

## Chapter 38 No.

The sun was cruel the next morning. It sliced through the uncurtained windows of the penthouse, hitting Caden directly in the eyes.

He woke up with a pounding headache and a stiff neck from sleeping on the sofa.

"Daddy!"

Elara stood over him. She was wearing one sock and holding a hairbrush.

"I'm hungry! And my hair is a rat's nest!"

Caden groaned, sitting up. "Where's Martha?"

"She's sick! Remember? You said Mommy would handle it!"

Caden rubbed his face. Right. Mommy.

The intercom buzzed. Caden stumbled to the wall panel, squinting at the grainy video feed. It was Eulalie. She was standing in the lobby, looking fresh and rested, though her complexion was paler than usual. Isla stood next to her, looking sheepish.

"Thank God," Caden muttered. He pressed the button. "Come up. Elara is a disaster."

"I'm not coming up, Caden," Eulalie's voice came through the speaker, tinny and detached. "I'm dropping Isla off. She needs a ride to the estate later."

"What? Just come up! I need help!"

"No," Eulalie said. "I don't live there. Goodbye."

"Wait!" Caden shouted at the plastic box. "Eulalie!"

But the screen had already gone black. She was gone.

Caden cursed and ran to the elevator. He rode it down to the lobby in his pajamas, barefoot. By the time the doors opened, the Porsche was already pulling away from the curb.

Isla was standing there, holding a takeout bag from the diner.

"Where is she?" Caden demanded, grabbing Isla's arm.

"She left," Isla said, pulling away. She looked at her brother with cold eyes. "She said she has a meeting."

"On a Saturday morning? Who is she meeting?"

"Her life," Isla said. She shoved past him toward the elevators. "Good luck with Elara. She wants a French braid."

Caden stood alone in the lobby, the doorman staring at his bare feet. He felt a pang of shame. But mostly, he felt anger. How dare Eulalie do this? How dare she make him feel incompetent?

He went back upstairs. Elara was screaming from the bathroom.

"Daddy! I can't find the toothpaste!"

Caden rushed in. The bathroom counter was covered in Adalynn's beauty products—serums, sprays, powders. The toothpaste was buried somewhere under the avalanche of expensive clutter.

"It's right here," Caden muttered, sweeping a row of Adalynn's lotions into the sink to find the tube. He grabbed the hairbrush.

"Sit still," he commanded, dragging the brush through Elara's tangled curls with more force than necessary.

"Ow! You're pulling!" Elara cried, batting his hand away.

"If you'd sit still, it wouldn't hurt," Caden snapped, frustration boiling over. It wasn't that he didn't know how to brush hair, it was that he didn't have the patience for the knots Eulalie usually smoothed out with detangler spray—spray he couldn't find because Adalynn had reorganized the cabinets.

"I want Mommy!" Elara sobbed.

Caden looked at the chaos. The unmade bed. The crying child. The hungover reflection in the mirror.

It used to be her job to fix this. To smooth the edges.

Twenty minutes later, Caden dropped Elara off at school for a weekend activity. Her hair was a lumpy, tangled mess held together by a rubber band he had found on the floor. She was wearing mismatched socks. She was crying.

"Everyone is going to laugh at me!" Elara sobbed.

Caden gripped the steering wheel. "Shut up, Elara! Just go!"

She slammed the car door. Caden watched her run into the building looking neglected.

He dialed Adalynn.

"Hey baby," Adalynn answered, her voice sleepy.

"I need you to pick up Elara today," Caden said.

"Ugh today? I have a facial at three. Can't the nanny do it?"

"There is no nanny! And Eulalie is on strike."

"Fine," Adalynn sighed. "But she better not be whiny. I have a headache."

Caden hung up. He looked at the empty passenger seat. He missed the silence. He missed the order. He missed the wife who made his life seamless, even if he never bothered to thank her.