

## Chapter 32 No.

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The following morning after ensuring Elara was safely dropped off at school by the driver she had personally vetted, Eulalie drove to Holloway Holdings for the last time. Even though she had officially vacated her position weeks ago, Caden had demanded she physically hand over the master encryption keys to the new system administrator. It was a power play, a final attempt to make her bend the knee, but Eulalie viewed it as a necessary evil to sever the final tie.

The atmosphere in the building was electric with panic. As she walked through the lobby, she saw employees huddled in corners, whispering. The stock price was plummeting just as she had orchestrated. The "Short Sell Protocol" was no longer a theory; it was a wildfire.

She took the elevator to the top floor. The doors opened to the familiar hum of the executive suite, but the frantic energy was palpable here too. Her desk—the desk she had occupied for five years as a "temporary" measure that became permanent—was occupied.

A young woman sat there. She couldn't have been more than twenty-three. Her hair was a glossy blowout, her makeup immaculate, and she was currently struggling to figure out the phone system.

HR Manager Henderson stepped out from the hallway. "Ah, Eulalie. This is Serena. She's... taking over the administrative duties."

Serena looked up. She scanned Eulalie's simple black trousers and white silk blouse. There was a flicker of dismissal in her eyes. She saw a woman being replaced. She didn't see the architect of the building's digital infrastructure.

"Hi," Serena said, not standing up. "So, you're the one leaving?"

"I'm not leaving, Serena. I was evicted," Eulalie said dryly. She placed a small stack of files on the corner of the desk. "These are the vendor contacts. The filing system is color-coded. Red for urgent, blue for legal."

Serena picked up a file with two fingers, as if it were contaminated. "Right. Filing. Got it."

Serena's phone buzzed on the desk. She glanced at it, then tapped out a quick reply, muttering under her breath, "Yeah, she's here. The ex. She looks so... beige."

Eulalie didn't blink. She had installed the surveillance software on that very terminal; she didn't need to hear the words to know the sentiment. "Keep the files organized, Serena. Caden hates looking for things."

Serena rolled her eyes and turned her chair toward the glass office where Caden's empty chair sat. "I'm sure I can manage Caden. I'm good with people."

Jared, the Chief of Staff, walked by. He looked tired, his tie loosened, a sheen of sweat on his forehead that had nothing to do with the room temperature. He saw Eulalie and stopped, relief washing over his face.

"Eulalie, thank God. Have you seen the retail tickers? The stock is wobbling. We're seeing massive sell orders coming from offshore shells. And the Tokyo contract needs a review before noon. Caden isn't answering his phone. Can you just...?"

"I don't work here, Jared," Eulalie said softly.

Jared paused. "But... you always ..."

"Not anymore. Ask Serena."

Serena looked up, panic flaring in her eyes. "Tokyo? I don't speak Japanese. And I don't know contract law. And what's a ticker?"

Eulalie unclipped her badge from her purse—she hadn't worn it in days. She placed it on the desk next to the files. It made a sharp click against the glass surface.

"Google Translate is free," Eulalie said.

She turned to leave.

"Wait," Serena called out. Her voice lost its arrogant edge. "How do you work the coffee machine? It has like... twelve buttons. Caden called this morning and screamed about the water temperature."

Eulalie stopped at the elevator. She remembered the mornings she spent calibrating that machine. 195 degrees Fahrenheit. 20 grams of beans. A precise thirty-second extraction. It was a labor of love that Caden had consumed without tasting for half a decade.

"The manual is in the bottom drawer," Eulalie said without turning around.

"But it's in Italian!" Serena wailed.

Eulalie pressed the down button. The doors slid open.

"Then you better start learning Italian," she said.

The doors closed, severing the connection. The silence in the elevator was profound. Eulalie leaned her head against the cool metal wall. She felt lighter. The weight of Caden's comfort was no longer on her shoulders. It was Serena's problem now. And Serena had no idea that the coffee machine was the least of her worries. The stock ticker in Jared's hand was the real tickingbomb, and Eulalie had just lit the fuse.

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