

Chapter 24 No.

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Grandmother Holloway tapped her crystal goblet with a spoon. The sharp ding-ding-ding silenced the table.

"Caden," she began, her voice commanding. "I've been reviewing the quarterly projections. The retail division is struggling. But I hear you have some... fresh capital injections planned?"

Caden straightened his spine, puffing out his chest. "Yes, Grandmother. We have strong partners. Very liquid."

Eulalie took a sip of wine to hide her smirk. Liquid because you're draining the company to fund your mistress's dad, she thought.

"Good," Grandmother nodded. "Stability is key. Which brings me to the other matter."

She turned her gaze on Eulalie. It felt like a physical weight.

"You've been married five years. Elara is five. It's time for an heir. A male heir."

Eulalie almost choked on her wine. She set the glass down carefully. The audacity was breathtaking. The divorce petition had already been filed, formally submitted to the court weeks ago, yet here was the matriarch, demanding breeding stock as if Eulalie were still a broodmare in good standing.

"We need to secure the line," Grandmother continued, oblivious to the temperature drop in the room. "Since you aren't working anymore, Eulalie, you have no excuse. You should be focusing on your health. Preparing your body."

"My body is fine, Grandmother," Eulalie said, her voice tight.

"Then prove it. You look thin. Pale. And that injury... carelessness."

Grandmother gestured to the platter of vegetables. "Caden, give your wife some broccoli. She needs iron."

It was a command. A performative act of care. Show us you are a happy, functional couple.

Eulalie was sitting at the far end of the table, exiled by Seraphina's seating chart. Caden stood up to bring the platter to her, looking awkward.

"Sit down, Caden," Grandmother snapped. She pointed a withered finger at Eulalie. "And you. Why are you sitting so far away? Are you shouting secrets to the wall? Move here. Next to your husband. Now."

Eulalie stiffened. "I'm fine here."

"I said move," Grandmother commanded. "I want to see a united front, not a separated couple."

Eulalie stood slowly. She picked up her plate and glass. She walked the length of the table, her heels clicking ominously. She sat in the empty chair beside Caden. She was close enough to smell his cologne—and the faint scent of another woman's perfume beneath it.

Caden picked up the silver tongs. He selected a large, limp spear of broccoli. He leaned over and dropped it onto Eulalie's plate.

It landed with a wet plat.

"Eat up, darling," Caden said through gritted teeth. His eyes were pleading. Just play along. Don't make a scene.

Eulalie looked at the broccoli. It was green, boiled to death, and represented everything she hated about this life. The control. The forced consumption of things she didn't want.

She didn't pick up her fork. She used her knife to slowly, deliberately push the broccoli to the very edge of the porcelain plate.

"I'm not hungry" she said.

"Eulalie," Caden warned, his voice a low rumble. "Don't be difficult. Grandmother is watching."

Eulalie leaned in slightly, her shoulder brushing his. To the room, it looked intimate.

"Did you wash your hands, Caden?" she whispered

"What?"

"After you shook hands with Grady Pennington today? After you handed him a five-million-dollar check in the parking lot of The Meridian? Did you wash the betrayal off, or is it seasoning my food?"

Caden froze. His face drained of color. He looked like he had seen a ghost.

"You..." he stammered. "How do you..."

"I know everything," she whispered. "So excuse me if I've lost my appetite. I'm allergic to bullshit."

"What are you two whispering about?" Grandmother demanded. "Secrets at the table are rude."

"Just discussing... dietary restrictions," Eulalie said brightly.

"Well, stop whispering and start acting like a wife," Grandmother snapped. "Hold his hand. Show some affection. It's like sitting in a morgue with you two."

"Yes," Seraphina giggled. "Hold hands. Unless you're afraid you'll catch his incompetence?"

Grandmother glared at Seraphina, then back at Caden. "Do it. For the photo. I want a picture for the family newsletter."

The butler stepped out of the shadows.

Caden reached for Eulalie's left hand under the table first, then brought it up to the tablecloth. He tried to clasp her fingers.

Eulalie didn't pull away violently. She just made her hand limp. Dead weight. Like a fish.

Caden squeezed. "Squeeze back," he hissed.

Eulalie stared straight ahead. She didn't move a muscle.


"Isla," Eulalie said loudly, breaking the awkward tableau. "Tell me about your race next week. Are you driving the Ferrari?"

Isla, sensing the rescue, jumped in. "Oh, yeah! Harrison is setting up the track. It's going to be insane. You should come, E! Caden never comes."

Caden dropped Eulalie's hand. He grabbed his wine glass and drained it in one gulp.

He looked at his wife, really looked at her. Her profile was sharp, her expression serene. She wasn't fighting him with anger anymore. She was fighting him with indifference. And that terrified him more than any scream.



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