

Chapter 98 No.

The storm broke at 3:00 AM. Thunder shook the city, rattling the floor-to-ceiling windows of the empty master bedroom.

Caden was deep in a nightmare. He was back in the panic room, where he had been locked once as a child during a security scare. It was dark. He was alone. The walls were closing in. He couldn't breathe.

He reached out in the darkness, his hand searching for an anchor.

It found only cold, empty sheets.

Instinct took over. He rolled over, clutching a pillow to his chest, the phantom scent of lavender and vanilla driving him mad. He was searching for a warmth that was no longer there.

"Eulalie..." he whimpered in his sleep. "Don't go... please..."

His voice was so broken. For a second, if anyone had been there to hear it, their heart might have softened. He was suffering.

He mumbled again, his lips brushing the cheap cotton of the pillowcase.

"Ghost..."

The name he had seen in her secret video logs. The architect of his ruin. The genius he had thrown away.

He was calling for the woman who had destroyed him, because she was the only thing that had ever been real.

Meanwhile, miles away in Seaport District, Eulalie was awake. Not from the storm, but from inspiration. An idea for a new encryption algorithm had struck her. She sat in her office, bathed in the blue glow of her monitors, the lightning flashing outside just another piece of data. She was building. He was breaking. The universe was in balance.

When Caden woke up, the sun was shining. He felt hollowed out. He

stretched, his hand hitting the empty space beside him. The reality of his solitude crashed down on him anew.

He found his tablet, his fingers seeking a familiar form of self-torture. He played one of her video logs. There she was, younger, fiercely intelligent, explaining the architecture of a system that would one day undo him.

"Morning," a voice said from the doorway. It was his grandmother. "Your lawyer called. The hearing is this afternoon. And Grandmother Bradford called. She wants you for dinner tonight at the Manor."

"I can't," Caden said instinctively. He hated the Bradford Manor. It was old, drafty, and smelled of decay. "I have the hearing."

"The dinner is at eight. The hearing is at two. You will go," his grandmother said. "It's about Elara. And apparently, there is a new development with the Pennington family."

"Fine," Caden said, not looking up from the screen, from the face of the woman he had lost. He knew this wasn't an invitation; it was a summons. Another humiliation to endure.

He knew he hadn't called for Adalynn. He had been calling for Eulalie. The woman on the screen. The ghost in his house. And the chasm between them was wider than ever.