

Chapter 11 No.11

The taillights of Elias Thorne's Maybach vanished into the gray slurry of mid-morning traffic, leaving Aurora standing on the curb. The air in Midtown was heavy with exhaust and the impending threat of rain, but for the first time in three years, it didn't feel like it was pressing down on her. It felt like space.

She adjusted the strap of her worn leather bag on her shoulder. Her finger brushed against the phantom weight on her left ring finger. The skin there was slightly paler, a thin, white line that marked the duration of her captivity. She rubbed the spot with her thumb, the friction grounding her in the present.

A black sedan, sleek and unmarked, glided silently to a halt beside her. It wasn't a Maybach, and it wasn't a taxi. It had tinted windows that were probably illegal in three states.

The rear window rolled down an inch.

Boss? the driver asked. His name was Miller. Ex-military, hired by Victor King as part of the new security detail included in her anonymous contract.

Aurora opened the door and slid into the backseat. The interior smelled of new leather and sanitizer, a stark contrast to the cloying vanilla air freshener Sterling had insisted on—a scent that always seemed to mask rot with artificial sweetness.

Pulse HQ, Aurora said, her voice level and calm.

Miller nodded and merged into the unforgiving stream of traffic.

Aurora pulled her laptop from her bag. She didn't look out the window at the city she used to rule from the shadows. She opened the lid, and the screen illuminated her face with a cool, blue light.

She brought up the digital copy of the divorce decree she had scanned before handing it back to the lawyer at City Hall.

Decree Absolute.

The words looked clinical. Final. Impersonal.

Sterling had walked out of that building thinking he had discarded a

liability. He thought he had cut off a limb that was dragging him down. He didn't realize he had actually severed his own head.

She remembered his face in the lobby, the condescending sneer when his assistant, Lance, had handed her a small, pathetic envelope.

A cab fare voucher, Lance had said, his voice dripping with the same arrogance as his employer. "Mr. Thorne is always generous to his charities."

She hadn't taken it. She had walked away with a king leaving the jester on the steps.

Now, sitting in a car owned by a company she secretly controlled, Aurora dragged the file to the trash icon. She didn't need the document to know she was free. She felt it in the way her lungs expanded fully, hitting ribs that no longer felt like cage bars.

Miller, she said, her eyes already scanning lines of code streaming across her terminal.

Ma'am?

"Stop by an electronics supply shop," she said. "The kind that sells components. I need a soldering iron, a new motherboard with an unlocked BIOS, and the fastest RAM you can find off the shelf."

Miller glanced at her in the rearview mirror. He didn't ask why a woman in a thrift store blouse needed industrial-grade electronics. His job was to facilitate, not question.

You got it.

Aurora typed a command into her terminal. The screen went black, then a single, stylized phoenix icon burned in the center.

[Initiate Phoenix Protocol: Phase One?]

A cursor blinked, waiting.

Sterling Thorne believed she was destitute. He believed she was currently crying in a subway station, regretting the loss of his credit card. He believed he had won.

She thought of the years she had spent building his empire, the code she had written, the strategies she had whispered in his ear. He had taken it all and called it his own genius. He hadn't just stolen her work; he had stolen her life.

She hit Enter.

[Protocol Initiated. Let the countdown begin]

Let him believe it, she thought, a cold smile touching her lips. The crash is always more violent when you don't see the wall coming.

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