

READING EXERCISE

The Adventures of Lola Badiola

CHAPTER 57 – RIBERA DEL DUERO

Cayetano Tolosa was a bad apple. It was good that he was gone. The confrontation had brought the rest of the team together and finally won Lola the respect of the programmers.

She called JJ's mobile and it went straight through to voicemail. She asked him to call her back as soon as possible. She needed to explain what had happened before he heard it from anyone else.

She went through her contact list and set herself the task of booking four more key meetings that morning. She needed to make up for lost time.

She was more convinced than ever that their product was a winner. While it was true that Pluto had reached level 9 of the game, he hadn't breached the most enhanced level of protection. Furthermore, the intrusion had alerted the team to weaknesses which they had subsequently addressed. In her opinion JBlock's software was now at least three years ahead of its closest competition.

She spent the next four hours on the phone mixing cold calls with sales pitches and relationship building chats. It was what she did best. If Lola really believed in a product, she was irrepensible. She would wear down procurement managers with her charm, intelligence and enthusiasm until they had no choice but to take the meeting, sample the software or sign on the dotted line.

At 2pm she received a call from JJ Thomson. It was her opportunity to explain how and why Cayetano had left the company.

"Lola what's up?"

"Hi JJ. Listen, I had an issue with Cayetano. I had no choice but to fire him."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line.

"Ok" he replied dispassionately.

Ok? Thought Lola. Was that it? No questions? No emotion?

JJ continued in the same detached manner.

"I'd like you to come for dinner with me and Diego this evening. 9pm at Benares. Can you make it?"

"Sure."

"Great. See you then."

And with that he hung up.

Alarm bells rung in Lola's head. That was not the voice of the boss that she knew and admired. Something was up. Her rational mind started to work through all the possibilities. She wanted to prepare herself for any surprises.

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JJ Thomson and Diego de la Fuente were already sitting at the table, looking solemn, when Lola arrived at Benares at 9pm that evening. They stood up and greeted her as she arrived. Then they all sat down, and Diego slid a menu across the table.

"Shall we order?"

Lola didn't pick up the menu. She looked directly into the eyes of the two men sitting opposite her. She wasn't going to play any games.

"What's going on?"

JJ looked across at Diego, then he put down the menu and leaned forwards. In a quiet but firm voice he said:

"We have an offer on the table."

Lola didn't react. The sale of the company was one of the possible, albeit unlikely, outcomes that she had anticipated after her brief telephone conversation with JJ.

"From whom?"

"Telecom España."

Once again Lola didn't react. It was the worst-case scenario, but one she had considered. She chose to remain silent and let JJ explain.

"We're in a difficult situation Lola. We're burning cash like its kindling. We have no sign of revenues. And there are forces, powerful forces, working against us. Telecom España have offered us a way out. With our software and their distribution, we would be unstoppable."

"Our software and *their* distribution?"

It was clear to everyone that Lola was the loser in this deal. Telecom España wanted the programmers and the technology, and nothing else. Considering the current lawsuit, there was no way Lola was going back to Telecom España.

"They are offering us 6 euros a share."

It was undeniably a generous offer, proof that Telecom España valued the intellectual property of JBlock very highly. JJ continued:

"We all have an equity stake in the JBlock, you me, Diego, the programmers. We all benefit financially from this deal. It's too sweet to refuse."

“You’re surrendering.”

Lola didn’t hide the bitterness in her voice.

“What happened to the idea of disrupting the market? What happened to David versus Goliath? We’re going to be just like all those other startups who begin with good intentions and end up selling their souls to the devil.”

JJ sat back in his chair and scratched his head. Lola was now on a roll.

“This deal is going to cement Telecom España’s monopoly position in the cyber security market for the next generation,” she said, her voice trembling with indignation “It’s going to allow them to kill their competition, squeeze their suppliers and screw their customers. It’s a complete betrayal of everything we stand for.”

Diego looked at Lola with admiration. She was a fighter. And in his heart, he completely agreed with her. He quietly ordered a bottle of red wine.

“So where is the next client gonna come from Lola? When are we gonna start seeing some cold hard cash?” JJ responded forcefully.

“Trust me, JJ. It’s just around the corner.”

“Trust you? You’ve brought in no clients, you’re being sued by TE, and you’ve just fired half the sales team. I think I’ve trusted you enough already.”

That hurt. And JJ knew it. He softened his tone.

“Listen Lola, if we had one big client, just one, that would be enough. That would prove to me that we have the ability to build this business ourselves. Do we have one big client, even on the horizon?”

Lola shook her head.

Diego looked down in disappointment. He had hoped that the conversation would go a different way, that Lola would be able to convince the entrepreneur to keep going.

JJ scrutinized his two faithful colleagues, giving them as much time as they needed to respond. But his question was met with silence.

“Ok. Tomorrow I have a meeting with the CEO of Telecom España. I’m going to accept his offer. We will then meet with the Board of Directors. And they will ratify the deal.”

Lola could hardly believe what was happening. Every prediction that Mario Ruiz de Velasco had made at their fateful meeting was coming true. He said that she had no future at JBlock because JBlock had no future. He promised that he would either buy the company or bury it. He threatened that he would either take her to the top of the mountain or throw her off it.

The waiter arrived with the wine. It was a fine bottle of Ribera Del Duero. He carefully popped the cork and then filled Diego’s glass with a small amount of the crimson liquid for tasting.

Lola stood up from her chair and looked down at the two men.

“Ok JJ. You know best. But let me just say. This company isn’t worth 6 euros a share, or 600 or 6000. It’s worth way more than that. And you’re selling it for a song.”

And with that she walked out of the restaurant. The two men watched her go, and then sat for a long time in silence. Eventually, Diego picked up his glass of Ribera del Duero and took a sip. It was sour, the wine had gone off, and he spat it back into the glass.

Outside the restaurant Lola burst into tears. She had lost more than a job, she had lost a dream, a vision of a better, safer world that she could play one small part in building. For almost an hour she wandered aimlessly around the streets of Barrio Salamanca reliving all the injustices that had been perpetrated against her, until she found herself standing outside a traditional bar on one of the quiet side streets that ran parallel to Velasquez. She walked inside, ordered a tequila and knocked it back in one go.

A small, middle-aged man with a bald head and glasses entered the bar after her. He sat down on the stool next to her and ordered a Rum and Coke. He put his right hand inside his jacket pocket and checked that his handgun was switched to safety. Then he turned to Lola and said:

“Can I buy you another drink?”

READING COMPREHENSION

1. How does Lola feel about the company, now that Cayetano has been fired?
2. What does she spend the morning doing?
3. Why do alarm bells ring in Lola’s head when she speaks to JJ on the phone?
4. Who has offered to buy JBlock, why and at what price?
5. Why is JJ considering the offer?
6. Why does Lola consider this a betrayal of everything they stand for?
7. What would give JJ the confidence to refuse the offer and continue independently?
8. What were Mario Ruiz de Velasco’s predictions? Are they coming true?
9. What is Diego doing and thinking throughout the conversation?
10. What happens to Lola after she leaves the restaurant?