

Chapter 23 No.

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Eulalie walked up the steps. Five minutes later, the Range Rover pulled up. Caden jumped out, looking frazzled. He practically dragged Elara out of the back seat. The child had ice cream on her face from the treat Caden must have produced to keep her quiet during the drive.

"Wipe her face," Eulalie said as he approached, not moving to help.

Caden glared at her, scrubbing Elara's cheek with his thumb. "You left us."

"I arrived on time," Eulalie checked her invisible watch. "You're late."

"Let's just go in. And for God's sake, smile."

"My contract covers attendance, Caden. Smiling is an add-on service."

They entered the grand foyer. It was exactly as she remembered: cold, imposing filled with portraits of dead white men who looked like they disapproved of joy.

In the drawing room, the clan was gathered.

Grandmother Holloway sat in her high-backed wing chair by the fire, a queen on her throne. Caden's mother, Mrs. Holloway, stood by the drinks cart, already on her second gin and tonic. And Seraphina.

Seraphina was lounging on a sofa, wearing a dress that was too tight and too bright. When she saw Eulalie, her eyes narrowed.

"Well, well," Seraphina drawled, her voice carrying across the room. "Look who decided to show up. I thought we took out the trash on Monday."

The room went silent. 🗣️

Eulalie walked forward, her heels clicking on the parquet. She didn't flinch. She went straight to the Grandmother.

"Good evening Grandmother," she said, inclining her head respectfully.

The old woman looked her up and down, her gaze lingering on the black velvet dress and the white bandage on her hand. "You look... severe,

Eulalie. And injured Clumsy as always. But punctual. Unlikemy grandson." ①

Caden hurried in, holding Elara's hand. "Sorry, Grandmother. Traffic."

Seraphina stood up, swirling her drink. She walked over to Eulalie, invading her personal space. "I'm surprised you have the nerve to show your face here, Eulalie. After you quit? Abandoning the family business right before the quarterly review? It's pathetic."

Eulalie felt Caden stiffen beside her.

"Is that right?" Mrs. Holloway, Caden's mother, chimed in from the drinks cart, a cruel smile playing on her lips. "Quitting when things get tough. Typical. She never really had the stamina for this family. Better she stays home and focuses on... whatever it is she does. Though looking at Elara's manners, she's failing at that too."

Elara was currently wiping her sticky hands on the antique velvet drapes.

Eulalie looked at Caden. He refused to meet her eyes. He was letting them flay her.

A week ago, this would have crushed her. She would have stuttered, apologized, tried to prove her worth. ①

Now? Now it was just data.

Eulalie smiled. It was a terrifyingly calm expression.

"Stamina isn't the issue, Seraphina," Eulalie said, her voice clear and light. "It was a strategic pivot. I realized my skills were undervalued in the current market. Caden couldn't afford my rates anymore." ①

She emphasized afford with a glance at Caden that made him sweat.

"Exactly," Seraphina sneered. "So, what are you doing now? Begging for alimony?"

"Actually," Eulalie said, smoothing her skirt with her good hand, "I'm enjoying my freedom. It's amazing how much you can accomplish when you aren't carrying dead weight."

"Dinner is served!" the butler announced, saving Seraphina from having to process that insult.

They moved to the dining room. The seating chart was rigid. Grandmother at the head, Caden at her right.

Usually, Eulalie was placed next to Caden. Tonight her place card was at the far end of the table, next to the drafty window. The seat for the outcast.

She sat down without complaint.

Just as the soup was being served, the double doors banged open.

"Sorry I'm late! My car wouldn't start and I had to hotwire it!"

Isla Holloway burst in. Caden's youngest sister. The black sheep. The race car driver. She had grease on her cheek and was wearing a leather jacket over a formal gown.

She scanned the room. Her eyes landed on Eulalie at the end of the table.

Isla grinned. She marched past her mother, past Seraphina, and flopped into the empty chair next to Eulalie.

"Hey, E!" Isla said, grabbing a bread roll. "I saw a sick Porsche 911 outside. Blacked out. Turbo S. Which one of your rich douchebag friends is here, Caden?"

Caden didn't choke on his water. He didn't look surprised. He set his glass down with a heavy, deliberate thud, his eyes darkening as he stared down the table at Eulalie. The memory of her taillights disappearing on the highway was clearly still burning in his chest.

"It's not a friend's car, Isla," Caden said, his voice dripping with suppressed irritation. "Ask your sister-in-law where she got the money for it."

Eulalie picked up her spoon with her left hand. "It's mine, Isla."

Isla stopped chewing. She looked at Eulalie. Then she looked at the car keys on the table next to Eulalie's clutch.

"No way," Isla breathed. "You? The woman who drives a Prius?"

"I upgraded," Eulalie said softly.

Isla's eyes shined. She leaned in, lowering her voice. "That is the sexiest thing I have ever heard. You have to let me drive it. Please. I'll be your best friend. I'll even stop calling you 'The Librarian'."

"We'll see," Eulalie said, taking a sip of soup.

"Please," Seraphina scoffed from across the table, her voice shrill. "It's probably a lease. Or Caden bought it for her as a severance package."

"Caden didn't buy it," Eulalie said, looking directly at her husband. "Caden can't afford my taste anymore."

Caden's jaw tightened until a muscle feathered in his cheek. He looked away, unable to hold her gaze, the weight of his financial secrets pressing down on him.
