

Chapter 112 No.

The truce lasted exactly twelve hours.

By dinner time, the server rack was still humming in the dining room, but Eulalie had draped a velvet cloth over the blinking lights to dampen the glare. The table was set at the far end, squeezed between the machine and the window.

Grandmother Holloway had changed tactics. The rage was gone, replaced by a terrifying, saccharine sweetness. She had spent the afternoon in the kitchen, shooing away the staff, stirring a large ceramic pot with a wooden spoon.

When they sat down, the air was thick with tension and the smell of herbs.

"Eat up," Grandmother said, ladling a thick, dark brown soup into Eulalie's bowl. "It's an old family recipe. From the old country. It builds the blood."

Caden looked at his own bowl. It smelled earthy, medicinal. "Grandmother, we usually start with a salad."

"Hush," she scolded gently. "Eulalie looks peaked. Too thin. You can't carry a Holloway heir with hips like a boy."

Eulalie sat frozen. She stared at the liquid in her bowl. It was steaming, swirling with dark flecks of vegetable matter.

She didn't pick up her spoon. She leaned forward slightly, inhaling.

Her nostrils flared.

Eulalie wasn't just a coder. Before she built digital architectures, she had built hardware. She knew materials science. She knew chemistry. And she knew exactly what that smell was.

It wasn't basil. It wasn't oregano.

It was a pungent, slightly balsamic scent with a bitter undertone.

Hypericum perforatum. St. John's Wort. And underneath that, the distinct, musky odor of Epimedium-Horny Goat Weed.

It was a fertility bomb. A crude, herbal cocktail designed to hyper-ovulate the reproductive system.

But that wasn't the problem.

The problem was the St. John's Wort. It was a liver enzyme inducer. Specifically, it induced CYP3A4, the enzyme responsible for metabolizing synthetic hormones.

If a woman was on oral contraceptives, a high dose of St. John's Wort would metabolize the pill so fast it would render it useless within hours.

Grandmother wasn't just feeding her soup. She was chemically sabotaging her birth control. She was trying to trap her with a pregnancy.

The realization hit Eulalie like a bucket of ice water. The cruelty of it. The violation. She felt a spike of adrenaline. If Caden knew she was on the pill, he would realize she had no intention of reconciling. He might use that against her in the divorce proceedings, claiming she was acting in bad faith. She needed a cover story. Something irrefutable. Something medical.

Eulalie picked up her spoon. She tapped it against the rim of the bowl. Clink.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

Grandmother's smile didn't waver, but her eyes hardened. "Nonsense. It took me three hours to brew. It's rude to refuse an elder's cooking."

"Just try it, Eulalie," Caden said, cutting his bread. He was desperate for peace. "It's just soup. Don't make a scene."

"Just soup," Eulalie repeated. She looked at Caden. "You want me to drink this?"

"Yes," Caden said, exhausted. "Please."

Eulalie stood up.

She picked up the bowl. The china was hot against her fingertips.

She walked past Caden. She walked past Grandmother. She walked to the corner of the room, where a rare, six-foot-tall *Dracaena fragrans*-a

Brazilian Corn Plant stood in a hand-painted pot.

Grandmother's eyes went wide. "What are you doing?"

Eulalie tilted the bowl.

The dark, sludge-like soup poured out. It splashed onto the soil, soaking into the roots of the innocent plant. The smell of concentrated herbs filled the room, overpowering and cloying.

"You ungrateful little brat!" Grandmother shrieked, slamming her hand on the table. "That is medicine! That cost a fortune!"

Eulalie let the last drop fall. She turned around, holding the empty bowl. Her expression was terrifyingly calm.

"It contains St. John's Wort," Eulalie said. "A high concentration. Probably an extract."

"So what?" Grandmother spat. "It's natural! It's for your mood!"

"I am currently taking medication," Eulalie lied smoothly. She wasn't going to tell them it was birth control. She needed a weapon they would fear. "An anti-histamine for a severe allergy. St. John's Wort interacts with it. It causes a rapid drop in blood pressure and potential anaphylactic shock."

She pulled her phone from her pocket. She snapped a photo of the soiled plant soil, then another of the empty bowl. The shutter sound was loud in the silent room.

"I'm documenting this," Eulalie said, her voice dropping an octave.

"You weren't feeding me," Eulalie said. "You were poisoning me."

Silence. Absolute, suffocating silence.

Caden looked from the plant to his grandmother. His face went pale. He knew Eulalie's background. If she said it was chemistry, it was chemistry. But a flicker of doubt crossed his eyes. Allergy? He didn't remember her having severe allergies. He watched her closely, wondering if there was another reason, but the sheer intensity of her anger made him swallow the question.

"Grandmother?" Caden asked, his voice shaking. "Is that true? What did

you put in there?"

Grandmother sputtered. She looked small suddenly, shrinking into her tweed suit. "I... I didn't know about any allergy. I just wanted... I wanted you to be healthy. To give me a great-grandson. That Pennington girl is barren, I can tell by her hips, but Eulalie..."

"You tried to drug my wife," Caden said. The words tasted like ash.

"She is my wife!" Grandmother yelled, trying to regain control. "I have rights to this lineage!" ③

"No," Eulalie said. She wiped her hands on a napkin and threw it on the table. "You have the right to remain silent. I have the photos. I have the residue in the soil. If I ever smell a foreign substance in my food again, I won't just document it. I will send the samples to a lab and I will have you arrested for attempted poisoning."

She looked at Caden. "Control your family, Caden. Or I will remove them." She turned and walked out of the room. Her footsteps echoed on the hardwood, steady and rhythmic.

Caden looked at the plant. In his mind, the leaves were already curling, dying from the toxicity of his family's desperation.

He looked at his grandmother. For the first time in his life, he didn't see the matriarch. He saw a dangerous, desperate old woman who would burn the house down just to rule the ashes.

"You could have killed her," Caden whispered.

"I was trying to give you a life!" Grandmother sobbed, burying her face in her napkin.

"No," Caden stood up, his appetite gone. "You were trying to breed a successor. There's a difference."

He walked out, leaving his grandmother weeping over a bowl of cold, poisonous soup.

