

After Divorce: My Arrogant Ex Regrets Calling Me Trash

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Chapter 1 No.1

The air in the master bedroom was too cold. It was the first thing Aurora Vance registered before her eyes even opened. It wasn't just the ambient temperature of the central air conditioning set to a sterile sixty-eight degrees; it was a chill that seemed to radiate from her own bones, a phantom sensation from a death she had already died.

She gasped, her body jerking upright in the king-sized bed. The sheets, Egyptian cotton with a thread count higher than her credit score used to be, clung to her damp skin. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic bird trapped in a cage. Thump. Thump. Thump. It was the rhythm of survival.

She pressed her palms against her face. Her skin felt warm, alive. She wasn't in the hospital bed anymore. She wasn't listening to the flatline of the monitor while Sterling Thorne held a press conference about his "grief" in the lobby.

Aurora lowered her hands and looked around. The room was aggressively modern. Chrome accents, black leather furniture, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the grey expanse of the Manhattan skyline. It was a cage disguised as a penthouse.

She turned her head to the digital clock on the nightstand. 7:00 AM. October 14th.

The date hit her like a physical blow. October 14th. The day Sterling Thorne was scheduled to ring the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange. The day Thorne Industries would announce their "revolutionary" new algorithm. The algorithm she had written on a cracked laptop in the laundry room while Sterling was out networking.

But more importantly, today was the day he would discard her.

The heavy oak door to the bedroom swung open with a violence that made the crystal vase on the dresser tremble.

Sterling Thorne walked in. He was already dressed in a bespoke charcoal suit, his hair coiffed to perfection. He looked like every magazine cover he had ever graced: handsome, sharp, and utterly hollow. He was adjusting his diamond cufflinks, his attention focused entirely on his reflection in the full-length mirror across the room.

You're awake, he said. His voice was dismissive, a throwaway comment. He didn't look at her. He never really looked at her. To him, she was just furniture that occasionally needed maintenance.

He walked over to the bed and threw a thick stack of documents onto the duvet. The papers landed with a heavy thud, sliding against her leg.

Sign them, Sterling commanded. He finally turned his gaze toward her, his eyes cold and impatient. "My lawyers say if we file this morning, I can announce my single status during the post-market interviews. It plays better with the investors. The 'eligible bachelor' narrative is trending."

Aurora looked down at the documents. Divorce Settlement Agreement. The bold letters stared back at her.

In her past life, this moment had broken her. She had cried. She had begged. She had clung to his arm, asking what she had done wrong, promising to be better, to be quieter, to be whatever he wanted. She had humiliated herself because she had loved him. She had believed the lie that she was nothing without him.

But now?

Aurora reached out and touched the paper. It felt dry and rough under her fingertips. She didn't feel the stinging in her eyes. She didn't feel the constriction in her throat. She felt... light.

She looked up at Sterling. For the first time in three years, she saw him clearly. He wasn't a titan of industry. He was a mediocre man standing on a pedestal she had built for him, brick by brick, code by code.

You're quiet, Sterling noted, a sneer curling his lip. "Save the tears, Aurora. We both knew this was coming. You were a fun project, but let's be honest. You're a trailer park girl playing dress-up in a penthouse. It's embarrassing for both of us."

A trailer park girl. That was his favorite weapon. He used her humble origins to keep her small, to make her feel grateful for the crumbs of his attention.

Aurora swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her feet hit the plush carpet. She stood up.

Her posture shifted. The slump of the submissive wife vanished. She straightened her spine, her chin lifting. She walked past him toward the mahogany desk in the corner of the room. She moved with a fluid grace that she hadn't possessed yesterday-or rather, a grace she had forgotten she possessed until death reminded her who she was.

Sterling blinked, momentarily thrown off by her silence. He had prepared a speech about how she wasn't "brand compatible" anymore. Her lack of reaction was ruining his rehearsal.

Did you hear me? he snapped, stepping into her path. "I said sign the papers. I don't have all day. The car is downstairs."

Aurora didn't stop. She didn't even flinch. She simply sidestepped him as if he were a minor obstruction, a piece of luggage left in a hallway.

She reached the desk and picked up a heavy fountain pen. It was a Montblanc, a gift she had bought him for their first anniversary. He had never used it. He said it was too heavy.

Aurora weighed the pen in her hand. It felt perfect. Balanced. Lethal.

She looked down at the signature line. Sterling Thorne. His signature was jagged, aggressive. Next to it, the blank line for Aurora Vance.

Memories flashed behind her eyes, fast and sharp.

Nights spent analyzing market trends while he slept.

The codes she wrote that saved his first startup from bankruptcy.

The shadow strategies she whispered in his ear before meetings, which he later claimed as his own brilliant ideas.

She had given him everything. Her mind, her soul, her dignity.

She uncapped the pen. The sound was a sharp click in the silent room.

I'm not negotiating alimony, Sterling said, his voice rising with irritation. "You get the settlement outlined there. It's more money than you've ever seen. Don't get greedy."

Aurora laughed.

It was a soft sound, barely a breath, but it froze Sterling in place. It was not a bitter laugh. It was the laugh of someone watching a child try to explain quantum physics.

I don't want your money, Sterling, she said. Her voice was steady, devoid of the tremors that used to plague her when she spoke to him.

She bent over the desk and pressed the nib to the paper. The ink flowed black and permanent. She signed her name.

Aurora Vance.

Not Aurora Thorne. Aurora Vance.

She capped the pen and tossed the document back toward him. It fluttered through the air and hit him in the chest.

Sterling fumbled to catch it, his composure cracking. He looked at the signature, expecting a mess, a scribble of protest. But it was elegant, sharp, and legally binding.

You... you just signed it, he stammered. "Just like that?"

Just like that, Aurora said. She walked to the walk-in closet. She didn't look at the rows of designer dresses she had bought her costumes for the doll he wanted her to be. She reached for the top shelf and pulled down a battered leather suitcase. It was the one she had brought with her three years ago.

You're leaving now? Sterling asked, following her. He sounded confused. He was winning, he was getting what he wanted, but it didn't feel like a victory. It felt like he was losing something he didn't understand.

Aurora threw a few essential items into the bag. A pair of jeans. A sweater. Her old laptop. The one with the sticker of a phoenix on the lid.

The agreement says I have thirty days to vacate, Sterling said, regaining his arrogance. "But honestly, the sooner you're gone, the better. I have designers coming to redo the space next week."

Aurora zipped the suitcase. The sound was like a zipper closing on a body bag.

She turned to face him one last time.

You think you're the one casting me out, she said softly. She walked toward the door, dragging the suitcase behind her. The wheels hummed on the hardwood floor.

Sterling blocked the doorway. He was taller than her, broader. He used his physical presence to intimidate, to remind her of the power dynamic.

Walk out that door, Aurora, and you're nothing, he sneered, leaning down. "You go back to the trash you came from. No one in this city will look at you twice without my name attached to you."

Aurora looked up. Her eyes were dark, endless pools of calm.

You're right, Sterling, she said. "The lifestyle you enjoy... it requires a certain level of genius to maintain."

She stepped closer, invading his personal space until he was the one who flinched back.

I hope you took notes, she whispered.

She pushed past him. His shoulder collided with hers, but she didn't stumble. She walked out of the bedroom, down the long hallway, and out the front door of the penthouse.

As the elevator doors closed, cutting off the view of the luxury she had created, Aurora checked her watch.

7:15 AM.

The market opened in two hours and fifteen minutes.

She closed her eyes and exhaled. The air in the elevator was stale, but to her, it tasted like oxygen.

Let the countdown begin, she murmured to the empty car.

Sterling Thorne was about to find out exactly how expensive "free" could be.
