

TOXIC



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Novella

PROLOG – The City We Built

We once built a city. Not out of concrete, but out of thoughts. A city that breathed, that sustained itself, that was clean, orderly, quiet — a counter-design to Berlin, which swallowed us day after day.

We were young. Too young to understand that we were, in truth, drawing ourselves: our longing for clarity, our fear of chaos, our hope for a life that didn't burn all the time.

Leon was the fire. Lukas the calm. I was the space in between.

And somewhere between plans, nights, and conversations, something emerged that was larger than our design: a small world that belonged only to us.

Sometimes I think we built that city because we sensed that, in real life, we couldn't hold on to anything.

2

1 – The Encounter

I still remember the smell of the corridors in the architecture building at TU Berlin. A mixture of cold concrete, printer heat, coffee, and the dust of old models that stood somewhere in the studios, never finished. It was one of those days when I wondered whether I was truly good enough for this degree, for this city, for the future I had imagined for myself.

I was new. New in Berlin, new at the university, new in a life larger than anything I had known before. I wasn't shy, but I was careful. I watched people before approaching them. I listened before I spoke. Maybe that was why I hesitated so long that morning before walking up to Leon and Lukas.

They stood by the window on the third floor, where you could look down into the courtyard. Leon leaned casually against the wall, a cigarette between his fingers even though smoking inside was forbidden. He did it anyway. Not out of defiance, but out of a natural indifference toward rules he had never accepted. Lukas stood beside him, a backpack slung over one shoulder, his hands in his pockets, a quiet smile on his face. He looked like someone who never needed to prove himself.

I had heard that we were allowed to form groups for the design module. I knew I didn't know anyone. I knew I didn't want to work alone. And I knew I had to make a choice.

So I walked up to them.

"Hey," I said, my voice sounding steadier than I felt. Leon turned his head toward me, studied me briefly, then smiled. It was a smile that was both friendly and challenging — as if he were testing whether I was real.

3

"Hey," Lukas said. "You're new, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm Alan."

"Leon," Leon said, extending his hand. His hand was warm, strong, a little shaky. I didn't know then why.

"Lukas," Lukas said, shaking my hand with a calmness that created instant trust.

I cleared my throat. "I wanted to ask... if you already have a group. And if maybe... well... I could join you."

Leon grinned. "Sure. Why not? We need someone who isn't as lazy as we are."

"We're not lazy," Lukas objected, laughing. "We're just... efficient."

I laughed with them, relieved. It was an honest laugh, one that came from the gut. I sensed immediately that the two of them

had a special dynamic. Leon was the storm, Lukas the anchor. And I... I didn't know what I was. But I knew I wanted to belong.

We sat down in one of the studio rooms, at a table covered with old sketches. The windows were large, the light fell in at an angle and made the dust dance. It was a beautiful room, one that smelled of work and ideas.

"So," Leon said, tapping the table with his finger. "Ecological city of the future. Ideas competition. Students and young architects. Sounds stressful."

"Sounds fun," Lukas said.

I nodded. "Sounds like an opportunity."

Leon looked at me, and for a moment his gaze was serious. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I want to make something good."

He smiled again, but differently this time. Warmer. More sincere.

"Then let's do it," he said. "The three of us. One city. One semester."

We talked for hours. About cities, about systems, about energy, about people. About Berlin, which we loved and hated at the same time. About the future we wanted to shape, even though we barely knew who we were ourselves.

I remember the moment when I thought: *This is going to be good. Really good.*

I didn't know then that I was meeting two people who would change my life. One of them would later teach me how deeply a person can fall. The other would show me how to keep going despite everything.

But on that day, we were simply three architecture students who wanted to build a city.

And I was happy.

2 – NON TOX

I no longer remember exactly why I said “yes” that night when Leon called and asked if I wanted to grab a drink. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe it was the wish to get to know him better. Maybe it was simply the longing for an evening different from the days in the studio, which smelled of paper and coffee.

It was just before midnight when I set out. Berlin was warm, the streets alive as if they had a heartbeat of their own. I stepped off the U-Bahn and walked the last few meters. NON TOX lay in a side street, unremarkable, almost hidden, as if the club only wanted to let in those who truly sought it.

5

When I arrived, Leon was already standing outside. He leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets, his gaze glassy. I recognized immediately that he wasn't sober. Not even close.

“Alan!” he shouted, coming toward me as if he hadn't seen me in years. He hugged me tightly — too tightly — and I smelled the sweetish mix of alcohol, sweat, and something else I couldn't name back then.

“You're late,” he said, laughing. His laugh was loud, shrill, a little too long.

“It's exactly midnight,” I said.

“For me, that's late,” he replied, winking.

We went inside. The bouncer nodded us through without looking at us. Inside it was dark, only the laser lights cutting through the room like knives. The music was a deep, vibrating

minimal-techno beat that felt as if it were hitting directly against your chest.

Leon moved instantly, as if the music were a current carrying him. I stood still for a moment, looking around, trying to understand what people sought in places like this. Maybe they were searching for themselves. Maybe for someone else. Maybe simply for silence inside the noise.

Leon returned and pressed something into my hand. A small baggie. I looked at him.

“No,” I said immediately, handing it back.

He laughed. “Are you Muslim?”

“No,” I answered calmly. “I just don’t take anything. Not even alcohol.”

He stared at me as if I had told him I was an alien. Then he laughed again — but this time it wasn’t joy, it was astonishment.

“Crazy,” he said. “You’re really... different.”

“I’m a child of nature,” I said. “I want to stay clear. As long as I’m here.”

He nodded slowly, as if trying to understand me. I don’t think he did. But he accepted it.

We stayed the whole night. The music grew louder, the people blurrier, the air heavier. Leon danced, talked, laughed, disappeared, reappeared. I often stood at the edge, watching him, watching the others, watching myself.

Toward morning, when the first rays of sunlight slipped through the cracks of the windows, Leon was barely responsive. His pupils were huge, his movements erratic, his voice fragile.

“Let’s go,” I said.

He nodded. We left the club. Outside, Berlin was suddenly quiet, as if the city itself had a hangover.

“Come,” Leon said. “To my place.”

3 – Friedrichshain, Coffee, and the Comedown

When we stumbled out of NON TOX that morning, Berlin was a different place. The night had swallowed us whole, but the day spat us back out — tired, empty, carrying a feeling somewhere between euphoria and exhaustion. The streets were quiet, as if they themselves had a headache. The sun hung low, a pale light that made the façades of the old Friedrichshain buildings look like faded photographs.

Leon walked ahead of me, hands in his pockets, his steps slightly unsteady. He seemed both awake and completely gone. I didn’t understand how he managed to function after a night like that. Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he only pretended to.

“Come,” he said, pointing at a grey building with tall windows. “This is where I live.”

We went inside. The stairwell smelled of cold smoke and damp concrete. The steps creaked under our feet. Leon opened the door to his apartment, and I stepped in.

It was a large room, yet it felt cramped. Not because of the furniture — there was barely any — but because of the things scattered everywhere. Stacks of books, loose papers, empty bottles, cigarette butts, a few pieces of clothing that looked as if they hadn’t seen a closet in weeks. On the table stood a computer, beside it an overflowing ashtray. The air was heavy, as if it had lived too much.

“Sit,” Leon said, heading into the kitchen. I sat down on the worn-out sofa, which smelled of dust and old leather. I looked around. It wasn’t an apartment — it was a condition. A mirror of his life. A room that was both alive and dying.

Leon returned with two cups of coffee. He set them on the table and dropped onto the sofa beside me.

“I love that club,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “In there... in there nothing matters. Nothing.”

I nodded, though I didn’t understand. For me, nothing was meaningless. For me, everything was clear, conscious, real. I didn’t need drugs to feel alive. I only needed the world as it was.

“You’re really different,” Leon said suddenly, looking at me. His gaze was clearer than it had been during the night, but still threaded with a tiredness deeper than lack of sleep. “You’re... clean.”

8

I didn’t know whether it was a compliment or a reproach. Maybe both.

“I like it that way,” I said. “I want to stay awake. I want to feel everything.”

Leon laughed softly. “I don’t want to feel anything.”

The sentence fell into the room like a stone. Heavy. Honest. Unavoidable.

We talked about architecture. About ideas. About the city we wanted to build. Leon was suddenly focused, almost passionate. He spoke about energy flows, adaptive buildings, systems that regulated themselves. He was brilliant. One of the smartest people I had ever met.

And at the same time, one of the most broken.

I watched him as he spoke, as his hands moved, as his eyes lit up. I wondered how a person could carry so much light and so much darkness at once.

By afternoon, I grew tired. The night clung to my bones. I stood up.

“I’m going home,” I said.

Leon looked at me as if he didn’t understand why I would leave. “Stay a bit longer.”

“I’m tired,” I said. “And Charlottenburg is far.”

He made a face. “Charlottenburg... bourgeois.”

I smiled. “Maybe. But it’s quiet.”

He nodded slowly, though I knew he didn’t understand. For him, quiet was something foreign. Something he couldn’t grasp. Something that frightened him.

9

I said goodbye and left. The stairs creaked under my steps. Outside, the sun had climbed higher, but it still looked tired. I walked to the U-Bahn, got in, sat by the window.

The city rushed past me. I thought of Leon. Of his energy. Of his darkness. Of his apartment, which felt like an open wound.

I didn’t know then that this morning was a preview of everything that would come. I didn’t know that I had found a friend I wouldn’t be able to save. I didn’t know that Friedrichshain would one day smell like grief to me.

I only knew that I was tired. And that Leon stayed awake — in a way no one survives.

4 – Lukas, Weed, and the City of the Future

The days after the night at NON TOX were quieter. I needed time to sort myself out, to process the impressions Leon had left behind. He was like a storm sweeping through my life —

loud, chaotic, fascinating. And I was someone who observed storms, not someone who let himself be carried by them.

When we met again three days later, Lukas was there. We had arranged to continue working on our design. I arrived a little early at the studio, sat down at the large table, and flipped through our previous sketches. The city we were building was slowly taking shape. It was clear, logical, thoughtful — a counter-design to Berlin, a counter-design to Leon.

Lukas arrived first. He wore his backpack slung casually over one shoulder, and when he saw me, he smiled.

“Hey, Alan,” he said, sitting down next to me. He smelled of fresh air and a hint of weed — not strong, just a trace that belonged to him the way his calm nature did.

“You alright?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. Just tired.”

He laughed softly. “Leon dragged you along, didn’t he?”

“You could say that.”

Lukas pulled a small, neatly rolled joint from his pocket, lit it, and took a drag. He did it with a natural ease that wasn’t provocative. It was simply part of his everyday life.

“I think it’s cool that you don’t take anything,” he said, blowing the smoke aside. “Nowadays that’s rare.”

I shrugged. “I don’t need it.”

“Me neither,” he said. “But I like it. A little. Not too much.”

He took another drag, then stubbed the joint out. “I drink tequila sometimes. But otherwise... nothing.”

I liked Lukas. He was honest without being loud. Relaxed without seeming indifferent. He was the opposite of Leon — and at the same time his best friend.

Leon arrived half an hour later. He looked rested, almost fresh, as if the night at NON TOX hadn't exhausted him but charged him up. He sat down, looked at us, and grinned.

"Well, you nerds?" he said.

"We already started," Lukas replied.

"Of course you did," Leon said, pulling his laptop from his bag. "I'm the creative one here anyway."

I laughed. "You're many things."

"I'm everything," he said, winking.

We worked for hours. It was one of those sessions where everything worked. Our ideas flowed into one another as if they were made of the same material. We discussed energy systems, autonomous mobility, waste cycles, adaptive buildings that responded to climate and use. We planned parks that weren't just green but alive. We designed neighborhoods that functioned socially. We built a city that wasn't just beautiful but meaningful.

11

Leon was brilliant. He thought quickly, unusually, radically. He asked questions I would never have asked. He saw connections I didn't see. Sometimes I wondered whether his intelligence was the reason he couldn't bear himself.

Lukas was the balance. Calm, analytical, structured. He brought order into Leon's chaos. He brought calm into my doubts.

And I... I was somewhere in between. I was the one holding everything together without realizing it.

We worked late into the evening. The sun set, the studio grew darker, but we stayed. We were young, ambitious, full of ideas. We believed we could change the world — or at least a city.

At some point Leon leaned back, stretched his arms, and looked at us.

“We’re good,” he said. “Really good.”

“Yeah,” Lukas said. “We’re a good team.”

I nodded. “We’re more than that.”

Leon looked at me, and for a moment his gaze was clear — without darkness, without exhaustion, without escape.

“We’re friends,” he said.

It was a simple sentence. But it meant a lot.

We packed up, left the studio, and stepped out into the Berlin night. The air was cool, the streets alive, the city humming. We walked side by side without saying much. It was one of those nights when you feel something beginning — something good, something important.

12

I didn’t know then that this time would be the best of our lives together. I didn’t know that we were building a city while Leon was destroying himself. I didn’t know that Lukas and I would one day argue about drugs and alcohol, about prohibition, about freedom, about abuse. I didn’t know that we would one day ask ourselves how many people in Germany drink, how many are addicted, how many lose themselves.

I only knew that we were three. And that we were building a city. A city that worked. A city we loved.

A city Leon would never reach.

5 – The First Crack

It was a few weeks after our intense phase of work when I first felt that something was wrong. Not with the project — it was going better than anything I had ever dreamed of — but with

Leon. It wasn't a big moment, no dramatic outburst, no scene. It was a feeling. A quiet but persistent feeling that ran like a thin crack across the surface of our friendship.

We met in the studio as always. Sunlight streamed through the large windows, and the room was filled with the sound of pencils gliding over paper and the soft hum of computers. Lukas was already there, absorbed in a calculation. I sat down next to him and began working on a model.

Leon arrived later. He seemed different. Not tired — he was often tired — but... absent. His gaze was glassy, his movements restless, as if he were fighting something invisible.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Sure."

But it wasn't sure. Nothing was sure.

He sat down, opened his laptop, stared at the screen without doing anything. I glanced at Lukas, who looked at me briefly and then looked away. He knew it too. We both knew.

After half an hour, Leon stood up, walked to the window, leaned against it, and stared outside. His body looked tense, as if it might break apart at any moment.

"I'm going out for a bit," he said.

He left. No explanation. No look back.

Lukas put his pencil down. "He's using again," he said quietly.

I looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Lukas sighed. "Alan... Leon doesn't just take a little. He takes a lot. A whole lot. And not just the usual stuff."

I felt my stomach tighten. I had suspected it, but I hadn't known. I had seen it, but I hadn't understood.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because he can’t do otherwise,” Lukas said. “He’s...” He hesitated. “He’s borderline.”

Back then I knew almost nothing about the disorder. I only knew it was serious. That it could destroy people. That it wasn’t just ‘a phase.’

“He told you?” I asked.

“No,” Lukas said. “But I’ve known him for years. I’ve seen his crashes. His attempts. His...” He broke off. “He needs help.”

I nodded slowly. “And what are we supposed to do?”

“Nothing,” Lukas said. “We can’t do anything. He doesn’t let anyone in. Not even me.”

I looked toward the window where Leon had disappeared. The sun was shining brightly, but the room suddenly felt dark.

14

When Leon returned an hour later, he was “normal” again. He smiled, made jokes, even worked a little. But I saw it. I saw the exhaustion in his eyes that didn’t come from lack of sleep. I saw the restlessness in his hands that didn’t come from coffee. I saw the emptiness in his smile that didn’t come from stress.

It was the first crack. A fine, barely visible crack. But I knew that cracks grow. That they spread. That eventually they break something you can’t repair.

That evening I went home and sat down at my computer. I searched for information about borderline. I read for hours. About emotional instability. About self-harm. About addiction. About emptiness. About fear of abandonment. About extreme emotions that come and go like storms.

I read about people who couldn't bear themselves. About people who lost themselves. About people who destroyed themselves.

I read about Leon. Even though his name wasn't there.

When I closed the laptop, it was late. I sat in the dark for a long time, thinking. About friendship. About responsibility. About limits.

I knew I couldn't save Leon. But I also knew I didn't want to leave him alone.

It was the first crack. And I didn't know how many more would follow.

6 – Blood in the Bathtub

15

It was a Sunday — one of those quiet, grey Sundays when Berlin feels as if it has forgotten itself. I was at home, drinking coffee, flipping through a book I wasn't really reading. The week had been exhausting, but good. Our project was going well, Lukas was relaxed, and Leon... Leon was still a mystery, as always, but I believed he was doing better. Or I wanted to believe it.

Around noon my phone rang. An unknown number. I answered.

“Alan?” a voice asked — tense, brittle, as if it might break at any moment.

“Yes? Who is this?”

“Mathias,” he said. Leon's roommate.

I sat up straight. “Mathias? Is everything okay?”

A short pause. Then: “Can you come? Please. It's urgent.”

I felt my heartbeat quicken. “What happened?”

“I... I’m not sure. But please come. Quickly.”

He didn’t give me details. He didn’t need to. I knew something terrible had happened — something that couldn’t be undone.

I got dressed, left the apartment, and headed out. The trip took forty-five minutes, but it felt like hours. I stared out the U-Bahn window, watching the stations pass without seeing them. My mind was empty and full at the same time — thoughts overlapping, cancelling each other out.

When I arrived in Friedrichshain, the air felt heavy. The sky was grey, the streets silent. I climbed the stairs, and even before I reached the door, I felt it. A coldness. A stillness. A weight that didn’t come from the apartment, but from what was inside it.

Mathias opened the door. His face was pale, his eyes red. He

16

looked at me as if I were the last person who could help him. “He’s in the bathroom,” he said quietly.

I walked in. The apartment was chaotic as always, but this time the chaos felt different. Not alive. Not everyday. But... abandoned.

I went to the bathroom. The door was open.

I saw him immediately.

Leon lay in the bathtub. His left arm hung over the edge, and there was blood everywhere — in the water, on the floor, on the tiles. Not bright red anymore, but a dark, heavy red that lay over the room like a shadow.

I stopped. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. I could only see.

His face was pale, his eyes closed. He didn’t look dead — he looked... gone. As if he had left himself behind.

I had to breathe deeply before I could move. My legs felt like stone. My hands were shaking.

I walked to him, slowly, carefully, as if entering a dream I didn't want to live. I knelt beside the bathtub. I touched his arm. It was cold.

"Leon," I whispered. It wasn't a call. It was a prayer.

I grabbed my phone and dialed emergency services. My voice was calm, though inside I was screaming. I told them what had happened. I gave the address. I told them they needed to come quickly.

Mathias stood in the doorway, his hands over his face. He was sobbing quietly. I couldn't comfort him. I couldn't comfort anyone. I couldn't even comfort myself.

The minutes until the paramedics arrived felt endless. I stayed with Leon, holding his hand even though I knew he couldn't feel it. I spoke to him softly — words that made no sense, but needed to be spoken. 17

When the paramedics came, the room suddenly filled with noise. Steps, voices, instructions. They lifted him out of the bathtub, placed him on a stretcher, bandaged his arm, checked his breathing. I stood beside them, unable to move.

"He's alive," one of them said. "But it's serious."

I closed my eyes. I didn't know whether to feel grateful or desperate. Maybe both.

They carried him out. I followed them to the door. Then I stopped. I watched them load him into the ambulance. I watched the doors close. I watched the blue lights flare.

And then he was gone.

I stood in the stairwell for a long time before returning to the apartment. Mathias sat on the sofa, his hands still covering his

face. I sat beside him. We didn't speak. There was nothing to say.

After a while I stood up. I needed to leave. I needed air. I needed to think.

I went home. The city rushed past me, but I didn't hear it. I didn't see it. I didn't feel it.

I felt only one thing:

The crack was no longer a crack. It was a break.

And I didn't know whether Leon would ever become whole again.

7 – Psychiatry

The next day I went to the psychiatric clinic. I remember the way there, the streets I knew but that felt unfamiliar. Berlin was loud, alive, restless — yet inside me there was a silence that almost hurt. I didn't know what awaited me. I only knew I had to go.

The building lay a bit outside the city, a grey complex that looked modern and desolate at the same time. The windows were large, but the curtains behind them were closed. The air smelled of disinfectant and something else I couldn't name — perhaps fear, perhaps hope, perhaps both.

I checked in at the reception. The woman behind the desk looked at me as if she could see through me. "Visit for Leon Brand," I said.

She nodded, handed me a visitor's badge, and pointed down a long corridor. "Room 214. Second floor."

I walked down the hallway. It was bright, but the brightness felt artificial, sterile. The walls were white, the doors grey,

footsteps echoed. I heard muffled voices, a quiet sobbing, somewhere a laugh that didn't sound happy.

When I reached Room 214, I stopped for a moment. I took a deep breath. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to act. I only knew I was afraid — not of Leon, but of what he had become.

I knocked. A soft voice said, "Yes."

I opened the door.

Leon sat on the bed. He wore a light blue hospital gown, his hair was messy, his face pale. He looked thinner, smaller, more fragile. Not like the Leon I knew — the one who laughed, who danced, who forgot himself. This Leon looked... broken.

Next to him sat Mia.

Her hands were folded in her lap, her face red from crying. When she saw me, she stood up, wiped her tears, and tried to smile. She couldn't. 19

"Hi, Alan," she said quietly.

"Hi," I answered. My voice sounded foreign.

I walked over to Leon. He looked at me, and in his eyes I saw something I had never seen before — shame. Deep, burning shame.

"Hey," he said.

I sat down on the chair beside the bed. "How are you?"

He laughed softly — a laugh with more pain than humor. "How am I? I'm in a psychiatric ward, Alan. How do you think I am?"

I didn't know what to say. So I said nothing.

Mia placed a hand on his shoulder. He didn't pull away. But he didn't react either.

"I was so scared," she said, her voice trembling. "I thought... I thought you were going to die."

Leon looked at her, and for a moment his gaze softened. "I didn't want to die," he said. "I just wanted... quiet."

That sentence hit me like a blow. Quiet. A word that meant peace to me — but for him it meant escape.

"It wasn't the first time," he said suddenly. "It was the fourth."

I looked at him. "The fourth?"

He nodded. "I never told anyone. Not even Lukas. Not even Mia. I... I can't sometimes. It gets too loud inside me."

Too loud inside me. A sentence that has stayed with me ever since.

20

Mia began crying again. She tried to hold it back, but she couldn't. Leon looked away.

I sat there, unable to move. I wanted to say something — something comforting, something wise, something right — but there was nothing right. There was only truth. And the truth was that I didn't understand him. Not really. Not deeply enough.

"How long do you have to stay?" I finally asked.

"Three months," he said. "Under supervision."

"That's good," Mia said. "You need help."

Leon looked at her, and in his eyes there was a mix of love and resignation. "I know."

We talked for a while. About trivial things. About university. About the project. About things that felt wrong because they were so normal.

Leon was calm. Too calm. As if someone had turned down the volume inside him, as if a part of him had been switched off.

When I stood up to leave, he looked at me. "Thanks for coming."

I nodded. "Of course."

"You're a good friend," he said.

I didn't know if that was true. I only knew I wanted to be one.

Mia walked me to the door. In the hallway she stopped.

"I don't know what to do," she said, her voice fragile. "I love him. But I'm afraid of him. And of what he does to himself."

I looked at her. "You're not to blame."

She shook her head. "Sometimes it feels like I am."

I placed a hand on her shoulder. "You're not to blame."

She nodded, but I knew she didn't believe me.

I left the clinic. Outside, the air was fresh, but it felt heavy. I walked slowly, step by step, as if each step led me deeper into a truth I didn't want to see.

Leon wasn't just "a friend who partied too much." He was a person fighting himself. A person losing himself. A person I couldn't save.

And for the first time, I understood how big that fight really was.

8 – The Mother

I waited two days before calling Leon's mother. Not because I didn't want to — but because I didn't know how. What do you say to a mother whose son has cut his wrist open? What do you say to a woman who has lived for years with the fear that her child is destroying himself?

I sat in my kitchen, the phone lying on the table in front of me, the number written on a slip of paper. I stared at it as if it were a doorway into a world I didn't want to enter. But I knew I had to.

I dialed the number. It rang. Once. Twice. Three times.

Then a voice. "Brand."

I swallowed. "Hello... this is Alan. A friend of Leon's."

A short pause. Then a quiet, tired: "Yes."

I didn't know how to begin. So I simply told the truth.

"Leon is in the psychiatric clinic. He had... an incident."

It was a weak word for what had happened. An incident. As if it had been a mishap. As if it had been a fall. As if it hadn't been blood filling the room.

She inhaled audibly. "I know," she said. "The clinic informed me."

Her voice was calm. Too calm. A calmness not born of serenity, but of exhaustion.

"I just wanted to tell you... that he's alive," I said. "And that he's being treated."

Another pause. Then she said a sentence I will never forget.

"I wish he were dead."

I froze. I thought I had misheard. I thought it was a mistake. I thought she meant something else.

But she didn't repeat it. She didn't explain it. She simply let the sentence stand — heavy, cold, honest.

I didn't know what to say. I only knew she didn't mean it the way it sounded. It wasn't hatred. It wasn't malice. It was despair. A despair so deep that it had no other words left.

"I..." I began, but I didn't know how to continue.

"You don't understand," she said. "No one understands. I raised him. I loved him. I tried everything. And I still lost him. Not now. Years ago."

Her voice didn't break. She was too tired to break.

"Every time the phone rings," she said, "I think it's the police. Or a hospital. Or a stranger telling me my son is dead. I've lived with this fear for years. And I can't anymore." 23

I closed my eyes. I saw Leon — laughing, dancing, destroyed. I saw him in the bathtub. I saw him in the hospital bed. I saw him in the psychiatric ward, small and fragile.

"He needs help," I said quietly.

"He needs more than help," she answered. "He needs a new life. And I can't give him that."

I heard her breathing. Slow. Heavy.

"I love him," she said. "But I can't save him."

I knew she was right. No one could save him if he didn't want to save himself.

"Thank you for calling," she said finally. "It means a lot."

"Of course," I said. "I just... wanted you to know."

"I know," she said. "And I'm grateful."

We said goodbye. I put the phone down and stared at the table. The sentence echoed in my mind.

I wish he were dead.

I knew she didn't mean it literally. I knew it came from pain. From exhaustion. From a life that had become too heavy.

But I also knew the sentence contained a truth no one wanted to speak:

Sometimes it is harder to watch someone live than to lose them.

I sat there for a long time, unmoving. The kitchen was still. The world was still. Only inside me there was a noise that wouldn't stop.

I thought of Leon. Of his mother. Of the battle they were both fighting — each in their own way.

And I knew that this battle was far from over.

24

9 – The Attempt to Be Normal

Leon stayed in the psychiatric clinic for three months. Three months in which I visited him regularly — sometimes alone, sometimes with Lukas, sometimes with Mia. Three months in which I saw, for the first time, how a person tries to repair himself — with medication, conversations, routines, rules meant to protect him. Three months in which I hoped things would get better.

When he was discharged, it was a bright day. The sun shone as if it wanted to promise something. I stood outside the building and waited for him. When he came out, he looked different. Not healthy — but ordered. Not happy — but clearer. Not healed — but stable.

“Hey,” he said, offering a small, cautious smile.

“Hey,” I replied.

We hugged. He smelled of fresh air and hospital soap — a strange but comforting scent.

“I’m back,” he said.

I nodded. “Yeah. And that’s good.”

He looked at me, and in his eyes there was something new — a mixture of gratitude and exhaustion. A kind of exhaustion that didn’t come from the night, but from life.

We walked to his apartment. Mathias had moved out. Leon had cleaned the place — or someone had done it for him. The bottles were gone, the ashtrays empty, the clothes folded. It was still his apartment, but it no longer looked like a battlefield.

“I’m taking a semester off,” he said while making coffee. “Just 25 three modules. Then I can start my master’s.”

“That’s good,” I said. “You need time.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Time.”

He sat down across from me. His hands trembled slightly, but not as much as before. He looked at me as if he wanted to say something heavy.

“Alan... thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything. For coming. For staying. For not leaving.”

I didn’t know what to say. So I said the truth.

“You’re my friend.”

He smiled. A real smile. One I hadn’t seen in a long time.

“I want to make it,” he said. “I want to be normal.”

Normal. A word most people take for granted — for him it was a goal, a dream, a fight.

“You’ll make it,” I said.

He shook his head. “No. Not alone.”

I looked at him. “I’ll help you.”

He raised his hand. “No. I have to do it alone. But... thank you.”

I understood what he meant. He didn’t want to be dependent. Not on drugs. Not on people. Not on me.

He wanted to be free — from himself.

The next weeks were quiet. Leon worked on his modules. He was focused, diligent, almost meticulous. He wrote long texts, drew precise plans, programmed simulations that would have impressed professors. He was brilliant — and this time without drugs. 26

I saw him often. We drank coffee, took walks, talked about architecture, about Berlin, about the future. Sometimes he laughed. Sometimes he was silent. But he was there. He was present. He was Leon — a Leon I hadn’t seen in a long time.

Mia visited him too. She was careful but loving. She brought him food, helped him with paperwork, sometimes stayed the night. She loved him — you could see it. But she was afraid — you could see that too.

Lukas was there as well. He smoked his joints, drank his tequila, but he was stable. He was the calm anchor Leon often lacked.

Sometimes the three of us met in the park, sat on a bench, and talked about our project, about the city we had built. Leon spoke about it with enthusiasm. He talked about energy flows, adaptive buildings, the beauty of systems that work.

“I want to work again,” he said one day. “I want to build something.”

“You will,” Lukas said. “You’re good.”

Leon smiled. “I know.”

It was a beautiful time. A fragile but beautiful time. A time in which I believed things would get better. That Leon would make it. That the break could heal.

But I didn’t know that some breaks don’t heal. They stay. They grow. They wait.

And one day, they break again.

10 – Mia Leaves

It was an afternoon in early autumn, the air cool and the trees slowly changing color. Leon and I were sitting in a café in Prenzlauer Berg — one of those places that manage to be cozy and overpriced at the same time. He drank a cappuccino, I drank water. We talked about architecture, about his modules, about the future. He seemed stable — not happy, but stable. I was cautiously optimistic.

Then Mia arrived.

She sat down with us without smiling. Her eyes were red, her hands trembling slightly. I knew immediately that something was wrong.

“We need to talk,” she said to Leon.

He looked at her, and in his eyes I saw a mixture of worry and exhaustion. “Okay.”

She took a deep breath. “I want children.”

Leon closed his eyes, as if he had been expecting that sentence. “Mia... I can’t have children.”

“You don’t want children,” she corrected him. “That’s different.”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t want to bring children into this world. Not the way I am. Not with what I have. Not with who I am.”

Mia looked at him for a long time. Her eyes filled with tears.

“I love you,” she said. “But I can’t spend my whole life waiting for you to maybe be ready someday.”

Leon looked away. He looked at his hands, which were trembling slightly.

“I know.”

“I want a family,” she said. “I want a life that isn’t constantly accompanied by fear. I want... normality.”

Leon laughed quietly, bitterly. “Normality. That’s a word I’ll never reach.”

“Maybe not,” she said. “But I need it.”

He nodded. Slowly. Heavily.

“So... you’re leaving?”

She swallowed. “Yes.”

I sat beside them, unable to move. I felt like a stranger in a moment too big to understand.

“With whom?” Leon asked suddenly. His voice was calm, but I heard the pain in it.

Mia looked at him. “With Lukas.”

I felt my breath catch. Leon remained still. He blinked once, slowly, as if trying to comprehend the sentence.

“Lukas,” he repeated.

“Yes,” she said. “We... we got closer. It wasn’t planned. It just happened.”

Leon nodded. He didn’t seem angry. Not surprised. Not hurt. He seemed... empty.

“He’s a good person,” Leon said. “You’ll have many children. As many as you want.”

Mia began to cry. “Leon... please don’t say things like that.”

“Why not?” he asked. “It’s the truth.”

She stood up. “I’m leaving now.”

Leon nodded. “Okay.”

29

She looked at me, as if she wanted to apologize. I didn’t know whether I could forgive her. I didn’t know whether I could blame her. I only knew that she was hurting — and that Leon was hurting.

She left. The door closed behind her. The room fell silent.

Leon stared at his cappuccino, now cold. Then he said:

“I loved her.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“But I’m glad she’s leaving.”

I looked at him. “Why?”

He gave a small, sad smile. “Because I can’t make her happy. And Lukas can.”

I didn’t know what to say. I only knew that this was one of the most honest sentences he had ever spoken.

“I’ll live alone,” he said. “And that’s okay.”

I wanted to contradict him. I wanted to say it wasn’t okay. That no one should live alone. That he needed help. That he needed people.

But I said nothing. Because I knew he wouldn’t hear it. Not now. Not in this moment.

We sat in silence for a long time. People around us talked, laughed, drank coffee. The world moved on. Ours didn’t.

When we finally stood up and walked outside, the air was cool. Leon pulled his jacket tighter around himself. He looked smaller, more fragile, as if the day had taken something from him he would never get back.

“I’ll make it,” he said suddenly. “I’ll work. I’ll live. I’ll... something.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He looked at me. “You don’t believe it.”

I looked away. “I hope so.”

He smiled. “Hope is good.”

We walked through the streets in silence. Berlin roared around us, but I heard nothing. I saw only Leon — and the crack that had opened inside him.

It wasn’t a small crack. It was a break. A break that would never heal.

30

11 – The Baseball Bat

It was a late evening, one of those nights when Berlin feels like an endless stream of light and noise. I was out with Leon, as so often. We had planned to go to NON TOX — even though

I entered the club with mixed feelings by then. Too many nights, too many crashes, too many shadows.

Leon was in a good mood. Too good. He talked fast, laughed loudly, moved restlessly, as if something inside him were burning. I knew he had taken something again. Not much — but enough to put him in a state that was dangerous.

When we reached the club, the Turkish bouncer was standing outside — the man Leon couldn't stand. I never knew exactly why. Maybe jealousy. Maybe plain resentment. Maybe he was simply one of those men who get nervous when others laugh with women inside the club. In any case, he didn't let us in.

We walked up to the door. The bouncer looked at us, sized us up, and before we could say anything, he shook his head.

"Not tonight," he said.

Leon stopped. "Why not?"

"No desire to deal with you," he said, looking Leon straight in the eyes. "You're not coming in."

Leon laughed — a short, sharp laugh. "We always get in."

"Not tonight," the bouncer repeated.

I felt something shift in Leon. His body stiffened, his eyes narrowed, his smile disappeared. It was as if someone had flipped a switch.

"Okay," Leon said quietly. Too quietly. "We're leaving."

We walked a few steps away. I thought it was over. I thought Leon would calm down. I thought we would simply go to another club.

But Leon stopped. He turned to me. His gaze was empty, yet determined.

"Wait here," he said.

“What? Why?”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Leon, what are you doing?”

“Just going home for a moment.”

My heartbeat quickened. “Leon, please... let’s just leave.”

He smiled. A cold, dangerous smile.

“I’ll be right back.”

He walked off. His apartment was only six minutes away. I stood there, unsure, nervous, with a feeling I didn’t recognize — fear. Not for myself. For him.

After a few minutes I saw him returning. He walked fast. His gaze was fixed. His hands were in the pockets of his jacket.

When he came closer, I saw it.

The baseball bat.

My breath caught.

“Leon... please don’t.”

He looked at me. “Stay here.”

“Leon, stop. This is insane.”

“Stay here,” he repeated.

I knew I couldn’t stop him. Not in this state. Not on this night.

He walked toward the club door. The bouncer stood there, the door half open, his head sticking out.

“I told you—”

He didn’t finish the sentence.

Leon swung. With a force I had never seen in him. The blow hit the bouncer directly in the face. A dull, heavy sound. The

man fell backward, crashing to the ground. Leon kept swinging. Again and again. At the head. The shoulders. The body.

I stood there, paralyzed. I couldn't move. I couldn't scream. I could only watch.

It happened fast. Too fast. A few seconds, maybe ten. Then Leon stopped. He was out of breath, his hands shaking, his eyes wide open.

"Come," he said. "We have to go."

I followed him. Not because I wanted to — but because I had to. He ran, and I ran behind him. We moved through the streets, past bars, past people who didn't notice us, past lights that didn't reach us.

When we reached his apartment, he closed the door behind us. He dropped the baseball bat. He sat down on the floor. He
breathed heavily.

33

I stood there, unable to say anything.

After a while he looked up at me. "He annoyed me."

I shook my head. "Leon... you almost killed him."

He shrugged. "He was in the way."

I sat down on the sofa. I felt empty. I felt guilty. I felt helpless.

"Why?" I asked quietly.

Leon looked at me. His gaze suddenly soft. Sad. Lost.

"Because I don't know who I am," he said. "And sometimes... sometimes it hurts."

I didn't know what to say. I only knew that for the first time, I was truly afraid — not of Leon, but for him.

We didn't speak anymore. The night was silent. The city outside kept living, but inside that apartment everything had stopped.

I didn't know what happened to the bouncer. I didn't know if he survived. I didn't know if he recognized us. I only knew that we never went to NON TOX again.

And I knew that Leon had crossed a line from which there was no return.

12 – Clubs, Nights, Berlin

After the night with the baseball bat, something was different. Not only in Leon — also in me. I had seen him in states that worried me before, but that moment, that blow, that violence... That was something else. Something I could no longer ignore.

34

And yet we kept going out.

Berlin is a city that swallows people if they're not careful. A city that lures with its lights, numbs with its music, seduces with its freedom. A city that says: *Come, forget yourself. Just for one night.* And we followed it. Again and again.

At the time I lived with Janett in Charlottenburg, in a large old apartment with high ceilings and creaking floors. She was calm, warm, someone who loved order. I was the opposite — at least during that period. I was often gone, often out at night, often with Leon. She accepted it because she loved me. And because she knew Leon was a part of my life I couldn't simply put aside.

The three of us — Janett, Leon, and I — often went clubbing together. Mostly in Prenzlauer Berg or Friedrichshain. Clubs that played minimal techno, with long nights, dark rooms,

people moving like shadows. Clubs where you could lose yourself without anyone noticing.

Leon was a different person on those nights. He was loud, wild, unpredictable. He danced as if he were fighting something inside him that was eating him alive. He laughed as if the world were a joke. He talked to strangers as if they were old friends. He flirted with women without intention, without aim, without heart. He was everywhere — and nowhere at the same time.

Janett liked him. She often said, “Leon is a good person. He’s just lost.” I knew she was right. But I also knew you can’t always bring people back when they lose themselves.

Sometimes we stood outside a club, smoking, talking, watching people walk by. Berlin felt like a living organism in those moments — pulsing, breathing, restless. Leon loved this city. He often said, “Berlin is the only city that understands me.” I didn’t know if that was true. I only knew Berlin wouldn’t save him. 35

There were nights that were beautiful. Nights when we laughed, danced, felt free. Nights when Leon seemed almost normal — almost happy, almost light. Nights when I believed things might get better.

But there were other nights. Nights when Leon took too much. Nights when he disappeared and reappeared hours later with glassy eyes and trembling hands. Nights when he argued with strangers because they had “looked at him wrong.” Nights when I had to take him home because he could barely stand. Nights when I was afraid — not of him, but for him.

Once we stood outside a club in Friedrichshain, and Leon told a group of strangers that he was “immortal.” He said it with a conviction that scared me. I pulled him away, but he only laughed.

“Alan,” he said, “I don’t die. I’m already dead.”

I didn’t know if it was a joke. I didn’t know if it was a cry for help. I only knew it hurt.

Janett looked at me later, as we walked home. “He needs help,” she said.

“I know.”

“But you can’t help him.”

I looked at the ground. “I know.”

We kept going out. We kept dancing. We kept moving through nights that made us feel alive and empty at the same time.

Berlin was beautiful. Berlin was brutal. Berlin was a mirror — and Leon saw something in it that destroyed him.

I remember one night in a small club in Prenzlauer Berg. The music was loud, the lights flickered, the people moved like waves. Leon stood in the middle of the room, eyes closed, arms outstretched as if he were flying. He looked free. He looked happy. He looked... peaceful.

I watched him and thought: *Maybe this is the only place where he doesn’t feel himself.*

Maybe that was why he kept coming back. Why he kept searching. Why he kept falling.

We went out often. Too often. But it was the only time Leon didn’t suffer — or at least pretended not to.

And I was there. Always. Because I didn’t know how to leave him alone. Because I didn’t know how to save him. Because I didn’t know how to save myself.

Berlin was our home. Berlin was our abyss. Berlin was the city that carried us — and the city that let us fall. And we kept falling.

13 – Three Days of Silence

It was a Wednesday, an ordinary day — one of those days when you have no idea that something in the world has already broken. I was sitting in the office, working on a design that actually excited me, but my thoughts kept drifting away. To Leon. To his silence.

We hadn't heard from him in three days. No message. No call. No sign. For most people that would have been normal — but not for Leon. He was chaotic, impulsive, loud, restless. He was never silent. Never gone. Never invisible for three days.

On the first day I thought he was busy. On the second day I thought he might be in a bad mood. On the third day I began to worry.

I called him. No answer. I wrote to him. No answer. I called Lukas. He said he hadn't heard anything either. I called Mia. She said she was scared.

“Maybe he's sleeping,” I said, even though I knew it wasn't true. Leon never slept for three days. He barely slept three hours.

I wanted to go to him. I wanted to open the door, walk in, find him. But I didn't. I still don't know why. Maybe it was fear. Maybe hope. Maybe the naive belief that silence is sometimes just silence — and not a warning.

In the afternoon my phone rang. I saw the number. It was his mother.

I answered. “Hello?”

Her voice was calm. Too calm. “Alan...”

“Yes?”

A pause. A long, heavy pause.

Then she said the sentence that changed my life.

“Leon is dead.”

I froze. I heard the words, but they didn’t reach me. They bounced off me like raindrops on glass. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t breathe.

“Alan?” she asked. “Are you alright?”

I wanted to say “No.” I wanted to scream. I wanted to ask how, why, when. But no sound came out.

Tears ran down my face. I didn’t wipe them away.

“Yes,” I finally said. “Yes, Mrs. Brand. I’m alright.”

It was a lie. One of the biggest of my life.

“Good,” she said. “I’ll call you another time.”

She hung up.

I stayed sitting there, the phone in my hand, unable to move. The world was suddenly silent. Not the silence of peace — but the silence of loss. A silence that swallows everything.

I don’t know how long I sat there. Minutes. Hours. Time lost its meaning.

Later I learned what had happened.

The building’s caretaker had heard music coming from his apartment for three days. Loud. Constant. No one went in. No one came out. She knocked. She rang. No answer. But outside the door it smelled... rotten.

She called the police. The door was broken open.

Leon lay on the bed. On his back. Eyes closed. As if he were sleeping. But he wasn’t sleeping. He had been dead for days.

He was barely recognizable. The body changed. The skin discolored. The air heavy.

On the table lay a few grams of heroin. A few ecstasy pills. Cigarettes. He had asthma. He smoked one to two packs a day. His body was tired. His heart was tired. His life was tired.

The autopsy found nothing. No clear cause of death. No definite reason. Just a body that couldn't go on.

I called Lukas. I called Mia. I said the words I didn't understand myself.

"Leon is dead."

Mia screamed. Then she cried. For a week. Nonstop. She said she should never have left him. She said it was her fault. She said she couldn't go on.

Lukas was quiet. He said almost nothing. Only: "I knew it would happen someday." 39

I didn't know whether to agree or disagree. I only knew I understood him.

Leon's mother later said: "If Mia hadn't left him, he would still be alive."

I knew that wasn't true. But I also knew that pain makes people say things they don't mean.

14 – The Apartment

I don't know why I went there. Maybe because I had to. Maybe because I hoped that something in that apartment would explain what had happened. Maybe because I couldn't believe Leon was truly dead until I had seen the place where he died.

It was late afternoon, the sun low, and the streets of Friedrichshain felt quieter than usual. I walked slowly, step by

step, as if each step led me deeper into a truth I didn't want to see. When I reached his building, I stopped for a moment. The door had been repaired, the frame freshly painted. Nothing suggested it had been forced open just days before.

I took a deep breath and went inside.

The stairwell smelled, as always, of cold smoke and damp concrete. The steps creaked under my feet as if they recognized me. I walked up until I stood before his apartment door. I placed my hand on the handle. It was cold.

I opened the door.

The apartment was silent. Not the silence of an empty room — but the silence of a place that had witnessed something no one should ever see. The air was fresh, yet it felt heavy, as if it carried something invisible.

I stepped inside.

The hallway was tidy. Too tidy. As if someone had tried to erase the traces. But some traces cannot be erased. They remain in the room, in the walls, in the light.

I walked into the living room. The sofa stood where it always stood. The table was empty. No bottles. No cigarettes. No drugs.

Only emptiness.

I sat down on the sofa. It was soft, but cold. I looked around. The walls were white, but they looked grey. The windows were large, but they felt small. The room was bright, but it felt dark.

I looked at the table where the drugs had been. I imagined Leon sitting there, alone, the music loud, the air heavy, his body tired. I imagined him looking at the pills, the heroin, the cigarettes. I imagined him breathing — heavy, restless, desperate.

I imagined him walking to the bed.

I stood up and went into the bedroom.

The bed was made. The blanket smooth. The pillows arranged neatly. But I knew he had lain there. On his back. Eyes closed. As if he were sleeping.

I walked closer. I touched the edge of the bed. It was cold.

I sat down on the floor beside it. I placed my hands on my knees and looked at the carpet. It was clean. But I knew it hadn't been.

I closed my eyes.

I saw Leon in front of me. Laughing. Dancing. Talking. Crying. Fighting. Falling.

I saw him in the bathtub. I saw him in the club. I saw him in the park. I saw him in the studio. I saw him everywhere.

41

But I didn't see him here anymore. Not alive.

I opened my eyes. The room was silent. I heard nothing. Not even my own breath.

I stood up and went into the kitchen. The table was empty. The cups washed. The trash gone. It was a kitchen no longer in use.

I opened the fridge. It was empty.

I closed it again.

I went back to the living room. I sat down on the sofa once more. I placed my hands on the armrests. I looked at the wall.

And suddenly I began to cry.

Not loudly. Not violently. But quietly. Slowly. Like water overflowing from a glass.

I cried because I missed him. I cried because I couldn't save him. I cried because I knew he had died alone. I cried because I knew he had lain there for three days while the music played and no one came. I cried because I knew I could have gone. Should have gone. Didn't go.

I cried because I knew some people cannot be saved — no matter how hard you try.

I stayed there for a long time. A very long time. The sun set, the room darkened, the shadows grew. But I stayed.

When I finally stood up and left the apartment, it was night. The streets were quiet. The air cool. I walked slowly, step by step, as if each step carried me further away from Leon.

But I knew I would never truly leave him. Not in my mind. Not in my heart. Not in this city.

The apartment remained behind me. Empty. Silent. A place no longer lived in — but never forgotten.

42

15 – The Autopsy

The message about the autopsy arrived three days after Leon's death. I was at home, sitting at my kitchen table, the coffee in front of me long cold, when my phone vibrated. An email. From the forensic department.

I stared at the subject line: "*Autopsy Report – Leon Brand.*"

I opened the file. I read.

The report was clinical, factual, cold. No emotion, no speculation, no story. Only numbers, values, findings. A human life reduced to medical parameters.

No definitive cause of death. That was the first sentence that caught my eye.

I read on.

No fatal injury. No massive overdose. No poisoning. No internal bleeding. No cerebral hemorrhage. No cardiac rupture. No pulmonary embolism. No external force.

Nothing.

Just a body that had stopped functioning.

I read the report twice. Then a third time. I searched for a hint, a detail, a word that would explain why Leon had died. But there was none.

The toxicology showed traces of heroin, ecstasy, alcohol, nicotine. But not in amounts that would have been lethal on their own. Nothing that could be called an overdose. Nothing that could be called poisoning.

It was as if his body had simply said: *I can't anymore.*

43

I called Lukas. He came over immediately. We sat together on my sofa, the report lying between us on the table.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

Lukas read the lines slowly, carefully. Then he put the tablet down and looked at me.

“It means he was tired.”

I shook my head. “That’s not a medical explanation.”

“Yes, it is,” Lukas said. “For Leon, it is.”

I looked at him. He looked back. His gaze was clear, but sad.

“His body was done,” he said. “He fought for years. Against himself. Against his illness. Against his thoughts. Against his nights. Against his drugs. Against his fear. Against his emptiness.”

He paused. “At some point, no body can take that anymore.”

I looked at the report. At the clinical words. At the numbers. At the values.

“But he was young,” I said. “He was strong.”

“No,” Lukas said. “He was fragile. And no one saw it.”

I knew he was right. Leon had never been strong. He had only pretended. He had laughed, danced, celebrated, talked — but behind it all was a void that consumed him.

Later I called his mother. She sounded calm, almost composed.

“I received the report,” she said.

“And?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “As expected.”

“There’s no cause.”

“There is,” she said. “It’s just not in the report.”

44

I stayed silent.

“He was tired,” she said. “Tired of life.”

I closed my eyes. I saw Leon — dancing, laughing, crying, fighting. Falling.

“I should have saved him,” I whispered.

“No,” she said. “No one could have saved him. Not you. Not me. Not Mia. Not Lukas. No one.”

I knew she was right. But it hurt.

It hurt deeply.

The next day I went to the forensic office to pick up his personal belongings. An employee led me into a small room. On the table lay a plastic bag.

Inside:

His phone. His wallet. His keys. A crumpled cigarette pack. A lighter. A single earbud. A torn notebook. A pen.

I lifted the bag. It was light. Too light.

“That’s everything?” I asked.

The employee nodded. “He didn’t have more.”

I walked outside. The sun was shining. The air was warm. The world was bright.

But inside me it was dark.

I sat down on a bench in front of the building. I opened the bag. I took out the notebook. It was worn, the pages bent, some torn out.

I flipped through it.

On one page there was a sentence. Just one sentence. Written in shaky handwriting. 45

“I wanted to live.”

I closed the notebook. I put it back in the bag. I stood up.

I walked slowly, step by step, as if each step carried me further away from Leon — and at the same time closer to him.

The autopsy had given no answers. But it had confirmed one truth:

Leon did not die from drugs. Not from violence. Not from illness.

He died from himself.

From a life that was too heavy. From a soul that was too loud. From a pain no one understood.

And I knew I would never forget that truth.

16 – The Funeral

The day of the funeral was one of those days when the world feels strangely quiet even though nothing is truly still. Cars moved, people walked, the city hummed — but inside me there was an emptiness that drowned everything out. I left early, far earlier than necessary, because I was afraid of being late. Or maybe because I was afraid of arriving at all.

The cemetery lay at the edge of Berlin, a quiet place with old trees and paths winding between gravestones. The air was cool, the sky grey, as if it had decided to match the occasion.

I saw Leon's mother from a distance. She stood alone, a small, slender figure in a dark coat. Her face was calm, but not empty — more like a stone that has been struck by water so many times it no longer resists.

46

When I approached, she looked at me and nodded. No smile. No words. Just a nod.

“Thank you for coming,” she said eventually.

“Of course,” I replied.

We stood side by side without looking at each other. It wasn't uncomfortable — it was simply how it was. Sometimes there are no words that fit.

One by one the others arrived. Lukas. Mia. A few classmates. A professor Leon had liked. A few people I didn't know.

Mia looked as if she hadn't slept in days. Her eyes were red, her hands trembling. When she saw me, she hugged me tightly — too tightly — as if she were trying to hold on to something that was no longer there.

“I shouldn't have left,” she whispered.

I didn't answer. There was nothing I could say that would help her.

Lukas stood a little apart, hands in his pockets, eyes on the ground. He looked calm, but I knew it was only a façade. He had never been good at showing pain.

The coffin was simple. Light-colored. No decoration, no ornament. Just wood. A body inside that had once been a person. A person I had loved — in the way you love friends who shape you.

The pastor spoke words I didn't hear. Not because they were bad — but because they didn't fit Leon. Leon wasn't a person for platitudes. He wasn't a person for rituals. He wasn't a person for peace.

He was chaos. He was pain. He was beauty. He was darkness. He was light. He was everything — and none of it fit into the words of a stranger. 47

I looked at the coffin. I looked at the hands of the people around me. I looked at the ground.

And suddenly I realized I wasn't crying. Not because I didn't want to — but because I couldn't. My body was empty. My thoughts were empty. My heart was empty.

When the coffin was lowered, I heard Mia sob. I heard Leon's mother breathe quietly. I heard Lukas curse under his breath.

I didn't hear myself.

After the ceremony we stood there for a while. No one wanted to leave. No one knew where to go. No one knew what came next.

Leon's mother looked at me. "He liked you," she said.

I nodded. "I liked him too."

“He was difficult,” she said.

“Yes.”

“But he was my son.”

I looked at her. “He was a good person.”

She closed her eyes. “I know.”

We said goodbye. Lukas left without a word. Mia stayed for a long time, staring at the fresh grave. I walked away slowly, step by step, as if each step carried me farther from Leon — and closer to the part of me that had died with him.

When I left the cemetery, the world was loud again. Cars moved. People talked. The city lived.

But inside me it was quiet.

A quiet that doesn’t fade. A quiet that stays. A quiet that carries the name of a person I will never forget.

Leon.

17 – After the Death

The days after the funeral were strange. Not loud, not quiet — just strange. As if the world had lost its color and no one had noticed. I went to work, I talked to people, I completed tasks, I ate, I slept. But everything felt like a simulation, as if I were watching myself from the outside without really taking part.

I thought about Leon constantly. Not only about his death — but about his life. About the nights we spent together. About the conversations we had. About the plans we made. About the city we wanted to build.

I thought about his darkness. His brightness. His contradictions. His beauty. His destruction.

I thought about him, and I knew I would never forget him.

A few days later, Lukas and I met. We sat in a café we used to visit often. He smoked, I drank water. We didn't speak for a long time.

"I visited his mother," Lukas said eventually.

I looked at him. "How is she?"

"Like someone who has lost her son."

I nodded. There were no words that could describe it better.

"She told me she's glad it's over," Lukas said.

I closed my eyes. I knew what he meant. I knew what she meant. It wasn't a wish for death — it was a wish for peace. For him. For her. For all of us.

"I've been thinking," Lukas said. "About everything. About him. About us. About the nights. About the drugs. About the clubs. About Berlin." 49

I looked at him. "And?"

"We couldn't have saved him."

I nodded. "No."

"But maybe we could have understood him earlier."

I thought about that. I didn't know if it was true. Maybe. Maybe not. Sometimes people are so deeply trapped inside themselves that no one can reach them — no matter how hard you try.

"I stopped smoking weed," Lukas said suddenly.

I looked up, surprised. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yes. I don't want to end up like him."

I didn't know whether it was a promise or a fear. Maybe both.

I met Mia a week later. She looked as if she had lost ten years. Her eyes were empty, her voice fragile.

"I dream of him," she said. "Every night."

I nodded. "So do I."

"I shouldn't have left," she said.

"You're not to blame."

"Yes," she said. "I was his last hope."

I shook my head. "No. He was his last hope."

She looked at me, and I knew she didn't believe me. But I also knew she would understand one day.

We walked through the park where we used to sit. The trees rustled, the air was warm, people laughed. The world kept living. We didn't.

"I'm leaving Berlin," Mia said.

I stopped. "Where to?"

"Anywhere. As long as it's away."

I understood her. Berlin had become a place filled with too many memories. Too many nights. Too many shadows. Too much Leon.

I stayed there for a while after she left. I looked at the trees, at the people, at the city. I thought of Leon. His laughter. His darkness. His nights. His silence.

I thought of myself. Of what remained. Of what was missing. Of what would never return.

After someone dies, something stays behind. Not just grief. Not just pain. But a kind of emptiness that doesn't fill. An emptiness that isn't loud — but quiet. An emptiness that doesn't scream — but whispers.

I heard that whisper every day. Sometimes loud. Sometimes soft. Sometimes not at all.

But it was there.

And I knew it would stay.

Epilogue

Months pass. Then years. And at some point you realize that you no longer think of him every day — but on the days you do, it hits you just as hard as it did the first time.

Leon remains an echo. Not loud, not intrusive, but a quiet tone that sometimes slips into everyday life without you knowing where it comes from. A shadow that isn't dark, but warm. A pain that doesn't destroy, but remembers.

Mia and Lukas get married. Not out of defiance, not out of escape, but because life carried them in a direction that eventually felt right. They have their first child — a boy — and name him Leon. Not as a monument, not as guilt, but as a quiet continuation of someone who shaped them both. Years later their daughter is born. They name her Alyssa.

Sometimes, when I see the two children, I think of him. Not because they resemble him, but because they carry something he never had: a future that doesn't work against them. A future that is light.

I see him sometimes in people I don't know. In a laugh that is too bright. In a gaze that is too tired. In a restlessness that feels too familiar.

I see him in Berlin. In the nights that go on as if nothing happened. In the clubs that still pulse. In the streets that carried him until they couldn't carry him anymore.

I see him in myself. In the parts he touched. In the parts he changed. In the parts that stayed.

Sometimes I ask myself whether he would have wanted us to go on. Whether he would have wanted us to laugh, to love, to live. I think he would. Not because he ever said it — but because he never managed to do it himself.

Leon was a person who burned. And people who burn leave warmth behind, even when they go.

The epilogue is not an ending. It is only one last look back before you move on.

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