

Chapter 11 No.

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The fear was a physical weight, pressing Caden into the plush cushions of the sofa. He sat there for hours as the afternoon light faded into the blue gloom of twilight, staring at the crossed-out clauses. The silence of the penthouse, usually a sign of order, now felt like a vacuum.

He had deliberately ignored the envelope for over a week, assuming it was just another of her passive-aggressive lists of household complaints or a tantrum over his late nights. He never imagined she had the spine to actually pack up and leave.

"She left. She really left."

But as the shock began to recede, a different, more familiar voice began to whisper in the back of his mind. It was the voice of his ego, the voice that had won him boardrooms and hostile takeovers.

"Wait. She crossed out 'Assets'? She crossed out 'Alimony'?"

Caden stood up, pacing the rug. He looked at the papers again, forcing a laugh that sounded jagged in the empty room. "Who walks away from millions of dollars? Who walks away from a child?"

"No one," he muttered to the empty air. "No mother does that."

The fear began to curdle into skepticism. This wasn't an amputation; it was theater. It was a bluff. Eulalie was playing a high-stakes game of chicken. She wanted him to chase her. She wanted him to beg. By asking for nothing she was trying to prove she was a martyr.

"You think you're clever," Caden whispered, his eyes narrowing. "You think this scares me? You have no job. You have no money. You'll be back the second your credit card declines."

The fear vanished, replaced by a hardened, callous resolve. He wasn't going to play her game. He wasn't going to be the desperate husband

begging the runaway wife to return. He was Caden Holloway.

He walked to his study. He turned on the heavy industrial shredder in the corner.

He fed the papers into the machine.

Eulalie's signature, written in that neat, small script he used to find charming and now found irritatingly passive, disappeared first. Then the crossed-out clauses regarding custody. Then the date.

In five seconds, the document was nothing but confetti.

"Problem solved," Caden said, dusting his hands. "If there are no papers, there is no divorce. She'll come home when she's hungry."

The next morning at Holloway Holdings was always a symphony of stress. Phones rang, heels clicked on marble, and the smell of high-end espresso battled with the scent of fear.

The elevator doors pinged open on the 30th floor.

Carter, Caden's executive assistant, was leaning against the reception desk, scrolling through his phone. He looked up, ready to sneer at the temp agency replacement they were expecting.

His jaw dropped.

Eulalie stepped out of the elevator.

But it wasn't the Eulalie he knew. The Eulalie he knew wore beige cardigans that swallowed her figure and sensible flats that made no sound. She walked with her shoulders hunched, apologizing for taking up space.

This woman was wearing Celine.

It was a charcoal grey power suit, cut with a razor-sharp precision that emphasized a waist he didn't know she had. Her hair, usually in a messy bun, was blown out straight, falling like a sheet of dark silk down her back. She wore stilettos that added three inches to her height and a dangerous rhythm to her walk.

She didn't look at Carter. She walked straight to her old desk—a small,

cramped workstation in the corner outside Caden's glass office.

"Mrs. Holloway?" Carter stammered, straightening up. "I thought... HR said you were terminated. Mr. Henderson stamped your file effective immediately. You handed in your badge. How did you even get up here? You don't have clearance."

"I didn't need an employee badge, Carter. I used the root access clearance I coded into the building's security system five years ago," Eulalie lied smoothly. She pulled a folded piece of paper from her bag—it was a standard NDA, but she held it like a court order. "My termination requires a formal digital asset handover protocol, witnessed by a third party, to ensure no proprietary data is corrupted. Unless you want to sign an affidavit taking personal liability for the integrity of the 'Ghost' architecture during the transition? I'm here to ensure the handover is compliant. It should take about two weeks."

It was complete nonsense. There was no such bylaw. But Eulalie knew that Carter, and even Caden, understood so little about the technical backbone of their own company that they wouldn't dare challenge a procedural threat involving "data integrity."

Carter blinked, his mouth opening and closing. He regained his composure, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Right. Well, since you're here to... transition, you can make yourself useful."

He grabbed a stack of quarterly reports, easily six inches thick, and dropped them onto her desk with a loud thud. Dust motes danced in the air.

"We need these collated and bound for the board meeting. Fifty copies. By lunch."

He expected her to nod, to say "Okay, Carter," to rush to the copy room like a good little administrative accessory.

Eulalie looked at the stack of papers. Then she looked at Carter. She reached out with one manicured finger and pushed the stack to the edge of the desk.

"No."

The word hung in the air, heavy and foreign.

"Excuse me?" Carter laughed nervously. "Do you want me to call Caden? You work here."

"I am an Administrative Consultant, Carter. My job description involves event planning and donor relations. Making photocopies is an intern's job. Do it yourself. Besides, I'm not here on Caden's payroll anymore. I'm here on my own time."

She sat down, woke up her computer, and put on a pair of large, noise-canceling headphones.

Carter stood there, his face flushing a blotchy red. He opened his mouth to shout, but the sight of her—calm, unbothered, typing rapidly on a screen he couldn't see—silenced him. He huffed, grabbed the papers, and stomped away toward the copy room, muttering about "ungrateful trophies."

Inside her headphones, the world was silent. Eulalie wasn't working on donor lists. She had opened a spreadsheet that looked like a budget report, but underneath the overlay, she was running a diagnostic on the Nexus AI server architecture. Her fingers flew across the keys, coding in a rhythm that matched her heartbeat.

Ten minutes later, the glass door of the CEO's office opened.

Caden walked out, looking fresh and arrogant in a navy suit. He saw her immediately. He paused, his eyebrows shooting up.

He smiled. A smug, satisfied smile. His theory was confirmed. She was back. The tantrum was over.

He walked over to her desk, leaning his hip against the edge, invading her personal space. He tapped his knuckles on the wood surface.

"So," he said, his voice dripping with condescension. "The prodigal wife returns."

Eulalie didn't look up. She kept typing.

Caden frowned. He reached out and pulled one side of her headphones away from her ear. "I'm talking to you, Eulalie."

She finally stopped. She turned her head slowly. Her eyes were dark,

devoid of the warmth he was used to seeing. It was like looking into a mirror that refused to reflect him.

"I'm working Caden. Isn't that what you pay me for?"

"I see you came to your senses," Caden said, ignoring her tone. He lowered his voice, leaning closer. "I got your little... package. The shredder took care of it. Stop the drama. We have a dinner with the Japanese investors tonight. Go home at three and get changed. Wear the blue dress."

Eulalie stared at him. He truly believed it. He believed that shredding the paper erased the intent. He believed she was here because she had nowhere else to go.

"I'm not going to dinner," she said softly.

"What?"

"That is a wife's obligation. I am currently an employee conducting a technical handover. My shift ends at five. After that, I am unavailable."

Caden's jaw tightened. "Don't push me, Eulalie. I cleaned up your mess. I forgave the little stunt at the Gala. Don't make me angry."

"You shredded paper, Caden," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper that was louder than a scream. "You didn't shred the law. A judge doesn't need your signature to start the clock. My lawyer submitted the official Petition for Divorce to the court this morning."

Caden recoiled as if she had slapped him. "You... you actually filed?"

Before he could explode, the elevator dinged again. Seraphina Holloway, Caden's sister, stormed out. She was a whirlwind of expensive perfume and entitlement.

"Caden!" she shrieked, marching across the floor. "Why is she here? I thought we were done with her!"

Seraphina stopped in front of Eulalie's desk, placing her hands on her hips. "You. You have some nerve showing your face after ruining Mike's birthday planning. Do you know how hard it is to find a baker last minute?"

The entire open-plan office went quiet. Heads popped up from cubicles.

This was the morning entertainment.

Eulalie sighed. She slid her headphones back over her ears.

Seraphina's eyes bulged. "Are you ignoring me? Take those off!"

She reached out, her long acrylic nails aiming for the headset.

Eulalie moved with a speed that shocked everyone. She spun her chair, dodging the hand, and stood up. She towered over Seraphina in her heels.

"Touch me," Eulalie said, her voice carrying across the silent room, "and I will file a police report for workplace harassment and assault. There are cameras in this corner. Try me."

Seraphina froze. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish. She looked at Caden, expecting him to reprimand his wife.

But Caden was staring at Eulalie with a mixture of confusion and horror. He had never seen her fight back. Not once in five years.

"Enough" Caden snapped, grabbing Seraphina's arm. "Sera, come to my office."

He looked back at Eulalie. His eyes were cold, promising retribution. "We will talk about this at home. Tonight."

Eulalie sat back down. "I won't be there."

Caden dragged his sister into his office and slammed the glass door. The blinds didn't close, and everyone could see Seraphina gesturing wildly while Caden paced.

Eulalie adjusted her headphones. She brought up her terminal window.

"System Status: Optimal."

A message popped up in the corner of her screen from the receptionist, Sarah.

Sarah: "That was the most badass thing I have ever seen. Go girl."

Eulalie allowed herself a small, fleeting smile. She typed back a simple smiley face.

She wasn't doing this for applause. She was doing it for survival. But for the first time in a long time, the air in the room didn't feel like it was crushing her lungs.

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