

Chapter 80 No.

The terrace of Eulalie's Seaport District loft overlooked the Hudson River, the water a churning grey mirror of the sky. The wind was sharp, carrying the scent of rain. It was a stark, beautiful view, a world away from the manicured lawns of the prison she had called home. ②

Jory stood by the railing, his laptop open on a small table. He had been a silent, supportive presence since the disastrous meeting.

"The custody filing is official," he said, his voice gentle. "He's petitioning for an emergency hearing. Citing your 'volatile new lifestyle' and 'unstable business environment' as a danger to Elara."

Eulalie didn't respond. She was watching a storm roll in over New Jersey, the clouds bruised and heavy.

"He's also liquidating a massive block of Holloway Capital stock at a loss," Jory continued, scrolling. "He's raising cash. A war chest. For the custody lawyers."

She finally turned from the view. Her face was pale, but her eyes were burning.

"He thinks money is the answer to everything," she said. "He thinks she can buy lawyers, judges, and eventually, my daughter."

"What are we going to do?" Jory asked.

"When he came for my company," Eulalie said, walking toward him. "I fought him with code. Now that he's coming for my daughter, I will fight him with everything else."

She picked up her phone. It didn't have a single social media app on it. It was a tool, not a toy.

Her first call was to Harrison Sterling. "Harrison, it's Eulalie. Caden has filed for sole custody... Yes. I need your help. Not your money. Your information. I want to know everything about Adalynn Pennington's

finances. Her father's. Every shell corporation, every offshore account. I want to know where every dollar from that 'charity donation' to Stanford actually went."

Her second call was to Professor Liu. "Professor, I need a character witness. But more than that, I need you to help me draft a proposal for the court. A trust for Elara's future. One that demonstrates my ability to provide for her, not just financially, but intellectually. A roadmap for her education, managed by the brightest minds in the world."

Her final call was to a number Caden didn't even know she had. It was to an old friend from before her marriage, a woman who had become one of the most feared investigative journalists in the country.

"Rebecca," Eulalie said. "I have a story for you. It's about a man who built an empire on lies, and the woman he's trying to destroy to protect them. Yes... I'm ready to talk. On the record. About everything."

She hung up the phone. The first drop of rain hit the glass of the terrace door. Then another. The storm was no longer approaching. It was here.

Jory looked at her, a mixture of awe and concern on his face. "This is going to be brutal, Lali."

"I know," she said, watching the rain wash over the city. "He left me no choice."

She thought of Elara's face, of her laugh. A fierce, protective wave washed through her, so powerful it was a physical force. Caden had started a war over a company he thought she stole. He was about to find out what it meant to fight a war over a daughter he was trying to take.

The architect had built her fortress. Now, the mother was going to defend it.