

Chapter 45 No.

Two days after the gun incident, the bruises on Eulalie's soul were hidden, but her need for armor was visible. The Nexus AI Gala was tonight. She needed a dress that didn't just say "I'm here"; she needed a dress that said "I own this."

She stood in the center of L'Eclat, a boutique on Fifth Avenue that required an appointment just to look at the window display. A sales associate named Chloe was showing her a rack of gowns.

Eulalie reached for a champagne-colored silk slip dress. "This one is nice. Simple."

"I'll take that one."

The voice came from the entrance. It was a voice that grated on Eulalie's nerves like sandpaper on glass.

Adalynn marched in, flanked by two women who looked like clones—same hair, same nose jobs. Adalynn pointed a manicured finger at the dress in Eulalie's hand.

"Adalynn," Eulalie said, not turning around. "Stalking is a crime, you know."

"Don't flatter yourself," Adalynn sneered, walking up to the rack. "Caden sent me to get a dress for the Gala. He said buy whatever I want. And I want that one."

Chloe, the sales associate, looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, this lady was looking at it first."

"She can't afford it," Adalynn said, flipping her hair. "She's unemployed. My fiancé, Caden Holloway, cut her off."

Eulalie released the silk fabric. It fluttered back onto the rack. "You can have it. I don't like things that have been touched by sticky fingers."

Adalynn's face tightened. She turned to the center of the room. On a

mannequinstood a monstrosity of a dress. It was midnightblue, covered in thousands of crystals, with a skirt so wide it needed its own zip code. It was called "The Tear of the Night." It cost thirty thousand dollars.

"That one," Adalynn demanded. "I want to try that one."

Chloe hesitated. "That... is a showpiece. It's very heavy. And Mr. Holloway actually put a hold on it... for his wife."

Adalynn smiled, a predatory grin. "Exactly. I'm the upgrade. Get it down."

Eulalie watched Adalynn preen. "You realize," Eulalie said quietly, "that dress weighs forty pounds. You'll be sweating by the appetizers."

"Jealousy is ugly, sister," Adalynn retorted. "Put it on my tab. Caden's tab."

Eulalie turned away. She walked to the back of the store, to a section marked "Minimalist." Her fingers grazed a black velvet hanger.

She pulled it out.

It was a Midnight Blue velvet column gown. Long sleeves. High neck. From the front, it looked almost severe. But the back... the back was completely open, a deep plungethat went down to the small of the back. It was elegant, mysterious, and dangerous.

"This one," Eulalie told Chloe.

She went into the changingroom. The velvet slid over her skin like water. It fit perfectly. She looked in the mirror. She didn't look like a wife. She looked like a widow who had killed her husband and gotten away with it.

She walked out.

Adalynn was standing on the podium, struggling to breathe in the massive blue dress. She looked like a disco ball that had eaten a smurf.

"It's... tight," Adalynn wheezed.

"It's magnificent!" her friends lied.

Adalynn saw Eulalie in the mirror. She saw the sleek, black silhouette. She saw the expanse of pale skin on Eulalie's back. She saw the quiet power.

Adalynn frowned. "Yours is boring. It looks like a funeral."

"Maybe it is," Eulalie said, handing her black AMEX card—her own card, linked to the private Zurich account she'd established through Ghost Holdings—to Chloe. "A funeral for your dignity."

"I'm taking the blue one!" Adalynn shouted, trying to turn around and nearly knocking over a vase with her skirt. "Wrap it up!"


Eulalie signed the receipt. She took the slim garment bag.

As she passed Adalynn, she leaned in. "A word of advice, Adalynn. The dress should frame the woman. When you have to scream to be seen, it means you're already invisible."

She walked out into the sunshine. Jory's car was waiting at the curb.

Adalynn stood in the store, trapped in forty pounds of crystal, watching her sister glide away. She felt heavy. She felt hot. But she had the most expensive dress. That meant she won. Right? 🎁



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