

Chapter 103 No.

Sunday afternoon at the Bradford Manor was supposed to be quiet. The sky was a piercing blue, the wind brisk.

Caden pulled his Aston Martin up to the intercom box outside the main gate. He couldn't enter. The restraining order was still active, and after his unauthorized entry the other night, the guards were on high alert. He opened the trunk and pulled out a large, sleek black case. It was a tactical drone-kite hybrid, carbon fiber, motorized assist. It cost four thousand dollars.

"I'm just dropping this off for Elara," Caden told the camera at the gate. "I won't come in. Just... tell her it's from me."

The gate clicked open, but only halfway. A silent invitation to walk in, but not to drive. He carried the case to the back lawn, hoping to impress.

He stopped.

On the grass, a simple, diamond-shaped red kite was dancing in the sky. It was made of nylon and wood. The string was held by Elara, who was laughing, her head thrown back.

Behind her, guiding her hands, was Harrison Sterling.

Harrison looked infuriatingly perfect. He wore a cable-knit sweater that fit him like a second skin, the sleeves pushed up to reveal forearms that spoke of actual labor, not just gym hours. He held the string with a relaxed, easy confidence, manipulating the wind with subtle flicks of his wrist.

He wasn't struggling. He wasn't awkward. He was teaching her with a quiet competence that made Caden's teeth ache.

Delmar was sitting in a lawn chair nearby, wrapped in a blanket, watching the red kite bob in the wind. He was smiling.

Caden felt the jealousy hit him like a physical blow to the stomach. It

was acid, burning his throat.

"Daddy!" Elara spotted him. Her smile faltered slightly.

"Hey, princess," Caden said, forcing a grin. He walked over, the heavy case banging against his leg. "Look what I brought. It's the SkyMaster 5000. It goes twice as high as that one."

"Harrison's kite is a dragon," Elara said, pointing up. "See the tail?"

"This one has a camera," Caden insisted. He set the case down on the grass and popped the latches. "And a motor. Watch."

He started assembling the device. It was complicated. Struts, batteries, controllers. He fumbled with the connections. His hands were sweating. He could feel Harrison watching him with that amused, superior expression of a man who didn't need batteries to capture a child's attention.

"Beautiful day for it," Harrison said pleasantly, letting out more line without looking away from the sky. "Though the wind is a bit gusty for carbon fiber. It can be brittle."

"I got it," Caden snapped.

He finally got the frame locked. He hit the power button.

WHIRRRRRRR.

The electric motor screamed to life. It sounded like a dentist's drill amplified ten times.

Delmar flinched violently. He covered his ears and started to rock. "No... no noise... please..."

"Caden!" Eulalie shouted from the porch, where she was setting out lemonade. "Turn it off!"

"It just needs to calibrate!" Caden yelled over the noise, wrestling with the controller. The drone-kite shot up into the air, erratic and aggressive. It buzzed near the red dragon kite, the noise cutting through the peaceful afternoon.

Delmar let out a high thin wail.

Harrison didn't yell. He simply handed the kite string to Elara with a gentle smile and walked over to Caden. He reached out and hit the manual kill switch on the drone's body.

The motor died. The heavy carbon fiber contraption fell out of the air and crashed onto the grass. Snap. A wing broke.

Silence returned to the garden.

Harrison immediately knelt by Delmar's chair. He pulled a small tin from his pocket. "It's okay, Mr. Bradford. Just a machine. Look, I have the gingerchews you like. For the nerves. My assistant picked them up from that shop in Chinatown."

Delmar took the candy, his shaking hands calming down as Harrison spoke in a low, soothing baritone.

Caden stood over his broken four-thousand-dollar toy. He looked at Elara. She was looking at the broken pieces with disappointment.

"You broke it," she said.

"It was too loud, Elara," Caden said, his face burning "I didn't know."

"Harrison knew," Elara said. "He said Grandpa needs quiet kites."

Eulalie walked onto the grass. She didn't look at Caden. She looked at Harrison, who was wiping a tear from Delmar's cheek.

"Thank you, Harrison," she said softly.

"Anytime," Harrison said. He stood up and looked at Caden. His eyes were cold steel. "Holloway. Maybe read the room next time. Or at least the medical file. Money doesn't buy intuition" ①

Caden clenched his fists. He wanted to hit him. He wanted to smash that perfect, fake-rugged face. But he knew, with a sinking sickening certainty, that he was the intruder here.

"I'll take the trash with me," Caden said, picking up the broken drone.

"You do that," Harrison said.

Caden walked back to the gate. He threw the expensive junk into a trash bin outside the perimeter and waited for his driver. He watched through the iron bars as Harrison helped Elara launch the red kite again. It soared effortlessly on the wind, silent and beautiful.

He had tried to buy the sky, and he had crashed into the earth.

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