

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 21:

Dr. Patton didn't ask why; he was long used to how I operated. "Understood."

"The more severe the diagnosis, the better."

"Of course, Mr. Grant."

I hung up.

Even a petty, vindictive man like Armond would back down if he thought Hyacinth had come off worse in the altercation with Vanessa.

Then I called Greg Hunt, my assistant. "Have a bouquet of white roses delivered to Vanessa Abrams tomorrow morning. With a card."

"What should the card say, sir?"

“The usual meaningless crap. Work it out yourself.”

I didn't give a fuck what was written on the card, as long as it pacified Vanessa.

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“Understood, sir.”

My thoughts, as they always did these days, drifted back to Hyacinth.

Would she fly into another jealous rage when she found out I'd sent flowers to Vanessa?

I'd never once given her flowers, after all.

Would she put on a brave front and claim she didn't care, using her lack of love for me as a shield?

Did she have any idea how much it secretly thrilled me when she showed that possessive streak, when she got that fire in her eyes at the mere suggestion of another woman?

Did she know that every time she insisted she didn't love me, it made me want to kiss her until she was gasping for air, until she saw stars, until those pretty, infuriating lips of hers were incapable of forming another word of denial?

But I could never tell her that.

We had a deal.

Love was never part of the arrangement.

Love meant a breach of contract, and a breach meant divorce. And I'd fucking die before I let that happen.

The bathroom door opened just as I stepped back into the bedroom.

Hyacinth emerged in her pajamas. The scent of her shower gel hit me as she moved past, her skin flushed and dewy from the heat. The neckline of her top revealed her shoulders and collarbone, and the way the fabric moved hinted at the slender curve of her waist. She wasn't wearing a bra.

I couldn't tear my eyes away.

She walked toward the bed. Without looking at me, she said, “My back is killing me. If you were planning on doing anything tonight, I’m afraid I won’t be able to oblige.”

My interrupted libido came roaring back. I moved behind her, wrapped my arms around her waist, and bent to kiss her shoulder. “I’ll be gentle.”

She shrugged out of my embrace. “I’m tired and I’m in pain. I really don’t have the energy for this.”

Fuck. The look on her face showed absolutely zero interest. It was frustrating, but I wasn’t about to force her. I let her go.

“Get some sleep, then.”

I looked down at the obvious tent in my trousers, then turned to leave the room.

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Chapter 22:

I spent a sleepless night.

It was the first time since our marriage that Cary had slept separately from me. Not just a different bed, but a different room entirely. I had expected the cold shoulder. After all, I'd refused to have sex with him, and no man I knew—certainly no married one—could tolerate that kind of rejection easily.

Which is why it came as a surprise to find him sitting at the breakfast table when I came downstairs.

He didn't say much; he never was one for morning conversation at home, but he didn't seem angry either. Further proof came when Dr. Patton arrived for a house call.

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“Mr. Grant called me last night,” he explained.

I just nodded and led the way upstairs to the bedroom. The injury was on my lower back, to the right, just above my buttock. Examining it properly meant I would have to undress.

“Not you,” Cary said from the doorway. He tilted his chin toward the woman carrying Dr. Patton’s medical case. “Let her do it.”

“She’s new, just an intern,” Dr. Patton clarified.

“Let her do it,” Cary repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I eyed the doctor and then the young intern.

Was this because Dr. Patton was a man?

Mentally rolling my eyes at his old-fashioned, possessive streak, I lay face down on the bed, lifted my blouse, and pulled down my trousers enough to expose the bruise.

The intern’s hands were cold as she prodded and pressed, asking questions about the pain.

When the examination was over, she conferred quietly with the doctor, who delivered a verdict of just a minor bruise. It would heal nicely in a couple of days.

Dr. Patton prescribed an ointment and rest.

After they left, I changed out of the blouse and into a crop top, thinking it would make applying the ointment easier later.

Holding the tube, I stood in front of the full-length mirror, twisting around to try and see the spot. It wasn't an easy angle, even with yoga practice.

"Let me do it." Cary took the tube of ointment from my hand.

When his calloused palm touched my back, I shivered. Goosebumps prickled my skin. His hand was so much warmer and larger than the intern's, his touch so familiar that it set off a whole cascade of unwanted reactions in my body.

"I can do it myself." I snatched the tube back from him. I didn't want him to touch me.

My rejection, the second time in twelve hours, must have triggered something in him.

There was no warning. Cary simply wrapped an arm around my waist, hauled me off my feet, and carried me over his shoulder as if I were prey and he was the hunter. The next moment, I was tossed face down onto the bed.

I scrambled to get up, but he slapped my ass. “Stay down.”

“I said I can do it MYSELF!” The slight stinging pain made me bite my lip. Damn it—why did his touch have to be so erotic?

He kept his palm firmly in place, pressing down on my buttock. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

The lack of sleep had made me grouchier than usual. It seemed to have had the same effect on him.

It also seemed to have made him hornier.

With one hand keeping me in place, he twisted the cap off the tube, squeezed a dollop of the cold ointment onto my back, then began spreading it with his fingertips. He made slow, deliberate circles on my skin.

The pressure of his palm made me more aware of the ache in my bruised back, but being face down also intensified the sensation of his hands on me. The way he rubbed, glided, and stroked. We were so intimately familiar with each other's bodies that I could tell which fingers he was using by the slight differences in the calluses on his fingertips.

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Chapter 23:

I was glad he couldn't see my face, which was burning hot against the pillow.

I didn't know when he'd removed the hand pinning me down until I felt both of his palms on me.

One slid down into the waistband of my trousers, while the other traced the curve between my lower back and my ass.

I closed my eyes, my breathing growing labored.

He splayed one hand flat against my buttock under the fabric, and I felt myself clench in response.

Slowly, his hands roved with unhurried purpose, exploring my back, my ass. One forefinger skimmed the inside of my thigh, an electrifying caress that made my breath catch.

I gasped as a middle finger thrust its way between my folds, and my muscles contracted involuntarily, clamping down hard around it.

“No,” I gritted out. “I don’t want to.”

“You’re wet,” he stated, with the confidence of a lawyer presenting ironclad evidence in court.

“I don’t want to. Not now.”

“Your body seems to disagree.” He wiggled his finger as proof, and I clenched again—an involuntary betrayal.

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I cursed and forced myself to relax, but it was a losing battle. Cursing again, I shoved myself off the bed and rolled away from him.

We were now face to face.

Cary stood, his displeasure evident in the set of his brow. He held up his middle finger, its tip glistening. “You want this as much as I do.”

I looked away. “Not today. My back still hurts too much.”

We both knew it was a lie.

Cary headed into the bathroom and didn’t come out for a long time.

When he did, his voice had returned to its usual aloof, commanding CEO tone. “Stay home for the next couple of days. I don’t want you at the company.”

I'd already resigned; I wasn't going back there anyway. But the way he issued the order, as if he didn't want me anywhere near the place, immediately put my back up. "Worried I'll catch you with another woman in your office?"

He stared at me. "Are you going to throw another jealous fit if you do?"

"I'm not jealous," I spat back, almost on autopilot. "You can sleep with whoever you want."

"Of course I can. That includes you."

"Not me. Not today."

He paused. Whatever thought had crossed his mind must have pleased him, because a ghost of a smile appeared at the corner of his lips. His eyes dragged over me.

Even though I was wearing a crop top with a bra, I felt incredibly naked under his gaze.

I yanked the blanket up to my shoulders.

Cary left the room without another word.

I dropped the blanket and looked down at my unbuttoned trousers, pulled down to mid-thigh, and the undeniable evidence showing through my panties.

Damn it.

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Chapter 24:

Cary's word was law.

Which meant if he said he didn't want me leaving the house, I was effectively under house arrest. But my prison was a red-brick Victorian mansion, and my warden served hand-cut prime fillet steak for lunch.

Afterward, I called Portia, who hadn't stopped texting me since I'd been whisked away from my new flat.

I gave her the latest update. I kept no secrets from my best friend, and that included the messy details of my sex life.

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"Sick bastard," was her immediate verdict.

"I don't care how big his dick is," she continued. "You have to cut this unhealthy attachment. He's toxic for you."

"I know." But knowing and doing were two very different things.

Being my best friend, Portia of course detected the hesitation in my voice.

“Why? I mean, you know the guy’s fucking other women. Plural. There was that blonde with the massive tits in his office, and now this Vanessa. And God knows how many others. So, knowing all that, why haven’t you slipped a lethal dose of insulin into his wine? Why haven’t you bought a fake passport and a one-way ticket out of the country? Why are you still there?”

“I told you, there’s the deal I made with his mother—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know all about your excuses. But I also know you’re not telling me the whole story.”

I said nothing. It was impossible to lie to Portia.

“I never understood why you married him in the first place,” she carried on. “And don’t give me that crap about the money. There are plenty of rich men in this city, yet you picked the one with the most dangerous vibe. Seriously, how did you not run screaming when you met him? The guy’s eyes scream sociopath.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

Admittedly, Cary could be terrifying to those who didn’t know him. Okay, fine— even at a first meeting he was intensely unapproachable. It wasn’t just the coldness in his eyes, but the way he carried himself. The way his gaze made you feel like you were being strip-searched and X-rayed simultaneously.

He'd made me feel exactly that way when we first met.

But he had been my best option at the time.

Looking back, I could still taste the desperation.

Swirling the glass of Left Bank Bordeaux in my hand, it was hard to believe that three years ago, I could barely have afforded the glass, let alone the wine.

I was at university back then, my time split between studying, writing papers, and working part-time jobs to pay my fees. I had no time to think about love; it felt like a luxury poor girls like me couldn't afford. But I didn't wallow in self-pity. I was sure things would eventually look up.

Then the news of Mum's diagnosis hit like a meteor, obliterating every carefully laid plan I had.

Before Cary appeared, I'd already decided to drop out of university to save the tuition fees and was seriously entertaining the idea of becoming a table dancer.

So when he made his proposal, I jumped at it.

I would have done anything to save my mum. Besides, being a secret wife had to be better than dancing in strip clubs, didn't it? It was still a huge gamble. For all I knew, this stranger could have been like the guy in American Psycho, and by signing his contract, I'd be signing my own death warrant.

Luckily, the gamble paid off.

Mum's health was fine now. She'd even joined a power-walking club and dragged Dad along with her.

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Chapter 25:

My parents couldn't sing Cary's praises enough; they believed him to be the perfect son-in-law, the ideal husband.

Still, his wealth intimidated them. The Grants and the Galloways were separated by so many tax brackets it was pointless to even compare.

That's why they'd refused to move in with Cary and me after we married, insisting on staying in the house I grew up in. They didn't want to be the poor relations, embarrassing me in front of the Grants.

With my work and my role as Cary's secret wife, I seldom had time to visit them except on holidays.

I missed my mum's sausage rolls.

"You should go and see them," Portia said softly. "Your parents must miss you terribly."

"I will," I said, wiping away a stray tear. "When the time is right."

When I'd figured out how to explain the divorce without breaking their hearts.

My phone beeped with an incoming call.

"I've got to go. Another call."

I promised to keep Portia updated if anything happened, then answered the second line. "Hey, Harper."

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"Why didn't you tell me you're leaving?" my colleague and lunch buddy demanded. "I had to hear it from McQuoid in Finance."

"Sorry, I meant to tell you." But then I'd gotten rather sidetracked by a naked woman in Cary's office.

"They're saying you've already handed in your resignation?"

"Yes."

"Damn." Harper sighed. "So there's no point me begging you to reconsider, then?"

"Afraid not."

"Is it because you've got an offer somewhere else?" She lowered her voice. "I swear I won't breathe a word."

"No." Not really. I'd put out feelers, but a firm offer was yet to materialize.

"Then why... Ah, never mind. It's not my place to ask. But you can't just slink off like this! We have to give you a proper send-off, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

“All right. Just text me the time and place.”

“Tonight. The Aviary. I’ve got a friend who knows the owner. We’ll book out the whole place.”

“Okay. But no speeches.”

“Deal.”

I set down the phone and went to get ready for a shower.

As for being grounded... well, Cary had said I wasn’t to go anywhere near the company.

He’d never said a word about a bar.

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Chapter 26:

The lift carried me up to the tenth-floor rooftop bar.

The turnout for my farewell party was surprisingly large; I didn’t even recognize half the people there. Then again, maybe they were just here for the free drinks. The whole company knew I was the CEO’s rumored girlfriend.

At first, plenty had been skeptical, assuming I'd slept my way to the top. I'd once overheard someone betting a month's salary that I got my job because I was good at giving blowjobs.

But as project after project was successfully landed, as I proved I understood both management and technical details, that chatter had died down.

"I'm sorry to let you all down," I said, raising my voice slightly. "But for personal reasons, I can't stay at Mayfair Global any longer. If you ever need my help, just get in touch. And you're always welcome to call me for a drink." I raised my glass in a toast to everyone.

Rachel Fitz was actually crying. She'd been with me the longest, and we were close.

"Without you, who's going to placate the boss when he flies into a rage?" she said through her tears.

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The group fell into a somber silence.

Cary's temper was legendary.

It wasn't that he was physically violent, but his standards were impossibly high. When he gave an order, he expected it done by the end of the day. Anyone who failed to meet his demands would be subjected to a tongue-lashing that left them questioning their own worth. A hundred-hour workweek was the norm to him.

He paid everyone exceptionally well, down to the janitors, but he expected every penny to be earned.

I'd often had to act as a buffer, mediating when someone fell short of his expectations. With me gone, that protection would vanish, and the staff would be left to face his wrath directly.

"It's all that whore Vanessa's fault," Harper spat out, her inhibitions loosened by alcohol. "Boss brought her into the company. Hyacinth caught the two of them getting cozy in his office the other day. I heard Vanessa wasn't even wearing any clothes. No wonder Hyacinth is heartbroken."

Heads nodded in agreement.

Rachel chimed in, "She's filthy rich. She doesn't need a job. She's just doing this to mess with Hyacinth."

"But we'll be the ones working with her. Imagine the horror," McQuoid said. "Does she even know what a spreadsheet looks like?"

“What if she accidentally deletes our files? They’re on the cloud and shared!”

“Does she even know what an LBO or short-selling is?”

“Or what KYC means?”

A wave of panic spread through the group.

I had to put a stop to it before the evening was ruined. “Look on the bright side. Maybe she’s not that dumb. She did graduate from LSE, after all.”

“Yeah, but what if she studied something useless, like anthropology?”

Rachel wiped her tears. “Let’s stop talking about the woman who’s about to ruin our work lives and savor the last days before she arrives. Let’s talk about the one who’s leaving us. Hyacinth, have you had any offers?”

“Nothing confirmed yet. I’m still looking,” I said, gratefully taking the lead to divert the conversation.

“Ooh, I’ve got an idea.” Harper brightened. “Hyacinth, you should look into Velos Capital. Their boss just returned from Wall Street and is building his team. I heard he still hasn’t found a Chief of Staff he’s happy with.”

“You want Hyacinth to be someone’s secretary? Have you lost your mind?” someone immediately retorted.

“Our Hyacinth is talented, young, beautiful, and has a proven track record. Any CEO would be desperate to hire her. If she’s on the market, the headhunters will be falling over themselves to get to her.”

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Chapter 27:

I just smiled without commenting.

They were underestimating the bloodhound instincts of recruiters. About ten days ago, someone had already called me, subtly sounding me out about my future career plans. At that time, there hadn't been a single whisper outside the company about me leaving Mayfair Global.

"Don't be so short-sighted! Chief of Staff is a powerful role! You get access to the City's top-tier network. Do well, and the sky's the limit."

"I know of a case overseas where a Chief of Staff was so capable she was promoted to Vice President within a few years. She later married the CEO."

"Yeah, and it would serve Mr. Grant right. Imagine the look on his face when he sees Hyacinth on the arm of another man."

"A man who's younger, probably taller, maybe even better-looking."

"And richer! I did some digging and downloaded Velos Capital's statement of capital. Wowza, the company is rich rich."

"Heck, if that's the case, I'd want to apply for the job myself."

“What does the boss of Velos Capital even look like? Has anyone seen him? Is he handsome?”

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“No idea. All I know is he was based overseas and just returned to the City.”

The group’s chatter grew more speculative and personal.

I just listened.

I’d thought about starting my own business, but I realized my entire professional network was built around Cary. Once I cut ties with him, who would give me the time of day?

Maybe Velos Capital was worth looking into.

After the party ended and I got home that evening, I called Portia. She was always a reliable source of insider gossip about the City’s elite circles.

After complaining that I’d gone to a party without her, she got down to business. “You’ve come to the right place. I know all about Lochlan Hastings.”

“That’s the boss of Velos Capital?” I asked. “What’s he like?”

“Asking about other men? Aren’t you worried your Cary will get jealous?”

“Let him be jealous. I don’t care.”

“Ah, you’ve finally come to your senses and are moving on. Good for you. You can’t see me now, but I’m giving you a massive thumbs-up.”

“Thanks. I’ve resigned from Mayfair Global, so I need to start planning my own future. I heard this Mr. Hastings is hiring a Chief of Staff. I’m thinking of applying.”

“Give it to me straight. Are you after the man or the money?”

“The money. It’s the only thing I care about now.”

“Consider it handled. I’ll make sure you get a meeting with him.”

“Thanks.”

“If you really want to thank me, come down to Seraphina Clinic. With our Aura Film Wax, your bikini line will be as smooth as a baby’s bottom. You’ll walk into that meeting with flawless skin and unshakeable confidence.”

“Thanks, but I don’t plan on displaying my bikini line in a first meeting with a potential boss.”

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Chapter 28:

After finishing the call, I sat back down at the computer.

The search results for “Lochlan Hastings” were disappointingly scarce. I muttered the name, thinking it would be best to get a sense of my potential future boss’s personality and preferences beforehand.

The study door opened.

Cary walked in.

I closed the laptop. “What are you doing here?”

“This is my house. Do I need a reason to come in?”

“No, of course not. Once I’m gone, you can come in and do a naked lap for all I care.”

Cary shot a suspicious glance at the computer. I’d closed it the moment he entered.

He settled into an armchair. “There’s something I want to discuss with you.”

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I gestured for him to continue.

“Vanessa will be taking over your responsibilities at the company.”

I’d suspected this politely worded prelude wouldn’t lead to anything good, but his words still felt like a punch to the gut. My face visibly cooled. “The company has so many departments. Does she have to go and ruin mine?”

Cary frowned. “She’s ambitious and capable. She’s not going to ruin anything.”

I was so angry I could scream. “I don’t care what she wants to achieve, but she can’t have my department!”

“You’ve resigned. You don’t work for Mayfair Global anymore. It’s not your department.”

I froze, my throat tight and uncomfortable.

He was right. Mayfair Global was his. What right did I have to disagree? What right did I have to challenge him?

If he wanted to hand over the fruits of my hard work to his new fling to make her happy, what could I possibly do about it?

Seeing my reaction, Cary reined in his temper. “Don’t assume the worst of her. I promise Vanessa isn’t there to cause trouble. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Whatever.”

A restless agitation churned in Cary’s eyes. “The reason I’m telling you this first is because I didn’t want you to get upset, exactly like this. I know you have a problem with Vanessa. I know you don’t like her. But we are in the middle of a major collaboration. Am I supposed to jeopardize the relationship with the Abrams family just because of your personal feelings?”

I was stunned by his utterly twisted logic.

What had I done wrong?

First, I lose my man, then my career, and now I’m supposed to be respectful and even happy about the woman who took them?

“Fine. I’ll clear my desk before she arrives. Is there anything else? Would you like me to throw out the desk as well? There’s a potted fern on it. If she doesn’t like it, please give it to someone else. Don’t just bin it.”

Cary stood, came over to where I was sitting, planted both hands on the arms of my chair, and leaned forward until he dominated my entire personal space.

“Are you angry?”

“I’m not.”

“Your face says you are.”

“Really? I wasn’t aware my face could talk.” I tried to shift out of the chair, but he didn’t budge. “You’re jealous.”

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Chapter 29:

The automatic denial was on the tip of my tongue before I realized how pointless it was.

He was doing this on purpose, throwing Vanessa's name in my face to provoke me. Why? Had my recent defiance challenged his authority? Did he feel the need to put me back in my place?

I adopted a flat, businesslike tone. "No. I understand. Vanessa's family is wealthy. They have connections that our comp— that Mayfair Global needs. Her working for you is a strategic move to strengthen that relationship. It's for the good of the company."

Cary scrutinized me, searching for a lie.

I kept my eyes fixed on the back of his right hand, pressed against the armrest.

Cary had big hands. Big, strong, powerful, yet graceful hands. Hands capable of strangling a person if necessary. Hands equally capable of giving a woman a body-shaking orgasm if he wanted to.

His hands were what I was going to miss the most after I left.

Not the dresser full of jewels, not the designer clothes or the car. It was his hands I would miss.

Cary followed my gaze. His right hand rose slowly and came to rest on the side of my neck. I felt my pulse jump under his touch.

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He leaned in, then paused. “Have you been drinking?”

I licked my lips. “Just a few glasses. With colleagues. It was a farewell party.”

He frowned. “I wasn’t informed. Or invited.”

“You’re the boss. No one wants the big boss showing up at a party.”

Cary made a low noise in his throat. “What did you have? Champagne?”

He lowered his head and touched his lips to mine.

I almost parted my lips to welcome him in before I caught myself.

Shoving his chest, I rolled the chair backward, out of his reach.

Cary straightened, displeased. “I spoke to Patton. Your back isn’t that bad.”

He thought I was going to refuse him sex.

I had been planning to. But then I reconsidered. With only twenty days left, sex with him became a limited-time offer.

I eyed him.

Even wrapped in a formal business suit, his powerful physique was unmistakable. He could lift me with one arm. His abs were toned and sculpted, but without the extreme bulk of a professional bodybuilder. And I had licked, more than once, the deep V that angled down from his hip bones.

And his hands.

I rolled my chair forward, grabbed his tie, and pulled him toward me.

“No kissing. Your rules,” I whispered, nibbling his earlobe and feeling it grow hot under my tongue.

He growled in response.

My blouse was torn off in a matter of seconds.

Straddling him, I pushed him down into the nearest chair.

This was my study, not technically an office.

But it was as close to office sex as we were ever going to get.

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Chapter 30:

Three days later, I went into the office to hand over my duties. Vanessa had already moved into my office with the air of a conquering hero. She had thrown out all the furniture, decorations, and the trophies I had lined up along the shelves, tossing them carelessly into a bin.

The entire department was in a state of panic.

Harper pulled me into the break room to unload her frustrations. “We were all guessing who would replace you as department head. We didn’t expect a genius, but we certainly didn’t expect a complete idiot. I heard from the secretarial pool that Vanessa doesn’t even know how to use the printer.”

“For real?”

“For real.” Harper nodded. “For two days, she’s done nothing but eat snacks and play games. She downloaded some dodgy game onto her own laptop and got a virus, then she stormed into the secretarial office and commandeered someone else’s computer, accidentally deleting important files. And the most infuriating part? The boss fired the victim—the one whose files were lost. I dread to think what havoc she’ll wreak on our department.”

I tried to comfort her, but my words were little reassurance. After all, Vanessa was now her direct boss, and an arrogant idiot backed by the CEO could easily destroy Harper’s work and career.

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Back in what used to be my office, I began the handover with a neutral expression.

But Vanessa cut me off and launched into a triumphant speech. “So, how does it feel? You lost your man, and now you’ve lost your job. Everything you worked so hard for all these years, I can get with just a snap of my fingers. Do you know why?”

I said nothing.

“It’s because we come from different worlds. I’m high-class, you’re trash. I have powerful people backing me, and you have no one. In our circle, I’ve seen too many pretty little things like you. You’re just toys for men to use and discard. And you actually thought you could marry into the Grant family? How pathetically delusional.”

I stood before the desk, looking down at her. “And what exactly makes you so high-class? Is it the brick for a head that doesn’t know how to use Gtmhub or Calendly? The fact you’re proudly recycling a man I’ve discarded? Or that you’re gleeful about taking a job I no longer want? And ‘our circle’? Who is this ‘our’? You don’t do any real work; all you know how to do is rut around the office like an animal. I want no part of that stinking barnyard. You and Cary can lock yourselves in it together.”

Vanessa was easy to provoke. She started shrieking before I had even finished. “Shut up! I’m going to tear your mouth apart! I’ll kill you!”

She jumped up from her chair and rushed at me, hand raised to slap me.

I stood my ground. Just as she reached me, I slammed the stack of files hard into her face. The impact sent her stumbling backward, blood trickling from her nose.

“Handover complete. I wish you every success in running Mayfair Global into the ground.”

I turned and walked out.

“You bitch! I won’t let you get away with this!”

Out in the corridor, colleagues cautiously approached me, their faces full of concern and sympathy.

Harper, braving the fallout, went into the office to retrieve my things. She gathered my trophies from the bin, wiped them clean, and packed them carefully into a cardboard box. “Hyacinth, I’ll help you carry these down.”

“Thanks.”

The team saw me off to the lift, and Harper carried the box down for me.

Before leaving, I said to her, “Please tell everyone to just focus on their own work and don’t confront Vanessa. She’ll get bored eventually, then she’ll leave. Meanwhile, if any projects run into trouble under her watch, go directly to Cary. Don’t let her pin the blame on you. You can’t be responsible for projects worth billions. If Cary knows it’s her fault, I’m sure he’ll find a way to handle it.”

Harper nodded. “I’ll let everyone know.”

I gave her a hug. “Keep in touch.”

As I drove away from Mayfair Global, it began to rain. The drops hitting the windscreen seemed to echo a sudden, inexplicable sadness.

Seventeen days left.

It would all be over soon.

The moment I got home, Portia called.

“Darling, it’s on. Tomorrow afternoon, one of my contacts is playing golf with Lochlan Hastings. I’ve arranged to bring a plus-one. You’ll have your chance to impress.”

“You’re the best, darling! Mwah!”

“Ugh, you’re making me cringe. Okay, Wednesday it is. Don’t be late.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

The good news lifted my spirits so much that I ate a hearty dinner—so much that I felt completely stuffed.

An hour later, I was in the home gym, trying to work off the heavy meal. I had been on the treadmill for about twenty minutes when my phone rang.

Cary hadn't come home again tonight. His absence was normal by now, but why was he calling at this hour?

I hesitated before answering.

As soon as the call connected, I heard a woman's ragged panting. "Cary, I can't take it. You're going to kill me. Deeper, deeper. Ahhhhh!"

My already unsettled stomach churned violently. I doubled over and vomited all over the floor.

The phone slipped from my hand and hit the tiles with a crack, the screen shattering into a spiderweb of lines.

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