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The sun rose gray and unforgiving over the Hudson River. ①

Eulalie sat cross-legged on the polished concrete floor, staring at a cardboard box she had brought with her days ago. It was the only physical debris she had salvaged from the wreckage of her marriage. Inside, nestled among tangled charger cables, was a dried-up succulent that had somehow survived five years of neglect and a framed photo of Elara from her second birthday.

She picked up the frame. Her thumb traced the glass.

In the picture, Elara was looking at the camera with wide, trusting eyes, a tiny hand reaching out for the lens, before the influence of designer labels and whispered poisons had taken hold. Before "Mommy is mean."

The "Short Sell Protocol" she had initiated hours ago was already working—her phone had been buzzing with market alerts since 4:00 AM—but the financial victory felt hollow against the weight of this photo.

Eulalie ran her thumb over the glass again, a pang of fierce, protective grief tightening her chest. She wasn't just fighting Caden anymore; she was fighting to excavate that little girl from the rubble. She needed to remember why she pushed the button. She wasn't destroying Caden out of spite; she was stripping away the resources he used to corrupt their daughter.

She placed the frame face down on the floor. Her phone buzzed against the concrete, the sound harsh and intrusive in the silence. The screen flashed: St. Jude's Academy - Principal's Office.

Eulalie stared at the screen. She had unblocked the school's number two days ago, after the "dress code" incident. She had realized that blocking them only punished Elara; if Caden ignored the school, someone had to answer. She couldn't leave her daughter in a void.

Her stomach dropped, a physical sensation of weight that had become her constant companion lately. She answered on the first ring. ②

Mrs. Higgins didn't waste time with pleasantries. Her voice was tight,

clipped. "Mrs. Bradford, we need you to come in immediately. There has been an incident involving Elara."

"Did you call Mr. Holloway?" Eulalie asked automatically.

"We tried," Mrs. Higgins sighed. "His assistant said he is in a 'crisis meeting' with the Board and cannot be disturbed under any circumstances. We need a parent here now, or we have to call Child Services."

"I'm coming."

The drive uptown was a blur of yellow taxis and red brake lights. Eulalie checked the time. According to the access logs she still monitored, Caden was indeed in the "War Room" at Holloway Holdings. The "Short Sell Protocol" was bleeding the company dry. The stock price was in freefall, and the board was likely screaming for his head.

Later, Eulalie sat in a leather chair that was too low, forcing her to look up at the Principal. To her left sat a woman she recognized from the PTA, clutching a weeping girl named Tilly. Tilly's knee was scraped raw, blood spotting the white gauze the nurse had applied.

To her right stood Elara.

Her daughter wasn't crying. She wasn't looking at the floor in shame. Elara stood with her arms crossed over her chest, her chin jutting out, tapping her foot with an impatience that was terrifyingly familiar. It was Caden's stance. It was Adalynn's smirk.

Eulalie felt a wave of nausea. She crouched down in front of Tilly.

"I am so sorry, Tilly," Eulalie said, her voice trembling slightly. She looked at the mother. "I am mortified. We will cover any medical expenses, of course. And I will make sure this never happens again."

The mother stood up, pulling Tilly close. "It's not about the money, Mrs. Holloway. It's about the attitude. Your daughter laughed when Tilly fell. She said Tilly was 'in the way.'"

Eulalie turned to Elara. Her heart was hammering against her ribs, a frantic rhythm of panic and failure.

"Apologize to Tilly," Eulalie said.

Elara rolled her eyes. "No."

The word hung in the air, heavy and toxic.

"Elara," Eulalie's voice dropped an octave. She wasn't the soft, permissible mother anymore. "Apologize. Now."

"I won't!" Elara stomped her foot. "Adalynn says saying sorry is for losers," Elara parroted, stumbling slightly over the big words. "She said I have to be a big wolf. Wolves eat the fluffy sheep, Mommy."

The room went silent. The Principal looked at Eulalie with a mixture of pity and judgment.

Eulalie felt the blood drain from her face. This wasn't just a playground spat. This was a philosophy. A cancerous worldview that had been injected into her child's mind.

"This isn't a race track, Elara," Eulalie said, standing up. She didn't yell. She didn't plead. She spoke with the cold finality of a judge delivering a sentence. "This is a school. You hurt someone. You will apologize, or you will lose every screen, every toy, and every privilege you own until you are eighteen."

Elara looked up, startled by the steel in her mother's voice. She looked for the weakness, the hesitation she was used to exploiting. She found none.

"Sorry," Elara mumbled, not looking at Tilly.

Tilly's mother huffed, grabbed her daughter's hand, and marched out. The Principal handed Eulalie a disciplinary form.

"She's been aggressive all week," Mrs. Higgins said softly. "It's a radical change in behavior."

"I know," Eulalie signed the paper. The pen tore through the page. "I'm handling it."

The walk to the car was a battle of wills. Elara dragged her feet, muttering under her breath. Eulalie opened the back door of the Porsche.

"Get in."

Elara climbed in, buckling her belt aggressively. Eulalie got in the driver's seat but didn't start the engine. She locked the doors. The click echoed in the small cabin.

"Adalynn taught you that?" Eulalie asked, watching Elara in the rearview mirror. "That pushing people makes you a winner?"

Elara crossed her arms again. "Yes! She says sheep get eaten! I don't

want to be eaten!"

Eulalie gripped the steering wheel. Her knuckles turned white. The leather felt cold under her palms. 🗨️

"Wolves protect their pack, Elara. They don't hurt the weak. What you did today wasn't being a wolf. It was being a bully."

"I'm not a bully!" Elara screamed, her face turning red. "I want Daddy! Daddy wouldn't yell at me! He understands winning!"

Eulalie reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. She unlocked it and handed it back to Elara.

"Call him."

Elara blinked, confused by the bluff being called.

"Call him," Eulalie repeated. "Tell him the Principal suspended you for two days. See if he thinks that's winning."

Elara grabbed the phone with shaky hands. She dialed. She put it on speaker.

"Daddy?" Elara wailed the moment the line connected. "Mommy is being mean to me!" 🗨️

In the background of the call, there was absolute chaos. Phones were ringing off the hook. People were shouting numbers. It sounded like a riot.

"Elara?" Caden's voice was strained, shouting over the noise. "I can't talk right now! The market is crashing! Jared, get me the liquidity report!"


"Daddy, I pushed Tilly and..."

"Honey, Daddy is losing millions of dollars right now!" Caden snapped, his patience vaporized by the stress. "I don't care about the playground! Listen to your mother! I have to go!"

The line went dead.

Elara stared at the phone. The silence in the car was deafening. Her lower lip began to tremble. Her hero, the wolf, hadn't come to save her. He hadn't even listened. 🗨️

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 +120 Points at most

"He hung up," Elara whispered, her voice trembling. "He... he wouldn't listen. I tried to tell him before, but he just gave me the iPad." 📱

Eulalie took the phone back. She didn't gloat. She didn't say 'I told you so.' She simply started the engine.

The Porsche purred to life. Eulalie merged into traffic, her eyes dry, her heart bleeding.



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