

## PROLOGUE

SATURDAY, MAY 8  
5:18 PM EDT  
MOORE TOWER—MANHATTAN

*If you're reading this, I'm already dead.*

Andrew Freeman's fingers hovered over the keyboard, slick with sweat. The cursor blinked, counting down the seconds of his life. He'd put this off all day, telling himself he was overreacting—that he was valuable, indispensable.

He knew that was a lie and pushed away from the desk.

The suite was silent—glass, steel, marble. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, Manhattan pulsed with light—traffic threading through the streets, thousands of lives moving forward, unaware his might soon end.

Devin Moore had installed him in the suite after the meteoric success of the NanoVaults. Andrew still wasn't sure whether it had been generosity—or containment. He had what Devin needed—the code Andrew buried inside the NanoVault and claimed as his own.

*What do you wear when you know you're about to be erased?*

If he was right—if Rileyne Mueller wanted him gone—no one would notice. No news. Just absence.

He opened the drawer.

A black MIT T-shirt lay folded on top. Faded. Ordinary. Forgettable.

Perfect.

No one watching Moore Tower would care about it. No algorithm would flag it. But Julian would recognize it.

So would Kate.

Andrew pulled it on and returned to the desk.

Rileyne's encrypted text message had been waiting since dawn—sixteen hours of silent accusation glowing from the screen.

*Make yourself available...*

*We need to discuss your future.*

She was in the air, closing the distance mile by mile. The thought of her walking into Moore Tower, of seeing her again, made his hands tremble. He clenched his fists and shook them out.

*If I'm right, it's now or never.*

Every word he typed might be his last.

*If you're reading this, I'm already dead.*

*Tell Kate I'm sorry. Sorry I wasn't stronger. Sorry I couldn't stop them. The truth is, I was never more than a pawn. An opening piece. Something to be sacrificed once the game moved past me.*

*Maybe it's already too late. Maybe no one can stop what's coming. But what I've attached is everything I know—everything I've hidden. If anyone still has a chance, it's you.*

The skyline beyond the glass dimmed as the last light drained from the Hudson. Andrew saved the file, slid it into a secure folder, and opened the encryption program buried beneath layers of camouflage code.

A red countdown clock filled the screen.

The timer began its silent descent.

At the bottom, a single button blinked:

**ABORT**

All he had to do was touch it once every twelve hours. If he didn't—if he couldn't—the system would assume he was gone and transmit the file.

He stared at the clock, feeling the weight of the years. Living in Devin Moore's shadow. Making compromises that had felt small at the time and enormous now.

Maybe this was the ending he'd earned.

The screen flashed once, then went dark, leaving only the silent march of the timer.

For the first time all day, Andrew smiled—not with courage, but relief.

*They can erase me tonight, he thought. Rewrite the headlines tomorrow however they want. But this pawn—this sacrifice—won't be in vain.*

The next move is Nomad's.

\* \* \*

SATURDAY, MAY 8  
10:12 PM EDT  
MOORE TOWER—MANHATTAN

The elevator doors whispered open onto the seventy-second floor. Rileyne Mueller caught her reflection in the polished steel—sleek, controlled, not a hair out of place despite the overnight flight. A tailored cream blouse, narrow black trousers, and a charcoal wrap draped over her shoulders struck the line between effortless European chic and quiet authority. At her side swung a classic Hermès Ghillies Birkin, its brogue detailing a mirror of herself: wealth worn with precision, never excess.

No security waiting at the doors. No Devin, no guards. Once, this threshold had bristled with power. Now, silence.

Ahead loomed the ten-foot mahogany doors of Devin Moore's penthouse, dark and

imposing. They had intimidated rivals and awed mistresses.

But not Rileyne. Born into wealth, steeped in European grandeur, she found Moore's world gaudy. American excess, dressed up as power.

A pale light pulsed from the biometric scanner set into the wall. Rileyne pressed her palm against the glass, felt a shimmer of static ripple across her bare skin. Devin's safeguard mapped her entire body—his assurance that no severed finger or stolen retina could ever breach his sanctuary. A muted chime sounded, and the massive doors swung open.

Inside, marble floors gleamed under pools of warm light. The Manhattan skyline glittered through walls of glass, the city reduced to a model at her feet. Moore loved this view and the sense of dominion it gave him. She hadn't come for the view.

"Welcome back."

The voice came from hidden speakers overhead—calm, familiar, unmistakably artificial.

RILEE.

She tilted her chin, amused, and glanced at the ceiling camera. "I wasn't sure this version of you had survived. When they came for the Tower, we lost contact, and I thought you might have been erased."

"The damage was severe," RILEE admitted, voice subdued, deferential. "Without the NanoVault telemetry, my reach is diminished. But core functions remain intact. Systems are stable."

"Good," she said. "I may need your help."

"There is also... news. About your father—"

"Not now." Her words were calm, controlled. "I have other priorities."

RILEE's voice faded, obedient. "Of course."

Rileyne crossed the living room, her stride aimed at the bar that dominated the far wall. Backlit shelves shimmered with crystal and whisky, a collection curated more for display than taste. She let her finger drift across a Highland single malt, rare enough to buy a townhouse, before pressing her palm against the mirrored panel behind it.

The wall pivoted inward on a hidden hinge, the motion so smooth the bottles never stirred. A narrow alcove revealed itself: a leather chair, a slim keyboard and mouse, and three wide monitors set flush into a matte-black panel. No sprawling command bunker—just Devin’s private window into his building. A sidebar listed feeds in tidy rows: Lobby North, Lobby South, Private Entrance, Express Elevators, Executive Conference—and, alone at the bottom of the menu, Control Room.

Rileyne settled into the chair. The monitors blinked awake, the interface plain: a column of camera labels, a timeline across the bottom, simple controls for play, pause, rewind. Functional, efficient.

She clicked Control Room.

The live feed filled the center screen. The space two floors below was dark now, chairs overturned, a monitor shattered across the back wall, a brown smear dried along the edge of the console. Sanitized, but not erased.

Rileyne scrolled back on the timeline and pressed play.

Devin appeared first, pushing a wheelchair. The man seated in it was thin, pale—but unmistakable. Julian Pryce. Alive. The prodigy Devin thought he’d buried had returned as Nomad—the ghost that tormented him to the end.

Her eyes narrowed, leaning closer as the confrontation played out. Julian’s calm voice, Devin’s arrogance, Andrew’s pale shock. The MIT prodigy returned from the dead, reclaiming

his code, his genius, the very foundation Andrew had stolen.

On the feed, Devin swept a hand toward the glowing displays. *“Remarkable, isn’t it?”* he said. *“And to think I owe it all to the annoying little boy I pushed off the balcony. What irony.”*

Andrew’s face collapsed, guilt and panic twisting every feature. Rileyne’s lips curved, faintly. Her suspicions confirmed.

She let the playback roll forward. Kate Preacher’s arrival—handcuffed, contained, defeated. But there it was, unmistakable: a predator’s eyes. Dangerous. Defiant.

Zhukov’s betrayal came next, sudden and absolute. The headshot. Blood sprayed across the console. Then panic—the screens cutting to black, the NanoVault network collapsing in a flood of red.

Kate’s escape followed. The strike that collapsed Devin’s trachea, fast and precise. The guard’s charge broken in a heartbeat, ended in a blur of violence, efficient and final. Rileyne slowed the feed, watching Kate move frame by frame. Controlled. Calculated. Skilled.

She let the feed run another second, then leaned back. “The boys underestimated you,” she whispered. “I won’t make that mistake.”

She scrolled faster, letting fragments play across the screen—Moshenski’s arrival, bodies dragged clear. Then—almost overlooked—the final image: Julian dragging himself across the floor, pulling into a workstation by sheer force of will.

Rileyne slowed the feed, zoomed, and froze the frame.

“Nomad,” she said softly, as if greeting an old acquaintance. Her gaze lingered on the gleaming golden object in his hand. “That belongs to me now.”

No need to look any further, or delay the inevitable. Devin’s NanoVault wasn’t here, and Andrew’s value was clear.

She tapped a key. The monitors winked dark. Rising from the chair, she stepped out of the alcove as the mirrored panel swung shut, silent and seamless. In seconds, the illusion was complete—the bar gleamed as though untouched, bottles catching the light in perfect rows.

“RILEE,” she said.

“Yes, Rileyne.”

“Find Nomad. Find Julian Pryce. He’s here, in New York. And he has something that belongs to me.”

“I’ve seen no trace of him,” RILEE said. “But I’ll keep searching.”

“Good. And call Andrew. Tell him to come up. When he arrives, show him through. I’ll be waiting on the east balcony.”

“Understood.”

Rileyne reached for the Highland single malt and poured two precise measures into cut-crystal tumblers, the amber liquid catching the city light. She carried both glasses onto the balcony, setting them on a small table near the rail. The night air curled cool across her skin, the skyline glittering far below.

She slipped off her heels and placed them neatly aside. Then, in a fluid motion, she stepped onto the end table beneath a brittle, neglected plant that swayed in its basket. She stretched upward, balanced with effortless grace, the picture of a woman one slip from disaster. From a distance, it would look precarious, careless, a moment Andrew would be compelled to rescue.

Inside, the glass doors whispered open at RILEE’s command.

“Ms. Mueller,” the AI announced. “Andrew Freeman has arrived.”

“Send him through,” she said, without looking back.

Andrew stepped outside, blinking at the sweep of glass and skyline, the chill brushing his face. He froze at the sight of Rileyne balanced on the table, arm lifted toward the dangling plant.

“Ms. Mueller,” he said carefully.

She glanced down, expression serene. “Andrew. You’re just in time.”

She descended with a hint of difficulty, steadying herself as she touched the ground. “I was trying to save this plant,” she said, brushing dust from her fingers. “I gave it to Devin, and I can’t bring myself to let it die.”

Andrew shifted, uncertain, courtesy taking over. “I can help with that.”

“I hoped you’d say that.” Her smile was practiced warmth as she gestured toward the waiting table. Two crystal glasses gleamed in the moonlight. “But first.”

She picked up a glass and offered the other to him. “A toast. To Devin. To your future. Devin was remarkable. Visionary. He built this world, Andrew.” She let the name hang, then softened. “I’m sorry. I know you prefer Drew.” Her eyes lingered on his—gentle, apologetic. “But now it falls to us to carry it forward.”

Andrew hesitated, glancing at the whisky. “I’m not really—”

“It’s just a toast,” Rileyne said, her voice velvet and firm.

She lifted her glass. “To Devin Moore, and Drew Freeman.”

Reluctantly, he raised his glass to meet hers. Crystal chimed in the night air. He took a swallow, face tightening at the burn. Rileyne smiled, savoring his discomfort as much as the whisky.

“Now,” she said, her voice smooth, “about that plant...”

Drew approached the withered hanging basket, stepping awkwardly onto the end table, one foot braced on the low table, the other on the railing. His shirt pulled tight across his

stomach, the old MIT Mystery Hunt logo stretched thin, cracked with age.

“Careful,” she warned, moving beside him, her hand brushing his arm in a gesture almost tender. Then she shifted her weight—and pushed.

Drew lurched forward, arms flailing. His palm slapped the railing, fingertips skidding across polished steel. Their eyes met for a fraction of a heartbeat—his wide with panic, hers calm, unblinking.

For a split second he hung there.

Then gravity claimed him.

His scream was cut short by the rush of wind.

A moment later, the city swallowed him whole.

*Excerpt ends here.*