

Chapter 88 No.

Caden sat in the dark, the glow of a monitor painting his face in stark relief. He was in the server room of his deserted office, a place he hadn't set foot in for years. He was looking for a weapon, a forgotten file, a legal loophole buried in the archives. Anything.

Instead, he found a ghost.

It was an old project folder, buried deep in a backup server. The file name was innocuous: 'E.B._Pet_Project_2016.'. His curiosity piqued, he opened it.

Inside was not code, but a series of video logs. He clicked the first one.

Eulalie's face filled the screen. She looked younger, softer. She was in their old home, in the small office she had claimed as her own. The wall behind her was a chaotic mess of whiteboards covered in equations. She was talking to the camera, her eyes bright with an intellectual fire he hadn't seen in years.

"Okay, log entry one," she said, a small, excited smile on her lips. "The core concept works. A decentralized verification protocol where each node validates the others, creating a network that is inherently self-policing. The problem is recursion. If every node is checking every other node, the latency is... well, it's a disaster."

He clicked through the videos. Hours of them. Eulalie wrestling with the problem, muttering to herself, her face etched with concentration. He saw her frustration when a simulation failed, the pure, unadulterated joy when she had a breakthrough. He was watching the birth of the CUAP protocol, the creation of the weapon that had destroyed him.

He had been in the house when she recorded these. He remembered seeing her at her desk, lost in her own world. He had dismissed it as a hobby, some online course she was taking. He never asked. He never cared.

He clicked on the last video in the series. She looked exhausted but

triumphant.

"It's done," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "I'm calling it the 'Ghost Protocol.' Because the verification is so fast, so seamless, it's like it's not even there. It's a ghost in the machine." She looked directly into the camera, and for a second, Caden felt like she was looking at him, across the years of their failed marriage. "I think... I think this could change everything."

She had tried to show him. He vaguely remembered a night early in their marriage, when she had tried to explain her idea to him over dinner. He had been distracted, checking stock prices on his phone. He had told her it was "nice," then changed the subject to a gala they had to attend.

He had been sitting on a gold mine and had been too blind to see it. He hadn't just neglected her; he had ignored her genius. The woman on the screen was a supernova of brilliance, and he had treated her like a decorative candle.

He closed the laptop, the silence of the server room pressing in. It wasn't hatred he felt anymore. It was a profound, bottomless ache. A grief for the woman he had married but never known, for the partner he could have had, and for the future he had single-handedly, arrogantly, thrown away. 