

Chapter 62 No.

The heavy glass door swung outward, carrying with it a gust of conditioned air scented with expensive lilies.

Gussie Pennington stepped out.

She was a woman who wore her wealth like armor. Her blonde hair was sprayed into a helmet of perfection, and her fingers were weighed down by rings that looked heavy enough to cause repetitive strain injury. On her arm was Aunt Beatrice, a woman whose primary contribution to the family was spreading gossip and judging hemlines.

Gussie was holding a black velvet box. She spotted Eulalie instantly.

"Oh, my," Gussie said, her hand fluttering to her chest in a gesture of surprise that was clearly rehearsed. "Eulalie. You look... tired."

Beatrice peered over her glasses. "Ragged, I'd say. Stress does terrible things to the complexion."

Eulalie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Hello, Gussie. Beatrice."

Grady cleared his throat. "I was just telling Eulalie she should take a vacation. Somewhere far away."

Gussie smiled, a tightening of lips that didn't reach her eyes. "That sounds lovely. You really should, dear. It must be so hard for you, watching Caden finally find his true match."

She opened the velvet box in her hand. Inside lay a diamond necklace. It was gaudy, a cascade of stones that looked more like a chandelier than jewelry.

"Look what Caden just ordered for Adalynn," Gussie cooed, tilting the box so the streetlights caught the facets. "For the Tech Summit. He said he wants her to shine brighter than anyone else in the room."

"It's lovely," Eulalie said flatly. "It looks heavy."

"It's substantial," Gussie corrected. "Like Caden's love for her. He's so protective. He's furious about that little stunt your friends at Nexus pulled at the gala. This is his response. He's going to use the law to crush them."

Eulalie's pulse skipped a beat. She kept her face impassive. "What about it?"

"Oh, Caden is going to crush it," Gussie said breezily, snapping the box shut. "He told us over dinner. He's going to buy it out, strip it for parts, and gift the technology to Adalynn. He said you might have been clever once, but he's going to use the law to take back everything he claims you stole from him while you were living in his house. She wants to absorb it into a new Holloway subsidiary under her control."

Eulalie felt a cold chill slide down her spine.

A subsidiary?

"Yes," Gussie continued, oblivious to the predator awakening in front of her. "Adalynn has these wonderful ideas about... oh, I don't know, leveraging its AI for a fashion-tech line. She needs the software. Caden said he's going to sue the Ghost into oblivion and take the code."

Eulalie stared at Gussie.

They didn't know.

They had no idea that the "Ghost" they were planning to sue, the architect they were going to "strip for parts," was standing right in front of them, wearing a three-year-old trench coat and clutching a redeemed watch.

The absurdity of it was almost intoxicating.

"Adalynn wants the code," Eulalie repeated slowly. "To make... a fashion-tech line."

"Exactly," Gussie said. "It's sweet, isn't it? He'd do anything for her. So really, Eulalie, you're just in the way. If that company goes under, it's partially your fault for not warning your little friends."

Eulalie looked from Gussie to Grady. They looked so smug. So sure of

their victory.

The anger that had been simmering in her gut cooled instantly. It solidified into something sharp and useful.

"Thank you, Gussie," Eulalie said.

Gussie blinked "For what?"

"For the update," Eulalie said. She took a step back, creating distance. "Tell Adalynn I hope she enjoys the necklace. It will look beautiful on her while she explains to the board why she doesn't understand the difference between a server and a sewing machine."

Gussie's face scrunched up. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Eulalie said, turning toward her apartment, "that Caden might want to check the expiration date on his gifts."

She walked away.

She heard Grady shouting something behind her about "respect," but the words faded into the traffic noise.

Eulalie returned to the loft. She didn't go back to her work immediately. She sat on the sofa in the dark, her hands gripping the velvet pouch.

They were coming for Nexus. Caden was going to try a hostile takeover to give Adalynn a toy.

She pulled her phone out. Her fingers flew across the screen.

To Jory: Code Red. Caden is targeting the IP. He wants to gift the protocol to Adalynn. Initiate Plan C.

A response came three seconds later.

Jory: Plan C? The Poison Pill? Are you sure? That burns the bridge.

Eulalie looked at her reflection in the dark window. She didn't see the tired, rejected wife Gussie saw. She saw the Architect.

Eulalie: Burn it. I want him to choke on the ashes.