

Chapter 25 No.

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"Caden, Eulalie," Grandmother commanded. "Cut the cake. Together."

It was a tradition. The couple cuts the cake to symbolize shared prosperity.

Caden stood up. He offered his hand to Eulalie.

She stood up, ignoring his hand. She walked to the cake cart.

Caden picked up the silver cake knife. He held it out, waiting for her to place her hand over his.

Eulalie lifted her left hand.

The crystal chandelier above the table caught the light and shattered it into a thousand rainbows. The light hit Eulalie's hand.

It hit her ring finger.

And found nothing

The finger was bare. There was a distinct, pale band of skin where the sun hadn't touched for five years, a ghost of the massive pink diamond she had worn since the engagement.

The room went deadly silent.

Grandmother gasped. It was a sharp, intake of air that sounded like a tire puncturing

"Eulalie!" Grandmother pointed a trembling finger. "Where is your ring? The Holloway Diamond?"

Seraphina leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with malicious delight. "Oh my god. Did she pawn it? I bet she pawned it."

Caden looked down. He stared at her bare hand. He hadn't noticed. All night he hadn't noticed.

Panic flared in his chest. "It's... she..." He scrambled for a lie. "She sent it for cleaning. The setting was loose. You know how delicate the prongs are."

He looked at Eulalie, begging her with his eyes to nod. Back me up. Please.

Eulalie looked at the knife. Then she looked at the Grandmother.

"No," Eulalie said. Her voice was calm, conversational. "I didn't send it for cleaning."

"Then where is it?" Grandmother demanded.

"I returned it," Eulalie said simply. "I left it in the Penthouse weeks ago." She turned to Caden. "Check your pocket, Caden. I'm sure you kept it safe."

Caden stiffened. He felt the weight of the small velvet box in his jacket pocket—the one he had retrieved from the envelope days ago. He had brought it tonight intending to force her to put it back on in the car. He hadn't expected her to out him.

"Caden?" Grandmother's voice was sharp. "Do you have the ring?"

Caden swallowed hard. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the box. He tried to laugh, but it came out as a choke. "I... I picked it up from the cleaner. I forgot to give it back. Here, darling."

He tried to shove the box toward Eulalie.

"No thanks," Eulalie said. "It was too heavy. It was cutting off my circulation. I prefer my hands free."

"You... you ungrateful..." Grandmother sputtered. "Put it back on immediately."

"We'll see," Eulalie said.

"I like it," Isla piped up. "Naked fingers. Very punkrock."

"Shut up, Isla!" Seraphina snapped.

Caden grabbed Eulalie's bare hand and shoved it onto the knife handle, covering her fingers with his own so the lack of a ring was hidden. His grip was bruising.

"Cut the damn cake," he whispered into her ear. "You are embarrassing me."

"You're hurting me," she whispered back. "Mind the burn, Caden. Or I'll scream."

"I'll hurt you more if you don't stop this charade," he threatened, the stress breaking his composure. "That ring is a Holloway asset."

"I told you," she said, pressing down on the knife. "It's returned. Assets usually get divided, Caden. Consider the ring my down payment on freedom."

The knife sliced through the cake. It hit the silver platter with a harsh clink.

Eulalie pulled her hand away instantly. She wiped it on a napkin as if his touch had left a residue.

"Delicious," she said, not taking a bite.

The rest of the dinner was a blur of tension. As soon as coffee was served, Eulalie stood up.

"I have a headache," she announced. "I'm leaving."

"You can't leave before the port!" Grandmother protested.

"Watch me," Eulalie said.

She walked out.

Caden chased after her. He caught her on the front steps. The cool night air was a relief after the stifling dining room.

"Eulalie! Stop!"

She spun around near her Porsche. "What, Caden? Did I breach the contract? I sat. I ate. I didn't scream when your sister insulted me. I earned my fee."

"The ring" Caden panted. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I'm not your wife anymore, Caden. Not in any way that matters."

"You are my wife until a judge says otherwise!"

"Then hurry up and sign the papers," she said, opening the car door. "Or are you waiting for Adalynn to pick out her own ring first? Maybe she'll find the Holloway diamond less... heavy."

She got in. The engine roared.

"Go to hell, Eulalie!" Caden shouted.

"I just left it," she said.

She slammed the door and drove away, leaving him standing in the dark, wondering where the hell his obedient little mouse had gone.
