted, her voice echoing.

No answer. Just the wind.

Her heart sank. Another bust.

She turned to leave, but dusk was falling fast, and she was disoriented. Her phone battery blinked red. She was lost.

Then she heard it—a *rustling sound up ahead*.

She froze.

Someone—or something—was coming.

Chapter 1018

Jimena's nerves were on edge. In the middle of nowhere, that rustling could mean anything—a snake, a wild animal, or worse. With her ankle swollen and tender, running wasn't an option. She had to move—quietly.

But the forest floor was littered with twigs and leaves. *Snap*. Her foot landed on a branch. The crack echoed through the silence like a gunshot.

That's it. I'm done for.

The rustling grew louder.

She clenched her fists, bracing herself for a fight—or to flee. Eyes shut, breath held—

“Hey, lady? What’re you doing out here alone?”

The voice was young. Female.

Jimena opened her eyes, blinking in surprise.

A girl stood a few feet away, no older than thirteen. Barefoot, ponytailed, cheeks streaked with dirt, she looked more curious than threatening.

Relief crashed over Jimena. “I’m alone,” she said, her voice softer now. “Do you... know the way out of here?”

The girl nodded confidently. “Yup. Come on, I’ll take you. You’re not from around here, are you?”

Jimena shook her head. “No. I’m from out of state. I was... looking for my brother.”

The girl’s brow furrowed. “Did you find him?”

“No.”

“Aw, don’t be sad,” she said, grabbing Jimena’s hand gently. “I’ve got a brother—he’s awesome. I’ll share him with you. He can protect both of us.”

Jimena gave her a faint smile, amused despite herself. “You’re lucky to have him,” she said, humoring the girl’s childlike generosity.

“I know, right?” the girl beamed. “He picks mushrooms for me. We go fruit-picking together. Best guy in the whole village.”

As they walked, something about her cheerfulness tugged at Jimena’s attention. Too eager. Too polished. Still, with no signal and a dying phone, Jimena didn’t have many options.

After a long, uneven walk, the woods opened up to reveal a small village nestled among the hills.

“It’s late,” the girl said, her grip tightening just a little. “You should stay at our place tonight. My parents and brother will help you. Mom’s cooking is the best—she’ll make you a feast.”

Jimena hesitated. But the night was already falling, and her ankle throbbed with every step. She could pay them for the trouble in the morning.

“Alright,” she agreed. “Thank you.”

They arrived at a modest home with a rusted roof and a sagging porch. The girl pushed the door open.

“It’s kinda run-down,” she admitted. “But next year, when Dad makes more money, we’ll fix it up.”

She cupped her hands and shouted into the house, “Mom! Dad! I’m back! Look who I brought!”

“Hold on—we’re in the kitchen!” her parents called back, voices muffled by the clatter of pots and pans.

A young man stepped into the hallway. He had the same earthy features as the girl—tanned skin, wide eyes, shy smile.

“Sis... out picking mushrooms again?”

“Nope!” she chirped. “Come see!”

He turned—and stopped cold when he saw Jimena.

His eyes widened, expression caught somewhere between awe and disbelief. “You’re... like a goddess from a story,” he said, voice cracking as he blushed.

Jimena smiled warmly, brushing the dirt from her sleeves. “I got lost looking for someone. Your sister helped me.”

The girl nudged her brother toward the kitchen. “Go help Mom and Dad make more dishes. I’ll take care of our guest.”

She led Jimena to a small room with peeling paint and a bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

“It’s not much,” the girl said sheepishly. “But next year, this room’s gonna look amazing.”

Jimena lowered herself carefully onto the bed. “I believe you,” she said gently.

And she meant it. Not just to be polite. Somehow, this dusty little room and its wide-eyed inhabitants felt safer than the world she’d left behind.

For now.

Chapter 1019

Aisha hesitated. In their village, marriage was a big deal—especially for a poor family like theirs. Her brother, Paxton Cooke, walked with a limp, and people mocked him for it. He wasn't fast, and farm work was hard. At his age, still single, Aisha often worried. Would anyone ever accept him?

Then came Jimena—beautiful, gentle, and lost in the mountains. It felt like fate.

But what if Jimena left to find her grandfather? What if she slipped away, or worse, caught someone else's attention in the village?

"It's late," Jimena said softly. "It's not safe for you to go out now. Why don't you call your grandpa tomorrow?"

Aisha nodded, visibly relieved. "Yeah. Good idea. Tomorrow's fine."

A knock came at the door. "Dinner's ready!" Paxton called.

"Come on, I'll introduce you to everyone," Aisha said, tugging Jimena toward the main room, a space that doubled as dining area and sleeping quarters for the parents.

Jimena was greeted warmly.

"Sit, try our food," Cynthia said, her tone kind but eyes sharp. "You're stunning. No one in this village—or even the next—can compare."

Jimena smiled politely and sat down, though something in her gut twisted. Something felt off.

Aisha made introductions, proud and cheerful. "My mom, Cynthia. My dad, Princeton. My brother, Paxton. And I'm Aisha. We're a happy, safe family."

"I'm Jimena," she said, reaching into her bag. "Aisha, thank you for helping me. Here—this is for you. I'll need a ride to town tomorrow."

Princeton and Cynthia exchanged a quick glance. Paxton leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "You're leaving? Where to? You got someone out there waiting for you?"

"No," Jimena replied, startled by the intensity in his voice. "I just want to go home."

Paxton relaxed a bit, but then spoke with alarming certainty. "Good. No other guy. From now on, I'm your guy. Stay here, we'll build a life. Save that money for our kid. I'll build us a house."

Jimena's heart dropped. "What are you talking about? I have my own life. I'm not staying."

Aisha stepped in, pleading. "Big sister, you didn't find your brother, right? My brother can be yours. He'll protect us both. He's got a limp, yeah—but he's strong. And I'll help with the farm!"

Jimena stared at her. If she had known this was their plan, she would've never followed Aisha back here.

“Enough,” Princeton said firmly. He stood tall, his tone making the room go still. “This village is remote. Without a local, you’re not going anywhere. If you run, someone will bring you back. Everyone here knows us.”

Jimena’s face paled. She was trapped.

But she didn’t react. Panicking would only worsen things. She’d heard horror stories—women locked away, trafficked, erased. Her only option was to survive and wait for a way out.

“We’re not like other families,” Princeton continued. “Behave. Stay with my son. Give him a son. Life will be good.”

“Yeah, big sister,” Aisha said sweetly, her innocent voice now unnerving. “Brother Mailloux’s wife next door? She’s in the pigsty. Didn’t listen. If she had, she’d be fine now.”

Jimena’s blood ran cold. The woman was likely abducted, locked away, then blamed for trying to escape. These people didn’t see anything wrong with it.

The food—chicken, duck, steaming and seasoned—turned her stomach.

“Why aren’t you eating?” Cynthia asked, narrowing her eyes. “Eat our food. You’re family now. You’re not planning to run, are you?”

“I’m not running,” Jimena lied, forcing a small smile. “I’m just... vegetarian. All this meat—it’s not my thing.”

Aisha scooped a chunk of chicken into her bowl. “Try this. You’ll love it.”

Chapter 1020

Aisha nudged the bowl toward her. “It’s just a little meat. It won’t make you fat. Don’t worry! I ate pork all through New Year’s, and look—I’m still skinny!”

Jimena forced a tight smile. She wasn’t worried about gaining weight. It was the situation—the company—that made her sick. Still, Aisha was trying, in her own twisted way, to be kind.

Jimena picked up her chopsticks and ate a bite of the chicken, expression neutral.

Cynthia’s eyes lit up. “Good. You’re not pregnant yet, so don’t worry about your figure. Eat well now—makes for a strong, healthy boy. You can slim down later. Tonight, you’ll sleep with Paxton. You’re his now. Best to get started on that baby.”

Jimena froze.

She wasn’t afraid of sex. But being reduced to a breeding tool for a man she didn’t choose? In a place where escape meant punishment? No. Never.

She stayed calm. “Isn’t that... a bit fast?” she said quietly. “My family’s very traditional. I was raised to wait until marriage for that.”

Paxton perked up. “You’ve never been with anyone?”

Jimena hesitated, then nodded.

His eyes gleamed, like he’d just won the lottery.

“Marriage here’s simple,” Cynthia said. “We host a big meal. I’ll slaughter a chicken and pig tomorrow. Day after, we celebrate.”

Jimena leaned into the only leverage she had.

“Where I’m from, weddings are big—white dress, a suit, photos, music, everyone watching. Aisha said Paxton’s a good guy. I believe her. I just... want to be a proper bride.”

She turned shyly toward Paxton. His expression softened. The village girls never looked at him twice. Could Jimena really mean this?

Aisha jumped in before he could think too hard. “Brother, she likes you! She even said I’m lucky to have a brother like you!”

Paxton blinked. “Really?”

“Yup!” Aisha beamed. “She said the house will look great next year, and she doesn’t mind how it looks now.”

Jimena nodded, playing the part.

Paxton finally gave in. “Alright. You can sleep with Aisha tonight. We’ll do the wedding, then you’re with me.”

Cynthia huffed. “When I married your dad, I just wore a red scarf. Still got it. Why spend money on frills?”

Jimena pulled up wedding photos on her phone, its battery low but still alive. “Look, Aisha. Paxton would look amazing in this suit.”

Aisha gasped. “You’d look like a fairy, big sister! Can I try it on when it gets here?”

“Of course,” Jimena said sweetly.

That sealed it. Paxton wanted the suit, Aisha wanted the dress, and Jimena had already handed over money. Cynthia finally gave in.

She handed the cash to Paxton. “Go to town tomorrow. Alone. Don’t blow it—we don’t have many chickens left, and I need meat.”

“Got it,” Paxton nodded. He looked at Jimena. “You got money on your phone? Transfer it to Gangzi—he’s going with me.”

Jimena’s stomach turned, but she saw the silver lining. That transfer could be evidence someday. She sent the money, handed over the phone, and followed Aisha to their room.

Aisha barely slept, peeking at Jimena throughout the night to make sure she didn’t run.

But Jimena? She slept well. She’d need her strength to escape.

Morning came. Paxton left with Gangzi from the village chief’s family. Princeton headed off to work.

Only Aisha and Cynthia remained.

Jimena didn’t run. Not yet. She didn’t know the trails, and one wrong move could get her caged like Mailloux’s wife. But she couldn’t sit idle either.

Then came the announcement—a loudspeaker blaring through the village.

Aisha perked up. “Mom! A doctor from the city’s here—free checkups!”

Cynthia hesitated, eyeing Jimena.

“I’ll ask about Paxton’s leg,” she said finally.

“My throat’s sore,” Aisha added quickly. “I wanna go too. Let’s all go!” She grabbed Jimena’s hand.

Jimena nodded, concealing her rising hope.

A doctor from the outside... this might be her only way out.