

Chapter 16

"I'm done with the past," Elana said, her voice cutting through the stunned silence. "I'm living for my future now."

She turned her back on him and walked away, her friends quickly falling into step beside her, forming a protective barrier.

Emilio started to follow, a desperate, wounded look on his face, but Ansel blocked his path.

"She doesn't want to see you," Ansel said, his quiet voice now laced with a cold authority. "Respect that."

Ansel held his gaze for a moment longer, then turned and followed Elana, leaving Emilio standing alone on the dark street, a broken man in the ruins of the life he had destroyed.

Back in her hotel room, the facade of strength crumbled. Elana leaned against the door, the encounter having unearthed memories she had tried so hard to bury. The pain was still there, a dull, persistent ache. But it was different now. It was the memory of pain, not the pain itself. The love was gone, and with it, the power to be hurt by him.

Her phone buzzed. A message from Ansel.

"I'm here if you need anything."

A small, genuine smile touched her lips. She thanked him and tried to rest.

The next morning, as she went down for breakfast, the hotel lobby was buzzing.

"He's been out there all night," she heard a woman whisper. "Just kneeling on the pavement. He must have done something terrible."

Elana looked through the large glass window. It was Emilio. He was kneeling on the cold stone in front of the hotel, his head bowed, his suit

rumpled, a pathetic, public display of penance.

She felt a flicker of something-not pity, but a profound sadness for the man he could have been, for the love they could have had. Then, she turned away and ordered her coffee.

Ansel found her at her table. "Do you want me to make him leave?" he asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

Elana looked at him, at his kind, steady gaze. He was everything Emilio wasn't: stable, respectful, genuine. He was a vision of a future she was almost afraid to hope for.

"No," she said, a new resolve hardening in her voice. "I'll handle this myself."

She walked out of the hotel and stood before Emilio. He looked up, his eyes filled with a desperate hope.

"Elana," he whispered, his voice hoarse. "Please, just give me two minutes."

He launched into a desperate, rambling confession, admitting everything -the affair, the lies, the child. He explained how Hayden had manipulated him, how he had been a fool, how he had never stopped loving her.

She listened, her expression unmoving, until he was finished.

"Are you done?" she asked, her voice calm.

He nodded, searching her face for any sign of forgiveness.

"I heard you, Emilio," she said. "And it doesn't change anything. Your remorse doesn't fix what you broke. It doesn't bring back our child. It doesn't erase the fact that you left me for dead."

"I am not the same woman you married," she continued, her voice ringing with a newfound strength. "That woman is gone. You killed her. I have a new life now, a new career, and a chance at a love that doesn't try to destroy me."

She looked over at Ansel, who was waiting for her by the door, a silent pillar of support.

"I choose me, Emilio," she said, her final words a declaration of

independence. "I choose my life, my happiness. And it doesn't include you."

She turned and walked away, not looking back, leaving him kneeling on the cold pavement, a man forever trapped in the prison of his own making. She walked towards Ansel, towards the light, towards a future that was finally, completely, her own.

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