

## Chapter 14 No.

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Eulalie sat in the driver's seat of her beat-up rental car, parked across the street from Bergdorf Goodman on Fifth Avenue. Next to her sat Zoe, her best friend from college, a fashion buyer with neon green streaks in her hair and a mouth that had no filter.

"Okay, explain to me again why we are stalking a children's clothing store?" Zoe asked, filing her nails.

"We aren't stalking," Eulalie said, her eyes fixed on the window display across the street. "I'm observing."

"Observing your ex's mistress playing house? That's masochism, E. Pure and simple."

"Look," Eulalie pointed.

Through the plate glass window of the high-end boutique "Petite Trésor," two figures were visible.

Adalynn Pennington and Elara.

Adalynn was holding up a dress. It was an explosion of pink tulle, sequins, and synthetic feathers. It looked like a flamingo had exploded.

Elara was jumping up and down, clapping her hands. She looked ecstatic.

Adalynn knelt down, pressing the dress against Elara's chest to check the size. Even from across the street, Eulalie saw Elara flinch slightly. The child reached up and rubbed her neck where the cheap tulle brushed against her skin.

"She's telling her it's itchy," Eulalie whispered, her grip on the steering wheel tightening until her knuckles turned white under the bandage. "Elara has severe contact dermatitis to synthetics. Even a minute of contact starts the reaction."

Inside the store, Elara tried to push the dress away, saying something. Adalynn laughed, shook her head, and smoothed the fabric back against the girl. She said something that made Elara stop complaining though the child kept scratching her arm. Adalynn didn't let her put it on—probably didn't want to mess up Elara's hair before the party—but she marched to the register with the dress.

"Oh, honey," Zoe softened, reaching out to touch Eulalie's arm. "That's... that sucks."

"That's my daughter," Eulalie whispered. "She's smiling at the woman who destroyed her home."

"She's five, E. She sees sparkles and candy. She doesn't see the homewrecker."

"It's not just that," Eulalie said, her voice trembling with suppressed rage. "Adalynn is buying it. She's going to make her wear it for the party on Saturday. And when Elara breaks out in hives, Adalynn will tell her it's just 'nerves' or heat rash. She knows about the allergy. She just doesn't care."

Inside the store, Adalynn checked her reflection in the mirror while Elara twirled. Adalynn pulled out her phone and snapped a selfie with Elara in the background.

"Content," Eulalie realized. "My daughter is just content for her Instagram."

"Flashback time," Zoe muttered. "Isn't that... isn't Adalynn...?"

"My sister," Eulalie finished. "Half-sister."

The memory was always there, a jagged rock in her shoe. Twenty-five years ago, Grady Pennington had been married to Eulalie's mother, a Bradford. Then he met Gussie, Adalynn's mother—a girl with big dreams and zero scruples. Grady had walked out on Eulalie's third birthday. He started a new family, a "better" family, and pretended the first one didn't exist.

Adalynn had grown up with the father Eulalie never had. And now, she was taking the husband and the child, too. It was a generational theft.

"She's doing it on purpose," Eulalie said. "She knows who I am. She knows

what she's doing."

"So go in there!" Zoe said, unbuckling her seatbelt. "Go in there and snatch that hideous dress and tell her to back off!"

"No." Eulalie grabbed Zoe's wrist. "If I go in there, I look like the crazy, jealous ex-wife. Adalynn wins. Elara cries. Caden gets a call about how I harassed them."

"So you just watch her poison your kid?"

"I let Elara learn," Eulalie said, her heart breaking with every word. "I can't protect her from the truth forever. Pain is a teacher."

Inside the store, they were heading to the register. Elara was holding the pink dress bag like it was treasure.

Eulalie started the car. "We have work to do, Zoe. I need a favor."

"Name it."

"Bradford Department Stores. They're failing. They need a rebrand. I need you to pull your contacts. Get the indie designers, the cool brands that won't touch Holloway Malls. Divert them to us."

Zoe grinned a wicked glint in her eyes. "Oh, I love a good corporate revenge plot. Consider it done. We'll make Holloway look like a discount bin."

As they pulled into traffic, Eulalie's phone buzzed. It was a voice message. Sent from Elara's smartwatch, but the tone was entirely orchestrated by Adalynn.

Eulalie hit play.

Elara's voice filled the car, high and sweet. "Mommy! Look! Adalynn bought me the pinkest dress ever! You never buy me pink! You always say it's scratchy! Adalynn says you're just boring! Bye!"

The message ended.

Eulalie stared at the road ahead, her vision blurring. She never bought pink because the dyes in the cheap pink fabrics were the worst triggers for Elara's skin. She had spent nights putting calamine lotion on her

daughter's itchy skin, singing to her while she cried.

"It's not just boring," Eulalie murmured, realizing the depth of the manipulation. "Adalynn told her I don't want her to be pretty. That I'm jealous of her being a princess."

"She'll figure it out," Zoe said quietly. "When she starts itching she'll remember who has the lotion."

"I hope so," Eulalie said. "I really hope so."

She drove on, leaving Fifth Avenue behind. The image of the pink dress burned in her mind, a ticking time bomb wrapped in tulle.

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