

Chapter 26 No.

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Caden arrived a minute later in his Range Rover. He parked behind Eulalie's Porsche, jumped out, and hauled a sleeping Elara from the back seat of his SUV.

He walked up to the driver's side of Eulalie's car.

"You're not coming up?" Caden asked, seeing her stay in the driver's seat.

"I don't live here, Caden," Eulalie said, her window rolled down just an inch. "Remember?"

"Then why did you drive here?"

"To make sure you didn't crash on the way home," Eulalie said coldly. "You were swerving on the highway. I escorted my daughter. She is safe now. My job is done."

"But Elara... she might wake up. She'll ask for you."

"Then tell her I love her. And tell her I'll pick her up on Tuesday."

"This is ridiculous," Caden spat. "Just come up. Sleep in the guest room. Don't be melodramatic."

"Goodnight, Caden."

She rolled up the window and drove off, heading toward her new loft in Seaport District.

Her new apartment was vast, industrial, and empty. It smelled of freedom.

She walked inside, kicking off her heels near the door. The velvet gown felt heavy, like a suit of armor she no longer needed. She blindly unzipped the heavy dress, letting it pool around her ankles in a dark puddle of fabric, and pulled on an oversized, soft hoodie she had left on the chair.

She didn't unpack further. She sat on the floor with her laptop.

She opened the remote monitoring app. She had given Elara a new iPad before she left—one with a very specific set of parental controls that doubled as a listening device. She justified it as safety. Elara was five. She couldn't protect herself.

The audio stream flickered to life.

"I want to call Adalynn!" Elara's voice came through tinny and whining. She was awake.

"Elara, it's 11:00 PM," Caden's voice was slurred. He must have poured himself a drink the moment he walked in the door.

"No! She said she's a night owl! She said only boring people sleep early! Like Mommy!"

The words were a direct quote. Eulalie could hear Adalynn's voice in her daughter's mouth. It stung a sharp needle to the heart.

"Fine," Caden sighed. "Call her. But keep it down."

There was a rustling sound. Then the distinct chime of a FaceTime connection.

"Adalynn! Did you see my dress? Grandmama hated it!"

"Oh, poor baby," Adalynn's voice came through. "She just doesn't understand fashion. You know, when you live with me and Daddy, you can wear whatever you want. We'll have a dress-up room."

"Really?" Elara squealed.

"Yes. A whole room. Just for us. And no boring beige clothes allowed."

Eulalie ripped her headphones off. Her hands were shaking.

When you live with me and Daddy.

They were planning it. They were already promising it to the child.

Eulalie curled into a ball on the cold concrete floor of her loft. She had tried to be cold. She had tried to be the 'Ghost', detaching herself to

force Caden to realize what he had lost. It was a strategic withdrawal. But hearing her daughter being manipulated... the strategy crumbled. The mother in her was screaming.🙄

She looked at the screen. The data usage spiked. They were still talking.

Midnight

12:30 AM.

A five-year-old child was being kept awake by a woman who treated her like a plaything.

Eulalie stood up. She walked to the window looking out over the city. She wiped her eyes.

"Let them try," she whispered to the glass. "Let them build their castle on sand. I'm bringing the tide."
