

Chapter 40 No.

Friday night arrived with the tension of a drawn bowstring. ①

Eulalie was in her Seaport District loft, zipping up a small carry-on suitcase. She wasn't fleeing; she was advancing. She had a strategic board meeting at Nexus AI in San Francisco. It was time to reclaim her seat at the table she had built, a seat she had vacated to play housewife.

Her phone buzzed. It was Caden. ②

"I'm downstairs," he said, his voice clipped. "I need you to sign the permission slip for Elara's trip. The school won't accept my signature because you're still listed as the primary contact." ③

Eulalie sighed. "I'll come down to the lobby."

She took her suitcase with her. When the elevator doors opened in the lobby of her new building Caden was standing there, looking out of place against the industrial chic decor. He saw the suitcase.

"Where are you going?" he demanded, ignoring the paper she held out.

"San Francisco," Eulalie said, handing him the slip. ④

"Who's in San Francisco? That Stark guy? Jory? I know who he is, Eulalie. I read the tech blogs."

"Business, Caden. Something you used to be good at."

Caden snatched the paper. "You're abandoning your family for the weekend? We're going to the adventure park upstate. Elara wanted you to come." ⑤

"No, she didn't," Eulalie said calmly. "She wanted the version of me that serves pasta and braids hair. That version is unavailable. And as for the primary contact, you should have changed it weeks ago." ⑥

"I never bothered to change the forms," Caden muttered, signing the slip against the wall. "Too much paperwork." ⑦

"You are being incredibly selfish. I'm taking Elara upstate. Adalynn is coming too. She... she needs to scout the location for a potential brand partnership. It's a work trip, essentially. But Elara will have fun."

He looked at Eulalie, waiting for the jealousy. Waiting for the hurt. He was taking their daughter and his mistress on a weekend getaway, thinly veiled as business.

Eulalie adjusted the handle of her suitcase. She checked her watch; she had just enough time to catch her flight after successfully rescheduling the bank meeting for Monday morning.

"That sounds lovely," she said.

Caden blinked. "What?"

"Have fun. Make sure you pack her inhaler. And watch out for peanuts. You know how she gets."

She said the words automatically, the mother in her overriding the strategist. She had thrown away the spare, cutting the safety net she held, but she couldn't stop herself from pointing out where the net should be. It was a test. A test she knew he would fail.

"I know how to take care of my own daughter," Caden snapped.

"Good," Eulalie said. "Full custody for the weekend. Enjoy it."

She walked past him toward the waiting Uber.

Caden stood there in the lobby of her new life. He had the weekend. He had the mistress. He had the daughter. He had won.

So why did it feel like he had just been handed a grenade with the pin pulled out?

His phone buzzed. It was Elara.

"Daddy! Addie is outside in the car! She's honking! Let's go!"

Caden looked at Eulalie's retreating figure.

"Yeah," he said to the phone, his voice lacking conviction. "Let's go have fun."

He had no idea that the weekend was going to be a disaster that would make the coffee incident look like a minor inconvenience. He had no idea that by Monday, his world would be burning. And Eulalie would be the one holding the matches.