

Chapter 86 No.

The meeting room at the DARPA facility in Arlington was a stark, windowless space known as a SCIF—a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility. No phones were allowed. The air smelled of cooled electronics and institutional coffee. It was a world away from the glass-and-chrome opulence Caden favored. It was a world of substance over style.

Eulalie sat at a polished metal table opposite Dr. Aris Thorne and a panel of three stone-faced military and intelligence officers. Jory sat beside her, his role purely as a supportive business partner. This part of the war, the technical part, was hers to fight alone.

"Your protocol has passed every stress test we've thrown at it, Ms. Bradford," Dr. Thorne began, her voice crisp. "It's revolutionary. However, we have a concern."

She gestured to a file in front of her. "Your estranged husband, Caden Holloway. He remains a major defense contractor. He supplies hardware for dozens of our systems. He has been making inquiries through his political channels. He's framing this contract as a conflict of interest, an award being given to a 'vindictive spouse' based on stolen technology."

Eulalie met her gaze without flinching. "The technology is mine, Dr. Thorne. The patents predate my marriage. My legal team has provided your office with the full documentation."

"We are aware," one of the generals interjected, his voice a low rumble. "And legally, your position is sound. Our concern is not legal, it's practical. Holloway is a known quantity. You, Ms. Bradford, are not. Washington is a town that runs on relationships, not just merit. He is attempting to paint you as a security risk."

This was the crux of it. Caden wasn't fighting her on the technology anymore. He was fighting her on trust, on reputation.

"With all due respect, General," Eulalie said, her voice steady and clear. "Mr. Holloway is the security risk. I have provided your technical team

with the full security audit of CUAP 1.0. It shows a system deliberately designed with backdoors, designed to mine data, designed for leverage. The man you see as a 'known quantity' is a man who builds tools of control, not tools of security. My protocol, CUAP 2.0, is built on the principle of zero trust. It is incorruptible by design."

She leaned forward, her passion for the work burning away any trace of nervousness. "You are building the next generation of autonomous defense systems. Do you want them running on a network built by a man who prizes leverage above all else? Or do you want them running on a network that is mathematically, provably secure? That is the choice."

There was a long silence in the room. The officers exchanged glances. Dr. Thorne looked down at her file, then back at Eulalie.

"There is also the matter of the ongoing civil litigation," Dr. Thorne stated. "The custody battle. It's messy. It draws attention."

"It does," Eulalie conceded. "Mr. Holloway has made it so. He is using our child as a pawn in a business dispute. That should tell you everything you need to know about his character. I am fighting to protect my daughter and my work. He is fighting to protect his ego."

Dr. Thorne closed the file. A decision had been made.

"Washington abhors a loser, Ms. Bradford," she said, a faint, almost imperceptible smile touching her lips. "And it despises a technological liability. Welcome to the program."