

Chapter 84 No.

The therapist's office was decorated in shades of beige, a deliberate attempt at neutrality that felt more like a colorless void. It was the court-mandated location for Caden's first supervised visit with Elara. The air was thick with unspoken words.

Elara sat on a small couch, drawing in a coloring book. She hadn't looked at Caden since he'd walked in. The therapist, a woman with a kind but weary face, sat in a chair in the corner, a silent observer.

Caden sat opposite his daughter, feeling like a defendant on trial. He had brought a gift, a large, intricately designed LEGO set of a starship. It remained in its bag by his feet.

"I miss you, bug," he said, his voice sounding hollow in the quiet room.

Elara didn't look up. She chose a new crayon, a dark purple, and began to color in the sky of her drawing. "Mommy misses you too," she said, her voice small. Then she added, "But she said you're not allowed at home because you were being mean."

The therapist made a small note on her pad. Caden felt a flush of heat crawl up his neck.

"It's... complicated, Elara," he said, struggling for words. "Grown-up stuff."

"Is it because of the Ghost?" Elara asked, finally looking up. Her eyes, so much like his, were clear and piercingly direct. "I saw the article Mommy's friend wrote. The one in the big newspaper. It said you took her work and put your name on it. Is that why you're mad at her? Because everyone knows now?"

The innocent question struck Caden with the force of a physical blow. The complex war of intellectual property, marital betrayal, and corporate espionage had been distilled by a five-year-old into a simple, devastating truth: he took what wasn't his, and now he was mad that he'd been caught.

"That's not... that's not what happened" he stammered, his mind racing. How could he explain the nuances of venture capital, of branding and execution, to a child? How could he justify his actions when, stripped of their corporate jargon, they sounded so much like theft?

He looked to the therapist for help, but she remained impassive. This was his moment to be a father, and he was failing.

"Your mother... she's very smart," Caden began, the words tasting like ash. "She built something amazing. And I helped. I helped build the company around it."

"But you told everyone you built it," Elara pressed, her crayon forgotten. "The article said you lied."

The silence stretched. In that moment, Caden saw the chasm that had opened between them. He had spent years building an image of himself as an infallible titan, a master of the universe. Now, that image was shattered, and he had nothing to replace it with. He couldn't win his daughter back with gifts or promises. He had to win her back with a truth he couldn't bring himself to tell.

He looked down at the unopened LEGO set. It was a complex machine, a thousand tiny pieces that fit together to create something magnificent. He used to build them with Elara for hours. Now, he felt like he was the one who had been taken apart, and he had no idea how to put himself back together. The hour ended in silence.