

Chapter 3 No.

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Eulalie Bradford.

Not Holloway. Never again Holloway.

She set the pen down, the metal cool against her feverish skin. Slowly, she reached for her left hand. The four-carat diamond solitaire felt like a shackle. She twisted it. It stuck for a moment over the knuckle, resisting before sliding off.

The skin beneath was pale, indented. A ghost of a ring

She held it up to the light. The inscription inside—"C&E Forever"—glinted mockingly. She dropped the ring into the thick envelope along with the papers. It made a dull thud as it hit the bottom.

She grabbed a black marker and wrote on the front of the envelope in block letters: "TO CADEN - URGENT."

At 10:30 PM, the Holloway's Maybach pulled up silently to the curb. Carter, Caden's assistant, opened the rear door and unbuckled a sleeping Elara from her car seat. He carried the small, warm body into the building and handed her over to Martha.

"Mr. Holloway and Ms. Pennington have gone to a private club," Carter said softly. "He'll be back very late."

Martha nodded, her expression grave, and carried the child upstairs. Carter drove the empty car away, disappearing into the night.

The front door beeped. 2:15 AM.

Eulalie stiffened. She switched off the lamp, grabbing the envelope. She stepped out of the study just as Caden stumbled into the foyer.

He reeked of expensive gin and Adalynn's cloying perfume. His tie was

undone, hanging loose around his neck. He blinked blearily at her.

"Still up?" He slurred slightly, leaning against the wall to pull off his shoes. "Don't start with me, Eulalie. I'm exhausted."

Eulalie stood three meters away. She didn't move to take his coat. She didn't ask if he wanted water.

She placed the envelope on the marble console table near the door. "Caden. I have something for you."

He waved a hand dismissively, walking past her toward the stairs. "Whatever it is, it can wait. I have a headache."

"It's important," she said, her voice steady, cutting through his haze. "It's about our future."

Caden paused, one foot on the bottom step. He turned, a sneer curling his lip. "Future? As long as you stop moping and act like a wife, your future is fine. I take care of everything don't I?"

He didn't even look at the table. He thought she was handing him a brochure for a vacation or a bill for Elara's tuition.

"Goodnight, Caden," she said.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, trudging up the stairs.

Eulalie went to the guest room. She didn't sleep. At 5:00 AM, she was up. She packed two suitcases. No designer dresses. No jewelry Caden had bought. Just her jeans, her hoodies, and a small, heavily encrypted hard drive she had kept hidden in the back of her underwear drawer. She checked the drive's biometric lock. It blinked green. This was her lifeline, the only thing in this house that was truly hers.

Martha was in the kitchen, starting the coffee. She jumped when Eulalie walked in with luggage.

"Mrs. Holloway?"

Eulalie walked to the foyer and pointed to the envelope on the table. "Martha. When Mr. Holloway wakes up, give this to him. Put it in his hand. Tell him I'm gone."

Martha's eyes widened. "Gone? But... where? Miss Elara will ask for you."

Eulalie's smile was brittle. "She won't. If she does... tell her I want her to be happy."

She walked out the door. The latch clicked shut. A final, metallic sound of closure.

Two hours later.

Caden woke up with a poundingskull. He groaned, rolling over. The other side of the bed was cold.

"Eulalie?" he croaked. No answer. "Good. Sulking."

He dragged himself downstairs. Martha was dusting the hallway, looking terrified. She saw him and rushed over, grabbing the envelope from the table.

"Mr. Holloway... Mrs. Holloway left this. She... she took her bags."

Caden rubbed his temples, squinting at the envelope. "Drama queen," he muttered. He reached for it.

His phone blasted a ringtone from the kitchen counter. Adalynn.

He pulled his hand back. "Hang on." He answered the phone. "Adalynn?"

"Caden!" Adalynn was sobbing theatrically. "The press... they're saying I looked fat in the photos last night! You have to kill the story! I can't breathe!"

Caden's face hardened. "Calm down, I'm on it." He grabbed his coat, ignoring Martha. "I have to go."

"But sir, the letter-" Martha tried to shove it toward him.

Caden pushed her hand away. The envelope slipped from her fingers and slid down the side of the foyer sofa, wedging itself between the cushion and the armrest.

"Put that away, Martha! I don't have time for her tantrums right now!" he shouted, storming out the door.

Martha stood trembling in the empty hall. She looked at the sofa. The envelope was barely visible. She reached down to retrieve it, but Caden's sharp voice echoed from the open elevator.

"Leave it! I'll deal with her nonsense later!"

Startled, Martha snatched her hand back. She sighed, thinking it was just another complaint letter about Caden's late nights. Too afraid to disobey his direct order, she left the envelope wedged in the dark crevice.
