

Chapter 13

In the weeks that followed, Emilio ceased to exist. He locked himself in the cavernous, empty house, the silence a constant, screaming reminder of what he had lost. He drank until he passed out, hoping to find oblivion, but Elana haunted his dreams.

He dreamt of her on their wedding day, her face radiant with a love so pure it now seemed like a fantasy. He dreamt of her at the gala, her eyes full of a pain and betrayal so profound it mirrored his own.

He woke up one night, feverish and shaking, the dream-Elana's voice echoing in his ears. "I'll haunt you forever, Emilio."

He stumbled through the house, searching for medicine, but he couldn't find it. Elana had always been the one to take care of him, to organize their lives with a quiet, loving efficiency he had taken for granted.

He collapsed back into bed, his body aching, and scrolled through the photos on his phone, a masochistic pilgrimage through their shared past. He found a video from their first year of marriage.

It was in their old apartment kitchen. Elana was laughing, her face dusted with flour, as she tried to teach him how to cook. She held a spoonful of something up to his lips, her eyes sparkling with mischief. He made a face, and she burst into that beautiful, uninhibited laugh that he had once loved more than anything.

The video ended, freezing on her smiling face. A sob tore through him, raw and uncontrollable.

"Come back, Elana," he whispered to the empty room, tears streaming down his face. "Please, just come back. I'm so sorry."

He finally understood the magnitude of his betrayal. The casual affair with Hayden, born out of boredom and arrogance, had spiraled into a nightmare, a series of compounding lies he was too weak to stop. The pregnancy had trapped him, and he had chosen the easy way out, compartmentalizing his life, convinced he could have it all.

The regret was a cancer, eating him from the inside out.

His assistant found him a week later, delirious with fever and wasting away.

"Sir," the assistant said, his voice shaking with a nervous excitement. "Sir, we found something. I don't think she's dead."

Emilio's head shot up, his eyes wide and wild. "What?"

"We tracked down the park ranger from the police report. He said he saved a woman from the lake. She stayed with him for a week, and then she left. He said she took a bus to the airport."

Hope, fierce and desperate, surged through him. She was alive.

"The trail goes cold at the airport, sir. We can't find any record of her leaving the country under her name."

"It doesn't matter," Emilio said, dragging his weak body out of bed. "She's alive. That's all that matters."

He spent the next three months chasing a ghost. He flew all over the world, following phantom leads, his health failing, his company teetering on the brink of collapse from his neglect. He lived on IV drips and a single, obsessive thought: find Elana.

After six months, with no leads and his business in crisis, he was forced to return home. He was a shell of his former self, gaunt and broken, the charismatic CEO replaced by a haunted man.

He was in a hospital bed, recovering from exhaustion, when he saw her.

The television in his private room was tuned to an international news channel. A formal awards ceremony was being broadcast from Switzerland.

"And the Pritzker Prize for Architecture goes to... Elana Gomez!"

The world stopped. He stared, his heart pounding in his chest, as she walked onto the stage. It was her. She was thinner, her face sharper, but she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her. She wore a stunning, simple black dress, her hair pulled back, her eyes shining with a confident,

radiant light.

She was alive. And she was magnificent.

Tears of relief, of joy, of a profound and painful longing, streamed down his face.

She was back. And he would get her back.