

Chapter 10 No.

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Seraphina Holloway, Caden's older sister, didn't read tech blogs. She read the society pages. And she saw the photo.

She called Caden immediately.

"What is your wife doing?" Seraphina screeched. "She looks like a harlot! And where is she? Little Mike's birthday is next Saturday! He wants her red velvet cake! I sent her the guest list three days ago and she hasn't replied!"

For five years, Eulalie had catered every Holloway family event. Free labor.

Caden held the phone away from his ear. He was sitting in his office, staring at the stock ticker. It was red.

"She's not here, Sera. She left."

"Well, get her back! I'm not paying a caterer \$5,000 when she does it for free! Fix this, Caden!"

Seraphina hungup and dialed Eulalie.

In the Loft, Eulalie was testing a VR headset. The world around her was a grid of neon data.

Her new, encrypted phone rang. Seraphina.

She took off the headset. She answered.

"Eulalie!" Seraphina didn't say hello. "You are being incredibly selfish. Mike is crying because you haven't confirmed the cake. We need 50 cupcakes and a three-tier cake. And don't make the frosting too sweet this time."

Eulalie listened to the familiar, demanding whine. It used to make her stomach knot with anxiety. Now, it just sounded pathetic.

"Seraphina," Eulalie cut in.

"What?"

"I think you're confused."

"Confused about what?"

"I'm not your caterer. I'm not your servant. And I'm certainly not your family anymore."

Silence. Shocked silence.

"Excuse me?" Seraphina gasped. "You ungrateful little —Caden pays for your life!"

"Actually," Eulalie said, examining her manicured nails, "he doesn't. And if you want red velvet cake, I suggest you call Magnolia Bakery. They take credit cards. I don't."

"I'm going to tell Caden to divorce you!" Seraphina threatened.

Eulalie laughed. "Please do. Tell him to sign the papers. It would save me a legal fee."

She hung up.

Block Contact.

She tossed the phone onto the couch. She felt a weight lift off her shoulders.

The doorbell rang.

A courier stood there with a large, heavy box. "Package for Ms. Bradford."

It was from Jory. The latest prototype of the Nexus haptic interface gloves.

A note was attached: "Welcome to the future, partner."

Eulalie put on the gloves. She flexed her fingers. In the virtual world, her avatar's hands glowed with fire.

She was ready.

Back at the Penthouse.

Caden sat in the foyer. The house was quiet. Elara was at school. Adalynn was shopping.

He looked at the console table. It was empty.

He looked at the sofa. The cushions had been removed by the deep-cleaning crew and propped against the wall.

And there, resting on the bare upholstery frame where it had been wedged, was the white envelope.

"TO CADEN - URGENT."

It had been there for ten days.

Caden stared at it. He felt a strange sense of dread. He remembered Eulalie's face at the Gala. "I don't know you."

He slowly reached out. His hand trembled slightly.

He picked up the envelope. It was thick. Heavy. Something hard slid around inside.

He ripped open the seal.

The diamond ring slid out first, tumbling onto his palm. "C&E Forever."

Caden's breath hitched. He looked at the papers.

"DIVORCE SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT."

He flipped through them. He saw the black marker lines.

"Custody..." crossed out.

"Alimony..." crossed out.

"Assets..." crossed out.

She didn't want his money. She didn't want his house. She didn't even

fight for their daughter.

She just wanted out.

The room seemed to drop ten degrees. This wasn't a tantrum. This wasn't a ploy for more allowance. This was an amputation.

Caden sank onto the sofa, the papers crinkling in his grip. He looked at the crossed-out custody clause again. The black ink was definitive, violent.

She had given up everything just to get away from him. 🎧

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. For the first time in his life, Caden Holloway felt truly, completely afraid. He was holding his own destruction in his hands, and there was no one left to fix it. 🎧
