

## Chapter 74 No.

The TMZ article was a masterclass in character assassination. Anonymous "friends" of Caden and Adalynn painted a picture of a lonely, brilliant man betrayed. They described Eulalie as "cold," "socially awkward," and "ambitious," words that, when applied to a woman, were meant to be condemnations. They framed Jory as a "Svengali" who had preyed on a vulnerable woman, manipulating her into stealing from her husband.

The narrative was clever, insidious and utterly divorced from the truth. It was Adalynn's masterpiece.

In the sterile conference room of Holloway Capital, Adalynn was holding court. The board members, a collection of old-money vultures who wouldn't know a line of code from a line of cocaine, were eating it up. The technical disaster was too complex for them to grasp, but a sordid affair? That they understood.

"She played him," Adalynn said, dabbing a crocodile tear from her eye with a silk handkerchief. "Caden gave her everything—a home, a name, a life she could only dream of. And she used that time to conspire with her lover."

Grady Pennington nodded gravely. "The lawsuit will prove she was funneling trade secrets to Stark's company for years. This wasn't a sudden break. It was a long con."

Caden stood by the window, his back to the room. He listened to the lies, a sick feeling twisting in his stomach. He had unleashed this. He had given Adalynn the permission and the motive. He knew Eulalie. She was private, reserved. A public personal scandal would hurt her in a way a business dispute never could. It was a necessary evil, he told himself. A tool to regain control.

But as he listened to Adalynn's shrill, self-serving performance, he felt a flicker of disgust. The woman on the TMZ homepage—scheming, adulterous, greedy—bore no resemblance to the woman who would get lost in a problem for hours, forgetting to eat, her face lit with a fierce,

pure joy of creation. He was destroying the memory of the woman he'd married to protect the woman he'd bought

His phone buzzed. A text from Quentin Knight, his longtime friend and professional hedonist. It was a link to a new article, this one from a more reputable source: Forbes.

The headline was different: "Don't Call Her a Housewife, Call Her a Ghost": How Eulalie Bradford Built a Billion-Dollar Protocol in Secret."

The article wasn't about her marriage. It was about her work. It contained quotes from anonymous engineers at Holloway Capital, all praising the mysterious "Ghost" who would solve impossible problems overnight. It even had a quote from an unnamed Stanford TA.

"Bradford was brilliant," the quote read. "But some students, like Adalynn Pennington, were notorious for... 'collaborative efforts.' We had a major academic integrity hearing regarding her final thesis at Stanford. She barely attended class, and her degree was essentially bought with a hefty donation from her father to the new library wing. She couldn't code 'Hello World' if her life depended on it."

Caden's blood ran cold. The narrative was slipping from his grasp. This wasn't a simple mudslinging match. This was a war with multiple fronts.

He looked over at Adalynn, who was now smiling, accepting condolences from a board member. She looked radiant. Triumphant. And utterly fake.


The plastic bead was starting to crack.

Later that evening in the penthouse, Adalynn threw the Forbes tablet on the sofa. "I can't believe they printed that! It's slander! You have to sue them, Caden!"

Caden picked up the tablet. "It's not slander if it's true, Adalynn."

"So you believe them? You believe she's some kind of secret genius?" Adalynn sneered.

"I know she's clever with computers," Caden said, forcing a dismissive tone he didn't feel. "But Liu is exaggerating. She's a good technician, not a visionary. This whole 'Ghost' thing is a PR stunt Jory Stark cooked up to make his company look more mysterious."

He was lying. But admitting that to Adalynn meant admitting he had been a fool for five years. And his pride wouldn't allow it. 

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