

## Chapter 14

On stage, Elana was the picture of grace and power. The architect who had disappeared was back, reborn as a star.

"This award is not just for me," she said, her voice clear and steady, broadcast to millions around the world. "It is for every woman who was told her dreams were too big, who was asked to shrink herself to fit into someone else's world. Our vision matters. Our work matters. We matter."

The crowd erupted in a standing ovation. Emilio watched from his hospital bed, his heart aching with a mixture of pride and a deep, soul-crushing regret. That was his Elana. The brilliant, passionate woman he had fallen in love with. The woman he had so carelessly broken.

He had grown bored with her quiet strength, mistaking her devotion for a lack of ambition. He had betrayed her, and in doing so, he had revealed that it was he, not she, who had been weak.

"Book me a flight to Zurich," he barked at his assistant, ripping the IV from his arm. "Now. And get me a suit. I'm not letting her see me like this."

Meanwhile, in a bleak, grey room in a women's prison, another television was on. Hayden Cleveland, her face scarred and her eyes hollow, looked up at the screen. She saw Elana, radiant and triumphant, and a low, animalistic snarl escaped her lips.

"It can't be," she whispered, her voice a hoarse rasp. "She's supposed to be dead."

She lunged at the screen, her fists pounding against the glass, screaming curses, her face a mask of impotent rage. The guards dragged her away, her shrieks echoing down the sterile hallway. She had lost everything, and Elana had won.

In her luxurious hotel room in Zurich, Elana wiped off her makeup, staring at her reflection in the mirror. She was stronger, yes, but the shadows of the past still lingered in her eyes. The pain was no longer a fresh, gaping wound, but a scar she would carry forever.

She knew Emilio would have seen her on TV. A part of her was glad. Let him see what he had lost. Let him see that she could not only survive without him, but thrive.

She picked up the heavy, prestigious award, a symbol of her new life, and kissed it. Her phone rang. It was Ayla, her voice screaming with joy.

They talked for the first time in six months, a torrent of words and tears and laughter. After she hung up, Elana sent a picture of herself holding the award to her best friend.

"This is just the beginning," the message read.

Her parents had passed away years ago. Ayla was her only anchor to her old life, the only piece of her past she was willing to carry into her future.