

Becomes 28

Chapter 0028

Bill's POV

Honestly, I'm at a loss about what to do with my mom. She keeps pushing me to date Doris, saying she'd be good for me, unlike my ex- wife.

I've tried explaining to my mom that Doris is just a friend and a trusted business associate. But she insists on me dating someone she approves of this time.

Doris is gorgeous, smart, and kind. My family adores her, and she comes from a wealthy, respected family in finance. But despite all this, I still love Serena, even after our divorce. Right now, no one can fill the

void she left.

All I can do now is throw myself into my work to distract myself from thinking about Serena. Focusing on my businesses is what's keeping me sane while I'm left in the dark about her life.

One day, I received a text from my mom inviting me to a family dinner at her house, mentioning that Doris was also invited. Reluctantly, I agreed to attend, but I set one condition: I didn't want her and Aunt Claire pushing Doris and me to be a couple during the dinner, to avoid any awkwardness.

"Doris, how's the risotto? I made it especially for you since you mentioned it's your favorite," my mom says, turning her attention to Doris with a warm smile.

"È delizioso, grazie!" Doris responds in fluent Italian. "You've really outdone yourself, Elena. It's just as I remember from my favorite place in Italy. Bill is lucky to have such a wonderful cook in the family."

"Since when did you learn how to cook?" I ask, genuinely surprised. I can't recall a single time from my childhood, or really ever, when mom

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cooked my favorite meal.

"When you moved out and I found myself alone in the house, I found myself picking up new hobbies," my mom replies.

"Wow, that's great, Elenal" Doris exclaims, "So, are you taking cooking classes?"

"No, not really," Mom admits with a smile, "I mean, who needs cooking classes when I have YouTube?"

Everyone at the table laughs at this, including Aunt Claire's husband, Uncle Dan.

"You must be pretty special if Elena cooked for you," Uncle Dan says, his comment directed at Doris. He probably wasn't informed about my condition for coming to dinner.

"Aw, I hope so, Dan," Doris responds, her tone light. My mom and Aunt Claire glance at each other, heads bowed slightly, clearly holding back words to avoid adding anything more to the conversation.

"Excuse me, I need to get some fresh air," I say, standing up from the table. I can't sit through another round of them gushing about me and Doris.

I find a quiet spot in the garden and sit down to gather my thoughts. Reaching into my jacket, I pull out a pack of cigarettes. I take one out, place it between my lips, and strike a match with a practiced flick. The tip glows orange as I inhale deeply, the smoke curling up into the night. All the while, my gaze is fixed on the gently splashing fountain.

I'm not typically one to smoke. However, with the stress piling up after the divorce, reaching for a cigarette has turned into my go-to for a bit of

peace. *Ww.Novelm.com ©M*

"I didn't think fresh air meant smoking," Doris remarks with a hint of

sarcasm, coming up beside me. "Mind if I join you?"

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"Sure," I say, nodding as Doris takes a seat next to me. I pass her a cigarette and then hand over the lighter.

I hadn't realized Doris smoked. It seems there's another side to her, beyond the class and glamour I'm used to seeing. "Had no idea you were into smoking," I joke.

She chuckles, taking the cigarette. "I barely smoke these days. College, though, that was a different story."

"So, you partied like a normal college student. Big deal," I say, watching as she lights her cigarette and takes a drag.

Doris turns to me, her green eyes sparkling with warmth. "Look, Bill. I need to tell you something," she says.

I lean back slightly, intrigued. "Alright, I'm listening."

Doris looks at me, a bit nervous now. "Bill, I like you, more than just a friend," she confesses. "Do you think... maybe we could see where this goes?"

Doris' confession really caught me off guard. Suddenly, I started doubting our whole friendship and wondering what working together would be like now. *www.novelform.com*

I let out a sigh, unsure of how to respond at first. "Doris, you're incredible," I finally say. "You're smart, kind, and honestly, anyone would be lucky to have you..."

Doris's expression shifts to a frown. "But?" she prompts, sensing there's more I'm holding back.

"But I'm not ready to jump into another committed relationship or start dating someone," I admit. Deep down, I don't have the heart to tell her directly that I can't see us together in that way.

"I'm confused, Bill," Doris says, her voice showing her disappointment.

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+25 BONUS

Chapter 1020

You seemed over Serena, but now it's like you're still clinging to her. Wasn't the divorce meant to free you?"

My jaw tightens. "And when did my personal life become your concern? We should be focusing on the business, not my relationships."

"Wow, sorry I asked," Doris says, taking another drag of her cigarette. After that, we sit in silence for the rest of the night.

Doris and I keep working together, and she never brings up the night she confessed her feelings. I thought we could move past it, but then I saw how she talked to one of the janitors when she assumed I wasn't looking.

One evening, on my way home from work, it hit me that I've forgotten an important document at the office that I need to review. As I approach the office, a harsh, biting voice reaches my ears, stopping me in my *Ww.Novelform.com*

tracks.

"Ugh, look what you've done!" Doris shouts.

"S-sorry, Ms. Tipton. I didn't mean to spill coffee on your dress," the janitor stammers. "Please, I can have my salary deducted to replace it."

Doris laughs out loud. "You think you can do that?" she mocks. "Even if you work all your life, it won't be enough to pay for this dress."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. I've never heard Doris talk like this before. She's always been nice to the other staff here. Those words, that tone, it doesn't fit with the elegant, kind woman I thought I knew. *Ww.Novelform.com*

"You're fired. I don't ever want to see you here again," Doris snaps.

"Please, Ms. Tipton, my family relies on me. Don't do this," the janitor begs, his voice trembling, close to tears.

I witness the scene unfold before me. The janitor is on his knees,

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desperately pleading to keep his job.

"Tell it to someone who cares," Doris retorts. "Now, get out of here before I call the police to drag you out."

The janitor leaves, shoulders slumped, wiping tears from his eyes. Once he's out of sight, I manage to keep my composure, entering the office without letting on that I overheard the exchange.

"Oh, Bill! You scared me," Doris exclaims upon noticing me. "D-did you just get here?"

"Yeah, just walked in," I reply, my voice steady and neutral. I notice Doris trying to read my face, likely worried I caught her earlier outburst. It's obvious she didn't intend for me, or anyone else, to witness that side of her. "I just forgot something."

Were all of Doris's previous acts of kindness just a façade? I find myself questioning if she might have deliberately painted Serena in a bad light to me.

Serena had warned me about Doris, but I didn't heed her words.

Did I push Serena away because of Doris's influence?