

Chapter 114 No.

Le Coucou was the kind of restaurant where the silence cost money. The chandeliers were crystal, the waiters were invisible until needed, and the menu had no prices.

Eulalie sat by the window, the Boston skyline framing her like a portrait. Harrison sat opposite her, swirling a glass of Pinot Noir.

"You didn't have to pick me up," Eulalie said, cutting her turbid.

"I was in the neighborhood," Harrison lied. "Besides, I hate seeing good leather ruined by bad taste."

Eulalie smiled. It was a small, genuine thing. "Thank you."

The peace was shattered by a commotion at the entrance.

"Do you know who I am?" a voice boomed.

Eulalie stiffened. She didn't need to turn around. She knew that bluster. It was Grady Pennington.

She glanced toward the maitre d' stand. Grady was there, red-faced and sweating in a suit that was too tight. Gussie was beside him, fanning herself. And Adalynn... Adalynn was wearing a dress that was far too short for lunch, looking around the room as if she expected applause.

"We don't have a reservation," Grady shouted at the poor host. "But I am Caden Holloway's father-in-law! Well, practically. Give us a table. The best one."

The host looked pained. He glanced toward Harrison's table. He knew Harrison. Harrison's grandfather had been the angel investor who launched the chef's career thirty years ago. The Sterlings didn't own the building but they owned the loyalty of everyone in it. And he knew Eulalie was the actual Mrs. Holloway.

The host caught Harrison's eye. He made a subtle gesture—a slight tilt of the head, a raised eyebrow. What do I do?

Harrison looked at Eulalie. "Your call, boss. Do we bounce them?"

Eulalie took a sip of water. She watched Adalynn preening checking her reflection in a brass pillar.

"No," Eulalie said softly. "Don't bounce them. Feed them."

She pointed a finger. Not at the empty tables by the window. But toward the back. Specifically, to a small, wobbly two-top that was wedged right next to the swinging doors of the kitchen and the corridor leading to the restrooms.

It was the "Penalty Box." The table where tourists and people who didn't tip were sent to die.

Harrison grinned. He nodded to the host.

The host bowed imperceptibly. He turned to Grady with a tight, professional smile. "Mr. Pennington. My apologies. We have had a cancellation. Right this way."

Grady puffed out his chest. "See? I told you. The Holloway name opens doors."

They followed the host. They walked past the windows. Past the banquettes. Past the flowers.

They kept walking.

Adalynn's smile faltered as they approached the kitchen. The noise of clattering pans grew louder. The smell of dish soap wafted from the hallway.

"Here you are," the host said, pulling out a chair that sat directly in the path of a busboy carrying a tray of dirty dishes.

"Here?" Adalynn gasped. "But... the window tables are empty!"

"Reserved," the host said icily. "For our VIPs."

Adalynn spun around. "Who could possibly be more VIP than-"

She stopped.

Across the room, bathed in sunlight, sat Eulalie.

Eulalie wasn't looking at her phone. She wasn't hiding. She was looking straight at Adalynn. She raised her wine glass. She didn't smile. She just held the glass up in a silent, devastating toast.

I see you. And you are trash.

Adalynn went crimson. She started to march toward them, but Gussie grabbed her arm.

"Don't," Gussie hissed. "People are watching. Sit down."

The Penningtons squeezed into the tiny table. Every time the kitchen door swung open, it hit the back of Grady's chair. Thwack.

Eulalie beckoned the sommelier.

"Yes, Madame?"

"That table," Eulalie whispered gesturing to the Penningtons "Send them a bottle. On me."

"Of course. The '82 Margaux?"

"No," Eulalie said. Her eyes danced with cold amusement. "Do you have anything... screw-top? Perhaps a house red that you use for cooking?"

The sommelier paused. His lips twitched. "I believe we have a bottle of 'Table Blend' in the back. It is... robust."

"Perfect. Send it over. Tell them it's a charity gift from Mrs. Holloway."

Five minutes later, the sommelier arrived at the Pennington table. He held the bottle like it was a dead rat. It had no label, just a generic sticker that said RED WINE.

He placed it on the table. He didn't offer to pour it. He simply unscrewed the cap. Click-crackle.

"Compliments of Mrs. Holloway," the sommelier announced loudly enough for the surrounding tables to hear. "She thought this vintage would suit your... palate."

A ripple of laughter went through the dining room.

Grady stared at the screw-top. His face turned the color of a boiled ham.

Adalynn looked across the room. Eulalie was laughing at something Harrison said, not even looking at them anymore. She had dismissed them completely.

"We're leaving," Grady snarled. He stood up, knocking his chair over.

"But dad, the food..." Adalynn whined.

"Move!" Grady shoved past the busboy.

The Penningtons fled. They marched out of the restaurant, the sound of their humiliation echoing in the clatter of the kitchen door.

Eulalie watched them go. She took a bite of her turbot. It tasted like victory.

"You're vicious," Harrison said admiringly.

"I'm efficient," Eulalie corrected. "Why waste a good steak knife when a screw-top will do the job?"

For you