

Chapter 109 No.

The next morning the sun was bright, mocking the dark mood in the house.

Caden came downstairs, eyes rimmed with red. He hadn't slept. He had spent the night reading old legal files, tracing the Penningtons' assets.

Elara was on the living room floor, coloring.

"Morning bug," Caden said, trying to sound normal. He sat on the floor next to her. "Whatcha drawing?"

"Family," Elara said. She didn't look up. She was scrubbing the paper violently with a black crayon.

Caden looked at the drawing. There was a stick figure labeled 'Mommy' with a crown. A small one labeled 'Elara'. A figure in a bed labeled 'Grandpa'.

And in the corner, a black, chaotic scribble. A void where a person should be. The paper was torn from the force of the coloring.

"Who is that?" Caden asked, pointing to the black mess. ⓘ

"The Bad Lady," Elara said. "Adalynn."

Caden felt his heart stop. "Why is she black?"

"Because she's dark inside," Elara said matter-of-factly. "She makes Mommy cry. She hurts the horses. I scratched her out."

She looked up at Caden with innocent eyes. "Daddy, why is the Bad Lady your friend?"

The question hit him harder than any of Eulalie's insults. Harder than Harrison's punches.

"She's not my friend, Elara," Caden said, his voice trembling.

"But you kiss her," Elara said. "I saw a picture on your iPad. From the Christmas party last year."

Caden closed his eyes. That photo. It was from before he knew. Before everything. To Elara, it was just yesterday.

He reached out and gently took the black crayon from Elara's hand.

"I made a mistake," Caden said. "A big one. But I'm fixing it."

He looked at Eulalie, who was standing in the doorway, holding a cup of coffee. She had heard everything.

"I bought the land," Caden said to Eulalie.

Eulalie blinked. "What?"

"The strip of land between the road and their driveway," Caden said. "I drove to the county clerk's house at 4:00 AM. I woke him up. I paid him triple in cash to sign the transfer deed right there on his kitchen table. My lawyers filed it electronically the second the office opened at 9:00."

"What does that mean?"

"It means," Caden said, a grim smile forming, "that the Penningtons' driveway now crosses private property. My property. And I am revoking their access rights."

Eulalie stared at him. It was petty. It was bureaucratic. It was brilliant.

"They can't get to their house?"

"They can helicopter in," Caden said. "But they can't drive. No construction trucks. No moving vans. They are landlocked."

Elara looked between them. "Did you scratch her out, Daddy?"

Caden kissed the top of her head. "Yes, baby. I scratched her out. For good."

Eulalie took a sip of coffee to hide the slight tremble of her lip. For the first time in years, the monster in the drawing had a monster hunting it back.

