

Chapter 102 No.

The Royal Oak Equestrian Club smelled of leather, hay, and old money. It was a sanctuary of silence and discipline usually.

Saturday morning sunlight filtered through the high windows of the stables. Caden had insisted on taking Elara out of the city, away from the stress of the blackout across the street. Eulalie had agreed only because the club was private, gated, and expensive enough to keep the riff-raff out.

Or so she thought.

"Look at the horsie, Elara! Smile for the camera!"

Eulalie was in the changing room, pulling on her boots, when she heard the voice. It was high shrill, and fake.

She slammed the locker shut and ran.

In the main stable aisle, Adalynn Pennington was crouching next to Elara. She looked out of place, not just because of her attire—a dress from last season that looked slightly worn at the hem—but because of the way she kept glancing nervously toward the main office, as if expecting to be thrown out.

Adalynn had clearly slipped in through the grooms' entrance; she wasn't wearing a visitor's badge, and her membership had been revoked two weeks ago due to 'insufficient funds.'

She was holding her phone up, the flash going off repeatedly in the dim light. Elara was pressed against the stall door of a nervous chestnut mare, her face pale.

"Stop it!" Elara cried, trying to hide her face. "I don't want to!"

"Just one cute one for the story, sweetie," Adalynn cooed, grabbing Elara's arm and yanking her forward. "I need the engagement numbers! Show everyone how much fun we're having!"

The mare, spooked by the flash and the noise, reared back in the stall, kicking the wood with a thunderous bang.

Elara screamed.

Eulalie didn't think. She didn't calculate. She moved with the velocity of a bullet.

She crossed the distance in three strides. She didn't grab Elara; she grabbed the phone. She snatched the device out of Adalynn's hand with enough force to snap a manicured nail.

"Hey!" Adalynn shrieked. "That's my only—"

Eulalie threw the phone onto the cobblestone floor. Then, she brought the heel of her riding boot down.

Crunch

Glass shattered. Metal bent. The screen went black.

Eulalie twisted her heel, grinding the device into dust. Then she looked up.

"Get away from my daughter," Eulalie said. Her voice was low, deadly quiet.

Adalynn stared at the ruined phone, her mouth open. "You... you crazy bitch! Do you know how much that cost? I can't... I can't just buy another one right now! I'm going to sue you!"

People were staring. Stable hands paused with their pitchforks. Other members in tweed jackets stopped their polite conversations. A security guard was already walking briskly down the aisle, radio in hand.

"Sue me," Eulalie said. She pulled Elara behind her, checking her quickly for injuries. "Send the bill to my lawyer. But if you ever touch her again, I won't break the phone. I'll break the hand holding it."

Adalynn looked around, realizing the audience wasn't on her side. She spotted Caden walking in from the parking lot.

"Caden!" she wailed, running toward him. "She attacked me! She broke my phone! She's unhinged!"

Caden looked at Adalynn, then at Eulalie. Eulalie stood protectively over Elara, wearing breeches and tall boots, her spine straight as a steel rod. She looked magnificent. Terrifying, but magnificent.

"What are you doing here, Adalynn?" Caden asked, his voice devoid of warmth. "I was told your membership was terminated."

"I just wanted to say hello!" Adalynn stammered, backing away as the security guard approached.

"Did you take photos of Elara?" Caden asked.

"I was just—"

"Escort Ms. Pennington off the premises," Caden said to the guard. "And ensure she is trespassing formally this time."

Eulalie didn't wait for his defense. She turned to the stable master. "Saddle Midnight. I need to burn off some adrenaline."

The stable master's eyes widened. "Midnight? Ma'am, he's... spirited. Nobody's ridden him in a week."

"Saddle him."

Five minutes later, Caden stood by the fence of the outdoor arena. He watched as a massive black stallion exploded out of the gate.

On its back, Eulalie sat deep in the saddle, her hands light on the reins. The horse bucked, twisting in the air. Adalynn, who was being dragged toward the exit by security, gasped, hoping for a fall.

Eulalie didn't flinch. She moved with the animal, absorbing the violence, guiding it into a gallop. She turned the horse toward the highest jump in the ring—a five-foot oxer.

"She's going to kill herself," Adalynn muttered.

Eulalie drove the horse forward. They flew. For a second, horse and rider were suspended in the air, a perfect silhouette of power and grace. They landed softly, cantering away.

Caden felt his breath catch in his throat. He had been married to her for

years. He knew she had taken lessons-it was part of her aristocratic education at Bradford Manor-but he had always assumed it was polite dressage. He had never seen this. The raw power. The dominance. He had never known she possessed this kind of physical courage.

"God," he whispered.

"She's showing off," Adalynn spat as the guard finally pushed her through the gate. "It's pathetic."

Caden turned to Adalynn. He looked at her heavy makeup, her impractical heels, her obsession with the screen. Then he looked back at Eulalie, who was patting the sweating neck of a beast she had tamed with nothing but will.

"No," Caden said. "It's not showing off. It's command."

Eulalie rode the horse to the fence. She looked down at Adalynn.

"This is a sport for people who understand control, Adalynn," Eulalie said, her breathing even. "Go back to the mall. You're out of your depth."

She turned the horse and galloped away, leaving Caden staring after her, his heart pounding a rhythm he hadn't felt in years.