

Chapter 51 No.

The silence in Eulalie's Seaport District loft was heavier than the chaos that had preceded it. It pressed against her eardrums, a physical weight that made the simple act of breathing feel like labor.

The ambulance had left twenty minutes ago. The paramedics, after stabilizing Elara's oxygen levels and administering a nebulizer treatment that finally eased the terrifying whistle in her chest, had recommended immediate hospitalization. But Eulalie, armed with a cold fury and the contact information for one of the city's top private pediatric physicians, had signed the release forms against medical advice. She had made it clear that Elara would be under constant, private medical supervision in an environment free of the allergens and emotional stressors of the penthouse. She didn't want Elara in a cold hospital room; she wanted her here, in the bed that smelled like Eulalie's own lavender detergent, where she could watch the rise and fall of her chest like a hawk watching for prey.

Eulalie sat on the edge of the mattress, her spine rigid. Her hand rested near Elara's small, pale hand, not quite touching it, afraid that even the weight of her fingers might disturb the exhausted sleep her daughter had finally fallen into. The IV line the paramedics had inserted for fluids was taped to Elara's arm, a stark white contrast against her skin.

Eulalie's own hands were trembling. It was a fine, high-frequency tremor that started in her marrow and worked its way out to her fingertips. She clenched them into fists, digging her nails into her palms until the sharp bite of pain grounded her.

The sharp buzz of the intercom shattered the silence.

She didn't need to guess. She knew who it was.

She walked to the intercom panel, her bare feet silent on the polished concrete floor. Caden's face appeared on the small screen, distorted and pale under the lobby lights. She pressed the button.

"What do you want, Caden?"

"Let me up, Eulalie. I need to see her."

For a moment, she considered saying no. Considered leaving him on the street. But Elara might ask for him. With a sigh that felt like it scraped her lungs, she buzzed him in.

A few minutes later, a heavy knock sounded on the steel door..

She opened it.

Caden walked into the room. The dim light from the hallway spilled over his shoulders, casting a long shadow across the industrial floor that stopped just inches from Eulalie's feet. He looked wrecked.

He walked straight to the small kitchenette area, his movements jerky and uncoordinated. He grabbed a glass from the drying rack and filled it with tap water, his hands shaking so badly he spilled some on the counter.

He turned and extended the glass to her.

"Eulalie," he whispered. His voice was rough, stripped of its usual boardroom polish. "Here. You should drink something."

Eulalie stared at the water. She watched a single bubble detach from the side of the glass and float to the surface. She didn't move to take it. She didn't even blink.

Caden stood there for a long, agonizing moment, his arm extended, waiting for a pardon that wasn't coming. Finally, he retracted his hand and set the glass on the nearby console table with a soft clink that sounded like a gunshot in the quiet room.

"She's sleeping," Caden said, stating the obvious, filling the air because the silence was choking him. He took a step closer to the bed, bending at the waist as if to brush a kiss against Elara's forehead.

That was when it hit her.

The smell.

It wasn't the metallic tang of medicine or the sterile scent of the alcohol wipes the EMTs had used. It was floral. Cloying. Synthetically sweet.

Roses.

It was a scent Eulalie knew intimately. It was the limited-edition rose perfume Adalynn wore like armor. It was the scent that lingered in the hallways of the penthouse, on the throw pillows, and now, radiating in suffocating waves from Caden's suit jacket.

Eulalie's stomach lurched. A wave of nausea rolled up her throat, acidic and violent. It was a visceral rejection, her body repelling him before her mind could even form the words.

She recoiled, sliding back on the mattress, putting distance between her nose and his fabric.

"Don't," she hissed. The word was sharp, a blade drawn in the dark. "Get away from her."

Caden froze, hovering over his daughter. He looked at Eulalie, bewildered. "What? I just want to check her temperature."

"You smell like a chemical spill," Eulalie said, her voice low but vibrating with revulsion. "That perfume. It's a trigger. Strong scents induce bronchospasms. Do you want to send her back into an attack?"

Caden blinked, straightening up. He lifted his wrist to his nose, sniffing the cuff of his jacket. A flicker of realization crossed his face, followed immediately by a defensive mask.

"It's not that strong," he muttered, though he took a step back. "Adalynn... she was hysterical earlier. She hugged me. She was scared."

Eulalie stared at him. The absurdity of it made her head spin. She was scared.

"Adalynn was scared?" Eulalie repeated, the words tasting like ash. "Your daughter stopped breathing. Caden. Her lips turned blue. And you were comforting the woman who hid the nebulizer because it ruined her aesthetic?"

"She didn't hide it on purpose," Caden argued, his voice rising slightly before he caught himself and lowered it to a whisper. "She just moved it. She didn't know."

Buzz.

The sound came from Caden's pocket. A vibration against his thigh

He didn't ignore it. He didn't silence it. His hand went to his pocket automatically, a Pavlovian response wired into his nervous system. He pulled the phone out. The screen lit up his face in a ghostly blue hue.

Eulalie saw the name. Adalynn <3.

Caden looked at the sleeping form of his daughter, then at the phone. He answered.

"Adalynn?"

His voice changed instantly. It softened, melting into that protective, husky timber that used to be reserved for Eulalie when she had a nightmare. Now, it belonged to the woman waiting back at his apartment.

"Hey... shh, it's okay," Caden cooed into the receiver, turning his back to Eulalie and walking toward the window. "Are you still crying? ... No, nobody is blaming you. It was an accident. ... Yeah, I know the press is going to be annoying about the gala photos. I'll handle it. I'll call the PR team right now."

Eulalie sat there, frozen.

She looked at Elara. Her daughter's chest was still hitching slightly with every breath, a remnant of the trauma her small body had just endured. Her heart rate was still elevated. She had almost died tonight.

And five feet away, her father was promising to fix a PR crisis about a stained dress.

Something inside Eulalie broke.

It wasn't a loud break. It wasn't a shattering of glass. It was the quiet snap of a tether that had been stretched too thin for too long. The last thread of hope, the last microscopic grain of expectation that Caden might, deep down, still be the man she married, disintegrated.

The temperature in her chest dropped. The anger didn't leave; it calcified. It turned into something cold, hard, and incredibly heavy.

Caden hung up the phone and turned back to her, slipping the device into his pocket. He looked weary, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

"She's really shaken up," Caden said, as if expecting sympathy. "She feels terrible about the nebulizer. She's just... sensitive."

Eulalie stood up.

Her legs felt steady now. The tremor in her hands was gone.

"Caden," she said. Her voice was flat. Monotone. "Do you know what Elara's heart rate was when the paramedics arrived?"

Caden blinked, caught off guard by the shift in topic. "Uh... high? She was panicked"

"It was one hundred and eighty," Eulalie said. "Tachycardia. If I had arrived five minutes later-five minutes, Caden-her oxygen saturation would have dropped below eighty percent. Do you know what happens then? Hypoxia. Brain damage. Organ failure."

Caden's face went pale. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

"But please," Eulalie continued, stepping closer to him until she could smell the roses again, letting the nausea fuel her focus. "Tell me more about how sensitive Adalynn is. Tell me about her migraine"

"I called the ambulance," Caden defended weakly.

"After you called Adalynn's doctor for her migraine," Eulalie corrected, her voice dangerously quiet. "I saw the call log on Martha's phone. And your contribution to tonight was holding the hand of a woman crying about a dress while your child suffocated."

"That's not fair," Caden snapped, his guilt converting instantly into anger, as it always did. "I am under a lot of pressure, Eulalie. You think this is easy? Managing the company, the gala fallout, Adalynn's health, Elara ..."

"Adalynn's health," Eulalie repeated. She let out a short, dry laugh. "Right"

She turned away from him, sitting back down on the chair by the bed. She picked up Elara's hand, careful not to disturb the IV.

"Get out," she said.

Caden bristled. "This is my daughter."

"And you are polluting the air she needs to breathe," Eulalie said, not looking at him. "This is my home. You smell like betrayal and cheap roses. Get out before she wakes up and chokes on it."

Caden stood there for a moment, his chest heaving. He wanted to fight. He wanted to win the argument. But looking at the curve of Eulalie's back, at the wall of ice she had erected around herself and their child, he realized he had no weapons that could penetrate it.

He made a noise of frustration in his throat, then ripped off his suit jacket. He balled it up, the expensive fabric wrinkling in his fist, and dropped it on the floor near the door as if it were contaminated.

"Fine," he spat. "I'll be at the penthouse. If you need anything... don't bother calling."


He walked out.

Eulalie listened to his footsteps retreat down the hall. She heard the elevator ding.

Then, silence.

Eulalie closed her eyes. She reached out and touched Elara's forehead. It was still warm, but the burning heat had broken.



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