

Chapter 15 No.

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Adalynn's birthday party.

Eulalie parked her rental car near the service entrance, hidden behind a row of hedges. She wasn't invited, obviously. She was here because of a frantic realization she'd had two hours ago after seeing that dress.

She had called Martha to check on Elara. "Martha, did Caden pack the red medical bag? The one with the liquid antihistamine and the emergency inhaler?"

"No, ma'am," Martha had whispered. "Miss Adalynn said it was 'clutter' and ugly. She left it on the counter. She said Elara is a big girl and doesn't need a baby bag."

Eulalie had driven like a madwoman. With Elara wearing that synthetic dress, she was a ticking time bomb. Without the meds, a severe reaction could send her to the ER.

She clutched the red bag, her bandaged hand throbbing in the damp night air.

She moved through the garden, avoiding the main path. The sound of a jazz band drifted over the lawn, mixed with laughter and the clinking of glasses.

She reached the edge of the patio, concealing herself behind a large rhododendron bush.

The pool area was transformed. Pink balloons, pink lights, pink champagne towers. It looked like a Pepto-Bismol factory explosion.

And there they were.

Center stage.

Adalynn was standing by a massive three-tier cake, holding a knife. She looked radiant, playing the part of the hostess perfectly. Caden stood next to her, his hand on the small of her back, laughing at something she whispered.

And Elara.

Elara was wearing the pink dress.

Eulalie squinted. Even from this distance, she could see Elara rubbing her neck. The child shifted uncomfortably, scratching at her arm. Her cheeks were flushed, not just with excitement, but with the tell-tale blotchiness of a reaction. She kept tugging at the collar, her small face pinched in discomfort.

"Okay, everyone!" Caden's voice boomed over the microphone. "Before we cut the cake, someone special wants to say something."

He handed the microphone to Elara.

Elara took it with both hands. She looked nervous. She scratched her leg with the toe of her shoe.

"Happy Birthday..." Elara started, her voice amplified across the silent crowd. She looked up at Adalynn, who gave her an encouraging wide-eyed nod.

Elara took a breath. "Happy Birthday, Mommy Adalynn!"

The silence that followed was absolute. It lasted only a second, but it felt like an eternity.

Then, the crowd erupted in "Awwws" and applause.

Eulalie felt the ground lurch beneath her feet.

Mommy Adalynn.

The air left her lungs. It was a physical blow, harder than the coffee burn, harder than the divorce papers. That title was hers. It was the only title that mattered. She had earned it with labor, with sleepless nights, with every sacrifice she had made.

She knew Adalynn's playbook. It wasn't just candy. Adalynn had spent weeks whispering to Elara that her real mother was "too busy" and "didn't like parties," painting herself as the fun, sparkly savior. She was buying Elara's affection with sugar and lies, rewriting the child's reality.

Caden beamed. He looked proud. "That's my girl," he said, patting Elara's head.

Adalynn covered her mouth, feigning shock. "Oh my god, you are so sweet! Come here!" She hugged Elara, careful not to wrinkle her own dress.

Eulalie gripped the rough bark of the rhododendron. A branch snapped under her hand, scratching her palm, but she didn't feel it. Tears blurred her vision, hot and fast.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to march out there and tear the microphone away. She wanted to yell, "I am her mother! I am the one who knows she hates mushrooms! I am the one who knows she's allergic to that damn dress!"

But she froze.

If she went out there now, crying and screaming, she would be the villain. She would ruin the "perfect moment." Caden would look at her with pity and disgust. Elara would be scared.

She couldn't do it.

She watched Elara scratch her neck again, harder this time.

Eulalie turned away. She stumbled back toward the service entrance, her chest heaving with silent sobs.

She nearly ran into Martha, the housekeeper, who was carrying a tray of empty glasses.

"Mrs. Holloway?" Martha gasped, nearly dropping the tray. "Oh, my god. What are you doing here?"

Eulalie wiped her face aggressively with her sleeve, smearing her mascara. She held out the red medical bag.

"Martha, listen to me," Eulalie said, her voice shaking but urgent. "Elara is

reacting to the dress. Look at her neck. It's red. She's scratching. In about twenty minutes, her throat is going to start feeling tight. The antihistamine is in here. Give it to her now. Tell Caden it's an emergency."

Martha took the bag, her eyes widening as she looked back toward the party. "I... I told him, ma'am. I told him she shouldn't wear it. But Miss Adalynn insisted."

"Just give her the medicine, Martha. Please. Before it gets worse."

"I will, ma'am. I promise."

Eulalie nodded. She took one last look at the glow of the party, at the life she was locked out of.

"Goodbye, Martha."

She walked back to her car. She sat in the driver's seat for ten minutes, sobbing until her throat was raw, hitting the steering wheel until her hand throbbed.

Then, she stopped.

She looked in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were red, her face puffy.

"Enough" she said to the reflection.
