

Chapter 10

"Who the hell do you think you are, calling this number?" Ayla's voice was a whip crack of fury over the phone. "After what you did? After you let that psycho woman of yours try to kill her?"

Emilio stood frozen in the empty living room, Ayla's words hitting him like a physical blow. "What are you talking about? Where is Elana?"

"Like you care! You were too busy playing house with your mistress and your bastard child to even notice she was gone! You make me sick!"

The line went dead.

Emilio stared at his phone, his mind reeling. Kill her? It made no sense. He threw the phone onto the sofa, his hands shaking with a mixture of rage and a terrifying, creeping fear.

He dialed his assistant. "Find Ayla Guy. Now."

He found her an hour later, leaving a bar in the city. He cornered her in the alleyway, his hand closing around her arm.

"Where is she?" he demanded, his voice a low growl. "What game are you two playing?"

Ayla, her face flushed with alcohol and anger, just laughed in his face. A cold, bitter sound. "Game? You think this is a game? You are the most selfish, disgusting man I have ever met."

She looked at him with pure, unadulterated hatred. "I regret the day I told Elana to give you a chance. You broke her. You destroyed her."

"Where. Is. She?" he repeated, his grip tightening.

Ayla just shook her head, a smirk on her lips. "You'll never find her. People who betray the ones who love them always pay the price, Emilio. And your bill is coming due."

She wrenched her arm free and walked away, leaving him standing in the dark alley, his heart pounding with a terrible premonition.

He knew he wouldn't get anything else from her. He drove, his mind racing, to the one other person who might know something. Hayden.

He let himself into her apartment quietly, not wanting to wake the child. He was about to enter the bedroom when he heard Leo's small voice.

"Mommy? Is the bad auntie dead now? Is she really never coming back?"

Emilio froze, his hand on the doorknob. Bad auntie. He knew, with a sickening certainty, that they were talking about Elana.

"Shhh, baby," Hayden's voice was a soothing murmur. "He doesn't know yet. Once he realizes she's really gone, he'll stay with us forever."

"And he'll be all ours?" Leo asked, his voice bright with childish hope.

"Yes, sweetie," Hayden purred, her voice dripping with a venomous satisfaction. "She's gone. She can never come back."

A primal rage, cold and absolute, seized Emilio. He was about to burst into the room when his phone vibrated. It was his assistant.

He stepped back into the hallway, his voice a tense whisper. "What?"

"Sir..." The assistant's voice was strained, terrified. "I... I found something. It's about Mrs. Thomas. Sir... she's dead."

The world tilted on its axis. "What did you say?" he breathed, his voice barely audible.

"Her legal status... it's been updated. Cause of death... an accident. I've sent you the file."

Emilio's hand trembled as he ended the call. He stumbled out of the apartment, his mind a maelstrom of denial and horror. He drove home at a reckless speed, burst into his study, and tore open his laptop.

The file from his assistant was on his desktop. He clicked it open.

There it was. A police report. A death certificate. Elana Gomez.

Deceased.

He saw photos of her car, mangled and twisted, being pulled from a dark lake at the bottom of a mountain road. He saw her driver's license photo, her beautiful, smiling face looking back at him from the screen.

A low, guttural sound escaped his throat, a sound of pure, animal agony. He slumped back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the screen, tears streaming down his face.

She was gone. He had pushed her, he had abandoned her, and now she was dead.

And he knew, with a certainty that chilled him to the bone, that Hayden was the one who had killed her.