

Chapter 33 No.

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Lunch was a solitary affair at a small French bistro three blocks away from her new loft. Eulalie ordered a Niçoise salad and a glass of sparkling water. She opened her laptop, intending to review the acquisition strategy for Bradford Department Stores, but her eyes kept drifting to the time.

12:30 PM.

Elara usually had her breathing treatment now. The school nurse administered it, but Eulalie always sent a text to remind Elara to go to the nurse's office.

Old habits died hard.

She picked up her phone. Her thumb hovered over the message app. She typed: Reminder: Nurse. Inhaler.

She stared at the text. It was instinct. It was love. But sending it was enabling. If she sent it, Caden would never learn. Adalynn would never learn. And Elara would never learn to be responsible for herself.

Even though Caden was listed as the primary contact—a change he had arrogantly demanded after the divorce filing—he rarely answered the school's calls, leaving the nurses to chase Eulalie down anyway.


She deleted the characters one by one. Backspace. Backspace. Backspace.

She checked the family cloud account. She didn't need to run the full bypass script again; the backdoor was already established. She simply tapped the icon for the child-safety monitor.

Elara's iPad was active. FaceTime.

Curiosity, a dangerous and masochistic force, made her click on the

0.0%

15:41 



"Remote Monitor" feature. She told herself it wasn't spying it was a safety check. Caden had already proven he would leave their daughter in a car during a storm. She needed to know who was watching her child.

The video feed loaded. The connection was clear.

Elara was hiding in what looked like the school's equipment closet, surrounded by basketballs. Her face was lit by the screen.

On the other end of the call, the camera was shaky. It stabilized to show Caden and Adalynn. They were squeezed together in a frame, the background blurring past. They were in a car. A race car.

"Look, Elara!" Adalynn shouted over the engine noise. She was wearing a helmet, the visor up. Her eyes were manic, bright with adrenaline. "We're doing a test lap!"

Elara squealed. "It's so loud! Are you going fast?"

"So fast!" Caden yelled. He looked younger, reckless. He wasn't wearing a suit. He was wearing a racing jacket that matched Adalynn's.

Eulalie felt a cold clamp on her heart. The exhaust fumes. The dust. The stress.

"Elara," Adalynn said, pulling the camera closer. "I got a suit made for you. It's pink. With flames. We're going to take you to the track this weekend. You can be my pit crew."

Elara clapped her hands. "I want to go now! Mommy never takes me anywhere cool!"

Eulalie's finger hovered over the 'End Session' button.

"Caden," Eulalie whispered to the empty bistro. "She has sensitive lungs. The exhaust fumes..."

Caden laughed on the screen. "She's going to be a natural, Adalynn. Just like her Mommy Adalynn."

Mommy Adalynn. They were rewriting the family tree in real-time.

"But Daddy," Elara said, coughing slightly. Her chest hitched. "Mommy said the smoke makes me wheeze. And the snacks there might have



peanuts."

Adalynn rolled her eyes. "Mommy worries too much. It's just dust. You need to toughen up your lungs. Champions don't have weaknesses."

Champions don't have weaknesses.

The scientific illiteracy was staggering. Caden glanced at Adalynn, a flicker of hesitation crossing his face as he checked his mirror for the next turn. He was distracted, the adrenaline of the track overriding his paternal instincts.

"Yeah, honey," Caden said, his eyes fixed on the apex of the curve, barely registering the conversation. "Adalynn knows about... conditioning. Just... we'll talk later."

Eulalie slammed the laptop shut. The sound made the waiter jump.

He hadn't protected her. He hadn't corrected the lie.

She reached into her purse. Her fingers brushed against the spare inhaler she carried everywhere. It was a reflex. A talisman against disaster.

She pulled it out. The blue plastic felt smooth in her hand.

If she drove to the school now, she would be the villain. The nag. The boring mother stopping the fun. Caden would override her. Adalynn would mock her. Elara would hate her.

She stood up. She walked to the trash can near the exit.

She held the inhaler over the bin. Her hand trembled. This was the final cord. The umbilical cord of caretaking.

"If they want to play champion," she whispered, her voice shaking, "they can play without a safety net."

She pulled her hand back, her knuckles white as she gripped the blue plastic. She shoved the inhaler deep into the hidden bottom pocket of her tote bag, zipping it shut. She would monitor the situation remotely, ready to intervene if absolute disaster struck, but she refused to be their crutch any longer.

She walked out into the sunlight. She felt sick. She felt terrified. But for



the first time, she felt like she wasn't the only one carrying the weight of the world. Now, Caden had to carry it. And she knew, with terrifying certainty, that his knees were going to buckle.

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