

Chapter 52 No.

3:14 AM.

The digital clock on the bedside table cast a red glow across the room. The city outside was never truly silent, a low hum of tires on wet asphalt drifting up thirty stories, but inside the room, the only sound was the rhythmic hiss-click of the humidifier.

Eulalie had dozed off in the chair, her head resting awkwardly on her arms on the edge of the mattress. Her neck screamed in protest, a dull ache radiating down her spine. The air still smelled faintly of antiseptic from the spilled contents of the paramedics' kit.

A small movement woke her.

A tug. Weak, but insistent.

Eulalie's eyes snapped open. Her maternal radar, tuned to the frequency of her child's distress, cut through the fog of sleep instantly.

Elara was awake. Her eyes, glassy and rimmed with red, were open, staring at Eulalie. Her small hand was gripping Eulalie's silk sleeve, her knuckles white.

"Elara?" Eulalie whispered, instantly leaning in, her hand going to Elara's forehead. "Baby? Do you hurt? Is your chest tight?"

Elara shook her head slowly against the pillow. Her voice was a rasp, like dry leaves scraping together.

"Mommy," she croaked. "Don't go."

The words were a physical blow to Eulalie's chest. She moved from the chair to the bed, disregarding the lack of space, curling her body around her daughter's small frame, careful of the wires and tubes.

"I'm not going anywhere," Eulalie promised, stroking the damp hair back from Elara's temples. "I'm right here. I'm staying."

Elara sniffled, and a tear tracked a hot path down her temple into her hairline. "Daddy doesn't love me."

Eulalie froze. Her hand paused in its soothing rhythm. "Elara, no. That's not true. Daddy loves you very much. He was just... scared tonight."

"No," Elara whispered. She coughed a wet, rattling sound that made Eulalie wince. "He loves Adalynn. He only likes me when I'm quiet."

"Baby, you're sick," Eulalie murmured, trying to keep her voice steady despite the rage boiling in her gut. "You're just tired."

"I heard him," Elara said. Her eyes locked onto Eulalie's, possessing a clarity that was terrifying in a five-year-old. "In the car. Before you came. He was talking on the phone to Jared. He said... he said I was a... a log-is-tickle burden."

The air left the room.

Eulalie felt her heart stop, then restart with a violent thud.

Logistical burden

It was Caden's corporate speak. His way of dehumanizing anything that inconvenienced him. But to hear it repeated by this small, fragile voice...

Eulalie pulled Elara tighter, burying her face in the crook of her daughter's neck so Elara wouldn't see the dangerous flash in her eyes.

"He didn't mean it like that," Eulalie lied. The taste of the lie was bitter. "He meant... the schedule. The driving. Not you. Never you."

"He left me in the dark," Elara whispered. "For Adalynn."

Eulalie couldn't defend that. She wouldn't.

"I know," Eulalie said softly. "I know, baby. And I am so sorry."

"Why don't you live with me?" Elara asked. The question hung between them, simple and devastating. "If you live with me, he can't leave me in the dark."

Eulalie pulled back slightly to look at her daughter. In the red light of the clock, Elara looked so small, yet so old. She was learning the cruelest

lesson of childhood: parents are fallible.

"I can't live there anymore, Elara," Eulalie said honestly. "Because that house... it makes Mommy sad. And when Mommy is sad, she can't be strong for you."

"Are you fighting monsters?" Elara asked. It was a metaphor Eulalie had used once, months ago, to explain why she was working late on her laptop.

Eulalie smiled, a sad, broken thing. "Yes. I am fighting monsters."

"Is Adalynn a monster?"

Eulalie hesitated. She brushed a thumb over Elara's cheek. "Adalynn is... confused. But yes. There are monsters. And I have to go build us a fortress. A safe place. Remember the castle I told you about?"

Elara nodded. "Where wolves don't eat sheep."

"Exactly," Eulalie said. "But building a castle takes time. And money. And I have to win the battle first."

"Can I help?" Elara asked, her eyes drooping.

"Yes," Eulalie said firmly. "You have the most important job. You have to get strong. You have to eat your soup, take your medicine, and breathe deep. Can you do that for me? Be my little soldier?"

Elara nodded again. "Okay. Mommy?"

"Yes?"

"Can you stay until the sun comes up?"

"I'll stay until the sun comes up, and after that too," Eulalie promised.

Elara sighed, a sound of pure relief, and closed her eyes. Within minutes, her breathing evened out into the heavy rhythm of sleep.

Eulalie didn't sleep.

She sat in the dark, listening to her daughter breathe, and she let the rage clarify her mind.

Logistical burden.

She reached for her phone on the nightstand. She opened the Notes app. She created a new file.

Title: Custody Evidence.

Her thumbs moved silently across the glass screen.

Date: xxx. Incident: Severe asthma attack. Father failed to locate emergency medication. Father prioritized mistress's minor complaint over child's life-threatening condition. Call logs from Martha's phone as proof.

Date: xxx. Incident: Child left unattended in vehicle for 40+ minutes at night. Witness: Self, Doorman (check logs).

Statement: Child reports emotional abuse. Quote: "Logistical burden"

She typed until her fingers cramped. She cataloged every missed doctor's appointment, every weekend handed off to a nanny, every instance where Caden had chosen his ego over his child.

She wasn't just building a case. She was sharpening a guillotine.

At 6:00 AM, her phone buzzed with a call.

It was Martha. Her face, when Eulalie answered the video call, was drawn, her eyes puffy from crying. She was clearly calling from her own room in the Penthouse.

"Oh, Ma'am," Martha whispered through the phone, her voice thick. "Thank God you got her out of here. I was so scared."

"How is she?" Martha asked, her gaze full of concern.

"Stable," Eulalie said. "But she needs rest. Martha, listen to me."

Eulalie's voice dropped to a command frequency.

"I have to go into the office today to handle business. Caden will likely send someone for Elara's things. I need you to be my eyes and ears. Adalynn is a hazard. I need you to document everything. Every time she disregards Elara's health needs, every time he prioritizes her over his

daughter. Can you do that?"

Martha straightened up. "I will. I promise."

"If Elara wakes up and asks for me, tell her I went to get bricks for the castle," Eulalie said. "She'll understand. And call me. If Caden so much as sneezes wrong you call me."

"I will," Martha said. "Mr. Holloway is still asleep in the guest room. Adalynn... I think she's finally asleep too."

Eulalie's lip curled. "Good. Let them sleep."

She hung up. She knew she could fight for emergency custody now, but Elara was fragile. A legal war today would break her. She needed time to heal, and Eulalie needed time to build the trap that would ensure Caden never got up again.

She ended the call and walked toward her own master bathroom. She felt grimy, covered in the sweat of the gala and the lingering scent of the hospital. She needed to wash the night off. She needed to put on her armor.

