

Chapter 16 No.

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After the long drive back to the city, she was in a warehouse in Bushwick a gritty art gallery by day, an underground club by night. Zoe had dragged her here. "You need to exorcise the demons," Zoe had said. "And by demons, I mean the image of that pink dress."

Eulalie stood on the edge of the dance floor. She had ditched the business suit for a black silk slip dress. She had draped her leather jacket over her shoulders like a cape, leaving the sleeves empty so they wouldn't constrict the bulky bandage on her right hand. The white gauze looked stark against the black leather, a battle scar on display.

"Drink up!" Zoe shouted over the music. "To freedom!"

Eulalie raised her glass. "To hell with them."

She drank. The alcohol burned pleasantly. She let the music take over. She started to move. At first, she was stiff, self-conscious. But then, she closed her eyes. She imagined shaking off the layers of expectation, the years of silence. She danced harder, her hair flying around her face.

Her phone buzzed in her purse. A notification from her crypto wallet. "Funds Cleared. \$25,400,000 USD Available."

She smiled, a savage, sharp thing. The ammunition was ready. She just needed a target.

Across the room, Quentin Knight lowered his beer.

Quentin was Caden's oldest friend, a trust-fund kid who pretended to be a photographer. He squinted through the strobe lights.

"No way," he muttered.

He pulled out his phone. He zoomed in.

The woman dancing in the center of the floor was mesmerizing. She was laughing, her head thrown back, her body moving with a raw, sensual energy he had never associated with Caden's boring wife.

He hit record.

At the Holloway estate, the party was descending into chaos.

It started with a whine. Then a scratch. Then a scream.

"It itches! It burns!" Elara shrieked, tearing at the pink dress.

She was rolling on the pool deck, her skin covered in angry red welts.

"Elara, stop it! You're ruining the photos!" Adalynn hissed, trying to pull Elara's hands away.

"Get it off! Get it off!" Elara vomited on the patio stones, sick from the stress and the systemic reaction.

Adalynn jumped back with a screech of disgust. "Ew! Caden! She threw up on my Louboutins!"

Caden rushed over, looking panicked. "What's happening? Is it the food?"

Martha pushed through the crowd, carrying the bottle of antihistamine she had retrieved from the red bag. "It's the dress, sir! She's allergic to the fabric! Mrs. Holloway brought the medicine! She warned us!"

Caden froze. "Eulalie? When?"

"She was here! Just now! She dropped off the bag because she knew you forgot it!" Martha poured the medicine into a spoon and forced it into Elara's mouth.

Caden looked at the gate. She had been here? And she didn't come in? She had driven all the way here just to drop off a bag and leave?

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out, distracted. A video message from Quentin.

He clicked play.

The small screen lit up with the flashing lights of the club. And there was Eulalie.

She looked... incredible. Dark, dangerous, free. She was dancing with a group of people, smiling a smile he hadn't seen in years. A male model with tattoos was whispering something in her ear, and she was laughing.

The timestamp was "Now."

Caden looked at the chaos in front of him. His daughter screaming and covered in hives. His mistress whining about her shoes. The smell of

vomit.

And his wife, the woman who was supposed to be at home crying over him, was out partying.

"She's at a club?" Caden shouted, disbelief turning into rage. "My daughter is sick, and she's at a club?"

He dialed her number.

"The subscriber you have dialed is not accepting calls."

He hurled the phone at a patio chair in a blind rage. It ricocheted off the metal frame and splashed directly into the deep end of the pool.

"Dammit!"

Adalynn was wiping her shoe with a napkin. "God, Caden, can't you control your child? This is my night!"

Caden turned on her. For the first time, the "perfect" Adalynn looked ugly to him. "Shut up, Adalynn! Just shut up! Help me get her dress off!"

"I'm not touching that vomit!"

Caden scooped Elara up, ignoring the mess on his own suit. Elara was sobbing "Mommy... I want Mommy..."

"Mommy's busy," Caden muttered bitterly, the image of Eulalie dancing burning in his mind. "Mommy doesn't care."

Back at the club, Quentin approached Eulalie.

"Eulalie? Wow. Didn't know you had it in you."

Eulalie stopped dancing. She saw Quentin's smirk. She saw the phone in his hand.


"Quentin," she said, her voice cold steel. "Did you send it to him?"

"Just sharing the news, babe. Caden was worried about you."

Zoe stepped in front of Eulalie, pushing Quentin's chest. "Back off, creep. She's not interested."

"Relax," Quentin laughed, hands up. "Just saying. You look hot. Caden's a fool."


Eulalie stepped around Zoe. She looked Quentin in the eye.

"Tell him," she said, leaning close so he could hear over the bass, "that I'm having the time of my life. And tell him not to wait up." 

She grabbed Zoe's hand. "Let's go. The air just got toxic."

They walked out onto the street. The cool air hit Eulalie's sweat-dampened skin.

She checked her phone. No missed calls (she had blocked him, after all). But a text from Martha.

Martha: "Gave her the meds. She is sleeping now. Mr. Holloway is furious. He dropped his phone in the pool." 

Eulalie let out a short, sharp laugh.

"What?" Zoe asked.

"Instant karma," Eulalie said.

She looked up at the moon. "Zoe, the funds cleared. I have the capital."

Zoe stopped walking. "You mean..."

"I don't need his money," Eulalie said, pocketing the phone. "I have my own. And I'm going to use it to buy something he loves."

"What?"

"His competition."



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