

Chapter 22 No.

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Caden wasn't going straight to the estate. He had a detour to make. ①

She had been monitoring the GPS tracker embedded in the Holloway corporate vehicle fleet system—a system she had designed. The dot representing Caden's Rover wasn't taking the direct route. It was signaling a turn.

He was taking the exit for the exclusive rest stop near the country club, miles before their actual turnoff.

Why?

The dinner wasn't for another hour, but stopping now meant risking his grandmother's legendary wrath over lateness. He had Elara with him. Why stop there? Whatever this was, it was urgent. ①

Curiosity, cold and sharp, pricked at her. She signaled and followed, keeping two cars between them, trusting the deep obsidian paint of her car to swallow the reflection of the streetlights and keep her hidden from his rearview mirror.

Caden pulled into the parking lot of "The Meridian," a private members' lounge and business center that sat just off the highway. It was the kind of place where deals were made over scotch and silence.

Eulalie parked in the far corner, near a row of hedges. She killed the engine and watched. ②

Caden got out of the Rover. He didn't take Elara out. Instead, he leaned into the back seat, handing her the iPad and adjusting her headphones. He spoke to her briefly, pointing at the screen, then closed the door and locked it. The engine remained running, likely for the climate control, but he was leaving a five-year-old unaccompanied in a parking lot. ③

He straightened his jacket, looking around nervously, then walked quickly toward a secluded patio area on the side of the building.

A moment later, a man emerged from the shadows of the landscaping to meet him. ④

Eulalie's breath hitched in her throat. Her left hand involuntarily gripped the leather of the steering wheel.

Grady Pennington

Her father. The man who had abandoned her. The man who was currently trying to foreclose on her grandmother's home.

He looked older than the last time she had seen him in a magazine. His hair was thinner, his suit expensive but straining at the buttons. He walked with a swagger that didn't quite mask the desperation in his eyes.

They didn't go inside. They stood near a decorative fountain, the noise of the water masking their voices from casual passersby.

Eulalie pulled a baseball cap from her glove box—black, nondescript—and pulled it low over her eyes. She slipped on her sunglasses. She grabbed her phone with her good hand, wincing slightly as the movement pulled at the skin of her bandaged right hand. She activated the remote access app she had installed on Caden's phone months ago for "security backups."

She couldn't get close enough to hear them without being seen, but she didn't need to. She tapped the command to activate the microphone on Caden's phone, which was currently in his breast pocket.

She put in her earbuds. Grady's voice came through, slightly muffled by fabric but audible.

"Did you bring it?" Grady asked. He sounded hungry.

"It's risky, Grady," Caden's voice was tight. "The board is already asking questions about the last transfer. And the Bradfords just cleared the twelve-million-dollar debt this morning. The bank accepted the wire."

"Paid by some anonymous offshore shell company," Grady chuckled. It was a wet, ugly sound. "That doesn't mean we're done. We use this new capital to file an injunction. We tie that payment up in federal court, claim it's illicit funds, and freeze their trust. We bleed them in legal fees until they forfeit the deed. The mall project alone will net us fifty million. You get your cut, I get mine, and Adalynn gets her little empire."

Eulalie's blood turned to ice.

It wasn't just a loan. It was a partnership. Caden wasn't just helping Grady; he was investing in the destruction of her family. He was using Holloway capital—money that technically still belonged to their marital

estate—to fund the bulldozer that would level her childhood home.

"Here," Caden said. There was the sound of paper tearing. A checkbook. "Five million. This is the last tranche for the bridgeloan. Use it to pay off the lawyers and freeze that trust."

"You're a lifesaver, Caden. Really. Those Bradford hags won't know what hit them."

"Just make sure Adalynn is happy," Caden said, his voice dropping. "She's been... difficult lately. She wants this win."

"Adalynn gets what she wants. She's a Pennington. Unlike the other one."

Eulalie's left fingers flew across her screen. She couldn't take a photo of the check through the phone, but she didn't need to. She accessed Caden's digital banking log via the backdoor she maintained in his personal finance app. The pending transaction appeared instantly: \$5,000,000 Recipient Obsidian Ventures.

She took a screenshot. Then she exported the audio file of their conversation.

"Don't worry," Grady said. "Nobody knows. It's just us chickens."

"Let's hope so," Caden said. "I have to go. I have a dinner to pretend to enjoy. Elara is waiting in the car."

Eulalie pulled back, sinking lower in her seat. She had enough.

She watched Caden rush back to the SUV. He checked on Elara—who hadn't looked up from her screen—and got back in the driver's seat.

She sat in her car, her heart hammering against her ribs. It wasn't fear. It was the adrenaline of the hunt.

She opened the Signal app. She attached the files.

To: Jory

Message: Target confirmed. Caden is funding Obsidian directly. He's leveraging Holloway liquidity to do it. He's violating the conflict of interest clause in the bylaws.


Jory: That's illegal. Fiduciary breach. If the board sees this...

Eulalie: Not yet. Let him bleed first. Leak the liquidity concerns to the minority shareholders. Make them panic about the cash reserves.

Jory: Copy that. The board meeting on Monday is going to be chaotic.

Eulalie put the phone down. She looked at her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were hard, bright.

"You wanted to buy a win for Adalynn, Caden?" she whispered. "I hope she enjoys the receipt."

She started the engine with a twist of her left wrist. She had a dinner to attend. 



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