

Chapter 9

The plane landed in Zurich six hours later. A sleek black car was waiting for me. It drove me out of the city and into the mountains, to a secluded, state-of-the-art facility nestled among the peaks.

A woman with a sharp, elegant haircut and an appreciative smile greeted me at the entrance. She was the program director.

"We were so impressed with your portfolio, Elana," she said, her eyes warm. "We know you'll do incredible things here."

The rules were reiterated: six months of intense, focused work. No phones, no internet, no contact with the outside world. It was a creative monastery.

"If anyone asks," I said, my voice steady, "just tell them I'm dead."

The director looked at me, a flicker of concern in her eyes, but she just nodded. "Your past is your own, Elana. Here, you only have a future."

As I settled into my new life, a world away, Emilio was just beginning to feel my absence.

He spent the day with Hayden and Leo, playing the part of the happy family man. He took them to the park, pushed Leo on the swings, and bought them ice cream. But a gnawing unease was growing inside him.

That evening, over a dinner Hayden had cooked, he announced he was going on a business trip. In his mind, the "trip" was him going back to his real home, back to me.

Hayden's hand paused, a forkful of pasta halfway to her mouth. She exchanged a look with Leo. The boy's lower lip began to tremble.

"Daddy," he whimpered, "you can't go. The bad lady scared me. I'm still not better."

Emilio felt a familiar pang of guilt, but it was mixed with a new, strange

feeling of annoyance. He wanted to go home. He missed me. He missed the quiet order of our life, the easy comfort of my presence.

Hayden, ever the manipulator, quickly smoothed things over. "Let your father go, sweetie. He has to work." She smiled at Emilio, but her eyes were cold and calculating.

Later, as she packed his bag, he turned to her, his voice low. "Don't tell Leo that I'll be with you forever. Don't make promises I can't keep."

Her hands stilled. A flicker of anger crossed her face before she masked it with a hurt expression. "Of course, Emilio. I'll talk to him."

He pulled out his phone, scrolling through the messages he had sent me. They were all unanswered.

"Where are you, Elana? Are you still angry? You're taking this too far."

He was convinced I was just being difficult, punishing him. He had no idea.

He drove home, an apology rehearsed in his mind. He would be magnanimous. He would forgive me for my little tantrum.

He opened the door to a house that was dark, silent, and half-empty.

The living room was bare. The closets were cleared out. All my things—my clothes, my books, my entire presence—were gone. Only the expensive, thoughtless gifts he had given me were left, arranged neatly on the coffee table like offerings at a tomb.

A cold dread gripped him. He grabbed his phone and dialed my number, his heart pounding with a sudden, fierce anger.

He expected it to go to voicemail.

But someone answered.

"What do you want, you bastard?" a furious voice snarled on the other end.

It was Ayla.