

Chapter 15

The celebration was at a small, lively beer garden, the air filled with the smell of grilled sausages and the sound of laughter. Elana sat with her new friends, the other fellows from the program. They were a tight-knit group, bonded by six months of intense, shared creation.

Ansel Acosta, a kind, brilliant architect with warm eyes and a quiet strength, sat across from her. He had been her rock during the fellowship, a steady, supportive presence who respected her unspoken boundaries.

"You're not eating," he said softly, pushing a plate of food towards her. "The bratwurst is amazing."

Another fellow, a sharp-witted woman named Clara, laughed. "Don't you see, Ansel? He's completely smitten."

Ansel just smiled, a faint blush coloring his cheeks. "Elana is an incredible woman. Anyone would be."

Elana felt a warmth spread through her chest, a feeling she hadn't realized she missed. But the idea of a new relationship, of opening her heart again, was terrifying.

"I'm just focused on my work right now," she said, her voice polite but firm, a clear signal.

The atmosphere shifted, a brief moment of awkward silence. Ansel, ever the gentleman, quickly changed the subject, and the easy camaraderie returned.

As they were leaving, a figure stepped out of the shadows, blocking their path.

"Elana."

The voice was a ghost from her past, raw and broken. It was Emilio.

He looked terrible. His expensive suit hung off his gaunt frame, his face

was pale and unshaven, his eyes haunted. He looked like a man who had been through hell. A hell of his own making.

"I finally found you," he breathed, taking a step towards her, his hands outstretched. "I've been looking everywhere."

He wanted to hold her, to pour out the six months of guilt and regret, to beg her to come back.

But before he could touch her, a tall figure stepped between them. It was Ansel.

"I think you should leave," Ansel said, his voice calm but firm, his body a protective shield in front of Elana.

"Get out of my way," Emilio snarled, his old arrogance flaring. "She's my wife."

The word hung in the air, a shocking revelation to her friends. They stared at Elana, their eyes wide with confusion.

Elana stepped out from behind Ansel, her face a cold, unreadable mask. She looked at the man she had once loved, the man who had torn her world apart, and felt nothing. Not love, not hate, not even pity. Just a vast, empty indifference.

"I've been searching for you for six months, Elana," he pleaded, his voice cracking. "I think about you every single day. Please, come home. I know I messed up. I know I hurt you. But I can fix it. I can make it right."

He was the same

Emilio, still believing he could fix anything, that his remorse could erase the scars.

She looked at his desperate, pleading face, the face of the man who had pushed her to the ground and left her to bleed, the man whose actions had led to the death of their unborn child, the man who had driven her into the arms of a murderer.

Without a word, she raised her hand and slapped him across the face. The sound was a sharp crack in the quiet night air.

"Now we're even," she said, her voice like ice. "We owe each other nothing."