

## Chapter 21 No.

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The words hung in the oppressive silence of the penthouse long after Elara had padded back to her room.

"I think I made a mistake."

Caden sank back onto the sofa, the admission echoing in the vast emptiness of the space that was once a home. The feeling was foreign, a cold, sharp shard of glass in his gut. For a moment, the sheer scale of his miscalculation was terrifyingly clear. He saw Eulalie's face at the gala, not with anger, but with a dawning horror. He had driven away the architect of his life, the silent engine that made everything run, and for what? For Adalynn's fleeting admiration? For the thrill of a conquest? The mistake wasn't a crack; it was a chasm. He ran a hand through his hair, the usual arrogance draining out of him, leaving him feeling hollowed out and... small.

But as the night wore on and the whiskey failed to numb the feeling, his fear began to curdle. This vulnerability was a weakness. It was her fault. This was her doing. She had orchestrated this, pushed him, cornered him until he felt this way. The thought took root, a welcome poison. The mistake wasn't in letting her go; the mistake was in ever letting her get under his skin. By the time the sun bled grey light through the windows, the fear was gone, buried under layers of hardened, familiar rage. He stood up, his jaw tight. He hadn't made a mistake. He had been manipulated. And tonight, at his grandmother's dinner, he would show Eulalie—and his entire family—who was still in control. He walked to the foyer, shouting for Elara, the sound of his own voice a comforting armor against the silence.

He stood before the floor-to-ceiling mirror in the foyer, his fingers working the knot of his silk tie. He adjusted it once, twice, three times. It wasn't straight. It was never straight anymore. He pulled it loose with a sharp tug of frustration, the silk hissing against his collar.

"Elara!" he shouted toward the living room, his voice echoing off the

marble floors. "We are leaving in five minutes. If you aren't ready, I'm taking the iPad away."

He checked his watch. 5:45 PM. The drive to the estate would take an hour, maybe more with the Sunday evening traffic leaving the city. His grandmother did not tolerate lateness. She considered it a moral failing, right up there with bankruptcy and wearing polyester.

The intercom buzzed. A harsh, electronic sound that shattered the silence.

"Mr. Holloway?" the doorman's voice crackled. "Ms. Bradford is here. She says she's waiting in the lobby per the schedule."

Caden clenched his jaw. She hadn't even bothered to come up. She was treating his home—their home—like a client's waiting room.

"Send her up," Caden barked.

"She refused, sir. She said the meter is running"

Caden cursed under his breath. He grabbed his car keys from the console table, the metal biting into his palm. "Fine. Whatever. Elara! Now!"

As if summoned by the stress in his voice, Elara came barreling out of the media room. She was clutching her tablet to her chest like a shield. Her hair was messy, a half-hearted attempt at a ponytail that was already sliding sideways. At five years old, she lacked the dexterity to fix it herself, and the nanny had left an hour ago.

"Daddy!" she whined, stopping in the middle of the rug. "Adalynn says she's going to a rooftop party tonight. Why can't she come with us? Grandmama's house smells like old books and soup. It's boring"

Caden sighed, crouching down to be at eye level with his daughter. He put on his 'patient father' face, the one he used when people were watching.

"Elara, honey, we talked about this. Grandmama has rules. Only family tonight. Adalynn... Adalynn has her own work to do."

"But she's not working!" Elara stomped her foot, the sound muffled by the plush runner. "She's partying! She sent me a picture of her outfit! It's sparkly! I want to see the sparkles!"

She threw the small stuffed bear she had been holding in her other hand. It hit the floor with a soft thud.

"I don't want to go!" she screamed, her face scrunching up into a mask of pure, spoiled defiance. "I hate it there! You can't make me!"

Caden looked helpless. He reached out to smooth her hair, but she ducked away. He looked around the empty foyer, instinctively waiting for Eulalie to step out of the shadows and fix this. This was usually the part where Eulalie would kneel, use her soft voice, promise a story on the ride over, and magically de-escalate the tantrum. She was the emotional shock absorber of the house.

But the house was empty. There was no shock absorber. Just the echo of a child's scream and his own incompetence.

"Elara, get in the elevator," Caden snapped, his patience fraying. He scooped the kicking screaming five-year-old onto his hip, ignoring her flailing limbs.

Down in the lobby, the air was cool and smelled of polished brass. Caden marched out of the elevator, Elara still sniffing against his shoulder.

Eulalie was waiting near the glass doors.

He expected her to look... appropriate. Subdued. Perhaps wearing one of those beige or pastel sheaths she used to favor, the ones that blended into the wallpaper and made her look like a well-behaved accessory.

Instead, she was wearing black.

It was a long-sleeved dress made of crushed velvet that swallowed the light. It fit her differently than her old clothes. The high neck was severe, almost Victorian, but the back—visible in the lobby's mirrored walls moments before she turned to face them—plunged dangerously low, exposing the sharp, elegant line of her spine. It was a dress for a widow, or an assassin.

She checked her wrist, though she wasn't wearing a watch. Her movements were precise, clinical. She didn't look at him with warmth; she looked at him like he was a line of buggy code.

Caden frowned, shifting Elara's weight. "Black? Eulalie, this is a family

estate dinner, not a funeral."

Eulalie adjusted her clutch, her eyes finally meeting his. They were cool, detached, like a doctor examining a particularly uninteresting rash.

"For me," she said, her voice smooth and devoid of inflection, "there is no difference."

Eulalie's eyes shifted to Elara. The child was staring at her mother, gripping Caden's jacket.

"Elara?" Eulalie said softly, taking half a step forward.

Elara looked at her mother. She remembered Adalynn's words from the morning Mommy left you. She doesn't fun. Elara scowled, burying her face into Caden's neck, turning her back on Eulalie completely.

"I don't want her!" Elara shouted into Caden's shoulder. "I want Adalynn!"

Eulalie froze. The rejection was a physical blow. She straightened her spine, her face closing up.

"Fine. Whatever. Let's go. We need to beat the traffic."

He gestured toward the valet stand where his Range Rover was idling.

"You take the Rover," Eulalie said, stepping through the automatic doors into the evening air. "I'll see you there."

"We are a family," Caden hissed, stepping toward her, lowering his voice so the doorman wouldn't hear, though Elara was currently wiping her nose on his expensive lapel. "We arrive together. That's the deal. United front."

"The deal was my presence, Caden. Not my transportation. Besides," she offered a cold, humorless smile, "I have another stop to make afterwards. I'm not coming back here."

"You... you don't even have a car! You drove that piece of junk rental!"

"Look in the valet circle," her voice drifted back.

Caden walked out, his irritation mounting. He opened the rear door of his SUV and wrestled the still-protesting Elara into her booster seat.

"Sit still," he muttered, buckling her in.

Then, an engine roared to life.

It wasn't the polite purr of a luxury sedan. It was a guttural, throaty growl that vibrated in the concrete.

Caden turned.

Pulled up right behind his SUV, in a space reserved for guests, sat a Porsche 911 Turbo S. It was black. Not just black, but a deep, metallic obsidian that looked like a weapon.

Eulalie was behind the wheel. She wore sunglasses, despite the fading light. Her right hand, encased in the thick white medical gauze from the burns, rested passively on her lap, a stark contrast to the dark interior. Her left hand, however, gripped the top of the steering wheel with practiced ease.

"You..." Caden muttered, staring. "When did she buy that?"

He had assumed she was broke. He had assumed her donating the \$200,000 he sent was a bluff driven by pure, reckless pride. He had thought she was secretly desperate. But that car... that car cost more than the "consulting fee" itself.

Eulalie didn't look at him. She reached out with her left hand to toggle the paddle shifter, avoiding any strain on her injured right hand. The engine revved with a sharp, aggressive bark. She peeled out of the spot, the tires chirping against the asphalt. She didn't wait for him. She didn't wave. She shot toward the exit ramp like a bullet leaving a chamber.

Caden slammed his hand against his steering wheel. "Dammit!"

She wasn't just driving separately. She was leaving him behind.

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