

Chapter 71 No.

The war wasn't over. Caden would fight back. He would be vicious. But the Ghost was out of the machine. And she was never going back in.

The war wasn't coming. It was here. The tires of the black Rolls-Royce Phantom bit into the snow-packed gravel of the St. Regis Aspen's VIP exit, the sound muffled by the falling powder. It was a heavy, imposing sound, but this time, it was the sound of departure. The car didn't just leave; it carved a path away from the wreckage of the summit, demanding the space around it surrender.

Harrison Sterling sat in the passenger seat, not the driver's. A discreet, uniformed chauffeur was at the wheel. The tinted windows remained a sleek, obsidian barrier, reflecting the flashing bulbs of the tech bloggers and industry paparazzi swarming the curb—a chaotic aftermath of the bombshell that had just detonated inside.

Inside the silent, leather-scented cocoon of the car, Eulalie Bradford leaned her head back against the seat. She wasn't wearing heels. She wore a pair of flat, black loafers that looked soft enough to be slippers but had just kicked down the door to an empire. Her sharp, black suit trousers were uncreased by the battle she had just won.

She didn't look like a wife. She didn't look like an ex-wife. She looked like she owned the code that ran the city beneath her feet.

Jory Stark sat opposite her, his tie loosened, a tablet glowing on his lap. He was scrolling through news alerts, each one a shockwave radiating from the main hall.

"Ghost in the Machine: Housewife Unveiled as Architect of CUAP Protocol." Jory read one headline aloud, a grin spreading across his face. "Holloway Capital in Freefall After 'Poison Pill' Activation.' They're not even trying to be subtle."

"Good," Eulalie said, her voice quiet but firm. "Subtlety was his weapon. Clarity will be mine."

The chauffeur navigated the car smoothly toward the Aspen-Pitkin County Airport, leaving the resort's glittering chaos behind. "The board of Holloway Capital will convene an emergency session within the hour," Harrison stated, his eyes on the snowy landscape, but his attention clearly on the chessboard. "They will pressure him to settle."

"He won't," Eulalie predicted. "His pride is a pre-existing condition. He'll double down."

She was right. Twenty yards behind them, still trapped in the glittering chaos of the summit's exit, Caden Holloway stood like a statue in a hurricane. Adalynn Pennington was clinging to his arm, her silver dress looking cheap and garish in the harsh glare of the news cameras.

"Did you know?" Adalynn's voice was a shrill whisper, a mixture of terror and the specific type of jealousy that tasted like bile. "Caden, did you know she was Ghost?"

Caden didn't answer. He was watching the taillights of the Rolls-Royce disappear. He was replaying five years of his life, searching for clues he'd dismissed as noise. Her late nights on the computer, her muttered frustrations about 'recursive protocols,' her strange excitement over a delivery of server components he'd seen once, dismissing it as some online shopping whim.

It wasn't a whim. It was the construction of a weapon. In his own home.

Grady Pennington, his face ashen, pushed through the crowd toward them. "The system is down! The real-time data feeds are all returning fatal errors! The trading bots are blind, Caden! We're hemorrhaging money!"

The deep, terrified regret he'd felt seeing her in the Rolls Royce curdled in his stomach, instantly transmuting into the cold, familiar armor of rage. Acknowledging her brilliance meant acknowledging his own blindness, and that was a failure he could not afford. Caden finally moved. He turned, not looking at Adalynn or Grady, but at the entrance to the summit hall, where the name-THE FUTURE OF NEURAL NETWORKS-still glowed. His future had just been stolen by his past.

"Get the legal team on the phone," Caden said, his voice flat, devoid of all emotion. It was the most terrifying sound Grady had ever heard. "All of them. We're filing an injunction. Theft of intellectual property. Corporate

espionage. And freeze every asset connected to her and Nexus AI. I want her bankrupt by morning."

He finally looked at Adalynn, his eyes cold and empty. "You wanted a show," he said. "Congratulations. The real one is about to begin."

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