

Chapter 41 No.

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. ①

The adventure park was a symphony of chaos, and Caden was losing control of the orchestra. The air, thick with the smell of fried dough and over-sugared children, was giving him a headache. Two hours in, and the "family trip" had devolved into a logistical nightmare.

"Caden, my feet hurt," Adalynn whined from a park bench, scrolling through her phone. She was wearing white leather sneakers that were clearly not designed for walking. "And the cell service here is barbaric. How am I supposed to update my story?"

"Daddy! I want another pretzel!" Elara shouted from ten feet away, her face already sticky with cinnamon sugar. "The big one!"

"You just had one," Caden snapped, his patience worn to a thread. He looked from his pouting mistress to his hyperactive daughter. This was supposed to be a power play, a demonstration to Eulalie of his perfect new family unit. Instead, it felt like punishment. He was the sole manager of two petulant children, one five and the other twenty-five. ①

"I'm hungry!" Elara stomped her foot. In her frustration, she knocked over a nearby trash can, spilling its contents. A half-eaten bag of roasted peanuts tumbled out near her shoe.

"Elara, watch out!" Caden started forward, a jolt of genuine panic cutting through his irritation.

"Oh, relax," Adalynn said without looking up from her phone. "It's just some nuts. Stop being so dramatic. She needs to build an immunity."

Caden froze. He stared at Adalynn, then at the peanuts lying perilously close to his daughter, who was about to reach for her fallen pretzel. He remembered Eulalie's parting words—watch out for peanuts. He had

dismissed it then as her usual nagging. Now, in the harsh light of the afternoon, her words sounded less like a nagging and more like a prophecy. This wasn't a family trip. It was a minefield. And he was standing in the middle of it, completely alone.

Adalynn, finally sensing the shift in his attention, looked up. "What? Are you going to let your ex-wife dictate our snack choices from three thousand miles away? Get a grip, Caden. Let the kid have some fun."

"It's not about fun, Adalynn," Caden said, his voice tight with a stress you couldn't see on her Instagram feed. "It's about keeping her out of the emergency room."

The rest of the day was a slow-motion disaster. Adalynn insisted on going on the roller coaster, then complained of a migraine for the next hour. Elara, overstimulated and under-supervised had a meltdown in the gift shop when Caden refused to buy her a life-sized stuffed unicorn.

By the time they checked into the rustic, expensive lodge upstate, Caden was exhausted. Adalynn immediately retreated to the spa for a 'de-stressing' massage, leaving him to handle bath and bedtime alone.

He tucked Elara into the large, unfamiliar hotel bed. "Daddy?" she asked, her voice small in the dark room. "Is Mommy coming tomorrow?"

Caden sat on the edge of the bed. The weight of his decisions pressed down on him. "No, honey. It's just us."

"Oh," Elara said, turning to face the wall. "Can I have some water?"

Caden stood up, ready to get the water, when his phone buzzed. It was Adalynn. A picture of her in a fluffy white robe, holding a glass of champagne. The caption: "Finally, some peace!"

He looked at the picture, then back at his daughter's small form in the bed. The grenade from Friday had gone off, and he was standing in the wreckage.