

## Chapter 2 No.2

The automatic doors of the obsidian-glass apartment buildingslid open, and Aurora stepped out into the bitingOctober air. The doorman, a man named Henry who had always looked at her with a mixture of pity and disdain, moved to whistle for a taxi.

No need, Henry, Aurora said, her voice cutting through the morningtraffic noise. She didn't stop walking. She gripped the handle of her battered leather suitcase and turned right, away from the line of waiting black cars.

Henry froze, his hand half-raised. He watched her go, confused. Mrs. Thorne never walked.

Aurora moved with purpose. The city was waking up. The smell of exhaust, roasting nuts, and damp concrete filled her lungs. It was gritty, dirty, and real. It was better than the sanitized, lavender-scented air of the penthouse

She needed to clear her head. The adrenaline from the confrontation with Sterling was fading, leaving behinda cold clarity. She had no home. She had no job. She had nineteen dollars in her pocket and a laptop that was three years obsolete.

But she had her mind. And she had a map of the future etched into her synapses.

She turned down a side street, taking a shortcut toward the subway station. The buildingshere were older, the shadows longer. This was the seam between the ultra-wealthy district and the rest of the world.

A scream shattered the morningquiet.

It was sharp, terrified, and cut off abruptly.

Aurora stopped. Her body reacted before her brain did. Her weight shifted to the balls of her feet. In her past life-before Sterling, before the facade of the trophy wife-she had learned to survive in places far worse than

this. And in the life she had lived before her death, she had learned skills that didn't belong in a boardroom.

She looked toward the mouth of a narrow alleyway about twenty feet ahead. Shadows danced against the brick wall.

She shouldn't get involved. She was a woman alone with a suitcase. She should keep walking.

But the scream echoed in her memory, overlapping with her own silent screams from the hospital bed.

Aurora dropped the handle of her suitcase. She moved toward the alley, her footsteps silent on the pavement.

Deep in the shadows, three men had cornered a young girl. She looked like a college student-backpack, oversized hoodie, terror wide in her eyes. One man had her pinned against a dumpster. The other two were laughing one of them flicking a switchblade open and closed. Click. Click. Click.

Across the street, parked in the gloom under a scaffolding, sat a sleek black Maybach. Its windows were tinted so dark they looked like voids.

Inside the car, Elias Thorne sat in the rear seat, a tablet resting on his knee. The screen displayed a complex financial report on Asian market fluctuations. His face was a mask of indifference, the sharp angles of his jaw illuminated by the blue light of the screen.

Sir, his driver, a stoic man named Graves, said, his voice tight. "There's a situation in the alley. Should I call 911?"

Elias didn't look up immediately. "If you wish." His voice was a low baritone, smooth and cold like polished stone. He had seen enough violence in the business world to be desensitized to the physical kind.

But then, movement caught his peripheral vision.

A woman.

She stepped into the frame of the alley entrance. She was slender, dressed in a simple coat that looked too thin for the weather. She didn't look like a hero. She looked like a victim waiting to happen.

Elias lowered the tablet. He watched.

Aurora didn't yell. She didn't announce her presence. She picked up a glass bottle from the ground.

She threw it.

The bottle smashed against the wall inches from the knife-wielder's head. Glass shards rained down. The men spun around, startled.

Get lost, Aurora said. Her tone was conversational, bored even.

The man with the knife laughed. It was an ugly, wet sound. "Look at this, boys. A volunteer."

He lunged at her.

In the car, Graves gasped. "Oh God, she's going to get killed."

Elias leaned forward, his eyes narrowing.

The thug thrust the knife toward Aurora's stomach.

Aurora didn't back away. She stepped into the space. Her movement was a blur. She didn't try to overpower him; she didn't have the strength for that anymore. Instead, she used physics. Her left hand shot out, catching the man's wrist, guiding his own momentum past her.

There was a sickening crack.

The man screamed, dropping the knife.

Aurora didn't stop. She used his momentum, spinning him around and slamming his face into the brick wall. He crumpled like a wet paper bag.

The second man roared and charged. Aurora ducked under his wild swing. She came up inside his guard, driving her elbow into his solar plexus. It wasn't a knockout blow, but it was precise enough to steal his breath. As he bent over, she delivered a sharp kick to the side of his knee.

He went down howling.

The third man, the one holding the girl, released her and backed away, his eyes wide with disbelief. He looked at his two fallen comrades, then at

the slender woman standing calmly amidst the carnage.

I suggest you run, Aurora said. She adjusted her coat, smoothing a wrinkle on her sleeve.

The third man turned and bolted down the alley.

The college student slid to the ground, sobbing

In the Maybach, silence reigned.

Graves' mouth was slightly open. "Did you see that? That was... efficient. Who is she?"

Elias stared at the woman. He replayed the fight in his mind. Efficiency. Zero wasted movement. She fought like someone who knew exactly where the human body was weak, compensating for her lack of mass with terrifying precision.

Sir, the police are arriving, Graves noted as sirens wailed in the distance. "Do we intervene?"

Elias watched as a police cruiser pulled up to the curb, blocking the alley entrance. Two officers stepped out, guns drawn.

No, Elias said, his voice devoid of emotion. "We are merely witnesses. Wait here until the officers take our statement. Do not engage with her."

He watched Aurora Vance kneel beside the crying girl. He saw her check the girl's pupils, her hands steady. She looked up, her eyes scanning the street until they locked onto the black tinted windows of his car.

She couldn't see him, but he felt she knew he was there.

Elias felt a strange, cold prickle at the base of his skull. Curiosity. A dangerous thing.

Graves, Elias said quietly.

Sir?

After the police clear us, find out who she is.

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