

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 301

Chapter 301:

I struggled out of his hold, straightening my dress. “I’m fine,” I said, aiming for nonchalant and probably landing somewhere near “wounded badger.”

He frowned, that familiar stubborn line appearing between his brows. “What made you cry?”

“Nothing.” A masterpiece of evasion.

He took a step closer. “You seldom cried.”

Oh, for God’s sake. “It’s none of your damn business,” I snapped, the frayed wire of my temper finally sparking. “I’m not your wife, not your employee, and why I cry is none of your damn concern.”

That seemed to slap him. He stared at me, his eyes unfathomable, just taking it in.

I was breathing a bit hard, and in the pause, my gaze caught on his left hand. A simple, thick platinum band on his ring finger.

Right. Of course. The world moved on.

“Congratulations, by the way,” I said, nodding at it, my voice all brittle fake cheer.

“It’s not Vanessa,” he said quickly, almost defensively.

“I know.”

“You do?” He sounded surprised, and a little pleased. The arrogance, slightly dented but never dead. “So you’ve been keeping tabs on me.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t have to, not with your name being a tabloid favourite.”

He opened his mouth, then hesitated. I had a sudden, dread-filled vision of him asking me to his wedding. I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.

“Would you excuse me,” I said. “I need to go to the restroom.”

“You’re going the wrong way,” he said, not moving. “This leads to a lounge and the smoking rooms.”

“Oh.”

I turned on my heel, a bit unsteadily.

“I’ll show you,” he said, already striding off down a different turn in the hallway.

“No need,” I called after him, but he didn’t stop. Typical.

I followed reluctantly.

He slowed to match my pace. After a moment of what was, for him, a thoughtful silence, he tried for casual. I knew him well enough to hear the serious intent underneath. “You came here alone?”

“Of course not,” I snorted. “Me on my own couldn’t afford the tablecloth at the Lanesborough, let alone the top table.”

“Top table?” Then it clicked. His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. “Of course. Because you came with Hastings.”

I felt myself go defensive, shoulders squaring. “He’s my boss. He needed a date for the night.”

My voice caught traitorously on the last words, the memory of Lochlan’s correction—Not my girlfriend—flooding back in Dolby surround sound.

Now that the shock had worn off somewhat... okay, no, it hadn’t worn off, but now that my ears had finally stopped ringing and my brain could function semi-normally again, I finally had time to think. Was it my fault? Had I been reading too much into it all? Had I completely misinterpreted his words in the car?

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Chapter 302

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He'd said he wanted me at the Lanesborough as his date. Not "like a date," not just as his plus-one, but a proper date. He'd said he'd waited long enough, for me to get over Cary and to move on. Move on with him. He'd said he wanted a relationship. He'd even said we could go public if I wanted. He'd kissed me in the car.

He hadn't used the word "girlfriend" exactly, but come on. How could I have misread so many sky-written, neon-lit signals?

No. I hadn't. Lochlan had wanted me to be his girlfriend.

At least, he did on Sunday night and Monday morning. Then he disappeared for a day, and then everything changed. The change coincided precisely with one thing.

Soraya showing up.

That had to be it. He'd changed his mind because of her.

Was it because he was still holding a candle for her, hadn't gotten over her? Was she the one who broke up with him, and he was still pining, and the moment he saw her, he couldn't let her misunderstand and had to immediately distance himself from me?

But what about me? What the hell had I done wrong to deserve such treatment? I felt like the butt of a giant joke I wasn't even aware I was in on. Humiliated was too mild a word. This was a full-scale, soul-cringing evisceration.

"Hyacinth?"

Cary's voice shook me out of the random, chaotic, confusing thoughts. Honestly, it was a relief. My own head was starting to feel like a particularly aggressive pinball machine.

"What?" I looked up.

He'd stopped walking and was turned towards me, his tall frame blocking out the overhead light as usual. Some things never changed. He was still built like a human eclipse.

With his face backlit, it was hard to read his expression.

"Something's bothering you," he stated.

I didn't deny it; it must've been written all over my face in neon capitals. BOTHERED. ALSO HUMILIATED. PLEASE KICK.

"Care to tell me about it?"

I looked up, surprised. That phrasing. “Care to.” This was so unlike the Cary I used to know. The Cary I used to know wouldn’t say “care to” and wouldn’t have used a question or a request. He’d have simply demanded it, with the full expectation of compliance. “Tell me.” Full stop.

For a moment, a mad, irrepressible urge washed over me to confide in him. Not because I saw him as a friend—God, no—but because he and Lochlan belonged to the same exclusive, privileged club. He might actually understand the rulebook I’d apparently failed to read.

“Does your fiancée know about Vanessa?” I asked.

He paused, surprised by the left turn, but eventually nodded. “Yes.”

“Are you still seeing her? I mean, Vanessa.”

“Of course not,” he said, a flicker of that old arrogance surfacing. “I don’t cheat.”

I automatically sneered. “Yeah, right.”

“I told you,” he said, his voice lowering, that stubborn set returning to his jaw. “I never slept with another woman when I was married to you. I—”

“Let’s not get into that again,” I interrupted. I couldn’t do this, not here, not now. The present was humiliating enough without raking over the past.

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Chapter 303:

“You still don’t believe me,” he said, and it wasn’t a question.

“Doesn’t matter what I believe,” I shrugged. “It’s all in the past.”

He looked at me, and his next words were so soft I almost didn’t catch them. “Not to me it isn’t.”

I looked away.

“Cary?”

A woman’s voice, cool and level, cut through the awkward silence.

Cary stiffened, then turned around.

A woman was walking towards us. She was dressed in a beautifully cut navy cocktail dress that screamed quiet money and impeccable taste, her makeup subtle and enhancing rather than dramatic. She looked practical, poised, and completely in control. Her eyes, a clear, intelligent grey, swept between me and Cary with an appraising, but not unkind, curiosity.

“Liz,” Cary said, his posture shifting into something more formal. He turned back to me. “Liz Forbes, my... fiancée.” He said it like he was still getting used to the word. He then turned to her. “This is Hyacinth Galloway.”

Liz Forbes extended a hand to me. Her smile was friendly. “Nice to meet you, Ms Galloway.”

I shook her hand. Her grip was steady, her hand warm and strong. No limp-fish socialite handshake here. “Please, call me Hyacinth,” I managed. “And it’s a pleasure to meet you too. Oh, and congratulations on the engagement.”

“Thank you,” she said, her smile warming a fraction. It reached her eyes, which was more than I’d managed all night.

I shifted my foot awkwardly. The scene was textbook awkward: a man’s ex-wife caught talking to him by the current fiancée. If I were her, I’d have questions. I’d probably be eyeing the nearest heavy ornament.

But she didn’t even look at me sideways. No suspicious glance, no jealous taunts veiled as pleasantries. She was courteous, confident, and not at all the kind of dramatically beautiful, high-maintenance woman I’d imagined Cary would marry next.

She glanced questioningly, but still politely, between me and Cary. “Hope I’m not interrupting.”

“No, no, of course not,” I said quickly. “I was just on my way to the restroom. Got a bit turned around.”

She shifted slightly and pointed a perfectly manicured finger towards a discreetly lit sign further down the hall. “That way.”

“Thank you,” I said, grasping the lifeline. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Nice meeting you,” she nodded, her smile still in place.

I walked past Cary, feeling two pairs of eyes on my back.

I practically scurried to the sanctuary of the ladies'. I pushed through the door, beelined for the sinks, and turned the cold tap on full. I splashed water on my face, once, twice, then kept cupping it and splashing it until my skull felt like it was packed with ice.

The front of my expensive dress was soaked, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Dignity had left the building about an hour ago.

I stared at my reflection in the ornate mirror. A stranger stared back, with kohl smudged under her eyes and foundation streaked like a bad watercolour. I looked exactly how I felt: half-ruined.

The other women who drifted in and out gave me strange looks, a mixture of pity and alarm. I ignored them all. I didn't belong in their world of perfect updos and discreet lipstick touch-ups. I never did.

Chapter 304:

My mind circled back to Cary.

He'd denied, and still denied, he was cheating even when I caught him with his head buried between the tits of a blonde in his office, when I'd run into Vanessa in front of his desk, buck naked.

Maybe he hadn't been lying. Maybe, to him, that wasn't cheating.

Only if I'd caught him in a proper bed, with his cock actually inside another woman, would it have counted as cheating in his personal, utterly ridiculous rulebook.

A woman in his office was just... a fling. A distraction. A bit of stress relief.

Maybe that's how all men like him thought. Like Lochlan.

He'd asked me out, kissed me, made promises with his eyes and his carefully chosen words, but that didn't mean I was his girlfriend.

Maybe men like him had a different vocabulary for women like me. An "associate." A "companion." A "temporary diversion." The "staff."

Whatever the hell I was to him, I didn't want to wait around to find out.

I left the restroom, my damp dress clinging unpleasantly. I grabbed the arm of a passing usher. "Nearest exit, please?" He pointed, looking concerned. I mumbled thanks and followed his direction.

I was almost at the grand doors leading to the lobby, freedom in sight, when my phone vibrated in my clutch.

A stupid, treacherous spike of hope hit me, immediately followed by a crushing wave of disappointment when I saw “Portia Pierce” light up the screen, not Lochlan.

I’d been gone for, what, almost half an hour? And he hadn’t bothered to call or text. I could have tripped, fallen down the stairs, and died for all he cared.

I answered. “Hey.”

“Hey back.” Portia’s voice was bright, edged with champagne. “Where are you? I scanned the whole place but didn’t see you. My date is getting jealous, thinks I’m looking for an upgrade.”

“I’m leaving,” I said, pushing through the heavy door into the blessedly quiet lobby.

“What? But dinner’s not even halfway through! And you haven’t seen my date yet, he’s got this absolutely ridiculous—”

“I’ve got a headache,” I lied, flagging down a doorman for a taxi.

“Really?” Her voice sharpened with instant suspicion. Portia could smell bullshit a mile away. It was her legal superpower. “You seemed fine to me two hours ago. What’s happened?”

“Tell you later,” I sighed, sliding into the back of a cab. “But for now, just enjoy your evening. Kiss the date with the ridiculous thing for me.”

“Hyacinth—”

“Bye, P.”

When Portia let herself into the penthouse later, I was midway through my sixth glass of a very nice, and now largely forgotten, Malbec.

I saw her, bleary-eyed, and waved a limp hand. “Where’s your date?” I slurred slightly.

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Chapter 305

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“I put him in a taxi and sent him home,” she said, kicking off her heels with a groan. She came to sit next to me on the sofa, not saying a word about the wine or my smeared

makeup. She just reached over and stroked my hair. “Alright, you tragic creature. Talk to me.”

So I told her.

At some point, she stood up, muttered “Christ on a bike,” and grabbed a box of tissues from the console table. She thrust it into my lap.

I hadn’t even realized I’d started crying again. Great. Now I was a drunk, weeping mess. A real catch.

“That absolute, utter, top-tier wanker,” she seethed, pacing the rug. “That posh, emotionally constipated fucknugget. I hope he chokes on his dinner. I hope Soraya Warren is secretly a serial killer who targets arrogant billionaires.”

I gave a wet sniffle that was half a laugh. “I don’t think she is.”

“Well, she should be!” Portia declared, then took a breath, forcing herself into a more reasonable, lawyerly tone. “Right. Okay. You need to confront him. Get the truth out of him. Properly. No more of this cryptic, genteel bullshit. Corner him in his office and demand an explanation.”

“No,” I moaned, cringing at the very idea. The thought of facing him, of seeing that polite, impassive mask, made my stomach twist. “I can’t. I’d rather staple my own tongue to the ceiling.”

“But you’ve got work,” she pointed out. “You can’t keep hiding from him. He signs your cheques.”

“I’ll call in sick tomorrow,” I said, my voice small. It was a child’s solution, but it was all I had.

“Fine,” Portia said, sitting back down. “But what about the day after tomorrow, and the day after that? You’re going to develop a mysterious, month-long flu?”

I had no idea. The future was a fog of dread and awkward meetings.

I groaned, frustration winning out over misery. “That’s why I said I didn’t want to date my boss! It’s a terrible, terrible idea!”

Too bad I broke my own damn rule the moment Lochlan Hastings looked at me and decided he “wanted” me. What an idiot.

Portia patted my hand, her anger melting into sympathy. “You’re not an idiot. You’re a human being who was lied to. You were right, you should call in sick tomorrow.”

“But you just said—”

“Just one day is fine. If he has a valid reason, or even just a reason he thinks is valid, for doing what he did, he’ll talk to you. You don’t show up to work, you make him come to you. If he cares about you at all, he’ll come. He’ll call. He’ll explain.”

“But what if he doesn’t?”

“Then you know you should cut your losses and move on. Painfully, messily, but definitively. And you do it with your head held high.”

“Fine.” I sighed.

She handed my phone to me.

Reluctantly, I took it and navigated to Kai’s number. I tapped out a message, trying to sound normal and not at all like a woman who’d been emotionally steamrolled.

Hi Kai. Came down with a nasty cold. Won’t be in the office tomorrow. Could you please shoulder my workload for the day? Really sorry for the short notice.

The reply came almost instantly. Of course. No problem. Hope you feel better soon. Are you okay?

The simple kindness in that last question almost undid me. I swallowed hard. I’m fine, I typed back. Just need rest. Thanks, Kai.

But the truth was I wasn’t fine. Not at all.

I spent the night in bed, wide awake, wishing for the phone to ring.

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Chapter 306:

I watched Hyacinth walk away, her spine rigid, the set of her shoulders broadcasting a distress my own actions had caused.

The need to follow her, to dismantle this calamitous misunderstanding before it solidified, was a physical pressure beneath my ribs. I began to rise.

“Looking for Hyacinth?” Soraya mirrored my movement. “Oh, I’ll come too. I need to use the ladies’ room.”

I sat back down. “What do you want?”

She settled back into her chair, the picture of ease. “I just said I need to use the ladies’. Surely you can understand every human has biological needs.”

“Not you.”

She laughed. “Are you saying I’m not human?”

“You know what you are.”

“Oh, I do. I’m the woman you used to fuck, then abandoned and left to rot in prison while you walked away clean.”

The old anger, cold and sedimented, stirred. “You served time for the crimes you committed.”

She let out a dismissive laugh, leaning in slightly. “You mean the crimes we committed.”

I leaned back.

“Don’t worry, I’m not wearing a wire.” She smirked. “You used algorithms and market trends to win, I used seduction and blackmail. And you, Lochlan, you made such excellent use of the insights I provided. We were quite the team, really. A sort of Bonnie and Clyde for the Wall Street set.”

The ghost of that collaboration, of the person I had allowed myself to become in her orbit, was a taste of ash.

“What are you doing here in London?”

“I already told you,” she sighed, as if explaining to a slow child. “Catching up with old friends. I grew up here, remember? Or did you purge that along with everything else?”

“You should have stayed in New York.”

“And done what, exactly?” Her green eyes lost their playful glint, hardening to jade. “My business partner betrayed me. My lover abandoned me. I’ve got nothing to live for in New York. All thanks to you.”

“You deserved it.”

“That,” she said, picking up her champagne flute, “is a matter of opinion.” She raised the glass towards me. “Here’s to old friends and lovers.”

I didn’t touch my glass. She reached over and clinked hers against it. “Come on. For old times’ sake.”

She swept her gaze across the room, where the auction was reaching a fever pitch, and sighed wistfully. “Remember what fun we used to have at events like these? Dress up, mingle, drink, snag a deal or two, and go home and fuck till the bed broke. Back then, it was us against the world.”

I cut through the memory, my voice flat. “That was years ago. You and I are no longer lovers.”

“Can’t we be friends, though?” she asked, the picture of innocence. Then her eyes flicked to Hyacinth’s empty seat, and the innocence curdled into something sharper. “Or is it because of her? Hyacinth, right? Seems like a nice girl. From solid working-class stock, I take it? Your taste in women has changed.”

A protective instinct, swift and violent, rose within me. I banked it, knowing any show of interest would only paint a larger target on Hyacinth’s back. “She’s not my woman. And it’s none of your business.”

At that moment, her date returned. Charles, I believe his name was, the third son of some minor viscount. He sat down with a plonk, his face flushed with triumph and alcohol. “Sorry, love, for abandoning you, but I just had to talk to the Marquess of Hereford. I think we’re on the verge of something rather significant with his northern estates.”

Soraya turned to him, her face transforming instantly into one of rapt, forgiving attention. “It was perfectly fine. Lochlan was keeping me company.” She smiled, a private, inviting thing.

Charles leaned in. She met him halfway, allowing him to kiss her cheek. He pulled her in for a longer, deeper, distinctly sloppy kiss, his hands beginning to roam over the back of her gown.

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Chapter 307

Chapter 307:

Soraya giggled and pushed him back gently. “Darling, we’re in public,” she chided, her eyes laughing.

Charles pulled back, his own eyes glazed. He whispered something hot and urgent in her ear, then stood, adjusting his trousers with unconscious vulgarity. “Excuse me,” he mumbled, and staggered off in the direction of the corridors.

Soraya turned back to me. She gave a small, conspiratorial smile. “He wants me to meet him in the restroom.” She rolled her eyes, a mannerism that somehow still managed to look elegant on her. “He can’t keep his hands off me.”

“Your taste in men has changed,” I observed, my tone devoid of any inflection that could be mistaken for jealousy.

“Well, yes,” she conceded with a light shrug. “I’ve had to make do. He’s a useful sort of connection, but he’s no Garrett, of course.”

The name fell between us like a stone. Her smile vanished. My own face settled into impassive ice.

“You have no right to mention him.”

“Why not?” she sneered, the charm evaporating entirely. “I’m his widow.”

“You weren’t married to him.”

“We were engaged to be married! We would’ve had our wedding if you hadn’t killed him a week before it.”

“I didn’t kill him.”

“It wasn’t your hand on the steering wheel,” she spat, “but your words sure as hell put him in that car.”

A familiar, grinding guilt, worn smooth by years of examination, turned in my chest. “He was my best friend. He deserved to know the truth about you.”

“Truth? What the hell do you know about truth? Garrett and I were happy. He loved me. We would’ve gone on to be happy if you hadn’t shoved your fucking oar in and messed everything up.”

“You were using him.”

“So what?” The admission was blunt, unashamed. “I used you, and you used me, and we were happy. You just couldn’t stand the fact that I walked away from you and picked Garrett. He was better than you. He was good.”

“Garrett was different,” I agreed, the memory of my friend’s decency a fresh ache. “He wasn’t like you or me. He wouldn’t have fallen in love with you if he’d known the truth, if he’d seen your true colours.”

“True colours?” she mocked. “So what if a few faceless people died? I didn’t kill anyone.”

“But you had a hand in their deaths. If you had reported that the Cardioflux trials had failed, that it caused fatal strokes, instead of suppressing the report and short-selling the stock for profit, that drug would never have hit the market. Those people would be alive. Garrett would have seen that. He was a doctor.”

“Don’t you dare get on your moral high horse,” she hissed. “You profited from that deal too. You made billions.”

“Only because you lied to me.”

“Whatever. If you want to keep believing your own revised history, you go right ahead.” She took a sharp breath, trying to recapture her cool, but the fury was too near the surface. “I’m not here to rake over the old debate.”

“There is no debate. You are a sociopath. And you did not deserve Garrett.”

The insult barely registered. It was the second statement that struck home.

Her face, for a fleeting, unguarded moment, crumpled into something resembling genuine agony. It was the ghost of the woman who might have loved him, twisted beyond recognition by grief and blame.

“Maybe I didn’t,” she said, her voice suddenly hollow. “Maybe you’re right. He and I... we would never have worked out. He was sunlight. I’m... not.”

She looked at me then, and her gaze was a curious, exhausted thing. “But you and me...”

She reached out, her fingers trailing down the sleeve of my jacket in a familiar, proprietary gesture. “We’re the same, Loch. You were born to addicts who didn’t want you. I was the illegitimate daughter hidden away by a duke who was ashamed. We’re both rejects. Outcasts. Only we could ever really understand each other.”

Her eyes searched mine, offering a perverse kind of solace in shared damnation. “What do you say? We could pick up where we left off. We could be magnificent again.”

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Chapter 308

Chapter 308:

I removed her hand from my arm. “Hell would need to freeze over before that happens.”

Soraya’s smile was a thin, cold line. “Fine. But—”

The vibration of my phone cut her off. I extracted it, seeing the name Declan on the screen. The driver assigned to Hyacinth for the evening.

“Apologies for disturbing your evening, sir,” Declan’s voice was tight. “I’ve just observed Ms Galloway leave the Lanesborough. She entered a black taxi. I tried to get her attention, but she didn’t appear to notice me.”

“Do you know her destination?” I asked, already moving to stand.

“I followed her as per your standing instructions. Judging from the route, the taxi is likely headed towards Lauderdale Tower.”

“Stay on her. Ensure she arrives safely. I’m on my way.”

I terminated the call.

Soraya watched me, a cat observing a bird it had startled into flight. “Going somewhere? But the party’s hardly done.”

I didn’t grant her a reply. I turned and left the dining room, the murmur of the auction fading behind me.

The valet brought my car around. I slid into the driver’s seat and aimed for Lauderdale Tower. The city lights blurred past. My mind wrestled with the phrasing of the necessary apology and the stark, unpalatable truth I would have to share.

I couldn’t tell her everything about Soraya, but I needed her to understand the necessity of the distance I had enforced.

But I hesitated.

Would she believe me if I said I was trying to protect her?

I'd just turned onto a quieter, tree-lined avenue when movement registered in my peripheral vision. A blinding wall of light. The grille of a lorry, veering across the centre line.

Time seemed to distend, then collapse.

There was no dramatic sound, just a profound, deafening crunch of rending metal and shattering glass. The world upended in a violent spin. My body was a ragdoll seized by a giant, my head connecting sharply with the window. A percussive blast of air, the smell of burnt rubber and hot, leaking coolant flooded the cabin.

Then, a sharper, coppery scent.

Blood. My own.

A high-pitched ringing swallowed all other sound, and a crushing weight settled on my chest, making each attempted breath a ragged, searing agony.

The last thing I saw before consciousness fragmented was the spider-webbed windshield, and through its cracked lens, the distorted, retreating tail lights of the lorry.

Consciousness returned in fitful, painful waves.

The first sensation was a deep, throbbing ache centered in my skull, a rhythmic pounding that synced with my heartbeat. Then, a sharper, stabbing pain with every inhale, radiating from my right side.

I became aware of the stiff, starched sheets, the antiseptic smell, the low beep of a monitor.

A hospital.

A figure in blue scrubs materialized beside the bed. "You're awake. Sir, can you tell me your name?"

"Lochlan Hastings." My voice was a rough approximation of itself. "What happened?"

"You were in a serious collision. A lorry driver, drunk, failed to stop at a junction." Her tone was calm, factual. "The police came. The driver's been arrested. You were brought here to A&E unconscious. You have a moderate concussion, three fractured ribs on your right side, and a deep laceration on your left forearm which required surgical closure. You've been under sedation."

The information was absorbed through a filter of cotton wool and pain.

I needed to call someone.

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Chapter 309:

“My belongings,” I managed.

A nurse brought over a clear plastic bag. Inside, my wallet, watch, and the shattered remnants of my mobile phone.

“It’s best if you rest now,” the doctor said, checking the IV line. “The anaesthesia is still wearing off. We’ll need to monitor you closely for the next twenty-four hours due to the concussion. Try to sleep.”

Sleep was a fractured thing, punctuated by the beep of machines and the soft footsteps of nurses. Each time I surfaced, the fog in my mind was thicker, laced with a chemical haze from the pain medication.

I needed to call Hyacinth, Kai, Cameron—but forming a coherent thought was like trying to grasp smoke.

I remember asking a nurse for a telephone at one point, my words slurred. She said no.

I slipped under again.

The next time I awoke, the light in the room had changed.

Two familiar figures were seated by the bed. My mother, her posture impeccably straight in the visitor’s chair, a book closed in her lap. My father was pacing a short, restless path by the window.

“He’s awake,” my mother said.

Holden was at the bedside in two strides, his large hand coming to rest gently on my uninjured shoulder. “Son. Thank God. How are you feeling? Pain anywhere?”

“I’ve been better,” I said, my voice slightly clearer. “How did you...”

“The hospital found your identification,” my mother explained. “They contacted the next of kin listed.”

“What happened, Loch?” Holden asked, his brow furrowed with concern. “The police said it was a drunk driver. A terrible accident.”

“An accident,” I echoed.

In my mind, the word was interrogated. Could Soraya be behind this? It was her style: an attack that appeared random, deniable. A warning shot.

“The driver. I need someone to look into him. His background, his finances. A private investigator.”

My parents exchanged a glance. My mother leaned forward slightly. “You suspect this was not an accident.”

“I don’t know for certain. That’s why I need the PI.” The effort of speaking sent a fresh lance of pain through my ribs.

“We’ll handle it,” Holden said, his tone uncharacteristically grim. “You just focus on getting better. I’ll make the calls.”

“How long have I been here?” I asked.

“You were brought in Tuesday night,” my mother stated. “It is now Wednesday evening.”

A cold knot tightened in my stomach, cutting through the medication. “Wednesday.” More than twenty-four hours lost.

Hyacinth. She would have gone to work. She would be waiting, wondering, her hurt curdling into something harder.

“I need to make some calls.”

“Absolutely not,” Holden said, his hand firm on my shoulder again, this time to prevent me from moving. “Work can wait. The world won’t stop spinning because you’re in a hospital bed for a few days.”

“It’s not about—” I began, but the pain and fatigue made arguing a Herculean task.

“Your father’s right,” my mother interjected. “Work can wait. Rest is the priority.”

“At least let me contact Kai,” I tried, a compromise.

Holden nodded. “I’ll call him. Give me his number. I’ll let him know you’re indisposed and will be out of contact for a short while. You,” he pointed a finger at me, “close your eyes.”

“And call Hy—”

“Kai will tell the rest of your staff, son. Just shut up and rest.”

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Chapter 310

Chapter 310:

I spent Tuesday night in a state of splendidly unrestful agitation, jumping at every creak in the penthouse, half-expecting, half-dreading a call that never came.

Wednesday was worse. A full twenty-four hours of silence, punctuated only by the frantic, stupid sound of my own thoughts. I stared at my phone like it was a hostile artefact, willing it to light up with his name.

By Thursday morning, I'd cycled through every stage of grief and invented a few new ones, finally landing on a kind of numb, grudging acceptance.

He wasn't going to call.

The message, or rather the deafening lack of one, was crystal bloody clear.

I debated calling in sick again, but the idea of a third day festering in my pyjamas with only my humiliation for company was unbearable. Better to face the music, even if the orchestra had already packed up and left.

I dragged myself to work, feeling about as appealing as yesterday's dishwater.

When I reached his office, I took a deep, fortifying breath. Right. Professional. Detached. I could do detached.

I knocked.

Nothing.

I knocked again, firmer this time, bracing myself for the sound of his “enter.”

Silence.

A door clicked open further down the hall.

Kai poked his head out, looking like he'd been pulled through a hedge backwards. The poor man had deep shadows under his eyes, and his usually immaculate hair was doing a convincing impression of a startled bird's nest.

“He’s not in,” Kai said, his voice a bit rough.

“What?”

“The boss. He’s... taking some personal time.” Kai shrugged. “That’s all I know.”

Personal time. The words hung in the air, ripe with implication.

My mind immediately served up an image: Lochlan and Soraya, wrapped in silk sheets in some five-star hotel, laughing about the silly little employee he’d briefly entertained.

Was he so eager to be with her that he’d abandon work, the one thing I thought he genuinely loved?

It felt like a final, gutting confirmation.

“Right,” I said, my voice thankfully flat.

Kai rubbed a hand over his face. “How are you feeling, anyway? You look a bit peaky.”

“I’m fine,” I lied automatically. “Just a lingering bug.”

“First you, then the boss,” he mused, leaning against his doorframe. “And I just heard two girls, one in HR and one in Finance, have called in sick too. Must be some winter lurgy going around.”

I nodded absently, my thoughts a thousand miles away from office viruses.

“Better dress warmly,” Kai said, and then ducked back into his office. He emerged a moment later with a small cardboard box. “Ginger tea. My aunt swears by it. Good for keeping the chill off.”

I took the box, my fingers brushing his. “Thanks, Kai. And thanks for covering for me on Wednesday.”

“No problem,” he said, offering a tired smile. “You’d do the same for me.”

I hesitated, the question burning on my tongue. “Can I ask you something?”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 311

Chapter 311:

“Shoot.”

“Have you ever heard of a woman called Soraya Warren?”

Kai’s brow furrowed in thought. “Can’t say I have. Who’s she?”

“A... friend of the boss’s. I saw her at the gala on Tuesday evening.”

Kai’s eyes widened slightly. “You went to the gala?”

I tried to dodge the implication. “Yeah. It was... an event. Miss Warren and the boss appeared to be quite... close.”

“That so?” Kai looked thoughtful, then shrugged again. “Huh. Must be an acquaintance from his Wall Street days. Before my time.”

I nodded. We chatted for a bit, then I retreated to my desk and tried to bury myself in work. It was like trying to concentrate while someone slowly deflated a balloon next to my ear. The phantom of his empty office loomed larger with every passing, silent hour.

He didn’t show up. Not at ten, not at lunch, not at three.

By four, I’d had enough. I left early, the knot in my chest now a permanent, leaden fixture.

Back at the penthouse, I was contemplating the profound spiritual merits of eating crisps for dinner in bed when my phone calendar chirped a cheerful reminder: Date with Leo. 7:30 PM.

Leo. I’d forgotten all about him.

The idea of making small talk, of pretending to be a functional, charming human being, felt Herculean. I just wanted to curl into a ball and marinate in my own miserable juices.

But cancelling on him last minute felt like adding “flaky” to my current roster of charming traits.

With a sigh that came from my toes, I hauled myself into the shower, slapped on some makeup armour, and threw on a nice top.

I was just grabbing my keys, one foot out the door, when my phone rang.

The screen flashed with the one name that could still send a jolt through my system.

My heart performed a complicated, painful gymnastics routine. I stared at it for three full rings, part of me screaming to let it go to voicemail, the weaker, stupider part winning out.

I swiped to answer. “Boss?”

“Hyacinth.” His voice was wrong. Raspy, a bit weak, stripped of its usual polished resonance. “I want to take you to dinner. We need to talk. Properly.”

“I can’t.”

A beat of silence. “Why not?”

“I have a date.” I injected the word with as much casual defiance as I could muster.

“A date?” The weakness was gone, replaced by a sharp, cold edge.

“Yes. With Leo.”

“The stripper?” The note of pure anger in his voice was astonishing.

My own temper, already on a hair trigger, flared white-hot. “Yes, the stripper. Who also happens to be my friend.”

“Friend? Is that all he is to you?”

“Why do you care?” I shot back, my grip tightening on the phone.

“Cancel it.” The command was absolute, delivered with the expectation of immediate obedience.

My eyes widened, then narrowed into slits. “Excuse me?”

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Chapter 312:

“Cancel it. You are not going out with him.”

A laugh, brittle and harsh, escaped me. “You have no right to tell me who I can see. You’re my boss, Lochlan, not my keeper. You don’t get to ignore me for two days after humiliating me in public and then demand my time.”

“I’m trying to protect you!”

“From what? A nice guy who actually calls when he says he will? Or from you?” The comparison rose, ugly and apt. “You know what? Cary used to do this. He used to tell me who I could see, where I could go. I left him for a reason. Don’t make me leave this job, too.”

“Hyacinth!”

I ended the call. Just like that. My hand was trembling.

I felt exhilarated and sick, powerful and utterly shattered.

I had just hung up on Lochlan Hastings.

I took several deep, shuddering breaths in the silent hallway, then squared my shoulders.

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The taxi ride to the restaurant was a blur of neon and my own chaotic reflection in the window.

I wasn’t thinking about Leo, not really. I was replaying that phone call, the sheer audacity of Lochlan’s order, the shocking rawness in his voice.

“I’m trying to protect you.”

From what? A dangerous art student?

It was nonsense. Control, pure and simple. A trait I’d sworn I’d never tolerate again.

Leo was already there, waiting outside the little Italian place. He was a vision of youthful, uncomplicated appeal in a worn leather jacket, his stylishly messy fringe falling into his eyes, which lit up when he saw me. He pushed his hair back with that quick, practised flick of his wrist.

“You look amazing,” he said, leaning in to kiss my cheek. He smelled of soap and fresh air.

“You’re early,” I teased, forcing a lightness I didn’t feel.

“Artist’s timing,” he grinned, holding the door open for me. He insisted this was his treat, a proper thank you for last time, and I was too tired to argue.

The restaurant was cosy, all checked tablecloths and candlelight. We talked about his latest painting project, a triptych inspired by urban decay, and I gave him a heavily sanitized version of my work week. He was easy to talk to, his enthusiasm a warm, undemanding blanket.

Halfway through our pasta, he set his fork down and laid his hand gently over mine. His hands were surprisingly rough for an artist. "Okay, spill. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said automatically.

"Come on, Hy," he said, his thumb stroking my knuckle. "You've been about a million miles away since you got here. Talk to me. Treat me as your personal emotional dumping ground. I'm sturdy."

I managed a small, real smile. "It's stupid. I just... made a mistake. Thought someone was different, but he turned out to be exactly the same as all the other privileged arseholes from that world."

Chapter 313:

Leo nodded, his expression sympathetic. "A jerk client? Let me guess, tried to pay you in exposure and a pat on the head?"

"Something like that," I muttered, swirling my wine.

"I get it," he said, his gaze turning inward. "Not the corporate bit, but the... entitlement." He took a sip of his water. "I was doing a private party last month. Hen do. One of the bridesmaids, absolutely bladdered, decided her booking entitled her to a free feel. When I moved her hand away, she called me a prick-tease. Said, and I quote, 'Isn't that what we're paying you for, you whore?'"

"Leo, that's awful," I said, my own problems momentarily receding. I turned my hand over to give his a squeeze.

He shrugged, but the hurt was there in his eyes. "Part of the job description, I suppose. But hey," he brightened, that resilient cheer returning, "when I've got enough money to open my own gallery, I'm going to paint her. And all the other asshole clients. They're going to be immortalized in my great masterpiece, The Gilded Cunts of Chelsea."

I snorted out a laugh. "Infamy for life. I like it."

"Exactly. My little act of revenge against the rich and privileged." He winked.

I sighed. "Too bad I can't paint."

“You can describe him to me,” he offered. “I could paint him shovelling horseshit in a medieval castle.”

“A stable boy villain! I love it.”

He grinned, and for a moment, the world felt a bit lighter. “You think about it.”

After dinner, we decided to walk. The night was crisp, and the city lights were doing their best to look romantic.

As we strolled, his hand brushed against mine. Once, twice. Then, subtly, his fingers laced with mine.

I didn’t pull away.

His hand was warm, his grip reassuringly solid. It was nice. Simple.

“If I didn’t have a brutal lecture at eight tomorrow morning,” he said, swinging our joined hands slightly, “we could’ve gone ice skating. There’s a pop-up rink near Southbank.”

“That sounds like fun,” I said, and meant it. “Maybe next time.”

We reached the junction where my street led off to the right, and his led straight on towards his shared student flat.

I stopped.

My original plan for tonight had been to let Leo down gently. To thank him for a lovely few dates, to say I valued his friendship, but that things couldn’t go further.

But Tuesday night had happened. Then the forty-eight-hour silence, a void so complete it felt like a deliberate erasure. And then that phone call—the sheer, breathtaking arrogance of Lochlan’s command. Cancel it. As if my time, my choices, were his to manage.

In that moment, standing on the cold pavement, the calculus became brutally simple. Lochlan or Leo. One or the other. No more dangling in between.

If Lochlan didn’t want me, then fine. But I would not sit in the dark waiting for a light he might never switch on.

I turned to Leo. “Do you want to come up?”

Chapter 314:

Leo’s eyes, a warm brown in the streetlight, lit up with surprised pleasure. “Sure. That is, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

We smiled at each other, a new understanding passing between us.

Hands still linked, we turned and walked the short distance to Lauderdale Tower.

I was still smiling when I pushed through the heavy glass door into the lobby.

Then my smile vanished.

Lochlan was standing by one of the stark, modern armchairs, as still and out of place as a panther in a dentist’s waiting room.

He looked... terrible. Not messy, because God forbid Lochlan Hastings ever be truly messy, but diminished. Paler than usual, with a shadow of stubble darkening his jaw. More telling was the way he was holding himself, with a slight, careful stiffness, as if moving too quickly would cost him.

As we entered, he slowly pushed himself upright from the chair, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that felt like a physical touch, then dropping to my hand, still entwined with Leo’s.

His expression was unreadable, carved from stone and something darker.

“Hyacinth.” His voice was that same rasp from the phone, rough-edged. “We need to talk.”

“Whatever it is,” I said, my voice cool and far steadier than I felt, “it can wait until tomorrow. Office hours.”

“It has to be now.”

“This isn’t the office. And you’re not my boss right now. You’re just a man loitering in my lobby.”

“It’s not an office matter.”

“Then I don’t think we have anything to talk about at all.”

Leo shifted uncomfortably. “Maybe I should, uh, go. Let you two...”

“No,” I said firmly, tightening my grip on his hand.

“Yes,” Lochlan said at the exact same moment, his gaze never leaving my face.

I glared at him, the heat of my anger a welcome shield against the confusion of seeing him here, looking like that.

I held up our joined hands. “Lochlan, this is Leo. My... boyfriend.” I put a little emphasis on the last word.

I saw the surprise register on Lochlan’s face—a slight widening of his eyes, a tightening at the corner of his mouth.

But I was more surprised to feel Leo stiffen beside me, a tiny flinch transmitted through our linked fingers. I turned to look at him and saw not pleasure, but a sort of panicked confusion flicker across his features.

I didn’t have time to ask him if declaring him my boyfriend was a bit premature, because Lochlan took a step forward, wincing a little as he did.

He directed his question not at me, but at Leo. “Leo?”

“Yeah,” I snapped, stepping slightly in front of him. “What about it?”

“Are you certain that’s his real name?” Lochlan asked, his tone lethally polite.

“Of course that’s—” I began, then paused. The hesitation came because I felt it again—a subtle tug as Leo tried to disentangle his hand. I looked at him. “Leo?”

His face had closed down, the warm, open expression replaced by something shuttered and wary. “I think I should go,” he mumbled, not meeting my eyes.

He removed his hand from mine. “Goodnight, Hyacinth.”

Before I could say another word, he turned and fled back out into the night, pushing past the doors without a backward glance.

I stared after him, completely bewildered.

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Chapter 315

Chapter 315:

“Hyacinth.”

I turned back to Lochlan, all my defiant energy curdling into something sour and tired.

Standing this close, I noticed details I'd missed. The faint, medicinal smell clinging to him. The way he favoured his right side. A barely-there tension around his eyes that spoke of pain, not anger.

"Are you hurt?" The question left my mouth before I could stop it, propelled by a stupid, reflexive concern I immediately resented.

He gave a single nod. "There was a car accident on Tuesday night. My phone was destroyed in the impact. That's why I couldn't call you."

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

A car accident. Not a romantic getaway with Soraya. A crash.

His destroyed phone explained the silence, but it didn't explain the gala. It didn't explain "she's just an employee."

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The two facts warred in my head, creating a frustrating stalemate.

Eventually, I just walked past him to the lift and called for it. We waited in a silence so thick you could have spread it on toast. The doors slid open. I pressed my palm to the private scanner, and the button for the penthouse lit up. He followed me in.

The ascent was agonizing.

Once we were alone in the penthouse, the vast space feeling suddenly claustrophobic, I turned on him. "What? How? What happened?"

He told me, in that precise, unemotional way of his, about the lorry, the drunk driver, the police.

"I'm still having the incident looked into," he finished.

The subtext was clear as day. "You don't think it was an accident."

"No," he confirmed, his gaze steady on mine. "And that is why I need you to be careful."

"Me? Why me? Why would your mysterious enemy care about me? I'm just an employee, remember? A conveniently available plus-one." I couldn't keep the bitter edge out of my voice.

He flinched, just a tiny movement, but I saw it. He was about to speak when his phone rang. He glanced at the screen. “I have to take this.”

He connected the call. “Hastings.”

I watched as he listened, his face becoming a mask of cold concentration. “Understood. I’ll be there.”

He hung up.

“What is it?”

“It’s work. I have to go.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said immediately. It was partly a professional reflex, partly because the man looked like a strong wind would knock him over.

“There’s no need. You’re not familiar with the New York office’s operations.”

“I can still help. Even if it’s just making coffee and taking notes. You can’t go out like this on your own.” I gestured at his general state of unwellness.

He studied me for a long moment, then gave a curt nod. “Very well.”

We headed down to the basement car park. The car waiting wasn’t his usual sleek sedan. It was larger, boxier, with thicker window frames. It sat heavier on its wheels.

As Declan, the driver from the gala, got out to open the door, I saw it. The neat leather holster under his left arm, the butt of a gun resting snugly against his ribs.

I stopped dead. “What is that?”

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Chapter 316

Chapter 316:

Lochlan followed my gaze. “The car is armoured. And Declan is armed for security purposes. He’s fully licensed, I assure you.”

I slid into the back seat, my mind reeling. The luxurious interior now felt less like a car and more like a mobile vault.

I wanted to ask if he was in immediate physical danger, if the gun and the armour were for a “just in case” or a “definitely expecting,” but he was already absorbed in his phone, his face illuminated by the cold blue light, fingers moving with a quiet urgency that told me now was not the time.

So I sat in the expensive, tense silence, watching the darkened streets of London slide by, feeling like I was being chauffeured into the opening scene of a particularly bleak spy film.

We arrived at the Velos Capital offices. The entire building was dark and empty. We took the private lift directly to his floor.

In his office, he woke his computer and a few seconds later, the large screen on the wall flickered to life. A woman with a harried expression and the unmistakable spire of the Empire State Building behind her appeared. She looked like she’d been running a marathon in her mind.

“Report,” Lochlan said.

The woman on screen took a breath. “Mr Hastings, Sherry McCullers, New York. About forty minutes ago, our offices were raided by the FBI and NYPD. They had a warrant. They have seized servers, files, and ordered an immediate suspension of all trading activities pending investigation.”

A cold trickle of dread started its journey down my spine. I’d seen news clips of this sort of thing. It never ended well.

“On what grounds?” Lochlan asked.

Sherry’s eyes darted to me, a shadow in the corner of Lochlan’s screen. She hesitated. “Sir, maybe we should talk privately—”

“Ms Galloway stays,” Lochlan said, not even glancing at me. “Continue.”

Sherry’s lips tightened, but she complied. “The warrant cites suspicion of serious securities fraud, market manipulation, and conspiracy to commit money laundering. The

affidavit alleges Velos Capital's New York platform was used to wash funds for organized crime syndicates, specifically citing ties to Eastern European arms traffickers."

The air left my lungs in a quiet rush.

Money laundering for criminals. Not just aggressive trading or shady loopholes, but actual, proper, career-in-cinderblocks crime.

I looked at Lochlan. His profile was carved marble, but I saw the muscle in his jaw tighten, a tiny, telltale flicker.

"Have you reached out to our contact in the Mayor's office?" he asked, his voice still frighteningly level.

"I called immediately before this meeting. It went straight to voicemail. It's noon here, he could be at lunch, but..." She left the ominous pause hanging, the professional equivalent of a shrug that says "we're screwed."

"Keep trying. The moment you have a reply, I want to know." Lochlan's fingers steepled on the polished desk. "Email me the warrant details and the agent in charge. I will handle the rest from here."

The call ended. Lochlan stared at the blank screen for a long moment, then turned to me.

"I need you to call Martin Nichols, Director of Overseas Operations. Tell him to reach out to every contact he has in New York, legal or otherwise, and find out who specifically initiated this. Then call Caroline Howard, head of legal. Tell her I need a preliminary list of options to challenge the warrant's validity by sunrise, London time."

"Okay," I said, already pulling out my phone. Then I hesitated. "Boss... those charges. Are they..."

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Chapter 317

Chapter 317:

I couldn't even finish the sentence. Are they true? It felt absurd to ask, and yet.

He swiveled his chair to look at me fully, his face unreadable in the lamplight. He stared for so long I thought he might not answer at all.

Eventually, he said, "I do not wish to lie to you."

A masterclass in evasion. It hit me with a sharp, stupid little pain.

"But you don't want to tell me the truth either."

"The truth is... complicated."

"Right. Got it," I said, my tone flattening.

The shutdown was so complete it was almost impressive. Here I was, days after he'd given me the keys to his literal home, after he'd said he wanted no doors closed between us, and the first real crisis had him building a wall of polite, impenetrable vagueness.

The whiplash was dizzying, and it hurt—a hot, humiliating sting beneath my breastbone. But this wasn't the time for a tantrum.

I shook the feeling off, a dog shedding water. Focus on the task. The man might be an emotional fortress, but his company was under attack, and I was, for now, still on the payroll.

Tracking down Martin and Caroline at that hour was its own special kind of awkward.

Martin was mid-dinner, the clink of cutlery audible before he muffled the phone, his voice strained.

Caroline sounded like I'd pulled her from the middle of a very expensive, very intimate date, her tone so frosty I was surprised my phone didn't develop a layer of ice.

To their credit, neither questioned the urgency, just swallowed their displeasure with the grace of people whose bonuses depended on it and promised action before dawn.

When I went back into Lochlan's office, he was standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling window, a dark silhouette against the city's necklace of lights. He was on another call, his voice a low, continuous murmur.

I hovered by the door, not wanting to interrupt.

When the call ended, he tossed his phone onto the desk with a quiet thud, then sank into his chair, closing his eyes for a brief second. He looked utterly drained.

“You need to go home,” I said, my voice softer than I intended. “You need to rest.”

He opened his eyes. “Come here.”

Wary, I circled the desk to stand in front of his chair. He reached out, took hold of my wrist, and tugged gently. The next second, I was perched awkwardly on his lap. I squirmed, but his arm settled around my waist.

“Stay.”

So I stayed.

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Chapter 318

Chapter 318:

He rested his forehead against my shoulder, his breath warm through my jumper, his other arm coming around to hold me loosely.

We stayed like that for a long while, not saying anything. The silence was a strange, fragile thing.

My mind was a riot of sympathy and unanswered questions. I felt a genuine pang for him, dealing with a transatlantic catastrophe in the dead of night, hurt and alone in this glass tower. But the questions buzzed like trapped flies. Who did he think caused the crash? How bad was the New York situation really? Were any of those horrifying charges even slightly based in fact?

And, selfishly, screamingly—what about Tuesday? What about “she’s just an employee”? Did this... this closeness now erase that?

It was clearly neither the time nor the place. But the cognitive dissonance was giving me a headache.

Eventually, I gave his uninjured shoulder a gentle nudge. “Come on. Let’s go.”

We walked to the private lift in silence. Once the doors closed, the strain he'd been holding back seemed to flood the small space. His breathing became laboured, shallow, and the sweat at his temples glittered under the fluorescent light. He leaned against the wall, his eyes closed.

"Are you all right?" I asked, the worry returning in a rush.

"I'm fine," he breathed, the words slightly strained.

His phone rang, the sound violently loud in the quiet. He fumbled for it, saw the screen, and sighed a sigh of profound exhaustion before answering. "Father."

I couldn't make out the words, but I could hear the tone. It was a distant, tinny roar of male concern, frustration, and what sounded like outright alarm.

Lochlan held the phone slightly away from his ear.

"I'm perfectly fine. I discharged myself because it was necessary. No, I do not need to go back tonight. I will return to have the dressing changed tomorrow. Because there are matters that cannot be handled from a hospital bed, that is why."

He listened to another burst of staticky yelling, then said, quieter, "I know. I will. Goodbye."

He hung up and groaned, a short, pained sound, as he tucked the phone back into his pocket.

"You should go to the hospital," I insisted.

"I'm fine."

"You are demonstrably not fine."

"I couldn't stay in the hospital," he said, his voice dropping so low I had to lean in to hear him.

"Why on earth not? They have drugs there. And beds. It's their whole thing."

He turned his head to look at me, his gaze intense despite the fatigue and pain. "Because I didn't want you to think I'd played you. That I'd simply vanished into thin air again."

My heart gave a single, hard jerk against my ribs. I looked away, focusing on the descending floor numbers.

"Let's not talk about that. It's not important right now. Your health is more—"

“It is important. You are important.”

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Chapter 319

Chapter 319:

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly as dry as sand. The lift felt incredibly small, the air too thin.

“You are important to me, Hyacinth,” he repeated.

Warmth flooded my chest, a treacherous, lovely heat, but it was immediately tempered by a colder, wiser wariness.

The lift doors opened with a soft chime, saving me from having to formulate a coherent response that wasn’t just a confused squeak.

We walked to the car where Declan was waiting, a silent statue in a well-tailored suit.

Once we were sealed inside the armoured tank again, Lochlan said to Declan, “Lonsdale Tower, please.”

He turned back to me, opening his mouth to speak, but his phone rang again. He glanced at the screen. “It’s Caroline. I must take this.”

He connected the call, and I listened to his half of the conversation.

“Coordinate directly with counsel in New York. File the motion to challenge jurisdiction by ten a.m. their time. Yes, expedited review. The affidavit’s reliance on hearsay from a single source is the primary weakness—exploit it.”

I watched him, this man who'd just been leaning on a lift wall in pain, now orchestrating a legal defence across an ocean with the calm clarity of a chess master.

There was a reluctant admiration there, tangled up with my worry for his ribs and a growing, hollow concern about what this all meant for the company, for my job, for the unsettling feeling that I was now tied to this sinking ship in a much more personal way than my employment contract stipulated.

"We are here, sir," Declan announced, pulling up outside the sleek modernity of Lonsdale Tower.

Lochlan ended his call. "Drive Miss Galloway to Lauderdale Tower, Declan. See her to her door."

"No need," I said quickly.

He looked at me, one eyebrow raised.

"Well," I said, crossing my arms. "You'll need someone to change your bandages, won't you? Unless you've developed a prehensile tail I don't know about. I doubt you can manage it one-handed, and something tells me you're too proud to call a nurse."

He held my gaze for a moment, then gave a single nod. A victory, of sorts.

He got out, and I followed him.

We rode the lift up to his penthouse. It was a different view but the same soul, if minimalist chic could be said to have a soul. All cool marble, abstract art, and furniture that looked more like sculpture.

A big, serious medical kit sat on the living room sofa like an accusation.

He tilted his head towards it, then undid his jacket and tie, moving stiffly, and sank onto the sofa with a quiet sigh. He looked so worn out, the kind of deep fatigue that sleep alone couldn't fix.

I fetched the bag, opened it, and checked the instruction sheet clipped inside. My breath hitched.

I knew he'd downplayed his injuries, but the clinical list was a shock. Medications for concussion management. Heavy-duty painkillers. Supplies for sterilizing and dressing a "deep laceration, surgical closure." Instructions for monitoring for signs of internal bleeding.

"Right," I said, my voice softer. "Shirt off."

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Chapter 320:

He complied, wincing as he lifted his left arm.

Seeing the stark white bandages wrapped around his muscular forearm, knowing what lay beneath, sent an unwelcome pang of sympathy straight through me.

I pushed it aside and focused on being clinical. I cleaned the area with the antiseptic wipes, my touch as gentle as I could make it. The skin around the stitches was an angry red, a brutal contrast to his usual perfection. I applied the fresh dressing, trying not to think about how close that lorry had come to doing something much, much worse.

When I finished and looked up, about to ask about the driver, I saw he'd fallen asleep. Just like that. His eyes were closed, but a faint furrow of pain or worry remained between his brows. His breathing was shallow, uneven.

Defenceless. It was a state I'd never seen him in, and it did funny things to my chest.

I glanced towards the bedroom. No chance of moving him.

So I did the only things I could. I fetched a duvet and a pillow from his bedroom, draped the duvet over him, slipped the pillow under his head, and, after a moment's hesitation, carefully removed his shoes. I turned up the thermostat. Finally, I gently extracted his phone from his slack hand, switched it to silent, and set it on the coffee table.

I sat on the opposite sofa and just watched him sleep for a while.

The quiet was absolute.

The questions from the night—about Soraya, about New York, about us—swirled in my head, a chaotic, unanswerable storm. It was a miracle that I eventually fell asleep at all.

I was woken by the blaring of my phone's alarm.

I sat up with a jerk, a blanket I didn't remember fetching sliding from my shoulders, and blinked in the grey morning light filtering through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Disorientation held me for a second before the memories crashed back in.

Then I smelled coffee.

I got up, my back complaining from the sofa, and followed the scent to the kitchen.

Lochlan was there, moving slower than usual, but he was upright. He was making breakfast, or at least arranging things that looked like breakfast on plates.

“Morning,” I croaked, my voice sleep-ravaged.

“Good morning,” he said, turning.

He looked better. Still pale, still with that shadow of pain around his eyes, but the utter depletion of last night had receded.

“Coffee’s over there.”

I poured two cups, drank half of mine in scalding gulps, and waited for the caffeine to perform its minor miracle on my foggy brain.

As the world came into sharper focus, I remembered the doctor’s note in the bag.

“There are instructions in there,” I said, nodding towards the medical kit. “You are supposed to go back for a check-up. You really shouldn’t have discharged yourself.”

“I’m fine,” he said, the same three words, delivered with the same infuriating finality.

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Chapter 321

Chapter 321:

I wanted to argue, to point out the clear and obvious evidence to the contrary, but I knew it was as useful as shouting at a brick wall.

After a quick, bland breakfast that neither of us seemed to taste, I stood. “I’ll run home, change, and meet you at the office.”

He nodded. “Declan will drive you.”

“No thanks. You need him here.” I grabbed my bag and headed for the door.

I took a taxi back to Lauderdale Tower. The penthouse was blessedly, silently mine.

The exhaustion from the night hit me all at once, a heavy wave. All I wanted was to wash off the stress and the strange events of the last twelve hours. I headed straight for the shower.

The hot water was heaven.

I was just stepping out, wrapping myself in a towel and mentally debating whether to bother with a hair dryer, when I heard it.

A low, electronic hum that was wrong. The distinctive sound of the private lift doors opening.

My blood froze. No one else had access. The palm scanner.

Before I could process the panic, they were there. A group of men, four of them, storming into my living room. They moved with a swift, brutal efficiency that sucked the air from the space.

I shrieked, clutching the towel to my chest. “Who the hell are you? How did you get in here?”

Then I saw the uniforms.

Police. But not the friendly bobby-on-the-beat kind. These were serious men with blank faces and tactical gear that looked designed for a war zone.

One of them, a man with a sharp gaze and close-cropped hair who radiated a chilling, impersonal authority, stepped forward. His name badge read “DI Davies,” and he was flanked by two other officers wearing tactical vests marked “CTP.”

“Are you Hyacinth Galloway?” His voice was flat.

“Yes! What is this about? How did you get in?” My own voice was rising, shrill with a fear I couldn’t control.

“We have a warrant,” he said, holding up a sheet of paper. “The building management provided access under Section 17 of PACE. Now, I’m Detective Inspector Davies, Counter Terrorism Command. You are under arrest.”

Arrest.

The word didn’t compute. It bounced around my skull, meaningless and grotesque.

I stood there, dripping on the marble floor, in a single towel, in my own home, with armed men spreading out around me, opening drawers, looking under furniture.

The violation was so total, so violently impersonal, it felt surreal.

This couldn't be my life. This was something that happened to other people on the ten o'clock news.

"What the hell?" My voice was a choked whisper. "On what charges?"

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Chapter 322

Chapter 322:

"You are suspected of arranging funds for the purposes of terrorism, contrary to Section 15 of the Terrorism Act 2000, and conspiracy to conceal and transfer criminal property under the Proceeds of Crime Act."

He paused, and his eyes—the kind that looked like they had never seen a moment of warmth or humour—locked onto mine. "We believe you were instrumental in funneling funds through Velos Capital accounts to groups linked to extremist activities overseas."

Terrorism.

The word exploded in my head, a flashbang of pure, mind-numbing terror.

I could feel the blood drain from my face, leaving me cold and dizzy, the room tilting on its axis.

"That's insane!" The protest burst out of me. "I've done nothing of the sort! This is... this is insane!"

"You do not have to say anything," he recited, his tone making it clear he'd said this a thousand times and believed it less with each repetition. "But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence."

The formal words washed over me, meaningless legal slurry.

I blinked rapidly, my mind scrambling for purchase. I actually pinched the skin on my wrist, hard, thinking if I just shocked myself enough I'd wake up from this nightmare.

"I suggest you get dressed now," Davies instructed, stepping back slightly but not lowering his guard for a second.

His colleagues had stopped their searching to watch, their hands resting near their utility belts. "And I advise you not to move faster than necessary. You will be handcuffed once you are dressed, and you will be searched before we leave this building."

I stumbled back towards my bedroom, my legs unsteady. Two officers fell into step behind me.

"You can't come in there," I protested, my voice trembling with outrage and sheer terror.

"We can and we will," one of them said, his voice a gruff monotone.

He shouldered past me into the room. Another checked the en suite bathroom, came out, and gave a curt nod.

The first officer grabbed a random pair of jeans and a jumper from my closet and thrust them at me. He nodded towards the bathroom. "In there. Be quick."

I retreated into the bathroom and locked the door, leaning against it for a second, my heart hammering against my ribs like a trapped bird. I stared at my face in the mirror, blank with shock, my hair dripping, my eyes wide with a kind of animal fear I'd never seen in myself before.

This was really happening.

A heavy fist knocked on the door, making me jump. "Out. Now."

I dressed with clumsy, fumbling fingers. I opened the door.

They marched me back to the living room where Davies stood waiting, the plastic handcuffs already in his hand.

He didn't say a word. He just took my right wrist, then my left, and pulled them behind my back.

The plastic bit into my skin with a sharp, final click.

I instinctively tried to pull my arms away. His hands, freakishly strong, tightened, immobilizing me. "Don't. It will go easier if you just don't."

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Chapter 323:

He steered me towards the lift, one hand firm on my elbow, then through the lobby, into a waiting police van—a sterile, windowless box that smelled of antiseptic and sweat.

I don't remember the journey. My mind was a numb, staticky blank, a television tuned to a dead channel. The van could have driven for five minutes or five hours, circled the globe or gone nowhere at all. Time had lost all meaning.

When the doors finally opened, I was led through a labyrinth of harshly lit, echoing corridors into a small, stark room.

The door shut with a heavy, final thud.

Alone.

The room was a perfect cube of nothing. A single metal table, bolted to the floor. Two chairs. Walls painted a shade of green that was probably called "Institutional Despair." No windows.

Above me, in the corner, the unblinking red eye of a CCTV camera watched.

I was still cuffed, my arms aching fiercely from being pinned behind my back for so long. The cold steel of the chair seeped through my jeans, biting into my arse.

The initial shock was hardening into a deep, bone-chilling terror, laced with a growing, furious outrage.

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be.

Maybe I was an unwitting participant in the world's most brutal, niche reality show: The Apprentice: Terrorist Edition.

Maybe it was an elaborate, cosmically cruel practical joke orchestrated by... by whom? Who had the budget for this many genuine, humourless policemen?

The most logical explanation, in its own insane way, was that there was another Hyacinth Galloway. A sinister, financier-of-doom Hyacinth, and I was about to be disappeared into the system because of a clerical error.

The thought was almost comforting. Bureaucracy I could understand. Malice, on this scale, I could not.

My throat was sandpaper. “Hello? Is anyone there? I want some water.”

Nothing. Just the faint hum of the lights and the pounding of my own heart.

I shouted again, the sound swallowed by the soundproofed walls. “Water! And a lawyer! I have a right to a solicitor!”

Silence.

It was a tactic, I realized dimly. Let the suspect stew. Let the isolation and the fear do the work for them.

Well, joke was on them. I was already perfectly stewed. I was a human casserole of confusion, terror, and a rapidly simmering anger.

I shifted on the unforgiving chair, the cuffs chafing my skin. My shoulders screamed.

A thousand years seemed to pass, marked only by the gradual cramping of my muscles and the desertification of my mouth.

When the door finally opened, the sudden sound was like a gunshot.

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Chapter 324

Chapter 324:

DI Davies entered, his expression as readable as a slab of granite.

Behind him was another man. He was older, perhaps in his late fifties, with thinning grey hair and a face that looked like it had been worn smooth by years of carefully contained pressure. He wore a suit, expensive but understated, and carried a simple manila folder.

He didn’t look like a typical copper. He looked like a bank manager, or a senior civil servant.

“Miss Galloway,” Davies said. “This is Commander Gilbert Sterling, from the Special Crime and Counter Terrorism Division of the Crown Prosecution Service. He’ll be conducting this interview.”

Commander Sterling gave a small, polite nod. He took the seat opposite me, placing the folder neatly on the table. Davies remained standing by the door, a silent sentinel.

Sterling laced his fingers together. His voice, when he spoke, was calm, measured, and ice-cold. It was the voice of absolute, uninterested authority.

“Miss Galloway, you’ve been arrested on suspicion of very serious offences under the Terrorism Act. I’m here to establish the facts. It is in your interest to be truthful with me.”

A hysterical laugh bubbled in my parched throat. I swallowed it, and it came out as a dry crack.

“Truthful? I’d love to be truthful. My truth is that I have no frigging idea what’s going on. One minute I’m having a shower, the next I’m being accused of... of what, exactly? Funneling funds? I can barely funnel money into my savings account before the end of the month!”

“Your employment at Velos Capital,” Sterling continued as if I hadn’t spoken. He opened the folder, glancing at the top sheet. “You started... over six months ago. A period spent in their Singapore office, then a return to London as Mr Hastings’s Chief Administrative Officer. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” I snapped. “Well done. You can read a CV. Do you want my GCSE grades next? I got a B in Maths, which frankly, should disqualify me from any complex international financing schemes.”

He ignored the sarcasm. “And after your return to London, you accompanied Mr Hastings on a business trip to Portugal. Ponta do Sol. You stayed at the Quinta do Sol Secreto resort.”

I stared at him. “So? It’s a nice resort. The view was lovely. Is sunbathing a prelude to terrorism now? Should I have declared my Factor 50 at customs?”

“You were there to meet a man named Tobias Saltzman,” Sterling said, his eyes fixed on mine, watching for a flicker.

My heart, which had been hammering a frantic rhythm, gave a single, hard squeeze.

So that’s where this was going. Toby. The slimy, grasping weasel.

“He was a business associate of my boss,” I said, my voice tighter. “I met him. It was part of my job. If that’s all you wanted to know, you could have asked me nicely in my office. You didn’t have to drag me down here in cuffs and accuse me of wanting to blow up the world.”

“You attended a party at his private villa within the resort,” Sterling pressed.

A cold wave of nausea washed over me, entirely separate from the surreal terrorism charges.

The memory of that party didn't just flood back—it crashed through me with the force of a ruptured dam.

The oppressive heat of the villa. The slick, sweaty bodies of the naked dancers. The cloying scent of expensive cigars. Toby Saltzman's friends, their eyes crawling over me like physical things.

And then him. Mateus Ribeiro. The way he'd cornered me, his breath hot against my ear, his grip tightening on my waist.

The blinding flash of panic, the solid, satisfying weight of the ceramic vase in my hand. The sound it made wasn't a crunch—it was a sickening thud, like hitting a rotten pumpkin. The blood, shockingly red and immediate, gushing over his stupid, smug face as he dropped like a sack of stones.

The silence that followed, then the screaming.

For one dizzying, heart-stopping second, I thought, This is it. This is what this is about. He died. Lochlan lied to me. I'm not here for terrorism, I'm here for murder.

My breath hitched in my throat, the sterile air of the interview room suddenly too thin.

"I left early," I said, my voice suddenly hollow, scraped raw from the inside. "With my boss."

Sterling watched me, his gaze missing nothing. "So you had no idea what Mr Saltzman did later that night. Were you aware he was arrested?"

The question wasn't about Mateus. A shaky wave of relief made my head swim. He wasn't dead. This wasn't about that.

I managed a nod, forcing my fingers to unclench. "I heard about it. If you're looking for dirt on Toby Saltzman, you should ask the Portuguese police. I'm sure they have a filing cabinet dedicated just to him."

Commander Sterling leaned back slightly, a minuscule shift that felt hugely significant. "Describe your interactions with Mr Saltzman. In detail."

"I've told you. He was an associate. We had meetings. I took notes. End of story." I leaned forward as far as the cuffs would allow, the metal edge of the table digging into my ribs. "What is this actually about? I want a phone call. I want a lawyer. Now."

“All in good time,” Sterling replied, unmoved. He tapped the folder. “The evidence we have is substantial, Miss Galloway. Financial trails are difficult to erase completely. Even for someone with access to the resources of Velos Capital.”

“What evidence?” I demanded. “What have you supposedly ‘found’? Because I can tell you what I find! I find that my flat was illegally entered and my life upended based on... on what? A tip-off from a business rival?”

Sterling gestured to DI Davies, who left the room. He returned a moment later holding a clear plastic evidence bag. Sterling took it from him and laid it on the table between us with a soft plop.

“Do you recognize this?”

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Chapter 325

Chapter 325:

Inside the bag was a small, teacup-shaped plush toy, one of its black bead eyes slightly loose.

“Yeah, that’s mine. But I don’t remember giving you lot permission to ransack my knick-knacks. Is owning a plushie a terrorism offence now?”

“We had a warrant to search and seize all evidence pertinent to the charges.”

“Trumped-up charges,” I sneered.

He took a smaller evidence bag from Davies. This one contained a generic, black plastic thumb drive. “What about this?”

I leaned forward, squinting. “That’s not mine. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Really.” It wasn’t a question. “Because this was recovered from inside the plush toy. Our digital forensics team from the National Cyber Crime Unit have just finished imaging its contents.”

A cold, sharp feeling, like swallowing a sliver of ice, dropped into my stomach. I swallowed, my mouth dry again. “What contents?”

“Financial records,” Sterling said, opening a laptop Davies handed him. The screen glowed in the dull room. “Specifically, transaction logs between Velos Capital and Saltzman Homes, authorized under your digital signature.”

He turned the screen to face me. It was a spreadsheet, rows and rows of data. Dates. Sums of money. Payment descriptions.

“I was the Chief Admin Officer,” I said. “Authorizing transactions was part of my job. But I never, ever hid a copy of confidential files on a thumb drive. That’s insane. And illegal.”

“I’d say it’s more than just illegal,” Sterling murmured, his finger tracing a line on the screen. “These sums, after being received by Saltzman Homes, were disbursed within hours to a network of shell corporations. Corporations our intelligence services have linked to the Eurys Front.”

He said the name like it should mean something.

It did. They were the sort of group that made the news every few months for something horrific. A designated terrorist organization operating across several European theatres.

The sliver of ice in my gut exploded into a full-blown glacier.

I stared at the screen, at the neat, damning rows. “That... that has nothing to do with me. If that’s true, and it’s a big if, then it’s Saltzman. He’s the one moving the money.”

Sterling looked at me, then pointedly at the thumb drive in its bag. “But Mr Saltzman stated he was acting on orders. Orders relayed from Velos Capital. Orders, according to the metadata in these files and his statement, that came from you.”

I barked out a laugh, a raw, shocked sound. “Saltzman take orders from me? You clearly haven’t met the man. The only instruction he’s ever been interested in from me would involve a bedroom, not a bank transfer. The idea that he’d move a fiver on my say-so, let alone terrorist money, isn’t just wrong—it’s a fundamental misunderstanding of his entire revolting personality.”

“I know,” Sterling said quietly.

He paused. Letting the silence do its work.

And in that silence, the horrible, elegant shape of it all finally clicked into place in my frozen mind.

I stared at him, my breath catching. “You want me to say it was my boss.”

“You are the Chief Admin Officer. You work directly for Mr Hastings. And, judging from a preliminary review of your personal finances, you do not have access to the capital required to initiate transactions of this magnitude. The funds had to originate from a source of significant wealth. If you did not, as you claim, independently issue these orders to Mr Saltzman, then you were relaying them. You were the conduit for someone else’s instructions.”

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Chapter 326

Chapter 326:

“You’re dead wrong. I didn’t give any orders. And I sure as hell didn’t take orders from my boss to transfer money to terrorists.”

“I understand loyalty,” Sterling said, leaning back. He almost sounded sincere. “I can even appreciate it. But let’s consider perspective. Your parents are comfortably retired, but their savings are modest. Your grandmother lives quietly in a village with your uncle. A prolonged legal battle of this nature... the publicity alone. ‘Granddaughter Charged with Terrorism Financing.’ It’s a difficult thing for a family to endure. The whispers. The looks.”

Rage, hot and clean, burned through the cold dread. “Are you threatening my family?”

“No,” he said, spreading his hands. “I’m illustrating consequences. The alternative, of course, is cooperation. Clarity about who was truly responsible could see charges reduced, or even... reconsidered.”

“I won’t cooperate with a lie. The charges are bogus.”

“Is the thumb drive found secreted in your personal belongings bogus?” he asked, his voice turning a degree cooler. “Are the transaction records bearing your digital signature bogus? A jury tends to find physical evidence compelling, Miss Galloway.”

I had no answer. The truth—it was planted, it’s all a set-up by a vengeful ex-business associate—sounded like the desperate fantasy of a guilty person.

I fell silent, staring at the grain of the metal table.

Sterling rose, the legs of his chair scraping loudly. “Why don’t you think it over. I’ll have some water and a sandwich brought in. We’ll continue after a short break.”

“I want a lawyer,” I said. “I have the right to a solicitor. Now.”

“You’ll have access to legal counsel,” he said, moving towards the door. “But—”

The door opened before he reached it. DI Davies came in and murmured something in his ear.

Sterling listened, then looked back at me. A faint, unreadable smile touched his lips. “It appears your wish is granted.”

A feeble spark of hope ignited in my chest. My lawyer was here? Who?

Portia. Of course. She’d somehow found out I was arrested. She’d be tearing through the legal code right now, a hurricane in heels.

Davies gestured. Two uniformed officers I hadn’t even noticed re-entered the room and guided me to my feet. My body was one giant ache.

They led me out, not back to the cell, but down a different corridor to another interview room. This one was slightly bigger, but just as spartan.

A miracle then happened. One of the officers produced a key and removed the plastic cuffs.

The relief was instantaneous and agonizing. As the blood rushed back into my hands, they erupted in a firestorm of pins and needles, so intense I gasped, cradling them to my chest.

The pain was bright, shocking, overwhelmingly physical. For a moment, it drove every other thought from my head.

The door opened.

I looked up, blinking through the pain, expecting to see Portia's furious, beautiful face ready to rain hellfire on these people.

It was a man.

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Chapter 327

Chapter 327:

The ache in my ribs had settled into a deep, persistent throb that synchronized with my heartbeat.

I dry-swallowed two of the prescription analgesics, the chemical bitterness a fleeting distraction.

I had significantly downplayed the injury's severity to Hyacinth; her concern, while welcome, was a variable I could not afford to let influence the necessary calculus of the next forty-eight hours. Worry clouded judgment, and I required absolute clarity.

My phone chimed with the specific tone reserved for Klaus Caputo, CEO of Wilson Allied. I connected the call. "Klaus. Report."

"Mr Hastings. Our preliminary investigation into the HGV driver is complete." His voice was, as ever, devoid of emotional inflection, a flat recitation of facts. "He remains in police custody, which made direct access... challenging. However, a forensic audit of his and his immediate family's finances revealed a single, significant anomaly. Six days ago, his mother's debt-ridden current account received an unsolicited credit of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. The transaction originated from a holding company registered in Luxembourg."

A quarter of a million. Not an accident, then.

"The payer," I stated.

“The trail dissolves at the Luxembourg entity. It’s a shell, with directors represented by a law firm in Panama. Untangling it will require time, pressure, and likely unconventional access. My team is pursuing all avenues.”

“Understood. Continue. Update me the moment you have a tangible lead.”

“Of course.”

Declan entered the living room as I ended the call. “The car’s ready, sir.”

I rose, a careful, measured motion to avoid sparking fresh pain. “Once Hyacinth leaves the office this afternoon, your sole assignment is to shadow her. Discreetly, but absolutely. Wherever she goes, you go. Her safety is the only priority.”

“Understood, sir,” he replied with a short nod.

During the drive towards the City, Sherry McCullers called.

“Sir, I’ve managed to secure a channel to the Attorney General, Baxter Healy. He’s agreed to a discussion, but his terms are non-negotiable. It must be in person, and it must be today.”

I frowned at the rain-streaked window. “A secure video conference would serve the same purpose. Transatlantic travel at this juncture is an unnecessary expenditure of time.”

“I proposed that. He was insistent. Face to face. He said the meeting had to be private because... he wants you to meet someone. A source within the investigation, someone with inside knowledge of the raid’s origins. This individual is, to use his word, ‘jumpy.’ Healy can’t risk you meeting him in any public or corporate setting.”

The proposition was irregular, and therefore suspect. Yet, the potential payoff—a name, a motive, a thread to pull—was significant.

“Did he mention any names?”

“Such as?”

“Soraya Warren.”

“No, I don’t believe so, sir, but the source... I think that’s what Healy wants you to hear directly from the source.”

“And the status of the charges themselves?”

“Healy claims they were filed by a rogue deputy without his authorization and that he’s working to have them dismissed. He cautioned against making overt approaches to the

presiding judge, however. He says drawing more attention could solidify the case rather than dissolve it.”

It stank of political maneuvering, but when one’s assets are frozen and one’s reputation is being publicly flayed, one meets with the politicians.

“Very well.”

I instructed Declan to redirect to Farnborough Airfield, then called Kai. “File an immediate flight plan for New York. Gulfstream. I need wheels up within the hour.”

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Chapter 328

Chapter 328:

“Right away, sir. Shall I accompany you?”

“No. I need you here as the anchor point. Manage the communications bleed from the New York office. And... inform Hyacinth of my travel when she arrives. Tell her I’ll be back soon.”

“Yes, boss.”

Cameron Sullivan, my head of personal security, met me at the hangar.

The flight was a seven-hour interval of forced stillness, a space I used to review the known variables: Soraya’s re-emergence, the New York raid, the orchestrated car crash.

They were not disparate events. They were moves in a game, and I was being deliberately herded. This meeting in New York felt like the next intended step.

Sherry met us at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey, her face drawn. The car ride into Manhattan was tense.

“Healy is waiting at The Mark hotel. He was... emphatic about secrecy.” She sounded apologetic. “Said he couldn’t be seen publicly consorting with the principal of a firm under a major investigation.”

A dry, mirthless sound escaped me. “He exhibited no such fastidiousness when accepting our two-million-dollar contribution to his re-election campaign.”

Sherry shrugged.

The hotel suite was on the eighteenth floor. Two large individuals who had “former law enforcement” written in their posture and their eyes were stationed outside. They intercepted Cameron as we approached.

“Mr Healy will see Mr Hastings only. Alone,” one stated, his voice leaving no room for discussion.

Cameron didn’t speak, but his gaze, fixed on the man, was a clear, cold promise of professional violence if the situation demanded it.

“Wait here with Sherry,” I instructed Cameron quietly. A direct conflict here would serve no purpose.

He gave a single nod, his disapproval palpable but contained.

I entered the suite alone. It was a standard layout for the hotel’s premium offering: a sitting room, a study alcove, a minibar. The lights were on, but the space was devoid of life.

“Mr Healy?” I called out.

No answer.

The door to the main bedroom was ajar. I pushed it open. Empty. The bed was pristine, untouched. A quick check of the study and the large marble bathroom confirmed it. I was alone in a vacant hotel suite.

My every instinct began to sound a silent alarm. This was wrong.

Then I saw it: a second door, set into the wall near the bedroom closet. A connecting door to the adjoining suite.

Excessive caution, or deliberate misdirection?

Suppressing a surge of impatience, I moved to it and knocked. “Mr Healy? It’s Hastings.”

There was no reply. I tried the handle. It turned smoothly, the door unlatched.

The moment the door swung inward, a fine, cold mist hit my face, carried on a sharp, chemical scent that was both cloying and alien.

My mind had just enough time to register the trap before the world dissolved into a sudden, soundless, and absolute blackness.

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Chapter 329

Chapter 329:

Consciousness returned not as a sunrise, but as a sudden, jarring switch being thrown in a dark room.

My first sensation was a thick, cottony pressure behind my eyes, followed by a vile, chemical aftertaste coating my tongue and throat. My head pounded in time with my heartbeat, a deep, sickening rhythm that felt detached from the rest of my body.

I sat up abruptly, a surge of adrenaline momentarily overriding the nausea. The movement sent a fresh lance of pain through my ribs, a stark reminder that my body was already compromised.

I was in a bed. A large, impeccably made hotel bed. The room was silent, filled with the sterile, filtered light of a high-floor suite.

A quick, assessing sweep confirmed it: I was still in The Mark.

The adjoining suite door stood slightly ajar.

Disorientation, cold and sharp, cut through the chemical fog.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, steadied myself against a wave of dizziness, and moved. I pushed through the connecting door. The adjoining suite was empty. Entirely empty. No sign of a meeting, no Attorney General, no mysterious source. No signs of a struggle.

It was as clean and impersonal as if it had been staged for a brochure.

I stood in the centre of the empty living room, forcing myself to breathe slowly, to compartmentalize.

My phone was in my inner jacket pocket. The screen, when I retrieved it, was a constellation of notifications: missed calls, message alerts, news updates.

The sheer volume was abnormal.

But what arrested my attention, what sent a genuine chill through the residual haze, was the date displayed beside the time.

Monday. 09:17.

A flat, cognitive dissonance settled over me. I had flown to New York on Friday afternoon. That left Saturday and Sunday unaccounted for.

Either my phone was catastrophically malfunctioning, or I had been unconscious, or otherwise incapacitated, for approximately fifty-two hours.

The profound violation of that—the utter loss of control and awareness—was a new and deeply unwelcome experience.

I moved to the hallway. It was deserted. No Cameron, no Sherry, no faux bodyguards.

The stage had been thoroughly struck.

Kai answered on the first ring, his voice uncharacteristically strained. “Sir? Lochlan? Thank God. Are you alright? Are you secure?”

“I’m physically intact, for the most part,” I said, my voice sounding rough to my own ears. “Report. Start from Friday.”

“I couldn’t reach you after your arrival. I assumed the meeting was running long, or you were in discussions. By Saturday morning, with no contact from you, Cameron, or Sherry, I reached out to our New York legal contacts. Nothing. By yesterday, Sunday, the only recourse that didn’t involve filing a missing persons report—which would have ignited a

media frenzy—was to inform your parents. They are currently en route to New York. I’m sorry, sir, it was the only option I had left.”

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Chapter 330

Chapter 330:

“Understood. You made the correct decision given the parameters.” My mind was already racing past the apology, collating the implications. “What else?”

Kai’s hesitation was brief but telling. “There is more, sir. It’s about Hyacinth.”

Every sense sharpened. “Go on.”

“She was arrested. On Friday morning, not long after you departed London. The charges are... severe. Terrorism related. I have made attempts to ascertain her location and status, but the authorities are not being forthcoming. They have denied visitation and will not confirm which station is holding her.”

A cold fury began to crystallize inside me, cutting through the last of the disorientation.

Hyacinth, in a cell. Frightened, confused, accused of atrocities.

The image was intolerable. My fault. A predictable move against a perceived vulnerability, and I had walked directly into the trap that left her exposed.

“Engage a solicitor immediately,” I instructed. “The most aggressive, well-connected firm in criminal defence. They are to establish contact with her as an absolute priority. Money is not an object. Access is.”

“I’ll see to it right now,” Kai said. “There is one further development. I think you should be sitting down.”

“What is it?”

“Velos Capital is under official investigation. The police came to our London offices on Friday afternoon. They didn’t have a warrant, only questions. Legal rebuffed them. However, this morning’s financial papers are running a story, citing unnamed sources, alleging the company is under investigation for financing terrorism. The articles specifically state that you have... fled the country.”

The strategy was now abundantly clear. It was a pincer movement. Isolate the asset. Discredit the entity. Destroy public and institutional trust.

Soraya had not lost her touch in prison; she had refined it.

“Instruct the PR department to draft a forceful denial of all allegations,” I said, already moving towards the suite door. “State that I’m returning to London imminently and will be making a public statement to address these malicious rumours. Initiate legal proceedings for defamation against the most prominent paper running the story. We need to establish a counter-narrative, immediately.”

“Yes, sir. That will help stabilize things. The rumours have been... damaging.”

“Maintain this line. I want updates the moment you have any information on Hyacinth’s location or legal representation.”

I ended the call and immediately contacted Klaus Caputo.

His relief at hearing my voice was communicated only by a slight exhalation before he returned to form. “Sir.”

“I require two immediate actions. First, locate Cameron Sullivan and Sherry McCullers. Determine their status and location. Second, re-route all analytical resources to the individual known as Soraya Warren. I want every financial transaction, every communication, every shadow she has cast for the last six months mapped and on my desk.”

“Understood. We will begin immediately.”

A visit to the front desk confirmed what I already knew. The adjoining suites had been booked under a company credit card authorized to Sherry McCullers. She’d instructed the hotel not to disturb her over the weekend.

As I hailed a taxi on Madison Avenue, I called my father.

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Chapter 331:

“Lochlan! For Christ’s sake, boy, what in the seven hells is going on?” Holden’s voice was a blast of undiluted, worried energy. “Kai said you’d dropped off the planet! Your mother is concocting theories involving Baltic state kidnappers and corporate espionage. Are you hurt?”

“I’m not hurt. The situation is contained, and I’m handling it. I need you and Mother to turn the plane around. There’s no need for you to be here.”

“Contained? Lochlan, you were in a car wreck five days ago and now you’ve been missing for two days. ‘Contained’ isn’t the word I’d use.” His voice shifted, the boisterousness receding to reveal the sharp concern beneath. “Your mother is insisting you need a hospital, and for once, I’m inclined to agree with her. Let us help.”

“I appreciate the concern, truly. But your presence here would only distract me. I’m in the middle of something and will explain everything when it’s concluded. Please, go home.”

He was silent for a long moment. I could picture him running a hand through his hair, looking at my mother for guidance she would not verbally give.

“Fine. You’re a grown man. We won’t meddle. But listen to me, son. That fortress you’ve built around yourself... it keeps the world out, but it makes it damned hard for anyone to get in to help you. The offer stands. Always.”

“I know. Thank you, Dad.”

His tone lightened. “Well, I’m not turning the plane around. We’re practically over the runway. We’ll do some shopping, stock up on Christmas gifts. Anything you want? How about an ice cream maker, eh?”

Christmas. I had forgotten it existed. “Anything you choose will be fine.”

A text arrived from Klaus as I ended the call. It contained an address in Queens—a municipal detention facility. I redirected the taxi driver.

My next call was to Caroline Howard, Head of Legal. “Caroline, I need a criminal defence attorney in New York City engaged within the hour. A colleague is being held on spurious charges. I require immediate visitation and a strategy for dismissal.”

Two hours later, after a period of forced, frustrating inactivity in a bland administrative waiting room, I watched as a door buzzed and Cameron Sullivan was released into the public area.

He was disheveled, a fading bruise on his temple, his jaw set in a hard line of pure fury. His eyes found mine immediately.

“Sir.”

“Report,” I said, turning to leave the building. He fell into step beside me.

“I’m sorry. I should have entered the room with you.”

“The guards prevented it. What happened after I went in?”

“I remained on station. You were inside for twelve minutes. Then twenty. At the thirty-minute mark, I requested entry. The guards refused.” Cameron’s voice was flat, but I could hear the self-recrimination beneath.

“Their posture was all wrong,” he said. “Ex-law enforcement, perhaps, but their positioning was amateur. Sherry McCullers was also displaying abnormal stress indicators. Fidgeting. Perspiration. She was engrossed in her phone, then stepped away to make a call.”

“You engaged the guards.”

“At the one hour, seven-minute mark, yes. I insisted on verifying your status. They moved to block me. I incapacitated them.” He said it with no pride, merely as a tactical fact. “The altercation was brief. They required medical attention.”

We reached the taxi. I gestured for him to continue once we were inside and moving.

“Sherry returned at that moment with NYPD officers. She pointed at me and informed them I was her ex-boyfriend, that I’d been stalking her, that the men on the floor were private security she’d hired for protection, and that I’d tracked her to the hotel and become violent.”

“A plausible narrative,” I acknowledged, the neatness of the lie confirming its premeditation.

“I tried to explain the situation, to insist they check the suite. The police observed the two injured men and deemed me the aggressor. I was restrained. I repeatedly informed them you were in the suite and potentially in danger. Sherry then produced a key card, stated the suite was booked in her name, and opened the door.”

“It was empty.”

“Yes, sir. I was processed and held on a fabricated charge. My phone was confiscated. I had no means of communication. Sherry disappeared once I was in custody.”

The taxi pulled up at the austere glass tower housing Velos Capital’s New York office. “Come on,” I said.

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Chapter 332

Chapter 332:

Inside, the atmosphere was one of subdued panic. I bypassed the flustered front desk administrator and went directly to the executive floor.

A small group of senior managers converged in the hallway, their expressions a mix of relief and acute anxiety.

“Where is Sherry McCullers?” I asked, my tone cutting through the murmurs.

Eric Mendez, the COO, spoke first. “She isn’t here, sir. She didn’t come in this morning. We’ve tried her mobile, her home line. There’s no answer.”

“Security,” I said. “Dispatch a team to her residence. Verify her status.”

I already knew the result, though. The bird had flown.

Sophia from Investor Relations ventured a question. “The reports in the press, sir... the investigation...”

“Are being addressed.” I turned to the group. “The raid last week. What was the outcome?”

Eric answered. “It was a scare tactic, sir. They turned the place upside down for six hours but left empty-handed. No arrests. Just... a mess. The press leak came after. My contact in the precinct said it was triggered by an anonymous tip which sounded convincing enough. We assumed a competitor.”

“It was not a competitor,” I said.

Sherry had orchestrated the raid—a flashy, frightening show to establish credibility for the crisis. She’d then used that manufactured crisis to lure me here, playing the part of the loyal lieutenant with a golden ticket to a solution. The Attorney General, the meeting, the source—all fiction.

The entire production served a single, simple purpose: to remove me from the board for forty-eight hours.

But why?

They could have killed me. They could have kidnapped me.

Instead, they had used a fast-acting aerosol sedative and left me in a hotel bed.

It was a message, not an execution.

Soraya's message.

She was demonstrating her ability to reach into my life, to turn my people against me, and to simply... make me disappear for a time.

The question of what hold she had over Sherry was a secondary one; money, threat, or some past leverage, the result was the same.

"Effective immediately," I announced, the managerial group snapping to attention, "Sherry McCullers is terminated for gross misconduct and breach of fiduciary duty. IT and Legal are to revoke all her system accesses and secure all documents in her purview. You will also formally report her as a missing person to the NYPD."

I looked at Eric. "You have interim control of this office. Manage the press, liaise with London, stabilize the clients. If you perform to standard, the role is permanent."

His nod was sharp, a man seeing unexpected opportunity rise from the chaos. "Understood."

Cameron, who had been a silent presence at my shoulder, spoke quietly. "The aircraft is refueled and filed for London. Ready when you are, sir."

We took another taxi. My body protested the relentless movement, the ache in my ribs a persistent drumbeat of pain and fatigue, but stopping was not an option.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"Republic Airport," I said.

As we merged into the traffic, Cameron asked, "What's the next step, sir?"

I looked out at the canyons of Manhattan, the scene of a professional and personal humiliation meticulously engineered by one woman.

"Find Soraya Warren."

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Chapter 333

Chapter 333:

The door opened.

I looked up, a stupid, desperate hope flaring in my chest. It had to be Portia. It had to be.

It wasn't.

The man they led in was about as far from Portia as it was possible to get.

He was tall, maybe in his late fifties, and dressed in a suit that probably had its own postcode in Savile Row. His hair was a distinguished silver-grey, perfectly groomed, and he carried a briefcase that looked older and wiser than I was.

He sat down opposite me, placing the briefcase on the table with a soft, precise click. He looked at me with an expression of professional assessment, like a mechanic inspecting a faulty engine.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Good afternoon, Miss Galloway. My name is George Bayley. I am a senior partner at Jefferson, Cole & Bayley. I am here to represent you."

I blinked. "I didn't hire you."

"No," he agreed, his tone smooth as aged whisky. "My services have been retained on your behalf by a third party."

"Who?"

"I am not at liberty to disclose that information."

I stared at him, my exhausted brain struggling to catch up. "I don't get it. Someone just... sent me a top-shelf lawyer? Out of the goodness of their heart?"

“The identity of my instructing client is not materially important,” he said, waving a dismissive hand that probably cost five hundred pounds an hour. “Our immediate priority is to secure your release and have these spurious charges dismissed. Now, if you could walk me through the police’s intrusion into your flat—”

“Wait,” I interrupted, a memory sparking. “You said Jefferson, Cole & Bayley?”

He gave a single nod.

“You don’t happen to know a man called... Cavanaugh Cole, do you? He works there. Or he did.”

A flicker of something—surprise, maybe—passed behind his eyes. “He’s still a partner at the firm.”

Cavanaugh Cole had been Cary’s lawyer for years. The attack dog who handled his nastiest business disputes. I felt a weird, hollow sensation in my stomach.

“Did Cary hire you?”

“I am not at liberty to disclose.”

“He did, didn’t he? That man was his lawyer for years. Did Cary call him, who then called you?”

“I am not at liberty to disclose.”

“How did Cary even find out I was arrested? Has he been keeping tabs on me? Having me followed?” The thought was equal parts creepy and, given my current situation, oddly plausible.

“I am not at liberty to disclose.”

“Or did someone call him? But who would—”

“I am not at—” he began, but I cut him off.

“—liberty to disclose. Yeah. I’m getting the theme.” I leaned back in the horrible plastic chair, crossing my arms. “Fine. What are you at liberty to disclose?”

“I am at liberty to tell you that I have extensive experience in serious criminal defence, with a particular focus on financial and national security cases. I have been practising for thirty-two years. I am at liberty to tell you that you are in very serious trouble, and that you should not say another word to anyone until we have formulated a strategy. Now, please. What happened?”

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Chapter 334

Chapter 334:

I shook my head. “I’m not sure I want to tell you anything. Not knowing who you work for. For all I know, this is an elaborate trick to get me to confess to something.”

“I assure you, my client’s identity has no bearing on my duty to you or my ability to mount a vigorous defence—”

“Yeah, well, I assure you, I’m not saying a word until you tell me who’s signing the cheques.”

His patience, a deep but clearly finite well, was running dry. “Miss Galloway—”

“I’m. Not. Talking.”

We sat in a stalemate, the humming silence of the room broken only by the faint buzz of the lights. He looked at me like I was a frustratingly complex puzzle. I looked at him like he was a door I couldn’t open.

Finally, he sighed. “Very well. I would need to seek approval from my client before I could disclose their identity.”

“You go and do that.”

He stood, straightening his impeccable jacket. “In the meantime, you are to say nothing. Not a single word to any police officer, detective, or custody sergeant. If they attempt to question you, you are to note their names and ranks. I can subpoena them later.” He picked up his briefcase. “I will return.”

He was almost at the door when it opened from the outside.

DI Davies stood there, his expression even more skeptical than usual. He looked from Bayley to me and back again. “How many lawyers do you have?”

“What?”

“There’s another one out here. Demanding to see you. Says her name is Portia Pierce.”

The relief that washed through me was so intense it felt like pain. “Oh. Yes. Yes, she’s my lawyer.”

George Bayley, who had paused in the doorway, frowned. It was the most emotion I’d seen from him.

“Miss Galloway, I would strongly advise you to think carefully about your legal representation. I have decades of experience in precisely this area of law. Your... friend may not be equipped for a case of this complexity.”

I looked at his perfect suit, his perfect hair. Then I thought of Portia, who once won a case by yelling “Objection, bullshit!” in a county court.

“I know. Thanks. But I’m sticking with my friend.”

He eyed me for a long moment, then gave a curt nod. “Very well.”

And he was gone.

The next few minutes were agony.

Then the door opened, and there she was. Portia.

Her usually flawless hair was in a chaotic bun, she had no makeup on, and she was wearing jeans and a leather jacket.

She sprang forward, arms out, but a uniformed officer grabbed her elbow. She shot him a look of pure venom but stayed put until they’d shoved her into the room and shut the door.

The second the lock clicked, we moved.

We met in the middle of the room in a hug so tight I thought my ribs might crack. I buried my face in her jacket, and all the terror, the confusion, the surreal horror of the last day just broke open.

I didn’t sob, but I shook, and I could feel her trembling too.

When we finally pulled apart, both of us were blinking back wet, furious tears.

“How did you know?” I managed to choke out.

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Chapter 335

Chapter 335:

“I called you Friday afternoon, thought we could get obliterated,” she said, her voice thick. “You didn’t pick up. I went to the penthouse. It was... ransacked. I nearly had a heart attack. The building manager told me the police had taken you. Wouldn’t say where. I had to call in a truly enormous favour from a guy in the CPS to find this hellhole. Now. Tell me what the actual fuck is going on.”

“I’m not sure I know much more than you do,” I said, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “It’s all just a... a confusing nightmare. I keep half-expecting to wake up.”

“Well, it’s real enough,” Portia said, her lawyer-voice snapping into place. “The charges are serious. I mean, seriously serious. If convicted—which you won’t be, because this is obviously bollocks—but if, you’re looking at decades. So. Who set you up?”

I took a shaky breath. “I think I have an idea.”

“Who?”

“Remember Leo?”

Her eyes widened. “The stripper? What about him? Don’t tell me he set you up?”

“The police found a thumb drive hidden inside a teacup plush toy he gave me.”

Portia stared, dumbfounded. “But... why? I mean, he’s just a guy. A fit guy, but still.”

“I don’t think it’s me he’s after,” I said, the theory solidifying as I spoke it aloud. “It’s Lochlan.”

I told her about the attempted hack on the Velos servers during my date with Leo, and about Commander Sterling’s not-so-subtle nudging to blame Lochlan.

“I think Leo was behind the hack. He must’ve got into my phone somehow. I think he planted that drive. He was framing me to get to Lochlan.”

Portia was silent for a long moment. “Right. Okay. This is a bit beyond my usual remit of divorcing rich wankers and restraining orders. This is proper spy novel stuff. We need the big guns.”

“I only trust you,” I said, and I meant it. “And we might not need to go to court if we can prove I was framed. We need to find Leo. I don’t know what they have on him, or why he’s doing this, but he’s working for someone. We need to know who.”

“Leave it to me,” Portia said, her eyes gleaming with ferocious intent. “But I’ll need help. Have you reached out to Lochlan? His resources would be handy.”

The question landed like a stone in my gut. The complicated mess of feelings—where was he? Why hadn’t he called? Did he even know?—rose up.

“I haven’t,” I said quietly. “I don’t exactly get great signal in here.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do it. I’ll call him the moment I leave. We’ll track down your stripper-boy, and I’ll choke the truth out of him if I have to.”

“Thanks, Portia. And... could you message my parents? Tell them I lost my phone, I’m on a sudden business trip, if they can’t reach me not to worry, and they can contact you. I don’t want them seeing this on the news.”

“Got it. Don’t worry, I’ll be vague and breezy. It’s my speciality.”

“There’s also a man called Toby Saltzman,” I added. “An ex-business partner of Lochlan’s. The police say he’s named me as the one who sent the money. I don’t know why he’d do that. If he wanted Lochlan, why not just target him?”

“Toby Saltzman,” Portia repeated, committing it to memory. “Got it. I’ll look into him, too.”

The door opened abruptly. DI Davies stood there. “Time’s up.”

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Chapter 336

Chapter 336:

Portia stood reluctantly. She leaned across the table and hugged me again, whispering fiercely in my ear. “Hang in there. I’m going to demand they move you to a proper room. You are not going to jail. You hear me?”

I just nodded, not trusting my voice.

I watched her leave, the leather jacket swishing.

I wasn’t taken back to the interview room. Instead, I was escorted down another featureless corridor to a holding cell.

If the interview room was a sterile box designed for pressure, this was a sink designed for despair.

The light was a constant, migraine-inducing fluorescent buzz that never, ever turned off, bleaching colour from thought and murdering any sense of time. Was it night? Day? Tuesday? It was impossible to tell.

The air was a toxic cocktail of stale bleach, underlying sweat, and a sharp, metallic tang of pure fear. It was cold, a deep, damp December cold that the sputtering air conditioning unit high on the wall seemed to amplify rather than fight.

They’d taken my clothes and given me a grey, paper-thin tracksuit that itched like fibreglass and did nothing to stop the chill seeping into my bones.

I sat on the metal bench, which was bolted to the wall and just as cold, and I didn’t cry.

I seethed.

I languished in a furious, frozen misery.

Hours bled into each other. To stop my mind from spiraling into sheer panic, I focused on the graffiti scratched into the bench. Fuzz are wankers. Jess loves Kev 4eva.

I found myself mentally correcting the spelling, analyzing the sentiment. It was that or scream.

My thoughts were a scratched record, replaying the same horrible moments. The shock of the lift doors opening. The feel of the cuffs. The violated emptiness of my ransacked flat. The deafening silence of my phone—not a buzz, not a blink from him.

My mind went to dark, cynical places.

So this was the full billionaire boyfriend experience. The curated sequence. First, the designer dress and the heirloom brooch—the lure. Then the chauffeured car. And finally, the pièce de résistance: the complimentary counter-terrorism unit raid. A real value package.

I felt like the world’s greatest fool.

I’d known his world was rotten. I’d tasted it with Cary. I’d sworn I wouldn’t be naive again.

And yet, the moment Lochlan Hastings looked at me with those serious eyes and spoke of moving on, I’d walked right back into the lion’s den, fancy dress and all.

Now, sitting in a cell colder than my fridge, I started to believe the obvious, brutal truth: he’d cut me loose. I was a liability. A scandal threatening his empire. He’d vanished, and I’d been left here to take the fall.

The heavy metal slot in the door clanged open with a sound that made my heart jump into my throat.

A guard’s impersonal eyes scanned the cell, then fixed on me. “You have a visitor.”

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Chapter 337

Chapter 337:

My breath hitched.

Finally. This is it. He’s here. He’s pulled some impossible string, made one call, and now he’s come to fix this. To get me out.

The door buzzed, a harsh, electric sound, and swung open.

But it wasn't Lochlan.

It was a woman. In her late forties, maybe, with a kind but weary face, her brown hair pulled into a practical, frizzing ponytail. She wore a slightly rumpled navy trouser suit and carried a battered leather satchel.

"Ms Galloway? My name's Lora Jenkins. I'm the duty solicitor. I've been engaged by Mr Lochlan Hastings to facilitate your release."

The words landed, but they were wrong. The messenger was wrong. The setting was wrong. Where was the man himself? Where was the dramatic, last-minute rescue?

"Where's Lochlan?" I asked.

"He isn't coming."

Three words. That was all it took. The fragile hope I hadn't even admitted I was clinging to shattered. The cold fear in my stomach ignited, transforming into a white-hot ball of anger.

Of course he wasn't coming. He was distancing himself. Saving his reputation. His company was under investigation, the papers were screaming, and the troublesome assistant who'd gotten too close was now a radioactive liability.

He'd send a lawyer—a duty solicitor, not even his own top-tier silk—to tidy up. To manage the problem from a safe, remote distance.

I remembered the armoured car. The gun on Declan's hip. Lochlan's tense warnings. He'd known this kind of danger existed. He'd known, and he'd pulled me into his orbit anyway, and then hadn't even had the decency to tell me what I was really stepping into. He'd let me walk around blind while he prepared for war.

I looked at the solicitor, with her tired eyes and her satchel full of legal aid forms.

"No," I said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said no. I'm not speaking to you." I stood up, the papery tracksuit rustling. "You can give Mr Hastings a message from me. Tell him if he wants to save me, he can get his aristocratic arse down here and look me in the eye while he explains what this is. Otherwise, he can save his money. I'll take my chances with a public defender."

Lora Jenkins blinked, taken aback. "Ms Galloway, I strongly advise—"

"The door's that way. Don't let it hit you."

I turned my back on her, facing the blank, stained wall, and hugged my arms around myself.

I heard her sigh, the shuffle of papers, and then the door buzzed and clanged shut once more.

The heavy silence after she left had physical weight, pressing in on my eardrums until they popped. It was broken by a metallic clang at the door slot. A tray appeared, shoved through with indifferent force.

Dinner. Or breakfast. Or some timeless meal purgatory.

I approached. On the tray: a foil carton of beige sludge with mysterious brown lumps, a slice of bread that could double as a building material, and a plastic cup of something that smelled like a teabag that had died of loneliness.

“Cheers,” I muttered to the empty slot. “Any chance of a wine list? A crisp Sauvignon Blanc to complement the... whatever this is?”

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Chapter 338

Chapter 338:

I ate. Not because I was hungry, but because it was something to do. The sludge tasted like lukewarm dishwater someone had boiled a gym sock in. The bread required serious jaw work, like trying to eat a piece of roofing felt.

Time became a flat circle. A light that never went out, buzzing like a trapped wasp behind my eyes. A chill that seeped up from the floor and into my bones, making the papery tracksuit feel as useful as tissue paper in a rainstorm.

I marked its passage by the arrival of the next unidentifiable meal, and by the escorted, humiliating trips to the lavatory, where a female officer watched from the doorway with a stare as blank as the tiles on the wall.

Morning wake-up was a sudden, blinding light and a barked order. “Slop out!”

They gave you twenty minutes in a concrete exercise pen that felt like the bottom of a well, the sky a distant, grey rectangle you couldn't reach.

On what I guessed was the third day—though it could have been the thirtieth—the door buzzed open again.

It wasn't meal time.

Commander Sterling stood there, flanked by DI Davies. He looked fresher than I felt, a clean razor line along his jaw.

"Miss Galloway. A word."

I was taken back to the interview room.

Sterling placed a single photograph on the table.

It was Lochlan, boarding his Gulfstream, one hand on the railing, his profile tense. I recognized the tail number.

"Last Friday," Sterling said. "9:17 a.m. Farnborough Airfield. Your boss was quite eager to leave the country. Our colleagues arrived at his London office at 10 a.m. He was already in international airspace."

He let the fact hang, a neat, tidy little fact that felt like a shard of glass in my gut.

"It would appear," Sterling continued, "that Mr Hastings saw the storm clouds gathering and decided his priority was securing his own exit. Leaving you, quite literally, holding the bag. Loyalty is an admirable quality, Miss Galloway, but it should be a reciprocal arrangement."

I said nothing. I stared at the photograph until the edges blurred.

It could be photoshopped. It proves nothing. Lochlan could've flown out to deal with the New York emergency, the raid on the office. He had a legitimate, pressing, billion-pound reason for leaving London.

And yet.

Legitimate reason or not, he went. You are here. He has not come. He'd rather send a lawyer than come and see you. The maths is very simple, Hyacinth.

A hollow feeling opened up beneath my ribs, a different kind of chill. Disappointment was too soft a word.

“Your cooperation would be viewed very favourably,” Sterling said. “The alternative is a protracted, public trial. The evidence we have—the thumb drive in your possession, the testimony of Toby Saltzman, et cetera—will be presented. It will be compelling to a jury. They do so love a clear narrative.”

He leaned forward slightly. “It would also, inevitably, draw in your family. Your parents. Your grandmother. Your uncle. The local press can be cruel. Imagine them having to field questions about their granddaughter the terrorist financier. We can shield them from that. We can keep your name out of the preliminary releases. That is, if we’re all on the same page.”

A cold that had nothing to do with the cell swept through me, freezing the air in my lungs.

I looked up from the photo and met his gaze. “Go to hell.”

Sterling straightened up, his expression one of mild disappointment. “Think it over, Miss Galloway. The clock is ticking.”

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Chapter 339

Chapter 339:

The private jet touched down on the London tarmac with a sigh of rubber on wet asphalt. Through the window, the city was a watercolour of grey smudges, the relentless rain blurring the lines between sky and concrete.

It suited my mood perfectly.

Roy was waiting beside the armoured SUV, a sturdy, familiar figure holding a large black umbrella. He gave a sombre nod as I descended the steps, the cold wind immediately cutting through my coat.

“Welcome back, Mr Hastings,” he said, his voice almost lost in the downpour. He hustled the umbrella over me as I moved to the vehicle.

“Thank you, Roy.” I slid into the back seat, the solid thunk of the door closing off the worst of the weather. The rain hammered a steady, frantic rhythm on the roof. Roy got behind the wheel, the car purring to life.

“Rough flight, sir?” he asked, glancing at me in the rear-view mirror. His kind, lined face was etched with concern. “If you don’t mind me saying, you look like hell.”

“I’m perfectly fine, thank you.”

I was not fine. Every nerve felt scraped raw, and behind my eyes was a constant, grinding pressure. I looked out at the weeping glass, seeing not the passing airport warehouses but a cell door closing.

“I heard about Hyacinth,” Roy ventured, his tone softening into that avuncular register he reserved for her. “Dreadful business. The wife and I, we’re just sick about it. Such a nice girl. A real nice girl. How the hell could they think she’d work with terrorists? It boggles the mind, it really does.”

He continued to gabble, his words flowing with the anxious, gossipy need to fill the silence with something—anything—that might make sense of the senseless.

I let the sound wash over me, tuning out the specifics.

A nice girl. The phrase was a tiny, sharp needle pressed into a vein of guilt. She was more than that—so much more—and she was in a concrete box because of me. Because of my world, my enemies, the calculated moves on a board she never asked to play on.

The fear was a cold, heavy stone in my gut. What would I see when I looked at her? Would there be hatred in those clear eyes? A blame so justified it would scorch the last remnants of feeling between us?

The thought was unendurable.

“...just hope she’s holding up alright in there,” Roy was saying, shaking his head.

“I will see her,” I cut him off. “Just not right now.”

Roy fell silent for a moment. Then, with a soft click of his tongue, he focused on the road. The silence that followed was worse, allowing the guilt to swell and prick at me with every passing streetlamp.

Seeing her is a palliative, I told myself, cold logic reasserting its dominion. It might assuage your conscience for a moment, but it won't open the door. Only removing the hand that turned the key will do that.

My phone vibrated. Klaus Caputo's name appeared on the screen. I swiped to answer.

"Klaus. Report."

"Sir, my team has compiled the latest intelligence on Toby Saltzman's situation. He wasn't simply arrested. His wife, Suzanne, initiated the process."

"Go on."

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 340

Chapter 340:

"Acting on anonymous photographs of her husband's extracurricular activities, she became... motivated. She approached the Crown Prosecution Service as a voluntary witness. Her testimony outlines Saltzman's role as a financial conduit for various illicit enterprises. Drug traffickers, smugglers, arms dealers."

He paused, allowing the list to hang in the air. I already knew what came next.

"And one of those enterprises was the Eurus Front," I stated.

"Confirmed. She provided encrypted drives containing transactional records linking Saltzman directly to them. He was arrested. In return for leniency, he's now cooperating fully. He's giving up names."

"He named Hyacinth."

“He did. The evidence is circumstantial but damaging in the current climate.”

“I need to speak with him. Arrange a meeting.”

There was the briefest hesitation on the line. “He’s being held in a high-security facility. Access is highly restricted. That said, I will apply the appropriate pressure and see what strings can be pulled.”

“Do it. What else do you have?”

“The principal subject, Soraya Warren. She’s not in the country. Open-source intelligence from her social media indicates she’s currently on holiday. The south coast of Gran Canaria, in the Canary Islands. We have identified her hotel.”

“Good. Keep the surveillance passive. Do not alert her.”

“Understood.”

I ended the call and stared at the phone in my hand. The rain continued its assault on the car.

Gran Canaria. Sunshine and sea breezes while she orchestrated Hyacinth’s ruin from a deckchair. The image ignited a cold fury. I found her number and dialled.

She picked up on the second ring.

“Lochlan.” Her voice was a smile wrapped in velvet. In the background, I could hear the distinct crash of waves and a gust of wind.

“Call it off, Soraya.” I kept my own voice flat, devoid of the heat churning inside me. “Come after me directly. Use whatever method you like. But leave Hyacinth out of it. Call off your dogs.”

A light, melodic laugh. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just enjoying the sunshine, Loch. I hear London is dreary this time of year. And jail... well, I imagine that’s even colder.” She dropped her voice. “How does it feel? To know that every minute she shivers in there, it’s really because of you?”

I could see her—a tumbler of something expensive in her hand, sunglasses hiding eyes full of malicious delight. My grip on the phone tightened until the casing creaked.

“Call it off. The evidence is fake. You know it, and I know it.”

“I have no idea what you’re implying,” she sang. “But I do know that women in her position... they break so easily. The isolation, the fear, the sheer injustice of it all. And

when they break, they learn who their real friends are. It seems she's learning you aren't one of them."

"What do you want?"

"If you want to save your little stray, you need to beg properly. Fly out here. Let's meet. Face to face."

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 341

Chapter 341:

Securing the meeting had required a specific combination of pressure, favours, and implied threats—a currency I was fluent in.

The result was this: a clandestine, irregular visit in a stark, airless room at Belmarsh, arranged for a time when certain staff were on shift and certain cameras could be persuaded to blink.

A corrections officer, his face pale under the harsh lights, led me through a series of clanging gates. His name was Pendle, and anxiety radiated from him like heat.

"You have twenty minutes, Mr Hastings," he muttered, not meeting my eye. "Not a second more. I'm risking my pension for this, you understand?"

"Your discretion is greatly appreciated," I replied. "It will be remembered appropriately, and no complications will arise from it."

He gave a tight nod and opened the final door.

The room was exactly as one would expect: bare walls the colour of old teeth, a solid metal table bolted to the floor, two chairs. The air smelled of industrial cleaner and a deeper, more persistent funk of despair. I took a seat and waited.

When they brought Toby in, the transformation was jarring. The man who had held court at his Madeiran villa—a well-fed patriarch in linen and gold—was gone. In his place was a

shambling, shabby figure in a grey tracksuit. He had lost a significant amount of weight, the fabric hanging loose on his frame. His face was unshaven, a patchy grey scrub, and his eyes, once full of bullish confidence, were now shifty and bloodshot, darting around the room like trapped animals. The bridge of his nose was a swollen, crooked mess.

He was, in every sense of the word, a wreck.

He saw me and flinched, then his fear curdled into anger.

“Him?” he barked at the guard, his voice cracking. “This ain’t my lawyer! Take me back. Now!”

The guard simply pushed him into the room and closed the door with a definitive thud. Toby stood there, trembling with rage and impotence. He stared at the camera in the corner of the ceiling, its red light conspicuously dark. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

“Sit down, Toby,” I said.

“You,” he hissed, finally slumping into the chair opposite. “I should’ve known. I thought you were one of us. A proper man. But you’re just a wimp, aren’t you? Got the vapours from a bit of fun. Called the filth on your own kind.”

He blamed me for the raid, for his incarceration, and most of all, for the way his so-called allies had melted away like snow in sunshine. I was the author of his ruin, and he knew it.

I ignored the accusation. “Who asked you to implicate Hyacinth?”

He laughed, a harsh, barking sound with no humour in it. “Why the hell should I tell you anything? Look at me! I’m in here, broke, divorced, all thanks to your pious interference. Suzanne took the house, the kids, everything. She’s the star witness.” He leaned forward, spittle flecking his lips. “I have nothing left to lose, Lochlan. I’m going down, and I’m taking as many people with me as I can.”

“Then why not come after me directly? Why target her?”

A nasty sneer twisted his broken face. “Oh, I’d have loved to. But that wasn’t the order.”

“Who gave you the order?”

His eyes gleamed with a desperate, spiteful cunning. “You want to know? Get me out of here. You pull the strings, you make this”—he gestured around the room—“go away. The day I walk free, I’ll tell you everything. Names, dates, the whole rotten lot.”

I leaned back, regarding him with a cold detachment. “Your charges, from the money laundering to the dealings with the Eurys Front, are all true and substantiated. No one’s getting you out of here. Not even the Queen could manage it.”

The last flicker of hope in his eyes died, replaced by a sullen, obstinate darkness. “Then I’ve got nothing to say to you. Get out.”

I steepled my fingers on the cold table. The time for polite inquiry was over.

“I understand your position, Toby. You believe you have reached the nadir of your circumstances. I’m here to inform you that you are mistaken.”

I let the words settle, watching the confusion mix with his defiance.

“I cannot get you out. But I can make your life in here infinitely more miserable. This,” I said, glancing at his crooked nose, “will seem like a friendly pat on the back. The population here is varied. Some are suggestible. Some hold grudges against men who think their money and their old-world connections still mean something. Accidents happen with such regrettable frequency in places like this.”

His bravado finally fractured. The colour drained from his already pale face. “You... you wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.” I held his gaze, letting him see the absolute lack of bluff in my eyes.

He wavered, his mind racing behind those frightened eyes. I could see the calculation warring with his hatred. But ultimately, he clamped his mouth shut, looking away.

“Very well,” I said, rising smoothly from my chair. “You have two days to come to your senses and tell me what I need to know. If I don’t hear from you by then, you will die in this prison long before you ever see the inside of a courtroom. Goodbye, Toby.”

I didn’t look back as I knocked on the door for Pendle. I walked away from the stench of his fear and his stubbornness, the clock now ticking in my mind.

Later, in the silent privacy of my car, I made another call. It was answered on the first ring.

“Good afternoon, Mr Hastings.”

“I have a task that requires a delicate touch.”

“Go ahead.”

“An individual at Belmarsh requires a persuasive argument. Name is Toby Saltzman. He needs to understand that his continued silence is detrimental to his health. Make it non-lethal, but convincing. Can you arrange a conversation?”

There was no hesitation. “It can be done. Timeframe?”

“Forty-eight hours. The message should be that his next meeting with me is his only chance to avoid a permanent solution.”

“Understood.”

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Chapter 342

Chapter 342:

The ache in my body was a constant, low-grade thrum, a persistent reminder of twisted metal and shattered glass from a week ago. The painkillers had worn off somewhere over the Atlantic, leaving behind a stiffness that felt welded into my bones.

Roy drove in silence back towards Lonsdale Tower, the city lights smeared into bleary streaks by the relentless rain on the windows. The visit to Belmarsh had settled nothing, only adding a layer of grim frustration to the physical discomfort.

My phone vibrated with an incoming call. Kol Donovan’s name appeared on the screen.

“Sir,” he began when I answered. “Klaus asked me to brief you on the drunk driver. We followed the money sent to his mother’s account. It moved through Luxembourg, then to a shell in Panama, which turned out to be a subsidiary of a Liechtenstein trust.” He paused, and I could almost hear the shrug in his voice. “The trail didn’t so much go cold as vanish into the administrative ether. Pinpointing the origin would take months of forensic accounting and a minor miracle.”

“Keep at it,” I said, the instruction perfunctory.

But inwardly, I dismissed the lead. I had known it would be fruitless. Soraya never left an obvious trail. She had perfected the art of operating through proxies and layered obscurity back when we were allies on Wall Street, her cunning and ingenuity making her invaluable. Those same qualities now made her a formidable enemy.

“Understood. We’ll keep picking at the threads,” Kol replied, before ending the call.

The car turned onto the final approach to the Tower. I was closing my eyes, trying to marshal the disparate pieces of this disaster into some semblance of a plan, when Roy suddenly slammed on the brakes. The force pitched me forward against the seatbelt, a sharp lance of pain shooting through my ribs. My eyes snapped open.

“Sorry, sir!” Roy blurted, his hands gripping the wheel. “There’s someone—”

A figure had darted in front of the car, a shadow in the downpour. Before Roy could complete his sentence, the figure lunged onto the bonnet, pounding against it with a fist.

Adrenaline burned through the fatigue. My hand went to the concealed safe under the seat, my fingers finding the release catch.

“Bloody hell,” Roy muttered, flustered. “Should I call the police? Or reverse?”

The figure slid off the bonnet, a blur of movement, and dashed to my window. A fist hammered against the reinforced glass. In the gloom, distorted by rain, I could just make out a furious, familiar face pressed close.

Portia Pierce.

I exhaled and let my hand fall away from the gun safe. “It’s fine, Roy. It’s Hyacinth’s friend.”

I lowered the window halfway. Portia’s rain-streaked face was immediately there, her hair plastered to her skull.

“Finally!” she shouted.

“Get in the car,” I said, raising the window again.

Roy, looking immensely relieved, waited for her to round the vehicle before unlocking the doors. She yanked the rear door open and collapsed onto the seat beside me, bringing the scent of wet wool and cold anger with her.

Roy guided the car into the underground garage of the Tower.

Portia sat rigid, dripping onto the cream leather, her agitation a near-physical force in the enclosed space. She was shivering, though I suspected it was as much from fury as from the cold.

“Stupid London rain,” she seethed, wiping a hand across her face. “And you. You are a ridiculously hard man to track down. Why haven’t you been answering your phone?”

“My phone has been on silent. I must have missed your calls.”

“Really?” she shot back, scepticism dripping from the word. “So you weren’t actively dodging my calls?”

“Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know, Lochlan. Maybe because you don’t want to talk about Hyacinth.” Her gaze was a direct challenge.

The car came to a stop.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 343

Chapter 343:

“Why don’t you come upstairs,” I said, opening my door. “We can talk properly.”

“I was going to, even if you hadn’t asked,” she declared, scrambling out after me. “I’m not leaving until I get some proper answers.”

We rode the lift to the penthouse in a charged silence. Roy murmured something about putting the kettle on and disappeared towards the kitchen. I led Portia into the living area.

“Excuse me for a moment,” I said, and went to the guest suite, returning with a large, fluffy bath towel. “I’m afraid I don’t keep a stock of women’s clothing. I hope this will do.”

For a second, she just glared at me. Then, with deliberate petulance, she gave her head a sharp shake, flinging a spray of rainwater across the expensive Kashmir rug. A petty, satisfying rebellion.

Then she snatched the towel from my hands and began roughly drying her hair.

“Right,” she said, her voice muffled by the towel before she emerged, her dark hair a wild halo. “First question. Why the hell haven’t you gone to see her yet?”

The question was a needle probing a bruise I had been carefully avoiding.

Because I'm the reason she's there. Because I dread seeing the accusation in her eyes, the trust broken, and knowing I deserve every bit of it.

"I've been occupied with securing her release," I said aloud, the words sounding sterile even to my own ears. "That requires my full attention."

"Occupied. How noble," Portia scoffed, wrapping the towel around her shoulders. "And what progress has this full attention yielded?"

"I'm working on a key witness. The one whose testimony led directly to her arrest. If he can be persuaded to recant, it significantly undermines the case against her."

"What witness?"

"A man named Toby Saltzman." I saw the flicker of recognition in her eyes.

"Good. That's something, I suppose. Bully him, bribe him, I don't care how you do it. But I also need your help with something else. I need you to track down Leo."

"Leo."

"Yes, Leo. Hyacinth's... whatever he was. He's vanished. Doesn't answer his phone. I went to that meat market he works at, The Bronze Standard, and threatened to have the place shut down over every health and fire code violation I could imagine. The owner finally told me Leo quit. No forwarding address, no idea where he went."

She hugged the towel tighter. "I remembered Hyacinth said he studies at London South Bank. I went there, greased a palm in the dean's office. They found a dozen students named Leo or Leonardo. None of the photos matched our Leo."

"You couldn't find him because that isn't his real name."

Portia went very still. "What?"

"His real name is Jason Rivers."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "Of course you know that. You probably have his bloody shoe size and dental records. So, since you're so well-informed, can you track him down? He's the one. He planted whatever they found. He set her up."

"I will find him," I promised.

Some of the frantic energy seemed to leave her then, replaced by a weary determination. She stared at me for a long moment, as if assessing my worth.

“You’d better,” she said finally, her voice low. “And you’d better get her out. If you don’t, I’m coming after you with everything I’ve got. I know I’m just one lawyer and you’re the almighty Lochlan Hastings, but I’ll make it my life’s work to be the most irritating gnat you’ve ever had to swat.”

She turned to leave, then paused at the doorway. She looked back over her shoulder, a glint in her eye.

“Oh, and don’t forget. I know your parents. If Hyacinth isn’t out soon, I’m going to go and have a very detailed chat with them. See how they feel about their son getting innocent women thrown in prison.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 344

Chapter 344:

The call from Kol Donovan came just after dawn, his voice cutting through the muted grey light of the penthouse.

“Sir. We’ve located Jason Rivers.”

I was already awake, standing by the window with a cup of black coffee that did nothing to dispel the fatigue. “Where?”

“He’s flown. Took a budget flight from Luton to Naples three days ago. Paid for in cash. And he travelled with a minor listed as his sister.” Kol’s tone was matter-of-fact, but I could hear the unspoken conclusion. He was running.

“Naples,” I repeated, the name conjuring images of chaotic streets and opaque loyalties—a decent place to disappear. “Keep a team on the ground there. Find out where he’s staying, who he’s contacted. But do not approach him.”

“Understood.” Kol ended the call.

The next call came an hour later, bringing more bad news.

“Regarding the individual at Belmarsh, sir,” he began. “My associates inside made contact. They were unable to deliver the message. The subject is under protection.”

“Protection.”

“A gang. From the description, their role appears dual. They are preventing other parties from accessing him, while also applying their own pressure. My conclusion is that a separate arrangement has been made. Someone anticipated your interest and paid for a pre-emptive insurance policy.”

I thanked him and terminated the call.

Leaning back in my chair, I let the frustration settle in my chest. I was being stymied at every turn. Toby was being kept in a cage within a cage, his silence purchased and enforced. Leo had been whisked out of the country. Each path to unpicking the case against Hyacinth was being systematically blocked by someone who knew exactly how I would move—because she had once moved in concert with me.

The thought of Hyacinth, languishing in a cell for nearly a week now, was a physical weight. I had exerted what influence I could, ensuring she was in a single cell, that she was left alone, that a certain corrections officer on my payroll kept a discreet watch. It was the bare minimum, a pathetic offering of comfort in an inherently comfortless place.

It was not enough.

I couldn’t imagine the grinding reality of her days—the fear, the boredom, the humiliation. The fact that she had refused to see the lawyer I sent cut deeper than any accusation.

This could not go on.

The private jet touched down on Gran Canaria in a blaze of afternoon sun, a brutal contrast to the London gloom. The air was thick with salt and the scent of bougainvillea.

Cameron, along with two other members of the security team, met me on the tarmac.

Soraya’s yacht was anchored off Playa del Inglés. We found it easily, a vision of obscene white luxury against the deep blue. A tender took us out from the marina.

As we drew alongside, two men—built like refrigerators in polo shirts—appeared at the rail. They did not offer to help us board.

“He goes on alone,” one of them said, his accent Eastern European, his eyes on Cameron.

Cameron took a half-step forward. “Not happening.”

“It’s fine, Cameron,” I said, removing my jacket and handing it to him. “Wait here.”

I boarded alone. The deck was teak, hot underfoot. The main lounge was empty. I followed the sound of low music to the aft deck.

She was sunbathing on a padded lounge, utterly naked, her skin glistening with oil. A young man, tanned and handsome in a way that spoke of diligent gym work and minimal intellect, was kneeling beside her, his hands slowly working lotion into her calves. He had the vacant, pretty look of a well-kept pet.

She didn't open her eyes as I approached. "Darling, be a love and fetch some more champagne from the cooler," she murmured.

The young man leaned in, and she gave him a slow, deep kiss. He left with a dazed smile.

Soraya sat up then, stretching with feline grace, making no move to cover herself. "Lochlan. You look tense. Help yourself to a drink." She gestured to a well-stocked bar cabinet.

I remained standing. "Where's Leo?"

"Leo?" She blinked, a pantomime of innocence. "I don't believe I know any Leos. Should I?"

"Cut the bullshit, Soraya."

She laughed, a rich, easy sound. "Alright, alright. You always did hate games. Yes, I've got your pretty little stripper stashed away. He's quite sweet, actually. Terrified for his sister. It makes people so wonderfully compliant."

She took a sip from a glass of water, watching me over the rim. "Before you ask, I've also paid off Sherry McCullers. And I've made sure Toby Saltzman understands his continued health depends on his continued silence."

"You've been busy."

"I have. I've had a lot of time to plan," she said, her green eyes bright with malicious amusement. "While I was in jail. It focuses the mind wonderfully. And it allowed me to hone my talent. Reading people. Finding their price. Everyone has one, Loch. You taught me that."

"What is yours?" I asked. "What will it take for you to stop targeting Hyacinth?"

She stood then and walked towards me. The scent of coconut oil and her familiar perfume filled the space between us.

“Sleep with me,” she said, her voice dropping to a husky whisper. “You were always magnificent in bed. God, the way you used to fuck me. We did it on a yacht just like this once, remember? It belonged to... oh, some Texas oil baron.”

She stopped in front of me, hooking one bare leg lightly over mine, her arms sliding around my neck. Her body was warm against my shirt. “For old times’ sake.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 345

Chapter 345:

My hands came up and closed around her wrists. I removed her arms from my neck. Then, almost of its own volition, my right hand shifted. It settled around the column of her throat, my fingers finding the delicate architecture of her windpipe.

The pressure required to end it—to end her—would be negligible. Less than a minute of applied force, and the most permanent of solutions would be achieved. Hyacinth would be safe.

The calculation was clean, surgical, and for a blinding moment, utterly compelling.

Soraya arched her neck, a perverse offering, her green eyes holding mine with a glittering, defiant thrill. She moaned and seized my left hand, pressing it firmly against her naked breast.

“I always loved your hands,” she breathed, her voice a husky tease. “So big, so strong. Loved how you used to spank me, finger me with them, Loch.” Her own hand slid down, palm cupping me through the fabric of my trousers. “It’s been so long. I’ve missed this. Did you miss me?”

Her eyes searched mine, the wicked glint hardening into something sharper. “Were you jealous when I slept with Garrett? Was that why you poisoned his mind against me?”

The name—Garrett—spoken by her lips, was a spark thrown into a pool of petrol. Rage, white-hot and acrid, flooded my veins, and my fingers tightened involuntarily. The image

of him—kind, guileless Garrett, who saw art where we saw arbitrage—flashed before me, followed by the screech of tearing metal and the silence that followed.

My fault. Hers. A shared crime etched in blood and grief.

A sharp gasp escaped her. The arousal in her eyes fractured, replaced by dawning, genuine alarm as her air supply constricted. Her face began to flush.

“Are you... are you trying to kill me?” she choked out.

I said nothing. The temptation was a dark, resonant hum in my skull.

“Do it, Loch,” she purred, the sound strained now, ragged at the edges, yet still defiant. “Keep squeezing. Just another thirty seconds, and I’ll be out of your hair forever.” She swallowed with difficulty against my grip, her gaze locked on mine—challenging, daring. “Do it.”

I maintained the pressure. I did not squeeze harder, but I did not relinquish my hold either.

A devil’s voice whispered in the back of my mind. Just a little more. A fractional increase. She disappears. All her plans, her poisons, her games, vanish with her. Hyacinth walks free. Do it.

Her eyes began to water, but that mesmerising gaze never wavered, watching me through spiked, wet lashes. Her breathing grew more laboured—a thin, threadlike whistle, then almost silent.

I removed my hand and shoved her back, sending her stumbling against the lounge. She fell against the cushions, spluttering, a fit of violent coughs wracking her body.

When she finally drew a ragged, full breath, her voice was a breathy, weak thing, yet still layered with that infuriating tease. “You always did like to choke me in bed, Loch. It made me come that much harder.”

“Cut the fucking games,” I snarled. “What do you want?”

“Give me Velos Capital.”

I stared at her.

“But don’t worry, not all of it. Just a controlling share. Fifty-one per cent. You can keep your fancy title and your office. I’ll just be the silent power behind the throne.”

“No.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “Then you can visit your girlfriend in jail for the next decade. Arrange those cosy couple’s visits. I hear the food is absolutely dreadful.”

“I’ll fight the charges. We’ll dismantle your evidence piece by piece.”

“Sure, go ahead,” she said, waving a dismissive hand. “Lawyer up, spend a fortune. It’s going to take years. Can your precious Hyacinth wait that long? Watching her life evaporate from inside a concrete box?” She tilted her head, a predator toying with its prey. “Do you think she’ll still look at you with those adoring eyes after a year of that? After two?”

I tamped down the surge of frustrated rage, the cold knowledge that she was right.

“What would you need with my company?” I gestured at the yacht. “You appear to have plenty of money. This, the bribes for Leo, for Sherry, for Toby’s protection... that requires significant capital. If you want more, why not just ask whoever’s been supplying you with the funds for this little revenge fantasy?”

Soraya smiled, a crafty, knowing smile. “Trying to get me to spill my secrets, Loch? Trying to find out who’s backing me?” She beckoned with a finger. “Why don’t you come over here, give me a proper kiss, and I might consider telling you.”

I didn’t move.

“Don’t worry,” she purred, stretching lazily. “I haven’t sold my body to some rich old wanker. I have my standards, you know. You set the bar rather high, once upon a time.”

“I don’t care who you’re sleeping with. You got out of jail. You got lucky. But you won’t keep getting lucky. Why not quit while you’re ahead? Take whatever money you’ve scrounged and disappear.”

She scoffed. “Quit while I’m ahead? Since when has that ever been your motto? I seem to remember you used to be the ‘take everything while you’re ahead’ type. Winner takes all. That was our philosophy.”

She padded back to her lounge and lay down, watching me. “Come on, Loch. It’s a good deal. You give up control of one company—you can always build another. I’ll hand Leo and dear, duplicitous Sherry to the police with a bow on top. I’ll even have Toby recant his statement. Hyacinth walks free. You get the girl, walk off into the sunset. A nice, tidy happy ending.”

“I’m not giving you my company,” I said. “You don’t know the first thing about running something like Velos. All you were ever good for was seducing drunk, arrogant men and getting them to whisper their secrets into your ear in bed. You were nothing but a whore.”

Her face tightened. The barb had found its mark.

“Just for that, it’s going to cost you. I’ve changed my mind. I want the entire company now. One hundred per cent. And your job as CEO. I want you to stand before the board and nominate me as your successor.”

“Not happening.”

“I’m only taking back what I’m owed. You wouldn’t be where you are today without me.”

I said nothing. There was no argument to make.

“Or,” she said softly, “maybe she’s not worth it. Maybe you’d rather keep your empire and toss the girl aside. The you from eight years ago would’ve done it in a heartbeat. Remember, Loch? Remember how we never cared about the bodies left behind in our wake? As long as we got what we wanted.”

The young man reappeared on deck with a bottle of champagne. Soraya waved at him, then turned to me.

“The girl,” she said. “Or your company. It’s your choice.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 346

Chapter 346:

“Hyacinth Galloway, you are free to go.”

Right up until the moment the iron gates clanged shut behind me, I was in a complete daze. One minute I was force-feeding myself the congealed, grey goo that passed for breakfast—mentally categorising it as “probable potato, possibly alien in origin”—and the next, a corrections officer was barking at me to get out. She thrust my own clothes at me and marched me down a series of corridors that all looked exactly the same.

Then, just like that, I was standing in the open yard, blinking in the weak daylight like a startled mole. Freedom. It felt less like a triumph and more like I’d been accidentally dropped off at the wrong stop.

The daze only lifted when I saw Portia.

She launched herself at me, wrapping me in a bear hug so fierce I thought my recently-freed ribs might crack.

“Oi, watch the merchandise,” I wheezed into her shoulder, which was damp from the drizzling rain.

She finally let go, holding me at arm’s length. “Look at you. Prison chic. It suits you.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, my voice sounding rusty from disuse. Or from screaming internally for the past two weeks. Same difference.

“Let’s get in the car, I’m freezing my tits off,” she said, shivering dramatically and hustling me towards her little Audi.

The cold was a slap in the face—a brutal, wonderful reminder I was outside.

Once ensconced in the passenger seat with the heater blasting, I tried again. “Portia. Seriously. What happened?”

She started the engine. “All charges dropped. You’re free as a bird. But don’t you worry, I’m not letting the bastards who did this off the hook. Wrongful arrest, unlawful imprisonment, psychological trauma. I’m going to sue their arses into the middle of next decade.”

“How did you manage it?” I asked, a wave of gratitude washing over me. My best friend, the legal avenger. I should have known.

“My exceptional lawyerly skills, obviously,” she said, pulling out into traffic with a defiant toot of the horn.

“Portia. Be serious.”

She shrugged. “Fine. I may have had some help.”

“From?”

“Your boss.”

How long had it been since I’d last seen Lochlan?

Since before the world fell in. The memory of him was tied up with the scent of his cologne and the cold dread of that interrogation room. A confusing, infuriating knot of feelings.

Portia launched into an explanation, her words tumbling out. “I went to track down that weasel Leo, but he’d flown the coop. Vanished. So I went to see Lochlan. I told him he needed to pull his finger out and get you released, seeing as this whole mess is basically his fault. The whole thing was a set-up from start to finish. Anyway, Leo’s been arrested now, apparently, and that Toby creep has recanted his statement.” She glanced at me. “By the way, do you know who actually tried to frame you?”

“I have an idea,” I said, staring out at the passing London streets. They looked surreal, like a film set. People were just... walking around. Buying coffee. Living their lives. It was bizarre.

“Who?”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 347

Chapter 347:

“An old... acquaintance of Lochlan’s, I suspect. But I don’t have any evidence.”

I’d genuinely liked Soraya at first. She was beautiful, clever, and made me feel interesting. But the way Lochlan had treated her—like she was a live grenade with the pin pulled—had given me pause.

My brain was still struggling to catch up with the sheer scale of it all. This wasn’t just spreading nasty rumours or keying my car, which was more the style of a petty, spoiled socialite like Vanessa. This was orchestrating a full-blown legal nightmare, bribing or threatening not just a skittish art student, but a wealthy businessman like Toby Saltzman. It was several leagues of crazy I hadn’t known existed.

Again, the question circled: why me?

“Does this old acquaintance have a name?” Portia pressed.

“Yeah, but I’d rather not talk about it now. Besides, I’m still not sure what’s happened. My brain feels like it’s been through a blender. Give me a minute to think.”

“Thinking is the last thing you should do today,” Portia declared, swerving into a tighter lane. “Today, we celebrate.”

And celebrate we did. She drove me to Lauderdale Tower, where I had my first proper, scalding-hot shower in two weeks, washing away the phantom smell of cheap disinfectant. I changed into clothes that didn’t have a prisoner number on them.

Then Portia took over. A long, decadent lunch at a restaurant where no one served slop on a tray. A few cocktails at a bar with actual ambience. Retail therapy, ice skating, and a fiercely competitive hour in a Soho arcade where I beat her at air hockey three times in a row.

By the end of it, I was exhausted, my cheeks ached from laughing, and the grim shadow of the prison cell had been pushed, temporarily, into a corner.

I fell asleep the moment my head hit my own pillow.

The first thing I did when I woke up was call my parents.

I put on my best “everything’s fine” voice. “Hi Mum, back from my business trip! Got a new phone, sorry I was out of touch.”

It sounded like she didn’t suspect a thing. “That’s fine, darling. Now, do you want to drive down to Mousehole with me and your father later, or will you make your own way?”

For a second, I was completely lost. Then it hit me.

Next week was Christmas.

I’d completely lost track of time.

“I’ll drive down myself,” I said. “You and Dad go ahead.”

“Don’t work too hard, sweetheart,” she said, and hung up.

I stared at the phone.

Work. Right. I still had a job.

A wave of anxiety crested over me. What would everyone at Velos think? Would they believe the news? Would they look at me sideways, wondering if there was smoke without fire?

What would he think?

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Chapter 348

Chapter 348:

Surely, by now, Lochlan would've known I was out.

Yet my phone was conspicuously free of texts or calls from one Lochlan Hastings.

I found his number and stared at it. Should I call him? Portia said he'd helped. I owed him a thank you, at the very least. But the fact that he hadn't called spoke volumes. He'd moved heaven and earth, apparently, but couldn't manage a simple "glad you're out."

In the end, I called Kai. I thanked him for holding the fort and asked, tentatively, if I could have the week off.

"Of course!" he said cheerfully. "You didn't even have to ask. The boss already authorised it. It's Christmas soon anyway. Merry Christmas, Hyacinth!"

"Merry Christmas, Kai."

Disappointment settled in my stomach, a leaden weight pulling everything down. So Lochlan would rather issue a kind, distant order through Kai than speak to me directly. Why was he shunning me? Was it guilt? Or had I, by the simple fact of being a problem that needed solving, finally exhausted his interest?

I packed a bag and spent two more days with Portia—a whirlwind of last-minute Christmas shopping and mulled wine. Then I pointed my car towards Cornwall and drove down to Mousehole.

The next week was a bubble of quiet, active normality that was exactly what my shredded nerves needed.

There was festive skating on the village pond, where I spent more time on my arse than on my feet. I went out on my Uncle Sam's boat for a bracing, unsuccessful fishing trip where the primary catch was cold. We helped decorate the village hall for the Christmas fair, where Sam, to everyone's shock—especially his—won the annual wreath-making competition with a monstrosity involving holly, seaweed, and a suspiciously shiny piece of fishing lure.

Gran was in her element, holding court and providing a running, mostly derogatory commentary on Dad's latest gardening catastrophe, which involved him "accidentally" beheading her prized winter-flowering heather with a rake. Between Gran's chatty critiques and the general, chaotic cheer of a village Christmas, my own quiet preoccupation went largely unnoticed.

Mum, of course, being Mum, sensed something. She didn't pry, just cornered me while I was drying dishes one evening. She put a warm, wet hand on my arm.

"If you need to talk about anything, my love, I'm here. Anything at all."

I leaned into her for a moment, breathing in her familiar scent of vanilla and garden soil. "I know, Mum. Thanks."

I didn't drive back to London until the third of January, having stockpiled a semblance of inner peace along with a boot full of leftover turkey and homemade chutney.

London greeted me with its January special: a bone-deep, damp cold that felt personally vindictive.

The Velos Capital building, however, was a temple of warmly controlled air. I walked through the lobby, nodding greetings to the staff. That's when I noticed it. The usual hive of pre-activity was missing. Instead, little clusters of people stood around, talking in hushed, urgent tones. A few nodded back absently, but their eyes were distant, glued to their phones or wide with gossip.

No one even seemed to register my little walk of shame back into the building. My recent notoriety was clearly yesterday's news. Something bigger had everyone spooked. A collective nervous energy hummed in the air, like the moment before a power cut.

I took the lift up to the top floor and stopped in front of the CEO's office door. My heart was doing a rather good impression of a drum solo.

Right. In and out. Professional, polite, final. The envelope in my hand felt suddenly flimsy.

I'd rehearsed the speech all the way from Cornwall. "Mr Hastings, thank you for the opportunity. For personal reasons, I must tender my resignation, effective immediately." Personal reasons being, of course, that his personal life was a minefield that kept blowing up in my face, and I fancied keeping all my limbs attached.

I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and knocked.

"Come in."

The female voice gave me a two-second pause. Maybe Claire was in there taking notes. I pushed the door open.

The person sitting in the high-backed chair that turned slowly to face me was not Lochlan Hastings. It wasn't Claire either.

It was Soraya Warren.

My thoughts stuttered to a halt. For a second, I just stood there, my rehearsed speech evaporating into the well-conditioned air. She was dressed in a stunning, ice-white tailored suit, her auburn hair a perfect cascade over one shoulder. She looked like she'd been born in that chair.

"Hyacinth," she said, her smile warm and utterly disarming. "Welcome back. Do come in and shut the door, there's a dreadful draught from the corridor."

I mechanically stepped in and closed the door. My grip tightened on the envelope.

"I expect you're looking for Lochlan. He's... stepped aside. Graciously, I might add. He felt it was time for a change at the helm. So, he's made me the new CEO." She spread her hands, indicating the office. "It's good to be back in my old stomping ground."

"Back?" I managed to get out, my voice slightly strangled.

"Oh, didn't you know? I guess not many people do. I was there at the very beginning. Loch and I... we built the foundations of Velos together, in New York. I was always more of a silent partner back then, but it feels good to step out of the shadows now." She made it sound so reasonable, so inevitable.

"Where is he?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Enjoying his newfound freedom, I expect. I know how much the day-to-day desk job of being CEO bored him rigid. He's probably on a beach somewhere, sunbathing." Her gaze drifted down to my hand, still clutching the stupid envelope. "What have you got there?"

I felt like a child caught with a naughty note. “It’s...” I began, but she cut me off, her smile turning knowing.

“A resignation letter? Oh, Hyacinth, don’t be so dramatic.” She laughed, a soft, tinkling sound. “Just because there’s a new boss doesn’t mean you have to jump ship. I’m keeping all the old staff. You’re excellent at your job, from what I’ve seen and heard. The CAO role is still yours.”

She stood up, smooth and elegant, and walked around the desk towards me. She stopped just a little too close, the faint, spicy scent of her perfume enveloping me.

“In fact, I think we’re going to be great friends. You’re sharp. You’ve got spirit. I like that.”

She reached out and gave my arm a little squeeze. It was meant to be reassuring, but it felt like being marked.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 349

Chapter 349:

Spending the day working for Soraya was a special kind of agony. It was like being trapped in a beautifully appointed room with a very elegant, very clever spider.

She was sharp, I’ll give her that. She picked up on details in reports that would have made my eyes glaze over, and she did it all with this easy, chatty charm that was somehow more intimidating than any outright demand. Every time she smiled at me, I felt a crawl of unease up my spine, like ants were having a rave on my vertebrae.

I spent eight hours smiling back, my face aching with the effort, while my brain screamed “imposter!” on a loop.

The moment her heels clicked away down the executive floor, I sprinted to Kai’s office. He was at his desk, but the usual organised bustle was gone. He just looked grim, staring at his monitor like it had personally offended him. All the holiday cheer had been well and truly vacuumed out of the place.

“Kai. What the hell is going on?” I asked, shutting the door behind me.

He looked up, and the expression on his face was pure sympathy, which was somehow worse. “You’ve seen the new management, then.”

“Seen her? I’ve been taking notes for her all day. What happened?”

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Boss transferred controlling ownership of Velos to Ms Warren. Stepped down as CEO. It all got signed and sealed over the Christmas break. Nobody had a clue until we walked in this morning and found... her.” He gave a slight, helpless gesture towards the main office. “The company is hers. For all intents and purposes.”

“But why?” It made no sense. This was his life’s work.

Kai just shook his head. “I don’t know, Hyacinth. He didn’t confide in me.”

Then he gave me a long, complicated look, the kind that held a question he was too professional to ask. The look said, But maybe he confided in you?

He hadn’t. He’d just vanished.

I skipped dinner. My stomach was in too many knots to consider food.

Instead, I drove to Lonsdale Tower, my hands cold and tight on the wheel. I sat in the car for a good five minutes, staring up at the penthouse lights.

I finally got out, marched to the entrance, and was about to press the intercom when I hesitated. On an impulse, I placed my palm flat against the scanner beside the private lift. A soft green light glowed. Access granted.

He hadn’t revoked my clearance. That simple fact made my chest ache with a confusing pang.

I rode the lift up. The doors opened directly into his penthouse. The vast living room was a shock. It was mostly empty, with cardboard boxes stacked against one wall.

“Lochlan? Boss?” My voice sounded small in the spacious quiet.

No answer. I ventured further in, following the low, rhythmic thump coming from behind a door. The gym.

I pushed the door open.

He was on the treadmill, running with a punishing, relentless pace. His back was to me, muscles in his shoulders and arms coiling and releasing with each stride. A sheen of sweat

coated his skin, catching the light. He was wearing only a singlet and shorts, and my traitorous body reacted immediately with a flush of pure lust.

It was wildly inappropriate, given the circumstances, but there you go. The man was sculpted by a vengeful god who really knew his way around a six-pack.

I noted, with a detached part of my brain, that he showed precisely zero signs of having been in a near-fatal car crash a few weeks ago.

I cleared my throat.

He turned his head, saw me, and hit the stop button. The treadmill slowed to a halt. He grabbed a towel, wiped his face, and walked over to me. He wasn't even breathless.

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Chapter 350

Chapter 350:

"I didn't hear you come in," he said, his voice calm. Politeness itself.

"Sorry, boss. I used my palm print access, let myself in."

"It's fine," he replied, his gaze resting on me. It was a scanning look, quick but thorough, from my head to my shoes and back again. A slight crease appeared between his brows.

"You've lost weight."

The concern in his voice nearly undid me. I deflected, holding up the garment bag in one hand. "This is the dress from the gala. I've had it cleaned."

"Keep it. It was custom-made for you."

“No, I can’t possibly. It’s too expensive.” I fumbled in my purse and brought out the small velvet box. “And this. The brooch you lent me.”

He stared at the box in my hand, then slowly lifted his eyes to mine. Understanding dawned. The silence stretched.

“So,” he said finally. “You are cutting ties with me.”

The words were a hammer straight to the sternum.

Yes, a voice screamed inside me. That’s exactly what I came to do.

So why did it feel like I was tearing out my own stitches?

I dodged. “What’s with all the boxes? Are you moving out?”

“Yes. This is a corporate asset. As I’m no longer the CEO, it’s time to vacate.”

“What about my flat? At Lauderdale Tower?” The panic was shallow, immediate. Was I about to be homeless on top of everything else?

“Don’t worry. You’re still employed by Velos Capital, just under a different management. Besides,” he added, almost as an afterthought, “Lauderdale Tower is... safe.”

“Speaking of management, what the hell’s going on?” I stepped closer, frustration overriding the hurt. “How is Soraya suddenly the boss?”

“It needn’t be your concern. It doesn’t affect your role. You’re still the CAO.”

“I’m not worried about my job,” I snapped. “I’m worried about you! Did she do something to you? Blackmail you?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” he said, and he sounded it. Infuriatingly composed. “I sold the company. It’s time to move on to new ventures.”

He was parroting a press release.

The confusion curdled into a sharper, more familiar pain. He was shutting me out. Building a wall of polite, impeccable words.

“Was it you?” I asked. “Did you get me out?”

He didn’t answer the question. “Toby Saltzman has formally recanted his statement. Leo, or rather, Jason Rivers, has been arrested. He confessed to planting the evidence and stated he was paid to do so.”

“Paid by who?”

“The police are investigating.”

“It was Soraya, wasn’t it?”

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