

## Chapter 2

"The fellowship is still available, Elana. We'd be thrilled to have you." The director's voice was warm on the other end of the line. "But you understand the conditions? Six months, complete isolation. No outside contact."

"I understand," I said. It was exactly what I needed. A place to disappear.

"We can have everything arranged for you," he promised. "Just let us know your travel plans."

"Thank you," I said, a flicker of something like hope cutting through the numbness. "I'll see you in Zurich."

I hung up and drove straight home. Our home.

The front door opened into a living room filled with symbols of our life together. A pair of matching coffee mugs on the counter. A framed photo of us on our wedding day on the mantelpiece, his arm wrapped tightly around me. A cashmere throw blanket he'd bought for me, draped over the sofa where we used to cuddle and watch movies.

A wave of revulsion washed over me.

I grabbed a garbage bag from the kitchen and started moving through the house like a storm. The mugs went in first, shattering at the bottom of the bag. The photo frame followed, the glass cracking. I tore every picture of us from its frame, ripped them into tiny pieces, and threw them in. The blanket, his clothes in my closet, the stupid little trinkets he'd brought back from his "business trips."

Everything went into the bags. I dragged them to the curb, a cleansing fire of rage burning through me.

Then I started packing. My clothes, my books, my architectural models. Everything that was mine. I arranged for a shipping company to pick them up and deliver them to my old apartment, the one I had kept as a studio space.

Emilio didn't come home that night.

He walked in the next evening, looking tired but smiling. He dropped his briefcase and pulled me into an embrace, his arms wrapping around me like nothing was wrong.

"God, I missed you," he murmured into my hair, his lips brushing my temple.

My body went rigid. I could smell the faint, sweet scent of a different woman's perfume on his shirt. All I could picture was him holding that baby, kissing Hayden Cleveland. Nausea rose in my throat.

I pushed myself out of his arms.

His smile faded, replaced by a look of concern. "What's wrong, Elana? You feel cold."

"I'm fine," I said, my voice flat.

"You're not fine," he insisted, his brow furrowed. "Are you sick? Let's go to the doctor."

The hypocrisy was suffocating. He could play the part of the concerned husband so perfectly, even after spending the night with his other family.

"I'm not sick," I said. "I'm just tired."

He didn't push it. Instead, he pulled a series of gift-wrapped boxes from his briefcase. "I brought you presents. From my trip."

He had even faked the evidence of a business trip. A silk scarf from a designer I hated. A bottle of perfume I would never wear. Each gift was a carefully constructed lie, a testament to the depth of his deception. The cost of these gifts could probably fund a small startup, but the thought behind them was worthless.

I wanted to scream, to throw the boxes in his face and demand to know how he could do this. But the words wouldn't come. I was trapped between the woman who still, somewhere deep down, loved the man he used to be, and the woman who was drowning in the truth of who he was now.

He noticed my silence, the redness in my eyes.

"What is it, Elana? Talk to me."

I looked him straight in the eye, my voice hard. "I want a baby, Emilio. I want one now."

His face changed. A flicker of panic, then a mask of weary patience. "We've talked about this. The timing is just not right."

"It's never the right time for you," I shot back.

"The company just launched a new initiative. I'm under a lot of pressure." The same excuse. Always the same.

"You don't think I'm under pressure?" I insisted, my voice rising. "I want a child, Emilio. With you."

His phone rang, saving him. The caller ID was blank. He glanced at it, his expression turning serious.

"It's work," he said, already turning away. "I have to go." A lie. I knew it was a lie.

He kissed my forehead, a gesture that now felt like a brand of his betrayal. "I'll be back late. Don't wait up."

I watched from the window as he got into his car and sped away, disappearing into the night.

I collapsed onto the sofa, the fight draining out of me, leaving only a bone-deep ache. He could have a child with her, but not with me. The thought was a physical blow.

My gaze fell on his second phone, the one he claimed was "for international business," lying on the coffee table. He'd forgotten it in his haste. The screen lit up with a message.

From Hayden: "Leo's fever is back. He keeps asking for his daddy."

He hadn't even noticed I was different. That the house was half-empty. That his wife's heart was breaking.

A single tear rolled down my cheek, then another. The pain in my heart was so intense it was a physical sensation, but it was overshadowed by a sudden, violent cramp in my stomach.

I lurched forward, my hand flying to my mouth as I ran for the bathroom, retching into the toilet.

My body felt strange. This wasn't just heartbreak. A cold, terrifying thought began to form in my mind. A possibility that was both a miracle and a curse.

He didn't come home that night.

The next morning, I went to the hospital alone.

The doctor smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she looked at the ultrasound screen.

"Congratulations, Mrs. Thomas," she said, her voice bright with a joy I couldn't feel. "You're six weeks pregnant."



## Chapter 3

I walked out of the doctor's office in a daze, her cheerful words echoing in the sterile hallway. Pregnant. Six weeks. I placed a hand on my still-flat stomach, a tear slipping from the corner of my eye.

This tiny, innocent life. Why now? Why did it have to choose this moment to arrive, in the middle of this wreckage?

As I reached the end of the long corridor, a familiar silhouette made me freeze.

It was Emilio. He was standing near the elevators, his arm wrapped around Hayden Cleveland, who was sobbing into his chest. He was murmuring words of comfort, his expression filled with a tender concern I hadn't seen directed at me in a long, long time.

I ducked behind a large potted plant, my heart pounding. I couldn't hear their words clearly, but his actions spoke volumes.

Then, Hayden's choked whisper carried down the hall. "Do you think she suspects anything?"

"She trusts me," Emilio replied, his voice casual, dismissive. It was a careless statement that revealed everything about how little he thought of me, of my intelligence.

"But when will you make me your wife?" Hayden pressed, her voice laced with a desperate ambition. "When can you give me and Leo the life we deserve?"

"Hayden, stop," he cut her off, a hint of steel in his tone. "Elana is my wife. That will not change."

My breath caught in my throat.

"It's the least I can do," he continued, his voice softer now, tinged with what sounded like guilt. "It's my penance for what I've done to her."

Hayden fell silent, accepting his decision with a reluctant nod. He pulled her into another hug, kissing her hair.

"You gave me a beautiful son, Hayden," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "And I will always take care of you both."

They walked towards the elevator, their arms around each other. As the doors were about to close, Hayden's eyes flickered in my direction. For a split second, her gaze met mine. There was no surprise in her eyes, only a flash of cold, triumphant victory.

She knew. She had known I was there the whole time.

I stepped out from behind the plant, my body trembling. The tears I'd been holding back streamed down my face, hot and unstoppable. The pain in my chest was a physical weight, crushing me.

He didn't want to divorce me out of guilt, but he would never give up his other family. What did that make me? A placeholder? A symbol of a commitment he no longer felt but was too cowardly to break?

I remembered his promises, his vows. "In sickness and in health, till death do us part." He had said them with such conviction. I had believed him.

But he had betrayed me. And this love, this toxic, fractured thing, was something I had to cut out of my life.

Before I left the hospital, I walked back to the front desk and scheduled an appointment. An abortion.

Then I called my lawyer.

"Draw up the divorce papers," I said, my voice cold and steady. "I want everything split down the middle. Everything I am entitled to."

I was sitting in my car in the hospital parking lot when my phone rang. It was Emilio. His voice was hoarse, tired.

"Happy birthday, Elana."

I had completely forgotten. In the chaos and the pain, my own birthday had slipped my mind.

"I'm so sorry about last night," he said, his voice laced with practiced regret. "A crisis at the office. I didn't get home at all."

A bitter laugh almost escaped my lips. "Okay," I said, the two words feeling like dust in my mouth.

He seemed to relax on the other end, relieved by my lack of questions. "I've arranged a gala for you tonight. To celebrate your birthday and the new wing you designed for the museum. To make it up to you."

"Okay," I repeated, my voice a monotone.

A year ago, those words would have made me cry with happiness. Now, they were just another layer to his elaborate lie.

I didn't want to hear his voice anymore. I hung up the phone, my hand gripping a steering wheel.

I looked out the window, but I didn't see anything. I just felt a deep, chilling premonition. He had no idea what was coming. He felt a sense of unease, a feeling that something precious was slipping through his fingers, but he couldn't name it.

He had no idea it was already gone.