

## Chapter 42 No.

The morninglight over the UpperEast Side was usually crisp and golden, but today it felt sharp, like the edge of a blade. Eulalie sat behind the wheel of her Porsche 911 Turbo S, the engineidlingwith a low, predatory rumble that vibrated through the soles of her stilettos.

She was parked across the street from the grand entrance of Caden's Fifth Avenue building She hadn't stood on this particular stretch of pavement since the night she walked out. The limestone facade looked the same-imposing cold-but it no longer felt like a fortress she was trapped in. It felt familiar, yet alien, like a house she had lived in duringa past life.

She checked her watch.

She didn't text. She didn't call. She tapped the screen of her phone sendinga single, pre-written message to Caden's personal number. 📩

"Downstairs. You have 60 seconds."

Two minutes later, the building's revolving glass doors swung open. Caden emerged, looking disheveled. His shirt was untucked on one side, and his hair, usually gelled to perfection, was chaotic. He was dragging Elara by the hand.

Elara looked small. Her school uniform was rumpled, her socks were mismatched-one navy, one white-and her hair was pulled into a ponytail that was too loose, strands falling into her eyes.

Eulalie killed the engineand stepped out of the car. The click of her heels on the pavement was the only sound as she rounded the hood. She was wearing a tailored cream power suit, her makeup flawless, her posture rigid. She looked like a CEO. She looked like a weapon.

Caden stopped at the bottom of the steps. He blinked, his eyes adjusting to the sunlight and to the sight of her. He looked her up and down, confusionwarring with a flicker of old attraction.

"You're here," he said, his voice raspy. "I thought you were in San Francisco."

Eulalie ignored him. She crouched down to Elara's eye level. Up close, she saw the puffiness around her daughter's eyes.

"Hey, baby," Eulalie said softly, reaching out to tuck a stray hair behind Elara's ear. "Rough morning?"

Elara didn't answer immediately. She looked at Caden, then back at Eulalie, her lower lip trembling. Then, she launched herself into Eulalie's arms, burying her face in the expensive cream fabric of the suit.

"Daddy left me in the car," Elara whispered, the words muffled but audible. "For an hour. It was dark. And I had to pee."

Eulalie's hand froze on Elara's back. The temperature in her veins dropped to absolute zero. She slowly stood up, keeping one hand protectively on Elara's shoulder, and looked at Caden.

Her gaze was physical. It hit him like a slap.

"Is that true?" she asked. Her voice was terrifyingly calm.

Caden shifted his weight, looking away. "It wasn't an hour. It was... forty minutes. Adalynn was really sick. She was delirious. I couldn't leave her."

"You locked a five-year-old in a vehicle on a public street at night" Eulalie stated. It wasn't a question. It was an indictment. "While you played nurse to your hypochondriac mistress."

"She had a fever!" Caden snapped, defensive now. "And Elara was fine. It's a Maybach, Eulalie, not a dumpster. It's safer than this sidewalk."

"It is child endangerment," Eulalie said. She took a step closer to him. She was shorter than him, but in that moment, she towered over him. "If you ever-ever-leave her unattended in a vehicle again, I won't just call CPS. I will have the police arrest you for negligence and I will make sure the family court judge sees the report. That alone will be enough to ensure you lose any right to unsupervised visitation. Forever." Ⓜ

Caden's face flushed a dark, angry red. "You wouldn't dare. I'm her father."

"Then act like one," Eulalie hissed. "Instead of a hormone-driven teenager

chasing a skirt. You are a CEO, Caden. Start managing your household with the same competence you claim to have in business. Because right now? You are failing at both."

"Watch your mouth," Caden warned, stepping forward, his hand raising slightly as if to point a finger.

Eulalie didn't flinch. She looked at his hand with utter disdain. "Don't."

She turned back to Elara. "Get in my car, Elara. I'm taking you to school."

"Wait," Caden said, his tone shifting from anger to a desperate sort of hassle. He reached out to grab Eulalie's arm. "We need to talk about the transfer of the encryption keys. The IT department is locked out of the Tokyo server."

Eulalie saw his hand coming. She didn't just step back; she sidestepped with a fluid, practiced motion, causing his hand to grasp at empty air. Then, she looked at the sleeve of her jacket where his fingers would have touched, and she brushed it off.

Three quick swipes. Brush. Brush. Brush.

It was a gesture of contamination. It said, You are dirt.

"Talk to my lawyer, Caden. Or better yet, ask Adalynn. Since she's running your life, maybe she can run your servers."

"Eulalie, stop being difficult!"

Before he could continue, his phone rang. The special ringtone. Adalynn.

Caden's hand twitched toward his pocket. He looked at the phone, then at Eulalie, hesitant.

Eulalie laughed. It was a dry, humorless sound. "Answer it. After her miraculous recovery from yesterday's 'fever,' I'm sure it's another emergency. Maybe she broke a nail."

Caden glared at her, but he pulled the phone out. "Adalynn? What is it?"

Eulalie opened the rear passenger door of the Porsche for Elara. She buckled her into the back seat, checking the tightness of the straps with a mother's muscle memory.

"Mommy?" Elara asked as Eulalie walked around to the driver's side. "Are you coming back to live with us?"

Eulalie paused, her hand on the doorframe. She looked at the massive stone building that had been her prison. She looked at Caden, who was now pacing on the sidewalk, cooing into the phone.

"No, sweetie," Eulalie said, sliding into the seat. "I'm never going back there."

"Can I come live with you?" Elara asked, her voice small. "I don't like it when Adalynn is 'sick'. She makes Daddy mean."

Eulalie started the engine. The roar drowned out Caden's voice outside.

"Soon," Eulalie promised, her eyes meeting Elara's in the rearview mirror. "I'm buildingus a castle. A real one. Where wolves don't eat sheep."

She shifted into gear and peeled away from the curb, leaving Caden standing in a cloud of exhaust, still tethered to the phone, still losing.