

Chapter 7 No.

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The Loft had a rhythm now. Wake up at 6, run along the Hudson River, code until noon, eat whatever she wanted, code until midnight

Eulalie felt her muscles tightening her brain sharpening The fog of the last five years was lifting.

But the silence was still tricky. Sometimes, she'd turn her head to tell Elara to stop jumping on the couch, only to realize the couch was empty.

In the Penthouse, the rhythm was broken.

It was Tuesday morning Martha was out sick with the flu. The agency sent a replacement, a young girl named Sarah who didn't know the household bible.

Sarah made toast. She used the jar in the pantry. CrunchyPeanut Butter.

Elara sat at the table, swinging her legs. Caden was on a call, pacing the foyer, his expensive leather shoes narrowly missing the sofa where Eulalie's divorce papers remained silently buried under the cushions Adalynn was sleeping in.

Elara took a huge bite. "Yummy."

Two minutes later, she started coughing She clawed at her throat. Her face turned blotchy red.

"Sarah screamed." "Mr. Holloway!"

Caden dropped his phone He rushed into the kitchen. Elara was wheezing her eyes rolling back.

"She's choking" Sarah yelled.

"No!" Caden grabbed Elara. "It's anaphylaxis! The EpiPen! Where's the EpiPen?!"

He tore open the kitchen drawers. Spoons, forks, napkins. No EpiPen.

Eulalie always kept it in a specific red pouch in her purse, or taped to the side of the fridge. But the fridge was clean.

"Call 911!" Caden roared.

Twenty minutes later, at Lenox Hill Hospital.

Elara was stabilized, an oxygen mask over her small face. Caden sat by the bed, his head in his hands.

The doctor, a stern woman, glared at him. "Mr. Holloway, peanut allergy is not a joke. It's in her file. How did you not have an injector on hand?"

"I... my wife usually handles..." Caden trailed off. The excuse sounded pathetic even to his own ears.

Adalynn burst in, wearing oversized sunglasses and holding a Starbucks cup. "Oh my god, is she okay? I hate hospitals, they smell like bleach."

She didn't touch Elara. She stood by the door, checking her reflection in the glass.

Elara stirred. Her voice was muffled by the mask. "Mommy?"

Caden's heart twisted.

"Mommy..." Elara cried softly. "Adalynn smells like chemicals. I want Mommy."

Adalynn's face stiffened. She forced a smile. "Oh, honey, Auntie is here. Mommy is... busy."

Caden stood up. He walked to the window. He pulled out his phone. He scrolled to Eulalie.

His thumb hovered.

Call her. Tell her you need her. Tell her Elara needs her.

But then he looked at Adalynn, who was looking at him expectantly. If he called Eulalie, he admitted defeat. He admitted he couldn't function without her.

He put the phone away. "She'll be fine," he said gruffly. "We don't need to bother anyone."

In the Loft, Eulalie was having tea with Mrs. Foster, her neighbor from 4B. Mrs. Foster was eighty, wore purple velvet tracksuits, and baked oatmeal cookies.

"You look sad, dear," Mrs. Foster said, patting Eulalie's hand.

"I miss my daughter," Eulalie admitted, staring at the steam rising from her mug.

"Then call her."

"I can't. Not yet."

That evening Elara was back in her room. Caden was downstairs arguing with the new maid. Adalynn was in the bath.

Elara climbed onto the nightstand. She picked up the landline. She knew the number. Mommy made her memorize it with a song.

"Nine-One-Seven..."

Eulalie's phone rang. ID: Holloway Residence.

Her heart stopped. She stared at it. It rang four times.

She picked it up. She didn't speak. She just breathed.

"Mommy?" A tiny, scared voice.

Eulalie clapped a hand over her mouth to stop the sob. Tears streamed down her face instantly.

"Mommy, are you there?"

"Ei-" Eulalie started.

"Elara!" Adalynn's voice shrieked from the other end. "What are you doing? Put that down!"

There was a scuffle. "No! I'm talking to Mommy!"

"She doesn't want to talk to you! Look, I bought you a new iPad! Come here!"

Click.

The line went dead.

Eulalie sat on the sofa, the phone still pressed to her ear, listening to the dial tone. It sounded like a flatline.

She slowly lowered the phone. Her hand was shaking uncontrollably.

Adalynn was in the house. Adalynn was controlling the access. As long as Eulalie was just the "ex-wife," she was powerless. ¹

She wiped her face with her sleeve. The sadness in her eyes hardened into something brittle and sharp.

"Okay," she whispered. "No more crying."
