

Chapter 2 No.

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Standing by the floor-to-ceiling window, she watched the tiny, sleek shape of the Maybach pull away into the Fifth Avenue traffic. They were gone.

Martha, the housekeeper, appeared in the doorway, wringing her hands in her apron. "Mrs. Holloway? I... Mr. Holloway said not to hold dinner."

Eulalie nodded, her eyes fixed on the unopened Rimowa suitcase near the closet. It looked like a foreign object, an intruder in the pristine room. "That's fine, Martha. You can go."

"But—"

"Go," Eulalie said softly.

When the apartment was truly empty, the air felt too thin. Eulalie stood up, gasping. She needed to get out. She couldn't breathe in this mausoleum of beige silk and indifference.

She grabbed her coat and walked out, not waiting for the elevator, taking the service stairs down all thirty floors. Her legs burned, a welcome distraction from the ache in her chest.

She walked aimlessly for blocks, the cold wind biting her cheeks. Her feet carried her on autopilot toward the Upper East Side's restaurant row. She found herself standing across the street from Le Jardin, a French bistro with Michelin stars and floor-to-ceiling windows.

It was Elara's favorite place for soufflé.

Eulalie stepped behind the thick trunk of a London Plane tree, pulling her collar up. Through the glass, the restaurant glowed like a warm, golden lantern in the dark night.

And there they were.

Table 4. The best table.

Caden was cutting a steak, his movements precise, elegant. Across from him sat Adalynn. She was wearing a dress the color of fresh blood, sequins catching the candlelight. She threw her head back, laughing at something Caden said, her hand reaching across the table to touch his wrist.

Elara sat between them, a little queen on her throne.

Eulalie watched as Adalynn spooned a massive dollop of chocolate mousse and held it out to Elara. Elara opened her mouth wide, accepting it greedily, chocolate smearing on her chin. Adalynn wiped it off with a napkin cooing

It was a perfect picture. A mother, a father, a child.

Except the mother was the wrong woman.

Eulalie's phone buzzed in her pocket. A notification. Adalynn Pennington just added to her story.

Her fingers shook as she unlocked the screen. She tapped the colorful ring around Adalynn's profile picture.

The video played. It was shot from Adalynn's perspective at the table. The camera focused on Elara, who was hugging Adalynn's neck.

"Tell the camera, Elara," Adalynn's voice purred from the phone speakers. "Who's your favorite?"

Elara grinned, her teeth coated in chocolate. "Adalynn is! Auntie Adalynn is a million times better than Mommy. Mommy is mean. She makes me eat broccoli. You're the best!"

The camera panned to Caden. He was swirling his wine, looking at them with a relaxed, indulgent smirk. "Eat up, kid. No drill sergeants here tonight."

The video ended.

Eulalie lowered the phone. The world tilted on its axis.

Mean.

She thought of the hours she spent researching nutrition. She thought of the nights she stayed up holding Elara's hand through fevers while Caden was "at a conference." She thought of the disciplines she enforced so her daughter wouldn't grow up to be a spoiled brat.

To Elara, that wasn't love. That was oppression. Adalynn's sugar-coated neglect was love.

A gust of wind ripped through her coat, chilling her to the bone. She felt nauseous. She turned away from the window, stumbling blindly. Her shoulder checked a passerby hard.

"Watch it!" the man snapped.

"Sorry," she gasped, breaking into a run. She ran until her lungs burned fleeing the image of that happy, stolen family.

Back at the penthouse, Eulalie didn't turn on the lights. She walked straight into Caden's study. The smell of his cigars hung in the air, once comforting, now suffocating.

She knelt before the wall safe hidden behind a landscape painting. Her fingers dialed the combination, 10-14-05. Her birthday. Caden had set it years ago because he said he'd never forget it.

The irony tasted like bile.

The heavy steel door clicked open. Inside, stacked beneath deeds and bonds, was a manila envelope. She pulled it out.

The Divorce Agreement. Drafted six months ago, after Caden had missed their anniversary to go to Adalynn's yacht party. She had never shown it to him. She had been afraid. Afraid of losing Elara.

She carried the papers to the desk and clicked on the brass reading lamp. The light pooled on the stark white pages.

She flipped to the custody section. Paragraph 4, Clause B. Joint custody requested, with primary residence to the Mother.

Eulalie uncapped a fountain pen. The ink was black, permanent.

She remembered Elara's voice. "A million times better than Mommy."

If she fought for custody now, with no job, no home of her own, and Caden's army of lawyers, she would lose. And even if she won, Elara would hate her. She would be the villain who took her away from the fun aunt and the rich dad.

Eulalie's hand hovered over the paper. A tear finally escaped, hot and stinging landing on the page.

Then, she drew a sharp, black line through the custody clause.

She slashed through the request for alimony. She slashed through the request for the house.

She was taking nothing. She was leaving them to each other. It was the only way to save herself.

She walked into Elara's room. The floor was covered in plastic toys that blinked and beeped—gifts from Caden. In the corner, gathering dust, were the LEGO Mindstorms sets Eulalie had bought to teach her coding.

She picked up the box of the new programmable robot she had bought for tonight. She walked to the trash chute in the hallway and shoved it in.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

The sound of it hitting the bottom echoed up the shaft.

She returned to the living room. Her phone buzzed again. A direct message from Adalynn.

"Best launch party ever with my fav people! Thanks for letting me steal the spotlight on your birthday. Hope you're having fun all alone, sis."

Eulalie stared at the screen. She didn't type a reply. She held the power button down.

"Slide to power off."

The screen went black. Her reflection in the dark glass stared back—eyes dry, jaw set. The weeping woman from the street was gone.
