

Chapter 9 No.

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The Pre-Summit Welcome Gala at The Temple of Dendur was lit in soft purple hues. Waiters circulated with champagne.

Caden walked in with Adalynn on his arm. Adalynn was wearing a pink feather dress that took up too much space. She was scanning the room for photographers.

Caden looked tired. The circles under his eyes were visible even in the dim light. The code problem was still unsolved. The stock price was dipping. Elara wasn't speaking to him.

"Look, Caden!" Adalynn pointed. "That's the CEO of Nexus, Jory Stark. You should go talk to him."

Caden straightened his tie. "Right. Business."

He began to weave through the crowd.

Suddenly, a hush fell over the room near the entrance. Flashbulbs popped in a blinding staccato rhythm.

Caden turned.

Jory Stark was walking in. But no one was looking at Jory.

They were looking at the woman on his arm.

She wore a sharply tailored Yves Saint Laurent Le Smoking tuxedo suit, the kind Marlene Dietrich would have worn to conquer the world. The lapels were black silk, and under the jacket, she wore only a lace bralette that was more shadow than fabric. Her hair was swept up in an intricate, severe chignon. Diamonds glittered at her ears.

She held her head high, her neck long and elegant. She looked regal. Untouchable.

Caden squinted. The profile was familiar. The curve of the jaw...

The woman turned to laugh at something Jory said.

Caden stopped dead. His champagne glass tilted, spilling a little onto his hand.

Eulalie. 2

But it wasn't Eulalie. Eulalie wore cardigans. Eulalie slouched slightly to make him feel taller. Eulalie had sad eyes.

This woman was radiant.

"Is that... Eulalie?" Adalynn gasped, her grip on Caden's arm tightening painfully. "What is she doing here? Did she crash the party?"

Caden felt a surge of irrational anger. Jealousy, hot and ugly, clawed at his gut. She was supposed to be crying in a cheap hotel. She was supposed to be miserable without him.

Why was she here, shining with another man?

He marched over, dragging Adalynn. 1

"Eulalie," Caden barked.

The conversation circle broke. Eulalie turned slowly. Her eyes landed on him, and the warmth vanished instantly. It was like a shutter closing.

"Mr. Holloway," she said. Cool. Distant.

"What are you doing here?" Caden hissed, stepping into her personal space. "Who let you in? And why are you dressed like... that?"

Jory stepped forward, placing himself between them. "Back off, Caden."

"This is my wife," Caden spat. "Eulalie, come with me. You're making a scene. You don't belong here."

Eulalie laughed. It was a low, dry sound. "I don't belong here? This is an event for innovators, Caden. And my keynote speech tomorrow will prove it. You're the one who just writes checks."

Adalynn bristled. "How dare you! Caden built this city!"

"Caden bought this city," Eulalie corrected. She looked at Caden. "And I'm not your wife. Not really. Not anymore."

"Stop this nonsense!" Caden reached for her arm. "You're coming home."

Eulalie didn't flinch. She just raised a hand. Two massive security guards in black suits materialized from the shadows. They had been trailing Jory.

"Gentlemen," Eulalie said calmly. "This man is harassing me." As she raised her hand, the crisp cuff of her suit jacket slid back an inch, revealing the small, geometric butterfly tattoo on the inside of her wrist, right over her pulse point.

The guards stepped in. One put a heavy hand on Caden's chest. "Sir. Step away from Ms. Bradford."

Ms. Bradford.

Caden stared at her. "You're calling security on me?"

"I don't know you," Eulalie said. She turned her back on him. The ultimate dismissal.

She took Jory's arm. Caden's eyes were glued to the tattoo on her wrist as she walked away. He had never seen it before. It was a new mark, a symbol of a life he wasn't part of.

He realized, with a sickening lurch in his stomach, that he didn't know the woman walking away from him at all.

Adalynn was tugging at his sleeve, whining about how rude Eulalie was. But Caden couldn't hear her. He just watched the sharp silhouette of her black suit disappear into the crowd, feeling a cold void open up in his chest.

Before Caden could turn away, the grand hall's lights dimmed. Jory guided Eulalie up the steps of the central dais. The room fell silent as she took the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen," her voice rang out, clear and authoritative, "for years, the true architecture of our digital future has been hidden in the

shadows. Tonight, the Ghost steps into the light. Tomorrow's keynote will rewrite the industry's rules, but let this serve as your first notice: the era of riding on stolen brilliance is over."

The crowd erupted into thunderous applause, the flashbulbs illuminating her like a queen ascending her throne. Caden stood frozen in the shadows, the sheer force of her impassioned declaration crushing the last remnants of his ego into dust. 🙄
