

## Chapter 20 No.

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"Eulalie!" he shouted.

Silence.

The apartment was quiet. Even with Martha and Elara living there, the air felt stale, stripped of the warmth and life Eulalie used to breathe into the vast rooms. He stood there, blinking expecting her to appear from the kitchen or to hear the hum of the vacuum. He walked into the livingroom, scanning for signs of life. He expected to see her coat on the rack, or her shoes by the door.

But there was nothing

He ran upstairs to the master bedroom. He threw open the closet doors. Her side was empty. Not just messy—empty. The hangers were gone. The drawers were open and bare.

He felt a strange, disorienting sensation, like missing a step on a staircase. He had known she was "gone," but he hadn't truly believed she had erased herself. He thought she was staying at a hotel with a suitcase, waiting for him to call.

Martha appeared from the kitchen, looking weary. "Sir? Mrs. Holloway isn't here."

"I know she's not here! I meant... has she called? Did she send for her things?"

"No, sir. She took everything she need the night she left."

Caden threw the macarons onto the console table. The box crushed slightly. He loosened his tie, feeling like the walls were closing in.

"Where is she sleeping? That dump in Seaport District?"

"I don't know, sir."

Elara came running down the stairs. She was wearing mismatched pajamas.

"Daddy? Is Mommy back?"

Caden looked at his daughter. She looked small and hopeful.

"No, Elara. Go to bed."

"But I can't find my paint set! And Adalynn won't answer my texts!"

Caden rubbed his temples. "Adalynn is busy, honey."

"She's always busy!" Elara stomped her foot. "Mommy always answered!"

Caden's phone rang. He looked at the screen. Grandmother Holloway.

He groaned. The matriarch. The woman who held the purse strings of the entire Holloway empire.

"Hello, Grandmother."

"Caden," her voice was like dry parchment rustling. "Sunday dinner. This weekend. I have an announcement regarding the family trust distribution."

"Of course, I'll be there."

"And bring Eulalie. I haven't seen her in months. I have a vintage brooch I want to give her."

Caden froze. "Uh, Grandmother... Eulalie is... she's a bit under the weather."

"Nonsense. She's young. Bring her. Or don't bother coming yourself. I won't have my family fractured."

Click.

Caden stared at the phone. If he showed up without Eulalie, his grandmother would ask questions. If she found out about the divorce, about Adalynn... she was old-fashioned. She might cut him out of the trust distribution. He needed that money to cover the losses from the tech slump.

He had to get Eulalie there.

He dialed her number. Blocked.

He cursed. He opened his messaging app. He typed a text.

Caden: "Grandmother wants to see you Sunday. Dinner. You have to come. It's important for the family."

"Message Failed to Send."

He switched to email, typing a message to the old iCloud address they used to share.

Subject: Business Proposition.

"Eulalie. Grandmother is demanding your presence this Sunday. I know you're angry. But if you come, I will give you whatever you want. Name your price."

He hit send.

Ten minutes later, his phone pinged.

From a newly generated, untraceable address.

"My consulting rate for hostile environments is \$50,000 per hour. Four hour minimum Payment in advance. Wire instructions attached."

Caden stared at the screen. Fifty thousand dollars? And the email address.... It was another taunt. Jory must be helping her set up these secure channels.

"She's insane," he whispered. "She's absolutely lost her mind."

But then he remembered the trust fund. Millions at stake.

He ground his teeth. He opened his banking app.

"Transfer: \$200,000.00 to Crypto Wallet. Address provided."

He sent the receipt.

Caden: "Done. You better be charming"

A minute later, a reply.

"Receipt received. Donation of \$200,000 made anonymously to the 'Women's Legal Defense Fund for Victims of Domestic Narcissism'. See you Sunday. I don't do charming anymore."

Caden dropped the phone on the sofa.

She had donated it. She didn't keep a cent. She burned his money just to make a point. And because she used an anonymous crypto wallet for the transfer, he couldn't even track where the money went or trace it to Jory.

He looked around the empty, cold penthouse. He looked at the crushed box of macarons.

For the first time, he realized that he wasn't buying her time. He was renting a stranger.

Elara sat at the top of the stairs, watching him.

"Daddy?" she whispered. "Why are you yelling at your phone?"

Caden looked up. He looked lost. The anger was still there, but beneath it was a sudden, terrifying loss of control.

"Because, Elara... I think I made a mistake."

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