

Chapter 79 No.

The restaurant was neutral ground—a sleek, minimalist space chosen by lawyers. It was supposed to be a preliminary settlement meeting, a chance to avoid a protracted and ugly legal battle. But Caden had no intention of settling.

Eulalie sat opposite him, flanked by her attorney, Helen. Jory was not present; they had agreed it was best to keep the focus on the principals. Eulalie looked composed, dressed in a simple navy blue dress. She looked like a CEO, not an ex-wife.

Adalynn was not at the table. She sat at the restaurant's bar, a blood-red slash of color in the muted room, pretending to look at her phone but watching their reflection in the mirror behind the rows of bottles. Her presence was a silent, deliberate provocation.

"Let's be clear," Caden began, ignoring the lawyers and speaking directly to Eulalie. "You can have the company. You can have the code. I'll even drop the lawsuit."

Eulalie's expression didn't change. "In exchange for what?"

"I want full, sole custody of Elara," he said, the words falling like stones onto the table.

Helen, her lawyer, started to object, but Eulalie raised a hand to silence her.

Caden glanced toward the bar, drawing his next words from Adalynn's playbook. "A child needs stability," he said, his voice cold. "Not a mother who is gallivanting around the world, playing CEO, and having her sordid affairs splashed all over the internet. A judge will see that."

"You mean the affairs you invented?" Eulalie asked, her voice dangerously soft.

"Prove it," Caden shot back. "It's your word against our sources. You're a public figure now. An unstable one. I can give Elara a quiet, secure life.

Away from the chaos you've created."

Eulalie stared at him, seeing the strings being pulled by the woman in the red dress. She wasn't just a rival; she was a parasite, trying to feed on the destruction of Eulalie's most precious bond.

Eulalie turned her gaze back to Caden. "You would use our daughter as a bargaining chip?"

"I'm using her as an anchor," Caden corrected, his voice hard. "You're out of control. This is the only way to protect my family."

"She is not your family!" Eulalie's voice was a whip crack, the first sign of fire beneath the icy calm. "She is my daughter. And you are threatening to take her from me unless I surrender the fruits of my life's work. That is not protection. That is extortion."

She pushed her chair back and stood up. She looked down at Caden, and for the first time, he saw no trace of the woman he had married. He saw a stranger. A queen.

"There will be no settlement, Caden," she said, her voice ringing with absolute finality. "You want a war? You will have one. But we will not be fighting over patents or stock prices. We will be fighting over our daughter. And you need to understand something. You thought my work was my most valuable creation. You were wrong."

She leaned down, placing her hands flat on the table, bringing her face close to his. "You have no idea what I am capable of when it comes to protecting my child. You have seen the architect. Now, you will meet the mother."

She turned and walked out of the restaurant without a backward glance. As she passed the bar, she didn't even look at Adalynn, an act of dismissal more profound than any insult. Adalynn let out a triumphant little laugh.

"She blinked" Adalynn said, walking over to Caden's table. "We've got her."

But Caden didn't look at her. He had seen a woman drawing a line in the sand. And he had the terrifying realization that he had just crossed it.