

Chapter 111 No.

The sound was not the gentle clinking of china or the sizzling of bacon. It was a hum. A low, throbbing vibration that seemed to emanate from the floorboards, crawling up through the soles of the feet and settling in the teeth.

At 6:00 AM, Grandmother Holloway descended the grand staircase of Bradford Manor. She was dressed in a pristine tweed suit, her pearls already in place, her silver hair coiffed into a helmet of iron discipline. She gripped the banister with a hand that had steered the Holloway family through three recessions and one SEC investigation.

She expected smells. Coffee. Toast. Perhaps the citrus tang of marmalade. She expected to see Eulalie in a sensible apron, perhaps looking a bit tired from the "adjustment" of sleeping in the same room as her husband directing the staff.

Instead, she heard the hum.

It sounded like a hive of mechanical bees. It sounded like the engine room of a transatlantic liner.

Grandmother frowned, her cane tapping a sharp staccato on the marble floor as she marched toward the dining room double doors.

"Eulalie!" she called out, her voice sharp with authority rather than hysteria. "This is a residence, not a machine shop. What is the meaning of this disturbance?"

She pushed the doors open.

She stopped. Her cane hovered in mid-air.

The dining room table—a mahogany masterpiece that had seated four generations of Bradfords—was gone. Or rather, it was buried.

In its place stood a fortress of black metal. A server rack, half the height of a man, sat squarely on the Persian rug. It hadn't been there at midnight. Eulalie must have had a Nexus tactical team move it in during the dead hours of the morning, bypassing the household staff completely. It was alive with blinking blue and green lights, a constellation of data processing that pulsed in the dim morning light.

Thick, black cables snaked across the floor like vipers, taped down with yellow hazard tape, disappearing into the wall where a sconce used to be.

And there, at the head of the table, sat Eulalie.

She wasn't wearing an apron. She was wearing a charcoal silk robe that looked more like a judge's gown than sleepwear. On her head sat a pair of massive, noise-canceling headphones. Three curved monitors were arranged in a semi-circle around her, casting a pale, ghostly blue light on her face. Her fingers were a blur on a mechanical keyboard, the clack-clack-clack sound cutting through the fan noise like gunfire.

"What in God's name is this?" Grandmother demanded, her eyes narrowing at the desecration of her dining room.

The sound didn't penetrate the headphones. Eulalie didn't even blink. Her eyes darted across lines of cascading code, her reflection trapped in the glass.

Grandmother marched forward. She slammed the ferrule of her cane onto the floorboards, missing a fiber optic cable by an inch.

"Eulalie! This is a dining room! It is for dining!"

Nothing.

Grandmother's face flushed a dangerous shade of purple. She was not used to being ignored. She was the matriarch. She was the law. She reached out, her claw-like hand aiming for the thickest cable, the one plugged into the main power strip.

"I will not have this industrial racket in my house!"

She grabbed the cord.

Before she could pull, a hand shot out.

It was fast. Violent in its precision. Eulalie's hand clamped around Grandmother's wrist. She didn't squeeze hard enough to bruise, but she held on with the immovable force of a hydraulic press.

Eulalie didn't look up. Her eyes stayed glued to the center screen. She typed a final command with her free hand, hit enter, and only then did she slowly turn her head.

She slid one ear cup off.

"Don't," Eulalie said. Her voice was devoid of morning grogginess. It was

cold, clear, and sharp as a scalpel.

"You insolent girl!" Grandmother sputtered, trying to yank her hand back. "Unplug this monstrosity immediately! We are having breakfast!"

"That cable," Eulalie said, releasing her grip and pointing a long, manicured finger at the black wire, "is currently sustaining a live, encrypted data migration for the Pentagon. We are moving forty terabytes of classified tactical data. If you sever the connection now, the packet loss will be interpreted as a hostile interception."

Grandmother froze. "The... what?"

"The Federal Bureau of Investigation," Eulalie lied. She didn't blink. "Do you want a SWAT team crashing through the French windows before you've had your tea? Because that is exactly how you get flash-banged in your own home." 

It was nonsense. It was a secure link to a cloud server in Oregon. But to a woman whose understanding of technology ended at the rotary phone, the words "Pentagon" and "FBI" were magic spells of terror.

Grandmother snatched her hand back as if the cable were a rattlesnake.

"You... you are bluffing," she hissed, though she took a step back. "You do not command the Pentagon from Bradford Manor."

"Try me," Eulalie said. She slid the headphone back over her ear. "But if you do, make sure you're wearing your good pearls for the mugshot."

The doors opened again.

Caden walked in. He was buttoning the cuffs of his white dress shirt, his hair wet from the shower. He looked tired, the dark circles under his eyes a testament to the awkwardness of sleeping on a rug in the guest suite while his wife slept in the bed.

He smelled coffee. He wanted normalcy. He wanted to sit at the table, open the Wall Street Journal, and pretend his life wasn't imploding.

He stopped dead.

He looked at the server rack. He looked at the cables. He looked at his grandmother, who was trembling with rage, and his wife, who looked like she was piloting a drone strike.

"What..." Caden rubbed his eyes. "What is happening?"

"Your wife!" Grandmother pointed her cane at Eulalie. "She has turned the manor into a factory! Look at this! It's hideous! It's loud! Tell her to remove it, Caden. Be the man of the house!"

Caden looked at the screens. He saw the waterfall of data. He recognized the architecture. It wasn't a game. It wasn't a hobby. It was the backend of Nexus AI. He also heard the tail end of Eulalie's threat about the FBI.

Caden knew it was a lie. Nexus AI had government contracts, certainly, but a dropped packet wouldn't summon a SWAT team. However, as he looked at Eulalie's steely expression, he realized she was establishing dominance. She wasn't just coding; she was drawing a line in the sand that his grandmother couldn't cross. He felt a strange mix of fear and admiration. She was managing his family better than he ever had.

"Eulalie?" Caden asked, stepping over a bundle of Cat6 cables.

Eulalie swiveled her chair. The blue light washed over him. "The bandwidth in the study is throttled. The fiber entry point is behind that wainscoting. I needed raw speed for a patch deployment. It stays until the upload is complete."

"We need to eat!" Grandmother roared. "This is the dining seat, not a garage startup! I am moving my things into the Master Suite if this room is unusable. The light is better there anyway."

Eulalie's eyes narrowed. The audacity.

Eulalie snapped her fingers. "Alfred!"

The butler appeared instantly in the doorway, looking terrified but alert.

"Alfred," Eulalie said, her voice cutting through the room like a whip. "Lock the Master Suite. Deactivate the guest keycards for the entire East Wing except for Caden's temporary pass. Mrs. Holloway is a guest in the Bradford ancestral home. She will take the ground-floor garden suite, or she will take a taxi back to her own house. Am I clear?"

Alfred straightened his spine. "Crystal clear, Miss Bradford."

Grandmother gasped, clutching her pearls. "You... you would lock me out? In my grandson's house?"

"It's not his house," Eulalie said, turning back to her screens. "It's mine. And the rent is respect. You're currently in arrears."

A sharp chime rang out from the center monitor. A video call window popped up. The caller ID read: Senator R. – Cmte on AI Safety.

Eulalie's spine stiffened. She looked at Caden. Her eyes were no longer cold; they were urgent.

"Caden," she said. "Shut her up."

"Excuse me?" Grandmother gasped.

"This is the pre-hearing briefing for the Artificial Intelligence Safety Act," Eulalie said, her hand hovering over the 'Accept' button. "If she starts screaming about toast while I'm talking to a United States Senator, I will lose a forty-million-dollar contract. And if I lose that contract, I stop paying for the upkeep on this house."

Caden looked at the screen. He knew Senator R. He had donated ten thousand dollars to his campaign just to get a handshake. Eulalie had him on speed dial.

The reality of who his wife actually was hit him like a physical blow to the chest. She wasn't playing office. She was shaping federal law.

Grandmother opened her mouth. "I don't care if it's the Pope, I want-"

Caden moved.

He grabbed his grandmother by the shoulders. He didn't guide her, he propelled her. He spun her around and marched her toward the kitchen swing door.

"Kitchen," Caden said firmly. "We are eating in the kitchen."

"Caden! Unhand me!" Grandmother flailed, her cane hitting the doorframe. "Have you lost your mind? She is forgetting her place!"

"She is the GDP of a small country right now, Grandmother," Caden hissed. He shoved the door open and pushed the matriarch of the Holloway family into the pantry area. "Quiet."

He looked back.

Eulalie had already clicked accept. Her posture shifted instantly. The hostility vanished, replaced by a smooth, predatory professionalism.

"Senator," her voice floated across the room, confident and deep. "Thank you for taking the time. Regarding the encryption standards in Section 4..."

Caden let the door swing shut.

He stood in the kitchen. The chef was staring at them. Grandmother was adjusting her jacket, looking as if she had been slapped.

"She is a witch," Grandmother whispered, her voice trembling. "She is bewitching you."

Caden sat on a stool at the prep island. He grabbed a piece of cold toast from a tray. He took a bite. It was dry. It tasted like sawdust.

Through the wall, he could hear the faint murmur of Eulalie's voice. She was speaking a language he barely understood, wielding power he had only pretended to have.

"No, Grandmother," Caden said, swallowing the dry bread. "She's not a witch. She's the smartest person in the room. And we're just the people eating in the kitchen."



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