

Chapter 87 No.

Adalynn Pennington felt the ground shifting beneath her feet. The world that had once bent to her will, smoothed by her father's money and her own practiced charm, had become a hostile, alien landscape. The Stanford plagiarism story had made her a pariah in the circles she cared about. Tech bloggers mocked her. Old "friends" stopped returning her calls.

Worst of all, Caden was slipping away. He was consumed by his war with Eulalie, locked in his office for hours, his moods swinging between volcanic rage and bleak despair. He no longer listened to her advice. He looked through her, as if she were a ghost.

She knew she had one card left to play: the board of Holloway Capital. They were old-money dinosaurs, men who understood betrayal and greed far better than they understood code.

She arranged a lunch with Arthur Vance, the oldest and most influential board member, at a stuffy, wood-paneled club where women were still a novelty.

"Arthur, the situation is critical," she said, dabbing her lips with a linen napkin. "Caden is letting his personal feelings for this woman cloud his judgment. He's becoming erratic. The company needs a steady hand."

Vance swirled the brandy in his snifter, his reptilian eyes watching her over the rim of the glass. "And you believe that hand should be yours, my dear?"

"I believe the Pennington family has a vested interest in protecting our investment," Adalynn said smoothly. "My father is prepared to inject a significant amount of capital to stabilize the stock. In exchange for a more... active role in leadership for me. A COO position, perhaps. To guide Caden. To make the rational decisions he is no longer capable of making."

It was a palace coup, plain and simple. She was offering to be the board's puppet if they would help her sideline Caden and seize control.

Vance took a slow sip of his brandy. He set the glass down with a soft click.

"An interesting proposal," he said. "Unfortunately, its timing is poor."

"What do you mean?" Adalynn asked, her smile faltering.

"I had a most illuminating conversation yesterday," Vance continued, a cruel little smile playing on his lips. "With Harrison Sterling. He was quite concerned about the board's fiduciary duty in light of the... let's call it 'catastrophic mismanagement' of the CUAP protocol. He pointed out several potential avenues for shareholder lawsuits."

Adalynn's blood ran cold.

"Sterling also presented an alternative," Vance said, leaning forward. "He has brokered a deal. Nexus AI is prepared to acquire the remaining viable assets of Holloway Capital—mostly hardware patents and client lists—for pennies on the dollar. It's a lowball offer, but it saves the board from being wiped out completely in the ensuing litigation. We vote on it tomorrow."

Adalynn stared at him, speechless. Eulalie wasn't just winning. She was buying the rubble of Caden's kingdom.

"As for you, Ms. Pennington," Vance said, his voice turning to ice. "Sterling also provided me with a rather detailed file on your father's... creative accounting practices. I believe the SEC would be very interested. My advice to you is to disappear. Quietly. Before you and your father become the subject of a federal investigation."

He stood up, dropping a hundred-dollar bill on the table. "Lunch is on me," he said. "Consider it severance."

Adalynn sat frozen in the leather booth, the scent of old money and defeat thick in the air. She wasn't a player anymore. She wasn't even a pawn. She was just collateral damage.