

Chapter 13 No.

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The doctor had been kind but blunt. "Second-degree burns. You're lucky it didn't hit the nerve endings deeper. It will scar if you're not careful. Keep it dry. Change the dressing twice a day."

Eulalie looked at the bandage. It was a bulky, white boxing glove of a thing. It throbbed in time with her pulse.

Her phone vibrated in her lap. She picked it up with her left hand.

Caden (Work): "Where are you? Carter says you left. Get back here and clean the rug. And write an apology letter to Adalynn. If you don't, I'm docking your bonus."

Eulalie stared at the words. Bonus. The audacity was almost impressive.

She opened her banking app. She transferred the co-pay fee from her secret account. Then she opened the camera, took a picture of the itemized medical receipt—\$450 for treatment and supplies—and hit reply.

Eulalie: "Workplace injury sustained due to unsafe environment created by unauthorized visitor. Bill attached for reimbursement. Per NY Labor Law, docking pay for this is illegal. Talk to legal."

Then, she did something she should have done years ago.

Block Contact.

She walked out of the clinic into the crisp autumn air. She didn't want to go back to the Loft yet. The silence there was too loud today.

She walked a few blocks to Central Park and found a bench near the reservoir. The water was grey, reflecting the overcast sky.

She looked at her bandaged hand. She had burned this same hand making soup for Caden when he had a stomach ulcer. He had eaten the

soup, complained it was too salty, and never asked about the bandage on her finger.

"He never saw me," she realized. "He only saw what I provided."

She pulled her laptop out of her tote bag with difficulty, bracing the base against her knee. She tethered it to her phone's hotspot. She needed to check on the family trust. Uncle Horton had mentioned a "restructuring offer" last week, and something about it had been nagging at her.

She logged into the public records database, her left hand pecking at the keys. She pulled the latest filing for the Bradford Manor lien.

Her eyes narrowed. The debt had been sold. It wasn't with the regional bank anymore. It had been purchased three days ago by a shell company called "Obsidian Ventures."

"Obsidian" she whispered. It sounded familiar.

She opened a secure terminal. She couldn't type fast with one hand, so she executed a pre-written script she had planted in the Holloway servers months ago—a backdoor into the vendor verification database Caden used for due diligence. If Obsidian was a player in New York real estate, Caden's system would have a file on them.

The script ran, bypassing the public records and pulling the internal tax ID match.

"Owner: Grady Pennington"

Eulalie felt the blood drain from her face. Grady. Her father. Adalynn's father.

It wasn't just bad luck. It was a siege. Grady Pennington had bought the Bradford debt through a shell company. He wasn't restructuring it; he was positioning himself to foreclose. He wanted to erase the Bradford name entirely.

And Caden... Caden's firm had provided a significant bridge loan to Obsidian Ventures recently. She saw the transaction log right there on the screen.

They were working together. Caden and her father were dismantling her mother's legacy piece by piece, probably over a steak dinner while

laughing about how stupid the Bradfords were.

Eulalie closed her eyes. The pain in her hand flared, a reminder of who these people were. They weren't just indifferent; they were predators. If she didn't act, her grandmother would be homeless soon.

She opened a secure browser. She navigated to her cold storage crypto wallet.

While the modest offshore trust her grandmother managed provided her with a black debit card for daily expenses, her true, massive wealth was entirely self-made. She had mined Bitcoin in the early days, back when Caden thought she was playing video games. She had held onto it through the crashes and the spikes. It was her "screw you" money.

"Balance: 450 BTC."

At current market rates... that was over \$25 million.

She hesitated. This was her safety net. Her freedom. But if Grady held the debt, he could call it in at any moment. She needed to be ready to strike.

She initiated a trade through an OTC (Over-The-Counter) dark pool desk she had access to, a method used to move large sums without crashing the market price or triggering immediate public alerts.

"Sell All. Convert to USD. Hold in Escrow."

The screen buffered as the liquidity provider confirmed the block trade.

"Confirm Transaction?"

She pressed Enter with her uninjured left index finger.

"Transaction Initiated. Funds pending clearance: 48 Hours."

She sat back, exhaling a cloud of mist into the cold air. She had pulled the trigger. In two days, she would be liquid. She would be powerful. And Caden Holloway thought she was worried about a \$450 medical bill.

Back at the office, Caden was pacing.

"She blocked me?" he shouted at Carter. He stared at his phone screen

where the message 'Status: Failed' mocked him in red text. It wasn't just a signal error; he knew that specific notification. She had cut him off.

"Yes, sir. And she sent this bill." Carter held up the tablet.

Caden glanced at the sum. "Four hundred dollars? She's making a federal case out of four hundred dollars? Pay it. God, she's so petty. She's probably sitting in a diner somewhere counting her pennies."

Adalynn sat on the sofa, icing her uninjured arm with a gel pack, looking tragic. "Don't be mean, Caden. Maybe she really is hurt. Though... I barely touched her."

"You didn't touch her at all," Caden corrected, rewriting history in real-time. "She's clumsy. And malicious."

He looked out the window at the darkening skyline.

"Let her sulk," he said. "I wonder whose credit card she's using to pay for that hotel she's likely staying in. I haven't seen a transaction alert all day."

Eulalie packed up her laptop. The sun was setting over the park, casting long shadows across the path. Her hand throbbed, a steady drumbeat of pain.

"Scar tissue is stronger than regular skin," she told herself.

She stood up. She wasn't going back to being the victim. She had a family to save, and a war to win.
