

Chapter 12 No.

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At 11:30 AM, the elevator doors opened, and the scent of roses and vanilla drifted into the workspace.

Adalynn Pennington

She was wearing a white cashmere sweater dress that looked innocent and expensive, carrying a limited-edition Hermès Birkin bag. She walked through the office like she was on a runway, smiling benevolently at the staff who were too terrified to make eye contact.

She stopped at Eulalie's desk.

"Hi, sis," Adalynn chirped, her voice sweet enough to rot teeth. "I heard you were still playing secretary. That's so... quaint. Showing true grit, aren't we?"

Eulalie didn't look up from her screen. "The walkway is clear, Adalynn. Keep moving."

Adalynn's smile tightened at the edges. She leaned down, lowering her voice. "You know, it's pathetic. Hanging around him like a stray dog. He doesn't want you. He's just too polite to have security throw you out."

"Is that what he told you?" Eulalie asked, finally glancing up. Her eyes were dry and unimpressed. "Interesting."

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Adalynn huffed, flipped her hair, and marched toward Caden's office. She didn't knock. She just walked in. Through the glass, Eulalie saw Caden's face light up. He stood immediately, coming around the desk to kiss her cheek.

Eulalie felt a phantom pain in her chest, a dull ache where her heart used to be. She forced herself to look back at the code. Focus. Logic. Syntax.

Five minutes later, the intercom on her desk buzzed.

"Eulalie," Caden's voice came through, tinny and commanding. "We need coffee. Adalynn wants an oat milk latte, half sweet, dash of cinnamon. I'll have my usual. Bring it in."

Eulalie stared at the intercom. It was a power play. He wanted to reduce

her to a servant in front of his mistress.

She checked her contract again in her mind. Clause 4: Employee shall assist with general office hospitality as required.

If she refused, he could write her up for insubordination. He was looking for a reason to fire her "for cause" so he could void the payout or sue her for breach of contract.

"Fine," she whispered.

She walked to the communal kitchenette. Usually, she would grind fresh beans for Caden. She would check the water temperature. She would make it perfect.

Today, she grabbed the jar of instant coffee powder. She spooned two heaps into a mug, added boiling water from the tap, and didn't stir it well. For Adalynn, she found a packet of stale oat milk powder and dumped it in. No cinnamon.

She put the mugs on a plastic tray and walked back to the office.

The smart-glass walls of Caden's office were switched to their frosted privacy setting, blurring the figures inside into vague, meaningless silhouettes. The door was ajar.

"Oh, Caden, look at this," Adalynn was saying, her voice a low purr. "Daddy says this necklace would look perfect on me for the gala."

Eulalie pushed the door open with her hip.

With the privacy glass no longer shielding them, the unobstructed scene froze her in place.

Caden was sitting in his leather executive chair. Adalynn was perched on his lap, her arms wrapped around his neck, showing him something on her phone. Caden's hand was resting possessively on her waist, his thumb tracing the curve of her hip.

They looked comfortable. They looked like they belonged together.

Eulalie felt bile rise in her throat. It wasn't jealousy anymore; it was pure, unadulterated disgust.

"Delivery," Eulalie said, her voice flat.

Adalynn jumped, letting out a theatrical little shriek. "Oh! You scared me!"

She scrambled off Caden's lap, smoothing her dress. Caden didn't look embarrassed. He looked annoyed at the interruption.

"Put it on the desk," Caden said, gesturing vaguely.

Eulalie walked forward. As she passed Adalynn to reach the desk, Adalynn turned.

It happened in slow motion.

Adalynn's elbow jerked out. It looked like an accident, a clumsy pivot. But Eulalie saw the glint in her sister's eyes a fraction of a second before impact.

The elbow hit the edge of the tray hard.

The mugs tipped.

Scalding hot black coffee and sticky oat milk cascaded over the tray's edge, splashing directly onto Eulalie's right hand and down the front of her grey blazer.

"Ah!" Eulalie gasped, the pain instantaneous and searing. She dropped the tray. It clattered onto the floor, shattering the mugs.

"Oh my god!" Adalynn screamed, jumping back. "Eulalie! Why are you so clumsy? You almost got it on my Birkir!"

Eulalie gripped her right wrist with her left hand. Her skin was turning an angry, vibrant red. Blisters were already forming on her knuckles. The pain was a sharp, throbbing rhythm that traveled up her arm to her neck.

Caden shot out of his chair. He rushed around the desk.

"Adalynn!" Caden shouted. "Are you okay? Did it splash you?"

He grabbed Adalynn's hands, inspecting them frantically. He didn't even look at Eulalie, who was standing there shaking coffee dripping from her fingertips onto the expensive rug.

"I'm fine, baby, I'm fine," Adalynn whimpered, pressing her face into his chest. "She just... she came at me so fast. I think she tripped. It was so scary."

Caden turned his head, his eyes locking onto Eulalie. His expression was thunderous.

"What is wrong with you?" he yelled. "Are you that jealous? You tried to

throw coffee on her?"

Eulalie looked at him. The man she had loved for five years. The man she had nursed through the flu, whose career she had built from the shadows. He was looking at her burned hand and seeing a weapon, not a wound.

She didn't cry. She didn't scream. The pain in her hand was grounding keeping her focused.

"I didn't throw it, Caden," she said. Her voice was terrifyingly calm. "But you believe what you want. You always do."

"Look at this mess!" Caden gestured to the floor. "Clean it up. Now."

Eulalie looked at her hand. The skin was peeling slightly near the thumb.

"No," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm injured Workplace injury. I'm leaving."

She turned around.

"If you walk out that door," Caden threatened, "don't bother coming back."

"Is that a promise?" Eulalie asked over her shoulder.

She walked back to her desk. Caden smirked, thinking she was submitting. But Eulalie didn't grab a cleaning rag. She grabbed her laptop bag. With her shaking left hand, she shoved her laptop—the one containing her private encryption keys—into the bag.

She walked out. Carter was standing there, mouth agape.

"Eulalie, your hand..." Carter started, actually looking concerned for once.

"Move, Carter," she hissed.

She went straight to the women's restroom. She ran the cold water tap and thrust her hand under the stream. The relief was minimal. The shock was setting in.

She pulled out her phone with her left hand. She took a photo of her hand

under the water, the blisters clear and ugly. Then she took a photo of her coffee-stained suit.

"Upload to Cloud: Folder 'Evidence.'" 📷

She gently dried her hand with a paper towel, wincing in pain. She had the laptop. She had the evidence. She walked to the elevator, pressed the button for the lobby, and left the building.

Upstairs, Adalynn was pouting. "She ruined the mood, Caden. She's so toxic."

Caden sighed, kicking a shard of ceramic under the desk. "I know. I'm sorry. I'll make sure she apologizes to you tomorrow."

"She better," Adalynn sniffed. "Or I'm telling Daddy." 📷

Caden kissed her forehead, feeling like a protector. He had no idea that the woman who had just walked out of his office wasn't coming back to apologize. She was going to war.
