

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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## Chapter 351

Chapter 351:

He met my gaze squarely. “There’s no direct evidence yet. But yes, that is my belief.”

He took a half-step closer, his voice dropping into a warning. “You should be careful around her, Hyacinth. She’s a dangerous woman.”

The concern in his tone was genuine, and it just made me angrier. “Is that why you’re being like this?” I gestured between us, at the cavernous, packing-box distance. “This sudden cold shoulder? Is it because of her?”

“Yes,” he admitted, and for a second, I saw a crack in the armour. “But not in the way you think. You’ll be safe as long as you’re just an employee. Soraya’s vendetta is against me. She has vowed to destroy anything I care about, anyone I care about.”

“Is that why you denied I was your girlfriend at the gala?”

He gave a single, stiff nod.

A hysterical laugh bubbled in my throat. I swallowed it down. “Well, that might be the case,” I said, my voice trembling with the effort to sound steady. “But you never asked me if that’s what I wanted.”

He blinked. “What?”

“You decided you were being noble. You decided to protect me. But it never occurred to you to ask if I wanted to be protected like that, did it?”

He stared. “I thought—”

“Maybe I’d rather face the threat from your terrifying ex and still be your girlfriend. Maybe I’d rather shoulder the danger with you than have you unilaterally decide I’m too fragile to be kept close.”

I could hear my own voice rising, all the fear and anger of the last few weeks pouring out. “Look what happened! I got dragged into your mess anyway, and I didn’t even get the relationship as a consolation prize. It’s a loss-loss.”

“Hyacinth, I... I just thought—”

“Yes, it’s always ‘you thought,’ isn’t it? Well, here’s what I think. I thought you were different from Cary. So much more considerate, the polar opposite of the tyrant. But turns out you’re just as arrogant as he was, only your version is more polite.”

“Hyacinth—”

“You decided you wanted a relationship,” I steamrolled over him. “You decided to push me away when things got hard. You decided to save me by making a deal with her. Everything has been your decision.”

I was right in front of him now, close enough to see the muscle feathering in his jaw. “But did you ever, for one second, stop to ask if I wanted to be in this with you? That even if I’d known the danger, I’d still have chosen to stay with you?”

He looked pained. “Hyacinth, I—”

“You never asked. You just decided and expected me to go along with it. Obediently. Uncomplainingly. Maybe even gratefully. That makes you exactly like Cary. And I swore I’m never going to be with a man like him again.”

The words hung in the air between us, brutal and final. I saw them land. A flinch in his eyes, a minute tightening around his mouth. But he said nothing. He just stood there, his expression closing down again.

I’d said everything. There was nothing left but the hollow, echoing ache where my pride and my stupid heart used to be.

I turned and walked away. I didn’t look back.

I felt his movement—a shift in the air behind me, a half-aborted step. I braced for his hand on my arm, for him to stop me, to say something, anything.

It never came.

I drove home on autopilot, London’s lights blurring into meaningless streaks.

The moment I stumbled into the penthouse, the dam broke. I snatched up a velvet cushion from the sofa, imagined it was Lochlan’s impeccably composed face, and punched it until my knuckles ached.

It was deeply unsatisfying. The pillow didn’t have his infuriatingly firm jawline.

Right. Fine. If I couldn’t punch him, I could at least remove myself from the scene of the crime. I was furious, hurt, and buzzing with a restless energy that demanded action. Or at least, packing.

I raided the wine fridge, retrieving a bottle of something red. I didn't bother with a glass. I took a long, unladylike swig straight from the bottle, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and marched to the bedroom.

I started yanking clothes out of the wardrobe and throwing them onto the bed. Another swig of wine. I emptied drawers of underwear and socks. Drink, pack, drink some more, pack.

By the time midnight rolled around, the bed was covered in chaos, two empty bottles lay on the floor, and my head was a fuzzy mess.

Stumbling back into the living room, I dug out my laptop, found the resignation email I'd drafted, changed the recipient, and hit send.

The lift doors opened.

Portia stumbled in, giggling, wrapped around a man who looked like he'd been hired from a catalogue entitled "Generic Handsome." Tall, floppy hair, a shirt unbuttoned just a bit too far. They were already kissing, her hands in his hair, his sliding down to her arse.

"Portia," I said, my voice slurry from the wine.

She froze, mid-grope, and peered over Mr Generic's shoulder. "Hy? What the hell? Why are you sitting in the dark like a sad ghost?" Then she took in the packing carnage, the open bottle beside me. "Oh." She whispered something to her date.

The man grinned, looking me up and down with a lazy appreciation. "I don't mind her joining us," he drawled. "The more the merrier."

Portia removed his hand from her backside. "What a spectacularly stupid thing to say." She shoved him firmly towards the front door. "The lift's that way. Piss off."

He started to protest, but she'd already jabbed the down button and pushed him into the carriage.

"But—" he managed, before the doors cut him off.

Portia turned back to me. "Right. Crisis management mode. Talk."

"Sorry," I mumbled, gesturing vaguely at the space where her date had been. "Can't let you use this as your shag pad anymore. I'm moving out."

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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## Chapter 352

Chapter 352:

Portia took the news remarkably well. “Okay. To where?”

“Dunno. Hotel, I guess. While I look for a place.”

“Don’t be an idiot. You’re coming to stay with me.”

“Portia, I don’t want to—”

“It’s settled. You’re coming. Now,” she said, kicking off her heels and grabbing the wine bottle from me for a swig of her own. “Start from the top. What’s going on?”

“I resigned. From Velos.”

That stopped her. She lowered the bottle. “But I thought you loved that job. Not that I ever understood why, all those spreadsheets and corporate wankery. But you loved it.”

“That was when Lochlan was the boss. He isn’t anymore. Soraya is. And I’m not working for the woman who tried to send me to prison.”

Portia’s eyes widened. “What? Why? How?”

“He didn’t tell me. Not in so many words. But I’m not stupid. I guess he traded his company for my freedom.”

She was silent for a moment, thinking it over.

“Yeah,” she said finally, handing the bottle back. “That tracks. The bastard actually has a heart. Who knew?” She nudged a pile of jumpers with her toe. “So what’s the plan now? Get revenge on the bitch who set you up?”

“Yes. But I need some time to figure out how to do it.”

If the police couldn’t get to her, I’d have to do it another way. However much history and hurt there was between Soraya and Lochlan, if she had a problem with him, she should have taken it up with him directly. A straight fight, eye for an eye, all that jazz. I could have respected that, in a twisted way.

But coming after me? That was just cheap. She saw someone she thought was an easy target, a soft touch.

Well, she'd picked the wrong supposedly-nice girl to mess with.

Portia collapsed onto the sofa next to me, stole the bottle back, and took a long pull. "Right. Well, I'll ask around. See if anyone in my circles has any gossip on one Soraya Warren. There's always something—a skeleton buried somewhere."

I nodded.

She nudged me with her foot. "So. What does this grand exit mean for you and the brooding billionaire, then? Is it curtains?"

"There's nothing to curtain," I said, taking the bottle back. "There's nothing between us."

Portia gave me a look. "But I thought you two had finally got your act together. He asked you out, took you to a black-tie gala, gave you a family heirloom brooch. That's not 'nothing' in anyone's language. And you've been secretly lusting after him since approximately the dawn of time. Why throw in the towel now?"

"Turns out he's just like Cary," I said, and the truth of it tasted bitter. "Only a more polished, better-dressed version. The control is quieter, but it's still control."

"He likes you, Hy. I could tell. The man looked at you like you'd invented sunshine."

"Yeah, well, I thought so too. Turns out his 'like' is more the way you like a pet. I'm like an adopted stray to him. Convenient to have around, nice to look at, but you don't ask the goldfish if it fancies a change of water. You just decide what's best for it. My opinions, my choices, they never entered the equation. He just... adjudicates. I'm sick of being the junior partner in every bloody relationship."

Portia sighed. "Oh, well. Too bad. I was really rooting for you two."

I moved into Portia's flat in Shepherd's Bush the very next day. It was all IKEA prints and throw blankets. It smelled of her perfume and takeaway curry, and was gloriously, normally shabby.

Soraya called me two days later. She was all warm concern and honeyed tones, doing her very best "disappointed but understanding boss" act. She gave me a whole spiel about my valuable contribution and how Velos's door would always be open. It was masterful.

I didn't want to burn that bridge just yet—not when I didn't know how deep the river ran—but I wasn't crossing back over it either. I stuck to my script, citing stress and health reasons for my abrupt departure. She made sympathetic noises and wished me a swift recovery.

We were two snakes smiling at each other through glass.

Then began The Great Unemployment.

I spent a week in a state of profound inertia, mostly in my pyjamas. I tried to cultivate a mini herb garden on Portia's postage-stamp balcony, an attempt at wholesome activity. It died within four days. I have the opposite of a green thumb. A black thumb. A thumb of death.

The weird thing was, I kind of loved it. I'd never not had a job. I'd gone from Cary's company straight to Velos Capital. This having nowhere to be, no fires to put out, no agendas to decode—it was blissful.

If not for the nagging fear of my parents eventually asking too many questions, I might never have updated my CV. As it was, I sent out a few applications and prayed they ended up in the HR's junk mail folder.

I spent my days mainlining Netflix on her sofa—"The Crown," because apparently I hadn't had enough of powerful, emotionally constipated people—until Portia, who splits her time between her legal practice and running her beauty clinic, could no longer stand the sight of me morphing into a cushion.

"Right, you're coming with me," she announced one morning, snatching the remote from my limp hand.

"Where to?"

"The clinic."

"Why? I don't need another facial."

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 353

Chapter 353:

Portia rolled her eyes. “You’re technically a part-owner of The Seraphina Clinic, remember? You lent me the seed money. If it goes under, you lose your investment.”

That gave me pause.

I had given her the money, back when she was starting out. We’d called it a loan for pride’s sake, but it was really a gift. I’d never given it another thought. The money, of course, had originally come from... Cary.

Speaking of the devil, I still owed him a thank you for sending that scarily expensive lawyer to see me in prison. The thought of texting him filled me with a deep weariness, though. What if it sparked hope, or worse, a misunderstanding with his fiancée?

I filed it under “Problems for Future Hyacinth.”

Reluctantly, I let myself be dragged to the clinic in Knightsbridge. I became a jack-of-all-trades: receptionist, stock-taker, tea-maker, holder of hands for nervous clients. Most of the clients were women seeking a confidence boost, and it was strangely satisfying. No corporate politics, no manoeuvring. Just helping someone feel a bit better about themselves. No difficult customers, and crucially, no lecherous male gaze from men who thought their share portfolio entitled them to a leer.

It was... nice. I was almost tempted to make it permanent.

But I hadn’t forgotten why I’d left Velos in the first place.

My evenings were now devoted to research—Portia confiscated the remote. Deep, obsessive, internet-sleuthing research on one Soraya Warren.

I combed through newspaper archives, financial magazines, society pages. I found a trail of pictures from New York. Soraya and Lochlan, the golden couple of Wall Street. Him in a tux, her in knockout gowns, grinning at galas, holding champagne flutes like weapons. They looked invincible.

Right up until the photos stopped, and the short, vague articles about her arrest for “financial misconduct” appeared. The details were frustratingly sparse. Insider trading? Fraud? Embezzlement? It was all hinted at but never stated explicitly.

A thought took root. If she’d gone down for financial crimes once, and a leopard never changes its spots, what was she doing now, sitting atop a multi-billion-pound investment firm? The potential for creative accounting was mind-boggling.

I felt a sharp pang of regret for resigning so hastily. If I were still inside, I could have looked for the loose thread myself.

But I wasn’t entirely without allies.

I composed a careful email to Kai, attaching links to the most revealing news reports of Soraya's past conviction. No message, just the links. Kai was clever. He'd know what I was implying. And his loyalty was to Lochlan, not the new regime. If anyone would want Soraya out and Lochlan back in more than I did, it was Kai. Hopefully, the email would persuade him to stay put and keep his eyes open.

The more I dug, the more Soraya's past seemed like a black hole. Everything was about New York. Her life before that was a void. No family mentions, no hometown pride, no university alumni profiles. It was as if she'd sprung, fully formed and ruthless, onto the trading floor.

I refused to believe it. Everyone leaves a digital footprint, especially if they were ever young and vain.

I started trawling through the social media accounts of her old New York "friends," the ones who featured in those party pics. I went back years, a decade, looking for any tag, any casual mention.

And then I found her.

Not Soraya, but a woman named Melissa Travers, whose bio listed her as a marketing exec and, more intriguingly, "St Catherine's alum – best years of my life!"

She had a locked-down profile, but a handful of old photos from more than ten years ago were public. And there, in a group shot from what looked like a school reunion, was a younger Soraya. Same striking eyes, less polished but no less magnetic. The caption read: "Crazy to catch up with the legendary S. Warren! Still winning at life, obv."

Bingo. St Catherine's.

I dug deeper, finding a few other former students who mentioned the school. One, a man named David, posted a throwback picture of a school play. "Remember this? Hamlet, 2011. Where's the ghost now? #stcatherines #throwback."

In the comments, someone had tagged a few people. One tag was an inactive account with the handle "SWarren\_." I clicked. Nothing but a default avatar. But it was a start.

The real break came from a local newspaper archive—the sort of defunct London borough paper that used to report on school fetes and parking disputes.

A short, chilling article from 2013: "Police Appeal for Information on Missing Tunbridge Wells Teen."

The boy was fifteen. His name was Benji Moss. He attended St Catherine's School. He'd failed to return home after a weekend revision session at the library. The article quoted a worried classmate.

And the classmate they quoted, giving a bland statement about Benji being a “quiet boy,” was a fifteen-year-old Soraya Warren.

Benji had vanished and was never found. And soon after, according to a follow-up snippet I found in a school newsletter archive, Soraya Warren had transferred out of St Catherine’s.

Coincidence? Probably. Life is full of them.

There was no direct link, at least none you could print in a newspaper. St Catherine’s was the kind of place where students flitted in and out like trendy pop-up shops—a missing person here, a sudden gap year there.

But something itched at the base of my skull, a sixth sense honed by two weeks in a cell and a masterclass in betrayal. If you kept digging around a beautiful, seemingly perfect tree and kept finding poison, you eventually started to suspect the roots.

I waited until Portia was home, armed with a decent bottle of Pinot Grigio and a packet of posh crisps.

I handed her a glass. “I need a favour from your legal underworld connections.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 354

Chapter 354:

“Ooh, shady,” she said, kicking off her heels. “What do you need? A fake passport? A stalker detained?”

“I need someone to take a peek at a cold case file. A missing person. From 2013.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Who’s missing?”

“A boy named Benji Moss. Fifteen years old. Went to St Catherine’s School in Tunbridge Wells. He never came home from the library one Saturday. Case went cold.”

Portia swirled her wine, thinking. “2013? That’s ancient history. The file will be gathering dust in some archive. But... yeah, I know a guy who knows a girl in the Met’s records department. The deeply bored and underpaid kind. For the right incentive, she might let something be ‘misplaced’ for an hour. But Hy, this is a long shot. Don’t get your hopes up.”

“My hopes are permanently in the basement. Just see what you can find.”

To her credit, Portia came through faster than I expected.

Two days later, she called me into the living room, her laptop open. “Turns out, a decade-old cold case isn’t exactly high security,” she said. “No one cares. My friend took some photos.”

She showed me the scanned pages. The Benji Moss file was depressingly thin. A worried mother’s statement. School photos of a smiling kid with floppy hair. Police reports detailing fruitless searches of local parks and riverbanks. Interviews with classmates that led nowhere. The official conclusion was a sad, generic shrug: missing, presumed likely to have run away, though no one could say why.

It was the kind of case that quietly breaks a family and fills a drawer.

“See?” Portia said, scrolling. “Tragic, but not exactly a conspiracy. I thought you were barking up the wrong tree.”

“Keep scrolling,” I said, my eyes glued to the screen.

She did. And there it was. A supplementary interview transcript. Subject: Soraya Warren, aged 15.

“Damn.” Portia leaned in, reading aloud. “‘The witness states she was acquainted with Benji Moss but denies any romantic involvement. Contradicts accounts from other students who suggested she had expressed interest in him. Witness claims it was Moss who pursued her, and she declined. Presents a calm and cooperative demeanour throughout.’ Blah, blah... and look, she had a rock-solid alibi. At a piano lesson with a tutor who confirmed it, then home with her parents. The police followed up, found no physical evidence, and dropped it.”

We both stared at the transcript.

“She’s lying,” I said quietly. It wasn’t a question.

“Explain.”

“The other students said she was interested. She says he was interested. One of them is gone and can’t argue. She crafts the narrative. She has the alibi. She walks away clean.”

“Or she could be telling the truth and her classmates were wrong.” Portia played devil’s advocate.

“Could be. But still. Everything else I’ve found is from New York onwards,” I told Portia. “Her Instagram is all charity galas and yacht sunsets. Her dates are arm candy who probably think her favourite colour is ‘money.’ She’s severed everything before Wall Street.”

“You think she’s hiding her past.”

I nodded. “Scrubbing your digital footprints takes a lot of effort. You don’t go to all that trouble if there’s nothing to hide.”

Portia looked at me. “There is one person who knows her past. Who knew her before, during, and after New York.”

“I’m not asking him,” I said flatly.

“I know you don’t want to. But would you be deathly opposed if I went and asked him?”

I looked away. The thought of Portia talking to Lochlan, of him knowing I was digging, of that connection being reopened, sent a jolt of panic—and something else—through me.

“Hyacinth,” Portia pressed. “I know you want nothing to do with him. But in this, he’s on our side. More than that, he’s in the crosshairs. You think he’s just going to let Soraya steal his company and toddle off to the beach? That man is probably plotting a counter-coup from a secret bunker as we speak. We have a common enemy. An enemy of my enemy is my friend. Or at least my temporarily useful ally. I get it if you don’t want to talk to your ex, but he’s not my ex.”

“He’s not mine either,” I muttered defensively. “We went on a total of... two dates. One and a half, really. A lunch, and that disastrous gala. That’s it.”

“And he gave you a family heirloom and traded his empire for your freedom. But fine, semantics.” She shrugged. “You’re letting emotions cloud your judgement.”

“Maybe I am.” The admission burst out of me.

That was the heart of it, wasn’t it? I needed time for the stupid, stubborn feelings to fade. The hurt was a fresh wound, but underneath it was a pull I couldn’t deny—a magnetism that infuriated me. Facing him now felt like picking at a scab.

“Alright. How about this? We keep doing what we can with what we have. But will you at least promise to think about it? Lochlan has resources we can only dream of. He has knowledge about Soraya that we don’t. He’s the primary source. Ignoring him is like trying to solve a puzzle with half the pieces still in the box.”

I looked at the closed laptop, at the ghost of Benji Moss's school photo behind my eyes, and then at Soraya's flawless, smiling face on her Instagram.

I gave Portia a reluctant nod. "I'll think about it."

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 355

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 355

[Prev Chapter](#)[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 355:

"Curtis, this isn't the way to Annabel's," I observed, watching the familiar landmarks of Mayfair give way to the grand, museum-like facades of Knightsbridge. The evening traffic was a slow river of brake lights, but the route was unmistakably wrong.

The family driver stole a glance at me in the rear-view mirror before darting his eyes furtively away. "Sorry, sir. Mrs Hastings instructed me to drive you there."

"There being?"

"Zaytinya."

"I assume I'm not dining alone," I said, my voice cooling several degrees.

I had suspected an ambush, but the confirmation was irritating nonetheless. Curtis had worked for my parents for over two decades. His loyalty was to them, and to my mother in particular, with a steadfastness I could only describe as feudal.

"Sorry, sir. Mrs Hastings didn't specify," Curtis murmured, a clear lie by omission.

The car glided to a stop in front of the restaurant. Curtis was out and opening my door with solicitous speed, beating the waiting valet by a half-second. And cutting off my escape route.

The maître d' flashed a professional, welcoming smile. "Mr Hastings, good evening. Your table is this way."

Apparently, I was the only person in London who hadn't known about my dinner reservation.

He led me to a discreet corner table. A woman was already seated there. She was wrapped in the kind of attire that defied the January chill with style rather than bulk: a forest-green velvet blazer over a cream silk blouse, tailored wool trousers, and leather ankle boots. Her hair was a loose cascade, as if she'd recently come from a windswept walk. She was leaning back slightly in her chair, her eyes scanning the room with a quiet, assessing curiosity.

She looked vaguely familiar.

Then I placed her. She was from the thick, depressingly thorough dossier my mother had labelled "Candidates."

I almost turned on my heel, but she looked up and saw me. Her smile was immediate and warm, and she gave a small, friendly wave. Retreat was no longer an option without causing a scene.

I walked over and took the seat opposite her.

"Good evening, Mr Hastings," she said, her voice pleasant.

"Good evening, Miss...?"

"Croft. Galina Croft." She leaned forward slightly, her eyes crinkling. "Thank you for arranging dinner here. I know how impossible it is to get a table on such short notice."

I merely nodded. This evening had my mother's fingerprints all over it, and I strongly suspected my father's boisterous encouragement in the background.

Both had been surprised when I told them I had sold Velos Capital, though I had omitted the exigent circumstances that compelled the sale. My mother had not asked many questions, which led me to suspect she was taking her time to formulate a sociological survey, perhaps for a future paper titled "The Phenomenon of Capricious Abnegation in Late-Stage Capitalists." My father thought early retirement was a capital idea and had immediately begun recommending hobbies I could take up, from falconry to competitive cheese rolling.

They'd both agreed on a new project for my suddenly free time: the founding of a family. This began, naturally, with the procurement of a wife.

“You’re a busy man to pin down for dinner,” Galina said pleasantly, a tactful allusion to the fact this was the third attempt our parents had orchestrated.

[Prev Chapter](#)[Next Chapter](#)

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 356

Chapter 356:

“My apologies for that Saturday. A work emergency couldn’t be avoided,” I replied.

That Saturday, everything changed between Hyacinth and me.

I remembered the howl of wind outside the stone bothy, the warmth of skin against skin as we huddled under the single thermal blanket, the desperate need in her eyes as I paused on top of her, silently asking for permission... and of Cameron’s untimely arrival interrupting what could have happened.

“Oh, I can absolutely relate to emergencies,” Galina said with an easy laugh. “Last winter, my upstairs neighbour’s pipe burst at two in the morning. A proper waterfall through my ceiling, right onto a new canvas. So there I am, in my ridiculous reindeer pyjamas, in a freezing gallery, holding a mixing bowl under the drip and blow-drying a painting of a very serene landscape. I looked like a madwoman. The plumber arrived and asked if the ‘water feature’ was part of the exhibition.”

I smiled.

A waiter arrived with menus. I inquired politely after her preferences, ordered for us both, and selected a wine. Galina took the lead in conversation, ranging from a recent exhibition at the Royal Academy to the absurdities of the contemporary art market. I engaged with appropriate courtesy, matching her light tone.

She was, undeniably, intelligent and charming.

After the second glass of wine, she relaxed further. “My father practically pushed me out the door tonight,” she confided with a laugh. “I’ve met so many of these supposedly perfect men from good families, with good faces and pedigrees to match. But five minutes in and you just want to scream into your napkin.”

She took a sip, her gaze meeting mine over the rim of her glass. “But you’re different. I’d almost thought the true gentleman was a dying breed. A relic. It’s refreshing.”

I offered a smile as reply.

“There’s a wonderful new exhibition opening on Saturday,” she said as dessert was served. “We should go.”

“I’m afraid I have a prior engagement on Saturday,” I said.

A flicker of disappointment crossed her features, but she was undeterred. “That’s alright. Another time, then. Whenever you’re free. I can be flexible. We should give this a proper chance, don’t you think?”

My smile diminished, becoming something more formal. “Miss Croft, you are an exceptionally lovely woman. However, I do not believe we would be a suitable match. I do hope you’ve enjoyed the dinner.”

“I have. And I’m disappointed. I rather liked you.”

“My apologies.”

She tilted her head, not angry but genuinely curious. “Can I ask what it is you found lacking? I rather thought I was doing alright.”

“It’s not you. It’s me.”

“That’s a clichéd excuse.”

“Clichéd, perhaps. But not an excuse in my circumstances.”

“I’m not your type, huh?” She considered this, a faint, stubborn line appearing between her brows. “Then what is your type?”

The image came to me unbidden—not of a type, but of a specific person.

I smiled. “The divorced kind.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 357

## Chapter 357:

The location in Bermondsey was a deliberate choice. It was anonymous, functional, and far removed from the polished glass of the West End. The converted warehouse smelled of old brick and cold metal, with the hum of the nearby railway tracks providing a constant, low-frequency rhythm to our work.

Klaus had already arranged the essentials on the steel desk. He stood by the window, his posture reflecting a decade of military discipline. He did not waste words, and he certainly did not use them to coat the truth in sugar.

“Declan and Kol have their teams in place,” Klaus said. “We are looking into her old connections and her current bank accounts. If there is a crack in her armour, we will find it.”

I gave him a short nod.

Soraya was currently under the impression that her name on the Wilson Allied payroll meant she held the leash. It was the kind of mistake people made when they mistook a contract for a commitment. She understood leverage and she understood fear, but she didn’t understand that men like Klaus and Declan didn’t work for money alone. They were loyal to me, and that was a currency Soraya could not mint.

I turned my chair to face the bank of monitors. One screen showed a quiet street in Shepherd’s Bush. It was a grey morning, and the drizzle made the pavement look like wet slate.

“How is she?” I asked.

“Miss Galloway left for her job at the clinic at eight forty-two,” Klaus replied. “She looks tired but otherwise fine. The surveillance team is keeping their distance as you asked. She hasn’t spotted them.”

I felt the familiar, cold weight of hypocrisy in my chest. I was doing exactly what Cary had done. I was watching her, tracking her, and invading the very privacy she had fought so hard to reclaim. In the penthouse, she had told me I was just as arrogant as her ex-husband, and she was right.

But the distinction mattered to me, even if it would mean nothing to her. Cary had followed her because he wanted to own her. I was following her because I had painted a target on her back, and I refused to let her be caught in the crossfire of my past mistakes.

“We need to find out who’s paying for all of this,” I said, looking back at Klaus. “Soraya was broke five years ago. This lifestyle—the yacht, the bribes, the legal fees—it doesn’t come cheap. Someone is bankrolling her, and I want a name.”

“The money is moving through a dozen shell companies,” Klaus admitted. “It’s going to take some time to peel back the layers. But we have found something else.”

He handed me a folder filled with handwritten notes. They looked like they had been copied in a hurry.

“She’s seeing a private therapist under a fake name,” Klaus explained. “We didn’t want to risk a digital breach, so we approached the clinic’s assistant instead. He has some gambling debts that he was quite eager to settle. He provided these summaries of her sessions.”

I skimmed the pages. It was a disturbing glimpse behind the mask.

“She isn’t sleeping,” I noted.

“The notes also mention a recurring nightmare,” Klaus nodded. “She’s careful not to give away names, but she keeps talking about a place. The therapist has written down the word ‘Eden.’”

I looked up. “Eden? As in the Garden of Eden? Or a location in real life?”

“The assistant thinks it’s a real place. The doctor’s notes suggest it’s the source of some significant trauma for her.”

A place was a physical lead. It was a fixed point in time—something I could investigate.

“There’s something else that came up in the background check,” Klaus continued. “A name from her school days. Benjamin Moss. He was a classmate of hers who went missing in 2013. They never found him.”

“What was Soraya’s involvement?”

“She was the last person to see Benjamin before he vanished. She was questioned at the time. Some of the other students thought they were dating, but she denied it. She told the police he’d been pestering her and she’d turned him down. She had an alibi, so they let her go.” Klaus paused for a moment. “She left the country and moved to a boarding school in America shortly after the investigation ended. She was only sixteen then, a minor. She went alone, and travel records show she never came back for the holidays.”

I knew the rest. I’d met the finished product at university.

I remembered a conversation from back then. She had been drinking, and, in a rare moment of unguarded bitterness, told me her secret. She was the illegitimate daughter of a peer, the result of a drunken mistake. He’d provided a single, substantial trust for her education and her exile—a final settlement. She’d described it as being paid to disappear.

But she'd never told me about Benjamin.

Could this peer be her benefactor now? From what I recalled, she hated him, hated the adoptive parents he'd stuck her with, and she was more likely to dance on his grave than work with him. Yet a lot could change in ten years, especially if she'd found a new way to squeeze him.

I looked at Klaus. "I want a full profile on the current Duke of Albemarle. I want to know where he is, how much money he has left, and if he's had any contact with Soraya since she got out of prison."

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## Chapter 358

Chapter 358:

"What about his family?" I asked, slumped so deep into Portia's sofa I was practically auditioning for a role as a human crumb. "If anyone still cares about a person who's been missing for over a decade, it's got to be his family. There's always someone who keeps the light on."

Portia pulled a face. "You're not going to like this."

"Try me."

"Right. Well, I had a chat with a retired DC who remembered the case. Benji was from a single-parent family. Just him and his mum. After he vanished, his mother... well, she lost it. In a completely understandable way. She went round to Soraya's house multiple times, screaming that Soraya had driven her boy away. She was convinced."

A cold little worm of dread started wriggling in my stomach. "Okay... and?"

"And then, one night, there was a gas explosion at her house. Benji's mother didn't make it out."

I felt a full-body shudder, a proper spine-tingling creep that had nothing to do with the draughty window.

“Do you think Soraya did that?” My voice was quieter than I meant it to be.

Portia shuddered too, wrapping her arms around herself. “Logic says no. She was sixteen. I can believe a teenage girl being manipulative, playing nasty little mind games. But arranging a gas leak? Actual murder? My brain just refuses to compute. It’s too... diabolical.”

I felt the same visceral rejection. And yet.

The world was full of stories more bizarre and horrible than that. A sixteen-year-old killer wasn’t exactly front-page news anymore. Maybe part of me wanted her to be guilty of something that monstrous, because it would make my own anger so neatly justified.

“Look at the timeline, though,” I insisted, clinging to the thread. “She leaves the country right after and doesn’t come back for years. That doesn’t smell like innocence to me. It smells like someone putting a lot of distance between themselves and a nasty situation.”

But if his whole family was gone, that was a dead end in every sense of the word.

Portia flopped down opposite me. “Why are you so hung up on this Benji thing anyway? It might have absolutely nothing to do with Soraya. It’s just a sad story from her past.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, rubbing my temples. “It’s just a gut feeling. When you look at someone’s life and there’s a hole where the beginning should be, and in that hole is a missing boy... you don’t need to be a detective to think that’s a bit suss.”

“Hmm.”

I thought for a moment. “What about Benji’s friends? He must have had some. A kid that good-looking doesn’t vanish without someone missing him.”

Portia snapped her fingers, her energy returning. “There was a girl. Mentioned in one of the old notes. She was really cut up about it, apparently. They were close, maybe even puppy-love close. She left the school not long after he disappeared. Some of the gossip at the time hinted at a love triangle—that Soraya liked Benji but he liked the other girl.” She shrugged. “Find the girl, maybe she knows something the police missed.”

“Where is she now?”

Portia dug through the stack of photocopied police notes on the coffee table. “Penrith. That’s where Benji was from originally, too.”

I hauled my laptop over and pulled up a map. “Penrith. That’s a five-hour drive. Longer, if it rains.”

Portia peered over my shoulder, and her eyes lit up at the screen, which was now showing pictures of the area. “It’s gorgeous! Look at that water. River Eden, nice name. And they have otters! We should go. Tomorrow. It’s the weekend.”

I blinked at her. “Tomorrow? Can’t we just... I don’t know, find her on Facebook? Send a careful message? Do we really have to trek up to Cumbria?”

“But I’m bored out of my skull here!” she wailed, gesturing at the grey London sky beyond the window. “It’s cold and wet and the city is full of miserable people and my love life is a disaster. I want to see a river. I want to see an otter.” She eyed me. “What, you don’t want to go? That’s fine, the clinic is rammed at the weekend, you can man the phones and listen to Mrs Henderson complain about her crow’s feet again—”

“No, no, alright!” I surrendered, holding up my hands. “We’ll go. Fine. Otters and investigation. A working holiday.”

Portia, being Portia, was an unstoppable force of action once she had a plan.

Fourteen hours later, after a drive featuring service station coffee and a lengthy debate on the musical merits of Abba, we were checking into The Manor Hotel just outside Penrith.

The place was all roaring fires, exposed beams, and the subtle scent of money and lavender polish.

I glanced around the grand hall. It was also, I noticed, full of couples. Holding hands, sharing secret smiles, looking at each other with that soppy lovers’ glow.

Portia bounced over, brandishing two key cards. “Got us the deluxe double. Huge room, two massive beds. We can spread out.”

“Why is everyone here part of a matching set?” I muttered, nodding at a pair who were practically intertwined by the giant fireplace.

“It’s nearly Valentine’s. What did you expect?”

“It’s next week!”

“These are the early birds, Hy. You don’t start celebrating Christmas on the actual day, do you? You have to build up to it.” She said it with the authority of someone who considered February a month-long festival of pink and prosecco.

A suspicion dawned on me. “How did you even get a room here at such short notice if it’s Valentine’s season? This place must have been booked solid.”

Portia suddenly became very interested in adjusting the strap of her handbag. “Oh, you know. I have friends. Contacts.”

I thought it through aloud. “You were weirdly eager to get out of London. But you hate the countryside. You think sheep are boring and fresh air is overrated. And Valentine’s is coming up.” I narrowed my eyes at her. “Portia. Are you dodging someone?”

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## Chapter 359

Chapter 359:

Portia let out a dramatic sigh. “Fine. Yes. It’s this guy I met. I thought we had a perfect, mutual understanding. A one-night thing. A fabulous, no-strings hook-up. You know the drill: fuck, say a polite goodbye in the morning, never learn each other’s middle names. But he... he seems to think we’re dating.”

“Is he stalking you?”

“Not stalking, per se. He’s just... persistently lovely. He keeps texting. Wants to know when we can meet for coffee. He’s sweet, you know? But in that puppy-dog, ‘I’ve brought you a stick and now I live on your doorstep’ kind of way. And he somehow got the address of the clinic. I had a vision of him turning up with a massive bouquet of roses, looking hopeful and earnest, and I just... I needed to be elsewhere. So, yes. Countryside detox. For both of us.”

A very solicitous bellboy helped us with our bags.

Portia, still buzzing with nervous energy, looked at me expectantly. “The spa here is supposed to be incredible. Shall we? Hot stone massage? Steam room?”

“The drive has drained my will to live. Temporarily. I just want to lie in a dark room and not move for an hour.”

“You can lie in the hydrotherapy pool! It’s basically a fancy bath.”

“Maybe later.”

I took a quick, invigorating shower to wash off the motorway, then went down to the restaurant to see if they'd miraculously still be doing a buffet. My hopes weren't high. This seemed more of an "à la carte or starve" kind of place.

The dining room was vast and quiet, the lunch rush having dissolved into the hushed, carpeted afternoon. A lone, splendid buffet table gleamed under a crystal chandelier, looking both inviting and slightly sad, like a party guest who'd arrived too early.

I filled a plate, my interest piqued by a slate label that read "Poached Salmon, freshly caught from the River Eden."

I texted Portia a photo of my plate with the caption "Food. Now," then found a secluded table in a corner alcove.

I was just deciding whether the salmon tasted more of river or of chef's ambition when the conversation from the table behind me began to drift over the high-backed settle.

"Big boss is coming tomorrow. Better look sharp."

"An inspection? It'd be the first since he bought the place. Hope Mr Hastings spots the talent in me and gives me a raise."

It was the "Mr Hastings" that made my fork freeze halfway to my mouth.

"Don't get your hopes up. I think it's a personal trip."

"How d'you know?"

"Because my friend's sister works for the daughter of Johan Croft, and she says Mr Croft is coming too."

"So?"

"So Mr Croft is bringing his daughter, and they just happen to have booked two suites on the same floor as the boss's suite. Coincidence? I don't think so. Not with it being Valentine's week."

"So, what, you think the boss is here to see Mr Croft?"

"More like he's here to see Ms Croft."

"For what?"

"Use your head—for a date, of course!"

"You're just making stuff up. That's pure speculation."

“Oh, am I? Look here.” There was the sound of a phone being tapped. “This is Ms Croft’s Instagram from a few days ago. Fancy dinner at Zaytinya. And look, there’s our new boss across the table! Check the caption: ‘Can’t wait for our trip to Penrith this Saturday.’”

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Chapter 360:

“Blimey. That’s pretty blatant. So they’re a thing? He’s actually dating someone?”

“Must be. Why else would he trek all the way up here?”

“But why’s her dad coming? Doesn’t exactly scream ‘romantic weekend,’ does it?”

“Maybe it’s ‘meet the parents’ official.”

“I heard someone say the new boss was gay.”

“Now that’s just a rumour.”

They kept chatting, but their voices faded into a distant murmur.

I looked down and realised I’d twisted the corner of my linen napkin into a tight, wrinkled rope. I tried to smooth it out, but the creases were stubborn, pressed deep into the fabric. It looked as ruined and pointless as I felt.

Oh, for God’s sake.

I tossed the napkin aside and decided to pretend I’d heard nothing.

The salmon now tasted distinctly sour. My appetite had vanished. I left the restaurant.

The lift arrived with a soft ping. I got in, alone with my own stupid reflection in the brass doors.

My phone buzzed.

Portia: “At restaurant. Where are you? Food looks good.”

I thumbed a reply: “Lost appetite. Going back to room.”

The lift began its ascent.

Maybe they were talking about some other “Mr Hastings.” It was a fairly common surname.

And yet.

What were the odds, really? Of running into Lochlan in a boutique hotel in the middle of nowhere, hundreds of miles from London? The coincidence was so staggering it felt like a bad joke.

For one wild second, I wondered if he was following me. But I dismissed it just as quickly. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I hadn’t even known I’d be here.

The lift chimed and the doors slid open on my floor. A shadow filled the open doorway, blocking my exit.

I looked up.

Lochlan stood there, his face as composed and unreadable as carved stone.

He looked... infuriatingly the same. Impeccable. The dark wool of his coat, the precise line of his jaw, not a single hair daring to be out of place. He looked like a man on his way to a board meeting, not a Valentine’s getaway in the Lake District.

I felt a ridiculous pang of disappointment. I don’t know what I’d expected. Maybe some sign of wear and tear? A hint of stubble, shadows under his eyes, something to show that losing his company and... well, whatever we were, had cost him something.

But Lochlan never conformed to such mundane human expectations. He probably ironed his pyjamas.

“Hello,” I said, my voice stiff and horribly formal.

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## Chapter 361

Chapter 361:

“Hello,” he replied, his tone low.

I wanted to demand what he was doing there, but that would require a conversation, and a conversation was the last thing I wanted while my insides felt like they’d been through a blender. I tried to step around him. “Excuse me.”

He didn't move aside. Instead, in one fluid motion, he stepped forward, his hand closing around my wrist. He drew me back into the lift, the doors whispering shut behind us.

One arm circled my waist, pulling me against him. My jaw collided softly with the solid wall of his chest. His familiar scent enveloped me.

His breath was warm against my ear, his voice a rough, quiet vibration I felt through my bones. "I've missed you."

My heart slammed against my ribs. The air in the small space turned thick and charged, as if all the oxygen had been replaced with something combustible. A huge, stupid wave of feeling surged up inside me, threatening to pull me under.

I felt like I should say something cutting, something to shatter the moment, but my mind was a perfect, breathless blank. His arm tightened around my waist, as if he wanted to erase every inch of space between us, to pull me right into his skin.

Then the lift chimed softly. The doors began to open.

"Lochlan?"

I pushed against his chest, breaking his hold, stumbling back a step.

Portia stood frozen in the corridor, her mouth hanging open in comical shock, a half-eaten bread roll forgotten in her hand.

I stepped around Lochlan, my face burning, and seized Portia's wrist, dragging her away from the lift doors and down the plush corridor.

"What in the absolute hell was that?" Portia hissed, recovering her power of speech as we rounded a corner. "Was that Lochlan I saw or a hallucination? Did I interrupt something? It looked like I interrupted something!"

"You didn't interrupt anything," I muttered.

"Hy, did he follow you here?"

I shook my head. "No. Just a spectacularly awkward coincidence."

"Really?" Portia's eyes were wide. "What are the odds? That's not a coincidence, that's fate waving a massive flag!"

"Not really. I think he owns the hotel. And he's probably here to see someone." I couldn't keep the bitter note out of my voice.

Portia looked like she had about a hundred more questions on the subject, but I cut her off. “I found the girl’s address. The one who knew Benji. Nicky Forrester.”

Portia was momentarily distracted. “Good work! Do you think she’ll talk to us?”

“I have her social media. I’ve been messaging her. She’s wary, but curious. I’m going to try and persuade her to meet us tomorrow.”

“Perfect. Hopefully she knows something.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon holed up in the room, conducting a delicate digital negotiation with Nicky. Her social media was a quiet stream of handcrafted pottery and moody photos of the fells. She communicated like someone who found words physically difficult, her messages short and delayed.

I posed as a potential buyer for her ceramics, which was only a partial lie. Some of the mugs were actually lovely. After an hour of gentle, persistent chatting about glazes and kiln temperatures, I sensed a slight thaw. She agreed, with the trepidation of someone agreeing to a root canal, to meet me tomorrow.

For dinner, I ordered room service. The thought of walking into the restaurant and potentially witnessing Lochlan hosting a cosy “meet the parents” dinner with the Crofts was more than my stomach or my pride could currently handle.

I had a club sandwich. It tasted of cowardice and mayonnaise.

Eventually, I managed to wear Nicky down to a specific time for our meeting. A small victory.

I ran a deep, hot bath, trying to soak away the lingering tension from the lift and the general absurdity of my life.

As I was getting ready for bed, however, a new, more physical absurdity announced itself. My stomach began to churn unpleasantly.

Maybe the salmon from lunch had been more “River Eden-adjacent” than truly fresh. Or perhaps my digestive system was simply rebelling against the sheer emotional melodrama of the day.

I tossed and turned, feeling queasy. The thought of being sick was awful, but the feeling of nearly being sick was somehow worse—a perpetual state of revolt.

I rummaged through my toiletries for the packet of digestion tablets I was sure I’d packed, only to find a cruel emptiness where relief should have been. Brilliant. Just perfect.

I glanced at Portia's empty, perfectly made bed. She'd vanished after dinner, undoubtedly to the hotel bar to select tonight's victim. I was on my own.

With a sigh of profound resentment, I pulled on jeans and a jumper over my pyjamas. I'd seen a pharmacy on the high street. How hard could it be to buy some tablets and reclaim a basic sense of bodily autonomy?

The answer, as it turned out, was very hard indeed.

The pharmacy was closed.

I stared at the sign proclaiming "24-Hour Service" with a sense of personal betrayal. It was only ten o'clock. I made a mental note to find this establishment online and leave a scathing review about their fraudulent time-keeping.

Defeated, I trudged back towards the hotel. The night in Appleby was clear and bitingly cold, the stars sharp as pins in a black velvet cushion. It was the kind of night meant for romance, and the universe was rubbing my nose in it. Couples were still dotted around, wrapped up in each other and thick coats, sharing whispers and stolen kisses.

I walked past them, a lone, grumpy, mildly nauseous asteroid in a sky full of happy binary stars.

As I approached the hotel's grand entrance, a familiar figure emerged, struggling with a large cardboard box.

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## **Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!**

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### **Chapter 362**

Chapter 362:

My spirits lifted a fraction. "Roy! Good to see you."

Roy set the box down with a grunt and enveloped me in a warm, avuncular hug. "Hyacinth! Well, this is a turn-up. Good to see you too. Been a while, and what a lot of water under the bridge, eh?"

"You could say that," I sighed.

I wanted to ask if he'd stayed at Velos under Soraya's reign, but he read my mind. He chuckled, patting the box. "Jumped ship soon as I could. Went back to working for Mr Hastings directly. Personal chauffeur again. Suits me better."

"Good for you," I said, and I meant it. I eyed the large box. "What's all this?"

"Oh, the boss bought this place, came up for an inspection. Noticed the hotel's little pharmacy cupboard was looking sorry for itself. Told me to get it properly stocked up. Just doing the fetching and carrying."

I peered at the box. It was filled with medicines. What were the odds?

Roy looked at me more closely, his kindly face creased with concern. "You alright, love? You're looking a bit peaky."

"Oh, just a bit of an upset stomach. I was actually just out trying to find something for it. No joy. The so-called 24-hour pharmacy is having a little nap."

"You didn't get anything? Of course you didn't!" Roy said, nodding sagely. "That place closes with the pubs. Well, isn't this your lucky night? Let's have a look in here." He bent down and started rummaging through the box.

I stood beside him, looking in. It was a miniature chemist's shop. Cold remedies, painkillers, antiseptic creams, cough syrup. Further down, more serious-looking boxes for every organ you could name. I even spotted a packet of laxatives and quickly averted my eyes.

Roy was digging with the fervour of a treasure hunter.

"Got 'em!" he announced triumphantly, emerging with not just my digestion tablets, but two other boxes of stomach settlers. "Here you go. Take your pick."

I took the proffered boxes. "Thank you, Roy. How much do I owe you?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "Don't be daft. A few boxes of pills? It's on the house. You're a guest, consider it part of the service."

I thanked him again. "Goodnight, Roy."

"Night, love. Feel better."

Back in the room, I took the tablets and fell into a deep, mercifully dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Portia was actually in the room when I woke up, which was unusual. She was humming and applying mascara with intense concentration.

“Good news,” I croaked, my voice still rough with sleep. “Nicky’s agreed to meet. We can head out after breakfast.”

“Brilliant,” Portia said, not meeting my eyes in the mirror.

I narrowed my gaze. “Out with it. What are you hiding? You look shifty. And guilty. It’s a disturbing combination on you.”

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## Chapter 363

Chapter 363:

She smiled a sheepish, too-bright smile. “Nothing! Just that I’ve, um, sorted us a driver for today.”

“A what?”

“Well, it’s a long drive to wherever Nicky lives, right? It’s probably in the middle of nowhere. I thought it would be a good idea to have some muscle along. Just in case.”

“I brought my pepper spray,” I said flatly.

“Pepper spray is for inconveniencing someone,” Portia retorted, finally turning to face me. “I’m talking about proper muscle, for a proper fight. And I happen to know a guy.”

I crossed my arms and stared at her until she caved, her shoulders slumping.

“Fine! It’s him. The one who’s been hounding me.”

“I thought you came up here to dodge him.”

“I did! And he is very, very persistent, okay? And... I don’t know. Maybe it was the stupid roses he sent to the clinic, or the schmaltzy vibe of this place with all the couples, but I felt a bit lonely last night. And you wouldn’t come down to the bar with me.” She tossed an accusing look my way. “So, if you think about it, this is really all your fault. I was alone and vulnerable, and I... may have called him.”

My jaw went slack. “So he drove up here in the middle of the night?”

Portia just gave me a wide, unrepentant grin.

Ten minutes later, standing outside the hotel, I got my first look at our “muscle.”

He was tall and well-built, but with the fresh-faced, eager look of a golden retriever puppy who’d just been told he was going for a walk. He couldn’t have been older than twenty-three.

I shot a withering look at Portia. “We look like two cougars who’ve hired a rent boy for a countryside tour.”

She just shrugged.

I sighed, looking the young man over. He did seem strong, and his friendly demeanour was probably less threatening to a reclusive woman like Nicky. And she was right—two women heading into remote areas was a risk. This overgrown puppy, for all his lack of menacing aura, probably was safer.

“Alright, fine,” I conceded, handing him the car keys. “I hope you’ve got your driver’s licence.”

“Oh, absolutely! I can drive, no worries at all. Really. I’m an excellent driver,” the young man—Josh, he said his name was—sounded very enthusiastic. Even his name sounded like a puppy’s. I once had a neighbour with a springer spaniel called Josh.

It suited the dog better.

His eyes were glued to Portia, who was pretending to be fascinated by a nearby potted fern, as he reached for the keys. His hand missed mine entirely on the first attempt, fingers closing on empty air before he finally connected with the key fob. He fumbled it, the keys jangling dangerously before he snatched them back from their brief, gravitational flirtation with the gravel.

“Whoops! Got ’em,” he declared, as if he’d just performed a daring rescue.

I sighed inwardly.

It was going to be a very, very long journey.

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## Chapter 364

Chapter 364:

The door to the suite clicked open. Roy came in, looking like he'd drawn the short straw for an early start.

I turned from the balcony, where I'd been watching the morning mist cling to the fells. "What was wrong with her?"

He blinked, confused for a moment. "Who, sir?"

"Hyacinth. Last night."

"Oh, that." Roy stretched and stifled a yawn. "Nothing serious. Just a bit of stomach trouble, indigestion. I gave her the appropriate meds."

I said nothing.

So, just seeing me had been enough to upset her stomach. The thought was a dull, persistent ache. I'd been too eager, too direct in the lift. I'd thought the distance and the shock of the encounter might work in my favour, but it seemed I'd only succeeded in making her physically ill.

I took a drink from the water glass in my hand and leaned back in the chair. I had misjudged the situation.

Roy hovered, looking uncharacteristically hesitant, as if he was weighing up whether to share something.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well, when I came back a little while ago, I saw her outside the hotel. She was getting into a car with her friend, the lawyer. Portia."

That wasn't a surprise. They were inseparable.

“There was someone else with them,” Roy added.

“Who?”

“A young man. A good-looking lad. He and Hyacinth were talking and laughing, and he got into the car too.”

I set the water glass down slowly on the side table. “Who is he?”

Roy shook his head. “No idea. Never seen him before. But they looked... they looked quite friendly. It is Valentine’s week, after all.”

He continued, almost to himself, “The boy seemed bright. Looked like a university student. Tall, handsome, had a shy sort of smile. He was looking at her like she’d hung the moon. I suppose Hyacinth must like that type.”

The implication was clear. She liked that normal, uncomplicated type.

I stared at him, and he had the grace to look slightly abashed.

I knew Roy had long since guessed my feelings for Hyacinth. Unlike Kai, whose support was quiet and practical, Roy disapproved. He would never overstep and lecture me on my personal life, but he saw Hyacinth as a niece and felt protective. He had, on more than one occasion, found subtle ways to relay her preferences to me—”She says she wants someone normal.”

And I, by whose association she had been framed and imprisoned, and who still had a vengeful psychopath threatening everyone in his orbit, was the very definition of “not normal.”

I stepped past him. “Get the car ready.”

Kai was waiting in the lobby. “Good morning, sir.”

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## Chapter 365

Chapter 365:

He had stayed on at Velos at my request, to monitor Soraya and act as an internal source. It was a risky position, and I owed him for it.

It was the weekend, but he'd insisted on driving up. He slid into the front passenger seat beside Roy as I got in the back. The two of them hadn't seen each other in weeks, and they soon fell into a whispered conversation. From the way their eyes kept darting to me in the rear-view mirror, I could guess the topic.

Kai was excellent in every way—efficient, loyal, discreet. Too bad he'd just picked up one of Roy's worse habits: gossip.

I tuned them out.

My phone rang.

"Son!" Holden's voice boomed with false cheer. "How's the scenic retreat going? Blowing the city cobwebs away?"

"Did you leak my itinerary to the Crofts?" I asked, my voice flat.

He played innocent. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"So it's just a remarkable coincidence that Galina Croft is booked into a suite on my floor."

"It's a small world, Loch! A happy accident."

"I don't like it."

He sighed, the breezy pretence dropping. "I know you don't. But your mother has been conducting a sustained campaign about you settling down before you become a 'socially atrophied statistic.' The pressure was immense. I had to throw her a bone."

"So you sold me out."

"Don't be so dramatic. Galina's a lovely girl. Perfectly pleasant. I like her. You like her too—she told her father you two had a very pleasant dinner."

"I found her pleasant as an acquaintance. That doesn't mean I wish to marry her."

"It's a start! I'm not asking for a ring tomorrow. Just go along with it for the weekend. See where it leads. I know you're hung up on this Hyacinth girl, and yes, she seems perfectly nice, but she's left, son. You have to move on."

“She hasn’t left,” I stated.

The situation was only temporary. The moment Soraya was neutralised, the threat would be gone. Then I could fix what I had broken.

Holden groaned. “You’re just as stubborn as your mother. I can’t change your mind, and I can’t change hers, and now I’m stuck in the middle getting it from both sides. Have a little pity on your old man. Just go along with it for the weekend as a favour to me, okay? I’m not asking you to propose. Just have dinner. Be civil. Is that so hard?”

I calculated the cost of continued resistance against the nagging it would invite. “Fine.”

“Attaboy!” he cried, and I ended the call.

From the front seat, Kai turned around, his expression cautiously helpful. “Sir, shall I make dinner arrangements for this evening? Do you know what kind of cuisine Miss Croft prefers?”

“Who said anything about dinner?”

Kai flinched at the tone. “I... I just assumed, given Mr Hastings’s call.”

“You assume too much.” I looked out the window at the passing drystone walls. “We have other priorities today. The Crofts can wait.”

In fact, they could keep waiting.

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## Chapter 366

Chapter 366:

Portia leaned over, peering at my phone screen. “Who’s she?”

I jerked the phone away like I’d been caught shoplifting. “No one.”

“You’re acting deeply suspicious,” she declared, and with the lightning reflexes of a magpie, she snatched it from my hand. She scrolled, her eyebrows climbing. “Why are you secretly stalking some girl’s Instagram? She’s gorgeous, I’ll give you that. Galina. Croft. Fancy name.”

I refused to admit I was digitally tailing the woman Lochlan had supposedly come here to meet, the star of the staff gossip I’d overheard. But I didn’t need to answer. Portia’s eyes widened as she landed on a photo of Galina and Lochlan at a dinner table. She pressed a hand to her forehead.

“Lochlan’s new girlfriend? The absolute nerve of that man! He’s a complete bastard!”

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed.

I glanced at Josh in the driver’s seat, whose ears were swivelling towards us like satellite dishes.

“It’s fine,” I said, trying for casual and failing miserably. “He didn’t do anything wrong. That dinner was after he and I... after we were already done.”

“Hmph. Doesn’t excuse him lining up the next candidate before your side of the bed was even cold!” Portia sniffed, then her eyes narrowed as she remembered. “And what about in the lift, then? What was that? A nostalgic dry hump? Honestly, the balls on that man. Canoodling with one woman while trying to get into your knickers.”

“Portia!” I clapped a hand over her mouth. “Josh is right there! Stop it! And he wasn’t dry humping me,” I whispered furiously. “It was just a hug.”

“So what?” Portia mumbled against my palm before I removed it. She reached forward and ruffled Josh’s hair. “Josh is one of us. Aren’t you, Josh?”

Josh nodded vigorously, a smile spreading across his face.

I was utterly defeated.

We weren’t even halfway to our destination, and I was already seriously doubting Portia’s story about hiding from Josh. She claimed she didn’t want to date him, yet at every stop—for coffee, for the loo, to photograph a particularly photogenic sheep—I’d watched her order him about. “Josh, take my picture. Josh, my water bottle. Josh, my shoulders are killing me.” And Josh, beaming with the pride of a knight entrusted with the Holy Grail, leapt to fulfil every request, happily henpecked.

Fine. They were both consenting adults. Who was I to judge?

The thought of returning to the hotel later, potentially walking into a scene of Lochlan and the vibrant Galina Croft being a Valentine’s power couple, surrounded by other loved-up

pairs, made my skin prickle with a deep, existential dread. Was Appleby-in-bloody-Westmorland some sort of romantic singularity? Was there only one hotel? Why must every couple stay at The Manor?

“Portia,” I said, “we should find another hotel.”

“Absolutely not! Why should we? You scared of running into Hastings? Why? You don’t work for him anymore. What are you scared of?”

I wasn’t scared. I was just... profoundly, bone-deeply annoyed.

But her point stood. I had as much right to be there as he did.

“Fine,” I muttered. “If I see them, I’ll just pretend I’ve gone blind.”

Twenty minutes later, we pulled into the car park of The Old Millstone, a restaurant housed in a charmingly converted watermill. As soon as we got out, Portia clutched her stomach, her face contorted.

“Ugh. I think... I think my stomach’s rebelling. It’s those roasted nuts from the farm shop.”

Josh tried and failed to hide a smile.

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## Chapter 367

Chapter 367:

I rolled my eyes. “They told you they were for the squirrels. You were literally warned.”

“You two go in and order,” she said, already speed-walking towards the loo. “I need to... attend to an emergency.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? Do you need me to find a chemist?” I called after her.

She waved a dismissive hand behind her. “I’ll be fine!”

Josh and I headed inside. The place was all low beams, stone floors, and the comforting smell of gravy. We found a table by a window overlooking the sluggish mill race. I handed Josh a menu. "You choose. I'm not fussy."

A waiter came by with a pitcher. Josh filled a glass with water and pushed it towards me. "You do look parched. Here."

"Thanks." I took it.

Just then, the door opened again.

I saw their reflection first in the glass front of a display cabinet holding local jams and chutneys. Roy, his familiar kind face. Kai, looking slightly out of place in his smart coat. And Lochlan.

My spine straightened. Were they following us? The urge to spin around and demand an answer was almost overwhelming. But a waiter appeared at our table, pad in hand, smiling with anticipation.

Josh was frowning at the menu. "Maybe we should go somewhere else? They don't seem to have any of Portia's favourites."

That made me smile. "You know her favourites?"

"Of course. Salt and vinegar crisps, but only the crinkled ones. Those expensive champagne truffles from Hotel Chocolat, but she picks the hazelnut ones out and leaves the rest. Spicy peanut noodles from that place in Soho. Pickled onion Monster Munch."

I was impressed. "She's picky when she has choices," I conceded. "But she's not actually spoiled. She'd survive on energy bars or packet noodles if she had to. As long as someone else does the cooking."

We ordered.

Josh leaned in. "Can you tell me more about her? Proper stuff. Not just the food."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Everything. I want to know everything."

I studied his open, hopeful face. "You're really serious about her, aren't you?"

He smiled, a bashful, golden retriever smile. "I know she says she's not looking for anything serious. But... maybe I could change her mind?"

I was torn. Here was a genuinely nice, disarmingly persistent guy who seemed to adore my chaotic best friend. But my loyalty was to Portia and her fiercely guarded independence.

I settled for vague generalities, things he could probably glean from her social media if he looked hard enough. “Well, she loves horror films but watches them mostly to criticise them. She’s terrified of spiders but will defend to the death anyone who’s being unfairly treated.”

I was only half-paying attention to my own words. A significant part of my brain was hyper-focused on the table behind me, tuned to their frequency. It was eerily quiet back there. No conversation, not even the clink of cutlery.

In the reflection of the jam cabinet, Lochlan’s profile was a study in cold stillness. Roy caught my eye in the glass and gave me a cheerful, complicit little wave.

Then the restaurant door opened again, letting in a burst of cold air and a voice as bright and clear as a bell.

“Lochlan! There you are.”

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## Chapter 368

Chapter 368:

Galina’s face was even more beautiful in person than it was on Instagram, which was frankly offensive. Even reflected in the smudged glass of a jam cabinet, she had that luminous, well-rested glow of someone who’d never had a parking fine, let alone a police record.

My lips were still moving, telling Josh some bland fact about Portia’s university days, but my ears were pinned backwards, laser-focused on the table behind me.

Lochlan’s voice was calm, polite. “Miss Croft.”

He said it in his usual, measured tone. Not the warm, intimate voice you'd use for a girlfriend. Then again, I realised with a sour pang, even when he'd said my name, it had often been with that same detached, perfectly enunciated calm. Maybe that was just his default setting, for soulmates and strangers alike.

Lochlan invited her to sit. She ordered food that suggested a very healthy appetite.

"Have you been to this part of the world before?" Galina asked conversationally. "It's so wild and raw. It's like the landscape hasn't gotten the memo that we're in the twenty-first century."

Her friendliness was a physical weight on my chest.

Josh leaned across our table, a smile in his whisper. "If you lean back any further, you're going to end up in their soup."

I startled. He was right. I'd been gradually tipping my chair back on its hind legs, stretching into a ridiculous, human parabola to catch every syllable.

I cleared my throat, the chair legs hitting the stone floor with a clumsy thud, and pretended to be fascinated by a watermark on the oak table. Josh just smiled understandingly and, to his credit, didn't say another word.

The restaurant door swung open and Portia marched in. She spotted Lochlan's table, her eyes narrowed, then darted to us. She altered course, making a beeline for him.

"Hello, Lochlan," she said, her tone sweet as poisoned honey.

"Hello, Portia," he replied, his politeness a perfect mirror.

She looked pointedly at Galina. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not at all."

"Good. I'd hate to intrude on a date." She loaded the word with enough insinuation to sink a battleship.

"It isn't a date," Lochlan corrected. "This is Miss Galina Croft. A friend."

Portia's eyebrow climbed towards her hairline. "Oh? Not a date? My mistake. Really?" She shot a look at Galina, who simply offered a magnanimous, unbothered smile.

"It is not a date," Lochlan repeated.

"Oh," Portia said, drawing the syllable out. "Well, that's... clarifying."

“What brought you here, Portia?”

“Oh, just taking in the sights. It’s good to get out of London. The air is... fresher.”

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## Chapter 369

Chapter 369:

“I see you have company.”

“You mean Josh? Yeah, he’s great.”

“I take it Josh is a... friend of yours?”

Portia’s voice turned sly. “Oh, he’s my friend. He’s also Hyacinth’s friend. They get along fantastically, don’t you, Hyacinth?” She raised her voice, pitching it directly at me.

I turned around slowly, wearing my best blank, “who me?” expression. “Hmm? What?”

“I said, you and Josh get along brilliantly, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Yeah. He’s lovely.”

I stole a glance at Lochlan from the corner of my eye. As usual, his face was a masterpiece of neutral composure. A marble statue would have shown more emotion.

“He looks young,” Lochlan observed. “Shouldn’t he be in lectures?”

Portia waved a hand. “It’s the weekend. Besides,” she added, with deliberate vagueness, “it’s nearly Valentine’s. People make time, especially for their loved ones.”

Lochlan stood up abruptly. “Hyacinth, a word.”

I looked up at him. “What?”

“Come with me, please.”

I blinked, baffled. What had I done? I'd just been sitting here! I'd barely even looked at him!

He just stared at me, that quiet intensity making the air around our table feel several degrees colder.

Reluctantly, I pushed my chair back and stood up.

Portia pounced. "But we're about to have lunch!"

"It won't take long," Lochlan said.

He walked ahead of me, out of the restaurant, his stride long and purposeful. I trailed after him, confused and irritated.

He led us past the mill wheel, its endless groan muffled by the freezing air, to a small, enclosed lift that serviced a viewing platform up the hillside. The sign promised "Panoramic Vista."

"What do you want to talk about?" I asked, my breath making little clouds in the air.

He said nothing, just pressed the call button.

I planted my feet. "If you're not going to talk, I'm going back to my lunch."

His hand settled firmly on the small of my back—not roughly, but with an undeniable pressure that propelled me forward into the now-open lift. I tried to shift away from his touch as the doors closed, but his arm simply curled around my waist, pulling me back against him.

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## Chapter 370

Chapter 370:

I glared up at him. The lift was the size of a coffin. It wasn't like I could make a run for it.

He stared straight ahead, his eyes like chips of winter sky, distant and frozen.

The lift dinged and opened onto a deserted wooden platform. The view was, admittedly, breathtaking. The River Sprint churned below, a powerful, peat-brown torrent swollen with winter rain, carving its way between fells that rose, stark and majestic, dusted with frost. It was a scene of brutal, beautiful isolation.

And we were the only people in it.

I immediately put several feet of frosty plank between us.

I'd managed about three steps when his arm hooked around my waist again, yanking me backwards. This time, he didn't just guide me. He spun me, his arm a steel band, folding me into his body with a force that felt less like an embrace and more like a capture. My back arched against the unyielding pressure; it felt like he was trying to mould me into his shape.

Alarmed, I shoved at the immovable wall of his arm. "If you have something to say, use your words. Stop manhandling me!"

His voice was low, a vibration I felt through my bones. "I'm angry."

"What are you angry about?" I shot back, my voice higher than I intended.

"What do you think?" His arm tightened around my waist like a steel cable.

My thoughts dissolved into a crackling, directionless static, overwhelmed by the galloping force of my own pulse. What was I supposed to think? That I'd had the audacity to exist in the same county as him?

Then I became acutely aware of a new, unmistakable pressure against my lower back. Something hot and hard and rod-like and...

Was he...?

Oh yes, he definitely was.

Heat flooded my face, a scorching wave from my neck to my hairline. "Could we maybe sit down to have this conversation? Like civilised people?"

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm not changing the bloody subject! Who has a serious chat while they're... while they're..." I sputtered, gesturing uselessly.

He turned me in his arms, pivoting us so my back was against the cold wooden railing. Now we were face to face, pressed together from chest to thigh. I was effectively sandwiched between his solid body and a fifty-foot drop to the roaring river.

Well. This was worse. Or better. Absolutely not better.

My face was on fire. I shoved at his chest, though it was like trying to move a mountain. “You’re the one who said we should go our separate ways! So what is this? What are you doing?”

“I’m intervening,” he said, his voice a rough scrape near my lips. “Because I saw you heading down a misguided path, making a... questionable choice. I feel responsible for steering you back.”

I stared at him, utterly lost. What was he even talking about? My heart was racing so fast I felt lightheaded. “I have no idea what you’re saying! Speak English!”

“Then I’ll demonstrate.”

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Chapter 371:

Demonstrate what?

I looked up at him, confused.

His hand came up, warm and dry, and covered my eyes, plunging me into sudden darkness.

A second later, his mouth was on mine.

It wasn’t a gentle kiss. It was a conquest. A wildfire in a drought, fierce and all-consuming, stealing the breath from my lungs and the sense from my head. It was hot and demanding, a raw, punishing claim that left no room for hesitation. It felt less like a kiss and more like being devoured.

And God help me, I wanted to be devoured.

My head spun, my lips tingled, and a sweet ache spread from my mouth straight to my core. Every sensible thought—that this was a bad idea, that he’d pushed me away, that he

was here with another woman—melted into a useless puddle. All I was aware of was the heat of him, the taste of him, the overwhelming rightness of his body against mine.

My hand, of its own volition, started to slide around his waist, seeking the solid warmth of his back beneath his coat.

The movement jolted me back to reality.

I snatched my hand away as if burned. I twisted my face to the side, breaking the kiss, breathing ragged.

Lochlan's forehead rested against mine, his own breathing a harsh, warm counterpoint. "Do you understand now?"

"Understand what?"

"That," he said, and his thumb brushed my lower lip. "What just happened. That is what happens between a man and a woman. A man." He emphasised the word. "Not a boy. Only a man can make you feel that."

My head was still swirling, my body thrumming with a traitorous, awakened hunger. "I don't... I don't know what you're talking about."

He shifted, his body caging mine more completely against the railing. "A boy like that belongs in a lecture hall. He can fetch your drinks and make you smile. But he can't give you what I can give you. He can't make you feel this."

The penny dropped with an almost audible clang. A hysterical laugh bubbled in my throat. "You don't actually think Josh is my boyfriend, do you?"

"It's a little late for denials."

We stared at each other in the frozen air. I slowly pulled his hand from my waist, then fixed him with my best "you are a colossal idiot" glare.

"He's Portia's... well, he's here for Portia. He drove through the night to see her. If you don't believe me, let's go back downstairs. I bet you a fiver he's currently trying to feed her chips off his fork."

Lochlan stared at me, the intense anger in his eyes slowly dissolving into something else. Something like dawning realisation, followed by a flicker of chagrin. The rigid tension left his shoulders.

"I see," he said, his voice softening. "Then I owe you an apology. It was wrong of me to make assumptions, and to act on them. You have every right to be angry."

“An apology is just words,” I said, my voice cool. “If you’re truly sorry, show it.”

“What would you have me do?”

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## Chapter 372

Chapter 372:

My eyes dropped to his mouth.

A wicked, vivid fantasy flashed: leaning in, biting that perfect lower lip hard enough to leave a mark, a brand. I could picture Galina Croft’s cheerful smile faltering at the sight of it.

The thought was profoundly satisfying.

But then I pictured Roy’s kind, gossipy eyes, and Kai’s discreet, knowing glance. I was many things, but I wasn’t cruel enough to send him back to his subordinates with a love bite on his mouth.

I was, apparently, a kind soul. Who knew?

“Alright,” I murmured, my gaze drifting lower. “I’ll collect.”

I reached up, one hand resting lightly on his shoulder for balance. I let my lips brush the air near his, feeling him go perfectly still, before I descended. My mouth found the strong, vulnerable line of his Adam’s apple. I opened my lips, letting the heat of my breath wash over his skin for a second before my teeth closed.

I’d intended it as a punishment. A petty, physical “see how you like it.”

But the sound that vibrated against my lips undid me completely. A low, stifled groan, more breath than voice, raw and unmistakably erotic. It shot straight through me, a bolt of pure, liquid heat that pooled low in my stomach.

My own breath hitched. The sharp, clean scent of his skin, the solid reality of him under my mouth, the thrilling proof that I could unravel his control—it was overwhelming.

Who was punishing whom now?

I jerked back as if scalded, my face flaming. I took two unsteady steps away, putting the cold, sane air of the platform between us.

“There,” I managed, my voice uneven. “We’re square. Now, I’m going back to my lunch. Unlike some people, I actually enjoy eating.”

Lochlan’s breathing slowly returned to normal. He studied me with that unnerving intensity. “So, you’re here alone.”

I rolled my eyes so hard I saw my own brain. “In case your billionaire powers of observation have failed you, Portia and Josh are down there. They’re fully formed human beings. I’m not marooned on a desert island.”

“You know what I mean.”

I sighed. “Fine. If you mean, am I here alone, unattached, tragically single, a pathetic singleton surrounded by a sea of Valentine’s couples, then yes. Congratulations on your deduction. I am alone. Are you happy now?”

A smile touched his mouth. “Yes. I am.”

I wanted to throttle him. Or kiss him again. The confusion was maddening.

It hadn’t even been a month since our spectacular non-breakup breakup. What happened to the man of glacial control?

“I’m here alone too,” he offered, as if this was a point in his favour.

I couldn’t stop the sharp, bitter remark. “Oh, really? And what does that make Galina? Scenic decor? A vibrant potted plant your parents sent along to improve the view?”

“She’s not my girlfriend. Our families have... overlapping social circles. There’s an expectation we might suit. We don’t. I’m not dating her.”

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## Chapter 373

Chapter 373:

A stupid flicker of relief sparked in my chest. I stomped on it. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me. You don’t owe me anything. I’m nobody to you.”

His eyes locked onto mine, that intense focus searing through all my brittle defences. “You’re not nobody. You are important. To me.”

I wanted to scream.

What the hell did he want from me? He was the one who’d erected the wall. He’d pushed me away “for my own good.” Now he was acting like a jealous, possessive idiot over a boyfriend who didn’t exist.

My head was starting to ache.

I looked away, towards the churning grey water below. “I’m starving. And I’m going back to my lunch.”

I didn’t wait for a response. I turned and marched back towards the lift, my back prickling under the weight of his gaze.

He was infuriating. His kiss had been infuriating. My body was still singing from the contact.

If we weren’t on a windswept platform, if we were in a hotel room with a lock on the door, I knew exactly what would happen. I’d take a page right out of Portia’s playbook: I’d jump his bones, scratch the itch, and call it a night. A clean, physical transaction. Get him out of my system once and for all.

But that was the problem. I wasn’t Portia. I’d never been able to compartmentalise that way. For me, physical desire was never just physical. Letting him in again, even just for a night, wouldn’t be a release. It would be a surrender. It would be me, willingly walking back into the same beautiful, gilded trap and clicking the lock shut behind me.

My brain, finally cutting through the hormonal static, issued a single, screaming command: Don’t be an idiot twice.

I kept walking.

Back in the restaurant, the warmth and the smell of gravy felt surreal. I slid into my seat, grabbed the water jug, and poured a glass with slightly unsteady hands.

My lips still felt soft, swollen, imprinted with him. The ghost of his touch was a maddening, persistent hum under my skin, a distraction I couldn’t shake.

I was halfway through gulping the water, trying to drown the sensation, when Portia’s voice floated over from across the table.

“Only twelve minutes?” She consulted her watch. “And here I was, giving him more credit. That was... quick.”

I choked. Water went down the wrong pipe, sending me into a coughing fit that made my eyes water. Across from me, Josh was staring intently at his plate, his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

“We were just talking!” I glared at Portia.

“Right. Right.” She smiled. “That’s what I was thinking as well. What did you think I meant?”

I snatched a bread roll from the basket and shoved it into her open, grinning mouth. “Eat. Chew. Swallow. Silence.”

For the rest of the meal, I made an effort to not look towards where Lochlan had been sitting. It was only when we were settling the bill that I realised their table was completely vacant.

He was gone.

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## Chapter 374

Chapter 374:

Portia, Josh, and I took turns driving. On the map, the distance to Nicky Forrester’s place had looked reasonable. On the ground, it was a different story.

The “roads” were more like optimistic suggestions—winding dirt tracks that dissolved into muddy grooves between fields, forded sleepy creeks, and eventually degenerated into a path barely wide enough for the car, flanked by skeletal winter hedgerows. What should have taken two hours took most of the afternoon.

The scenery, admittedly, was spectacular. Rolling fells painted in shades of slate and heather-brown, stone walls stitching the landscape together, and the ever-present

whisper of the River Eden somewhere close by. It was the kind of beautiful, empty place that makes you wonder who pays the council tax.

It was nearly dusk, the sky a wash of bruised purple and orange, when we finally nosed the car into a yard. The settlement wasn't so much a village as a conspiracy of a few stone buildings huddled together as if for warmth against the vast, indifferent landscape. Our destination was a lonely farmstead, the only light for miles around spilling from a downstairs window.

Josh pulled to a stop. We got out, the silence immediate and profound, broken only by the wind and the distant bleat of a sheep.

It was breathtakingly desolate.

A sharp pang of disappointment, stupid and unexpected, hit me. Some pathetic, romantic part of my brain had concocted a scenario where Lochlan was also on this wild goose chase, that we'd arrive to find his car already here. That we were, in some convoluted way, on the same team.

Reality, as usual, was quick to slap that fantasy away. The yard was empty. Of course it was. I was, as always, guilty of wishful thinking.

Portia linked her arm through mine, her voice dropping. "Stay close. This place gives me the proper creeps. It's like the opening scene of a film where the city folk get murdered."

I nodded, my eyes on the house.

It was old, built from local stone that had darkened with centuries of rain. The roof sagged slightly in the middle, and the garden was a tangle of dormant plants and forgotten tools. It wasn't derelict, but it wore its loneliness like a heavy coat.

Josh strode up and knocked firmly on the heavy wooden door. Nothing. He knocked again, the sound echoing in the quiet yard.

I was starting to think we had the wrong isolated, potentially haunted farmhouse when, after a long minute, we heard the scrape of a bolt.

The door opened a cautious few inches.

The young woman who peered out was painfully thin, almost translucent, like a page from an old book. She had delicate features that hinted at prettiness, but the illusion was shattered by a thick, ropy scar that crawled from her left temple down to her jawline, the colour of old wax. Her free hand flew up, a subconscious shield over the damaged side of her face.

"Are you... the people who wanted the pottery?" Her voice was soft, frayed with nerves.

“You’re Nicky Forrester, right?” I’d recognised her from the grainy school photo, the scar aside.

My online digging had told me she’d left St Catherine’s after Benji vanished. It hadn’t mentioned she’d left with a face full of stitches.

A dark, impulsive thought clicked: Did Soraya do that?

“Yes, I am,” she nodded, barely moving her head.

I introduced myself, reminding her I was the potential buyer she’d messaged. I kept my voice light, friendly, non-threatening.

She hesitated, her wary eyes flicking to Josh’s tall frame, but she eventually stepped back and opened the door wider, inviting us in.

The living room was a warm, cluttered cave. Every surface held evidence of her craft: drying pots, bowls glazed in earthy colours, tools, bags of clay. It wasn’t dirty, just intensely, creatively lived-in. It smelled of woodsmoke, damp clay, and herbal tea.

She offered us tea, which we accepted gratefully.

I launched into my prepared spiel, asking about her glazing techniques, the local clay, the kiln she used. Portia played her part perfectly, chiming in with enthusiastic, believable questions about “stock turnover” and “artisanal market trends.” Josh, bless him, just sat quietly radiating harmless, puppy-dog vibes.

Slowly, the tension in Nicky’s shoulders began to ease. The prospect of a large, serious sale was clearly a lifeline.

Night had fallen properly, pressing against the windows, when we made a show of getting ready to leave.

“We should get back to our hotel,” I said, stretching.

Portia, on cue, frowned at her phone. “Oh, blast. We’ve got that meeting with the wood-turner in Hawkshead first thing, and the weaver in Grasmere after that. The schedule’s a nightmare. We might not make it back this way tomorrow at all.”

I made a show of looking conflicted and disappointed.

Nicky’s face fell. The thought of her big sale evaporating was too much. “You... you could stay here, if you like?” she blurted out, then looked surprised at her own offer. “The house is big. Just me. The rooms upstairs... they’re clean, just not used much. If you don’t mind?”

I exchanged a glance with Portia. “We don’t mind at all,” I said, smiling. “That’s incredibly kind. Thank you.”

Portia helped Nicky throw together a simple dinner—a hearty vegetable soup with thick bread. We opened a bottle of wine we’d brought.

The combination of food, warmth, and alcohol worked wonders. Nicky, who had clearly been starved of company, began to talk more freely. She was still skittish, directing most of her conversation to me and Portia, but she no longer looked like a rabbit ready to bolt.

After dinner, I asked to see more pieces, and she led us down to the basement, a cavernous space that served as her workshop. It was even more impressive, filled with finished and half-finished works.

I placed a substantial order and, to her visible shock, transferred a hefty deposit on the spot using my phone. The relief and joy on her face were genuine.

Back in the living room with more wine, the conversation meandered. With Portia’s subtle steering, we eventually landed on the topic of school days.

Nicky confirmed she’d gone to St Catherine’s. “Scholarship kid,” she said with a faint, self-deprecating smile. “Benji Moss was the other one from this area who got one. We were the local oddities, I suppose.”

The air in the room shifted.

“Benji Moss,” I said gently. “The boy who went missing.”

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## Chapter 375

Chapter 375:

The genuine pain that flashed across Nicky’s face was instant and raw. It was the look of a wound that had never healed, just scabbed over thinly.

“Yes,” she whispered, her fingers tracing the rim of her glass. “After that... nothing was the same. I left. Everything changed.”

I leaned forward slightly, keeping my voice soft, non-accusatory. “Nicky, I know there were... things about Benji’s disappearance that didn’t add up. Things that maybe you didn’t feel you could tell the police back then. But you could tell us now. No one else has to know.”

At the mention of the police, Nicky’s face underwent a terrifying transformation. All the softness, the tentative trust, drained away. The colour leached from her skin, leaving her as pale as the clay on her shelves. Her hand flew to her throat. Her eyes, wide and suddenly flooded with a fear that was more than a decade old, darted between us, seeing not potential buyers, but a terrible, revisited threat.

“Why... why come to me...” she stammered, her voice a thin thread of sound. “I told the police everything I could. I really... don’t know anything. I didn’t see anything. Please don’t ask me anymore. Just don’t.”

She folded in on herself, sinking into a crouch and burying her face in her knees.

“It’s been years, love, what are you so afraid of now?” Portia said, her tone edging towards impatience. God love her, subtlety was a foreign language.

I shot Portia a sharp look and gave a slight shake of my head. If merely hearing Benjamin Moss’s name could trigger this level of collapse, pressing her further would be psychological assault. The girl was hanging by a thread.

“Nicky, it’s alright, no one’s cross with you. You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to.” I lowered myself to my haunches, pitching my voice into what I hoped was a soothing, gentle register. I placed a hand lightly on her trembling back. Christ, she was all bone and bird-like fragility beneath the worn jumper.

Slowly, incrementally, the violent shaking subsided into shallow hiccups for air.

“Would it be okay if we came up and sat with you for a bit?” I asked, still in that bloody unnatural whisper.

Nicky gave a tiny, jerky nod. She tried to push herself up, but her legs betrayed her, buckling weakly. Portia moved quickly, sliding an arm around her and hauling her upright with a sturdy grip. “Come on, up you get. Let’s get you settled.”

Josh and I followed them up the narrow staircase to a small room on the second floor. It was stiflingly neat and depressingly sparse, dominated by a single bed and a pottery wheel in the corner. An open window looked out over an overgrown backyard, offering the only hint of relief from the room’s cloying atmosphere.

Portia guided Nicky to a worn armchair by the empty fireplace, and the girl sank into it like a stone. I took the only other seat, a hard-backed chair, and let my gaze travel around. Josh, looking like a displaced rugby player in a doll's house, leaned against the doorframe.

Now, since we'd first stepped into this house that afternoon, I'd been aware of a strange, off-putting odour. Something vaguely organic and decidedly unpleasant, like forgotten meat. I'd put it down to locked windows and general mustiness, but here, in her personal space, it was stronger. Riper.

Josh's nostrils flared, and we exchanged a brief, eloquent glance.

You smell that too? his wide eyes asked.

Unfortunately, yes, mine replied.

Portia broke the tense silence. "So, Nicky, do you live here all on your own? Where's your family?"

"I live with my gran," Nicky said, her voice dull and lifeless. "But she's gone now."

Gone.

The word hung in the foul air. My mind immediately began conjuring worst-case scenarios. "Gone" could mean so many things, but when paired with this distinctive, creeping aroma... a cold dread slithered down my spine.

I saw the same horrific calculation flash across Portia's face. Josh actually took a half-step closer to her, as if for protection.

Portia and I locked eyes. You're thinking it. I'm thinking it.

No. It couldn't be. Could it?

"Gone where, exactly?" I asked, managing to keep a concerned smile plastered on my face while my internal monologue was screaming.

"My gran, she..." Nicky lifted her head slowly. The dead look in her eyes, combined with the vicious scar that cut from her temple to her jaw, created a moment of pure, gothic horror.

The atmosphere thickened. Portia and I held our breath, our societal smiles feeling grotesque and frozen.

"...went to live with my uncle," Nicky finished flatly, before dropping her gaze back to her lap.

Portia and I both let out audible sighs, hands going to our hearts in unison.

“Bloody hell, you gave us a fright,” Portia blurted out. “I thought she was...”

Tell me about it. My adrenaline was doing the conga. All thanks to this mysterious, pervasive stench. What on earth was it? And how could she sit here, day in, day out, without gagging?

Portia leaned forward. “You know, I run a beauty clinic in London. We do advanced procedures. That scar... we could do something about that for you. Really minimise it.”

Nicky’s fingers rose to trace the raised line on her face, a habitual, self-conscious gesture. She looked hesitant, uncertain.

“I’m serious,” Portia continued, warming to her sales pitch. “We use the latest lasers. It wouldn’t be painful, and the results are incredible. You wouldn’t recognise yourself.”

“Portia’s clinic is fantastic,” I added, backing her up. It was true. She could sell ice to an Eskimo and make them feel gorgeous about the purchase.

“Why?” Nicky asked softly, her eyes flicking between us, clouded with a deep, ingrained wariness. “Why would you want to help me?”

Right. Time for the carefully constructed fiction. I arranged my features into an expression of sympathetic resolve.

“Because I’m a friend, in a roundabout way,” I said. “My mother and Benji’s mother were close cousins. I’m a distant cousin of Benji’s.”

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## Chapter 376

Chapter 376:

Nicky’s head snapped up.

“I never knew Benjamin,” I pressed on, layering the lie with just the right amount of personal investment. “But my grandmother, my mother’s mother, is very ill. She’s... fading. And she’s haunted by not knowing what happened to that branch of the family. So my mother sent me on a bit of a genealogy hunt, to find any relatives left, to get some answers for her before it’s too late.”

I let a note of quiet urgency colour my voice. “I tracked Benji’s mother to this area. And then I saw the old news reports. About the gas explosion at her house. About her death. And about Benji... just vanishing.” I held Nicky’s gaze, willing her to believe me. “I need to get to the bottom of it. For my grandmother. To find Benji, or at the very least, to find out what happened. She deserves to know. We all do.”

Nicky absorbed this in silence, her fingers still pressed against her scar. The only sound was the faint buzz of a fly somewhere near the open window, and the distant, cheerful horror of birdsong outside, utterly at odds with the smell of quiet decay inside. The room seemed to hold its breath, waiting on her verdict.

Portia, impatient, jumped in. “Look, love, Hyacinth here is just trying to do right by her family. You went to school with Benji, you lived round here. You might know something, even if you don’t think it’s important. Anything could be a clue.”

“It’s been more than ten years,” Nicky whispered, finally looking at me. Her eyes were huge with a dread that seemed ancient. “Aren’t you worried that he’s...”

“Dead?” I finished for her. “The thought had crossed my mind, yes. But dead or alive, I just need an answer. A bit of closure for my grandmother. She’s clinging on, waiting for it.”

She still seemed resistant, a tiny, scared creature backed into a corner.

“This is just for me,” I reassured her. “For my family. It goes no further. You have my word.”

Portia saw her opening and went for the jugular—or rather, the cheek. “And like I said, we sort that scar out for you. On the house. A fresh start. Then, with the money you’re making from your pottery”—she gestured to the wheel in the corner with an encouraging nod—“you could think about moving. A new place. A proper new life.”

It was a powerful offer. The fear in Nicky’s eyes warred with a desperate, flickering hope.

Finally, the dam cracked, then broke.

“It was a girl from St Catherine’s,” Nicky said, her voice so low I had to lean in to catch it. She glanced at me, then away, her hands twisting together in her lap. “I... I can tell you. But you can’t say it was me. You can’t. Or I’ll be...”

“You have my absolute word,” I said, layering my tone with a sincerity I mostly felt. “We will not say a thing. I’m just a distant cousin, trying to find out what happened to my poor... cousin. I’d be so incredibly grateful.”

“Okay,” Nicky whispered, then nodded with more force, as if trying to convince herself.

She stared at the stained surface of the coffee table, her eyes losing focus, sliding into the past. “It was the last day of term. Final exams. We finished at half two. I was packing my bag to go home, and they stopped me in the corridor. Three of them. There was this girl... she’d had it in for me for ages because Benji was sometimes kind to me. He’d lend me a pen, or tell the others to clear off if they were taking the piss. She didn’t like that.”

Portia and I exchanged a look: Soraya?

Nicky took a shaky breath. “It was never anything you could really report. No shoving in the toilets or stealing my dinner money. It was subtler. She’d ‘accidentally’ knock my books out of my hands every time she passed. She’d start laughing with her friends the second I answered a question in class. She’d give me this look, this cold, smiling look that made me feel like something she’d scraped off her shoe. She made me feel like I didn’t have a right to breathe the same air, especially if Benji was nearby. It gets in your head, you know? Makes you small.”

I nodded. I knew. Oh, I knew.

“They said they were taking me to a party. A ‘leavers’ thing.’ I said I didn’t want to go. They just... took me. There was a car. I remember a big house with a garden. When we got there...” Nicky’s voice hitched, growing thinner. “They made me call Benji. Told me to tell him to come and get me. I refused. So she... she told the two boys with her to... to take my clothes off. And then she told them to... to...”

She couldn’t say it. She pressed her hands over her face, a low moan escaping her.

The room, already cold, turned to ice.

Portia and I listened, a slow, furious heat building in my chest. This was way worse than bullying.

Nicky wept, the words tumbling out between sobs. “I didn’t want to! They took my phone. They held me down and made me say it. I was so scared. I was so, so scared.”

Portia moved, wrapping an arm around Nicky’s shuddering frame. “Anyone would have been scared,” she said gently. “It wasn’t your fault. Not one bit of it.”

After a few minutes, Nicky’s crying subsided into shaky breaths. She wiped her nose on her sleeve, looking younger than ever.

“Benji came. He told them to let me go. Soraya said she would, but only if he agreed to be her boyfriend. He said no. He said he’d never liked her, that she was obsessed. That just... set her off. They started shouting. He called her a pathetic, sick bitch. She just went completely still. Then all that anger, it all turned on me.”

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## Chapter 377

Chapter 377:

Her hand went to her scar, tracing it with shaking fingers.

Portia and I exchanged a look over Nicky’s bowed head. The miserable picture was coming into a sickening sort of focus.

So that was the sequence of events. Soraya had used Nicky as bait to lure Benji to that house. And after Nicky was dragged away... Benji was never seen again.

Did Soraya kill him? Or did she order those two boys with her to do it?

Either way, she was definitely the mastermind.

Soraya would have been what, fifteen? Sixteen? The sheer, premeditated evil of it made my skin crawl. Most teenagers are melodramatic. She was a psychopath.

“Nicky,” I said, leaning forward to catch her downcast eyes. “If you had a chance now, a real chance, to get some justice for what happened—for you and for Benji—would you take it?”

She looked up, her eyes swimming and vague with tears. For a long moment, she just stared, then she gave a fearful little shake of her head. “Her family... they’ve got money. Real money. I could never fight that. Back then, they paid off local thugs to watch my house, to watch me. That’s why I never spoke. They even got to students and teachers at school. Everyone sang Soraya’s praises, said what a lovely girl she was. The police never looked at her twice. They even...” She swallowed. “They even got to Benji’s mum, I think. To keep her quiet.”

“You won’t be fighting them alone,” I said. “And what have you got to lose? Is hiding here, like this, really living? Can it possibly get any worse?”

Portia chimed in, her tone pragmatic. “If it goes tits up, that’s on us. But if it works? You get your life back. Properly. You’re still young, Nicky. You’ve got decades ahead of you.”

We watched her breathe, short and sharp, her fingers knotting and unknotting in her lap. It was a brutal, silent war playing out on her face. Fear against a dormant, decade-old longing for things to be set right.

Finally, her gaze cleared and hardened with a resolve that looked painful. “What can I do?”

I said, “Help us find the body.”

We spent the next hour talking in circles, and I could feel Portia’s patience, never her strongest virtue, wearing thinner than tissue paper.

I took Nicky back through her school days, trying to mine any detail about Soraya’s habits.

“Think, Nicky. Where did she like to go? Not school, but after. Did she have a favourite café, a park, a friend’s house she was always at?”

Nicky shook her head, her expression helpless. “St Catherine’s is in a big city. I was just a village girl on a bursary. I didn’t know the city. I went to school and came straight home on the bus. I’ve no idea where she spent her time.”

It was a dead end. Portia let out a frustrated sigh and got up to stare pointedly out the window, probably dreaming of more cooperative clients.

But then Nicky spoke again. “Maybe... maybe it’s not in the city at all.”

I stilled. “What do you mean?”

“The police, they looked everywhere up there. Around the school, the house where it happened. But I’ve thought about it, all these years. What if they were looking in the wrong place?”

She bit her lip, her gaze distant. “Soraya’s family... they had an orchard. Near the River Eden. At a place called Applewick. I only heard her mention it once. She was talking to someone, showing off. She said she had an orchard here. Her friend asked if it was her parents’. Soraya sort of snorted and said, ‘No, not really.’ But then she said, ‘Well, maybe. In a way.’ I remember being confused by what she meant. And a bit jealous, if I’m honest. I’ve always loved growing things. I thought, imagine having your own orchard.”

An orchard. A private, rural, out-of-the-way place. It had a dreadful, logical poetry to it.

“Do you know where this orchard is, Nicky? Exactly?” I asked.

“No. But there aren’t that many big orchards near the river around here. My uncle, my dad’s older brother, he’s lived here all his life. He knows every field and footpath in the Eden District. He might know.” She looked between us. “I could take you to him. He’s a bit... gruff. But if he doesn’t know, he’ll know who to ask. The old farmers, they know everything.”

Portia and I exchanged another glance. It was a thread, however slender.

“Alright,” I said. “We’ll go in the morning.”

It was late by then, the gloom outside the window deepening into proper night. We said our goodnights to Nicky, who looked both exhausted and strangely energised, and retreated to the cramped spare room Portia had insisted we share.

“I’m not giving Josh the wrong idea,” she’d declared, but I saw right through her. My best friend, who laughed her way through gore-fests, was spooked.

Frankly, so was I.

The story, the smell, the oppressive sadness of the house... it was a lot. We spent a fitful night, every creak of the old timbers sounding like a footstep, neither of us sleeping much.

We were up with the grimy dawn.

Josh, it turned out, was up even earlier, hovering in the kitchen like a nervous, oversized ghost. He cornered me as I was filling the kettle.

“Hyacinth,” he whispered, his voice strained. “When are we leaving? Soon, yeah? I don’t mean to be rude, but that smell...” He waved a hand in front of his nose. “It’s getting to me. Any idea what it is? I’m honestly gagging.”

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Chapter 378:

Portia, emerging yawning from the hallway, overheard. “Oh, for God’s sake, Josh. You’re built like a brick outhouse and you’re whimpering about a pong. Look at Hyacinth, cool as a cucumber.”

Not that cool, I thought.

The smell was weird. It wasn't just musty. It was... specific.

My eyes travelled to where it seemed strongest, towards the back of the house. Through the kitchen window, I could see the overgrown mess of the backyard. Nicky was in the basement; we could hear her shuffling and packing pottery.

Driven by a grim curiosity, I moved quietly towards the rear door. The closer I got, the stronger the rancid, sweet-decay odour became. My stomach did an unpleasant roll.

I reached for the handle, my mind already painting pictures I really didn't want to see.

Just as my fingers closed around the cold metal, a hand shot out from behind me and slammed the door shut again. I spun around, my heart in my throat, to find Portia. Her face was pale but set.

"Don't," she said, her voice low.

"You've already looked, haven't you?" I whispered back.

"No. I asked Nicky about it last night, after you'd gone up. She said it's a cat. A stray that died under the porch weeks ago. The weather's getting warmer. She said it's... well, it's brewing. She's been too scared to move it."

I fixed Portia with a look that I hoped translated to: Really? And you're buying that?

Portia looked genuinely spooked and gave a tiny, sharp shake of her head, her hand still flat against the door as if to physically bar my curiosity.

Don't, her eyes screamed.

I was weighing the merits of ignoring her and just yanking the damn thing open when Nicky emerged from the basement stairs. She'd changed into a plain white dress and wore a wide-brimmed hat, with a mask pulled up over the lower half of her face. She'd bundled herself up like someone about to perform surgery in a dust storm.

"We can go now," she said, her voice muffled.

The moment was lost. I let my hand drop from the handle, though the temptation to ask her about the cat, to see her eyes when she answered, was fierce.

Portia caught my gaze again and gave a minute, warning shake. Don't rock the boat. Not now.

Fine. I filed the putrid mystery of the backyard under "Things That Are Definitely Not a Cat" in my mental ledger, and we left the house.

Josh drove. Nicky gave him an address in a village called Mossbeck, a place nestled somewhere along the River Eden. The satnav announced it would take an hour and twenty-three minutes.

Josh muttered under his breath, “Will probably take twice as long on these roads.”

My stomach did a pre-emptive clench. “Josh,” I said, my voice straining for calm. “Drive slowly. Do not, under any circumstances, treat this like a track day.”

“Hyacinth,” he replied, all innocent grievance, “last time you said to step on it. Now you want a Sunday crawl. You’re very changeable.”

“You drive like a maniac and we’ll all be needing new spines! Or stomachs!”

Portia piped up from the back seat. “Oh, I don’t know. I can take it. I love a good, hard, fast ride. It’s the slow, tedious ones that make me want to scream.”

A profound silence filled the car. Josh’s ears turned pink. I stared straight ahead.

Portia blinked, the picture of naive innocence. “What? I’m talking about driving. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” I deadpanned.

Under my stern, unblinking supervision from the passenger seat, Josh drove with the restrained care of a chauffeur ferrying a van of priceless, volatile nitroglycerine. It was blissfully dull.

On the road, I dug through Soraya Warren’s meticulously curated online presence again. I was looking for any hint, any stray geotag or throwaway comment, about family property in the Eden District. An old house, a holiday cottage, a mention of apples or trees... anything.

It was like looking for a single black sock in a coal cellar. The woman’s digital life was all art galleries, rooftop bars, and aspirational quotes about success. Not a sniff of countryside.

After about an hour, the motorway gave way to proper country lanes. It was early February, still technically winter, but someone had forgotten to tell the day. The sun was out, weak but determined, gilding the frost-bitten fields and leafless hedgerows in a light that made everything look clean and strangely hopeful.

Under different circumstances, it would have been the perfect setting for a bracing walk and a disappointing pub lunch. Charming, even.

Portia and I had no time for charm. As the car wound deeper into the landscape, we both fell silent, our faces turned to the windows like scouts on a reconnaissance mission.

The problem, which became agonisingly clear within minutes, was the sheer, ubiquitous ruralness of it all. We passed countless ponds, some ringed with the skeletal forms of orchard trees. The land rolled in gentle, deceptive hummocks that could hide a thousand secrets. We saw small, ramshackle outbuildings everywhere, perched in the middle of fields or tucked beside copses. What were they for? Tools? Animals? Hiding bodies? They all looked like ideal places to bury something and not have it found until the next geological survey.

Before we'd come, I'd thought, How hard can it be to find one orchard?

Now, I realised the truth. It was like being told to find a specific tree in a forest, except all the trees looked the same, and someone might have already chopped it down.

My head began to throb with the sheer, impractical scale of it.

After another twenty minutes of increasingly narrow lanes, a weathered sign announced we were entering Mossbeck. It was little more than a cluster of stone houses clinging to the banks of a rushing, peat-brown river.

"You'll need to turn left up ahead," Nicky whispered from the back. "There's a space to park. The cars can't really get any further into the village."

Josh manoeuvred the beast of a vehicle onto a grassy patch of common ground, and we all piled out.

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## Chapter 379

Chapter 379:

The air was cold and sharp, carrying the scent of damp earth and woodsmoke. Nicky, looking even smaller and more out of place in her stark white dress, led us along a footpath on the north side of the river. The houses were quiet, curtains twitching. It was the kind of place where outsiders were noted, catalogued, and discussed over tea.

We were passing a particularly overgrown garden when hell itself announced its presence from behind a rusted gate.

It was a dog. A massive, shaggy-haired beast with teeth that looked like they could open tins without a can opener. It hurled itself at the fence with a loud roar, barking so

ferociously its whole body shook. The sound was volcanic, and the initial shock was absolute.

A scream, high and undignified, tore out of me. I'm not ashamed to admit it. Portia echoed it with a colourful swear word. Even Josh jumped back, throwing an arm out in front of Portia on pure, golden-retriever reflex. Nicky just froze, a pale statue.

The gate shuddered violently but held. For a moment.

The dog stood on its hind legs, paws on the top rail, slathering and barking its promise of dismemberment into our faces. My heart was trying to beat its way out through my ribs.

We were all backing away, slowly, carefully, when we heard the sharp, splintering crack.

The top rail of the old gate snapped under the beast's weight. It didn't so much open the gate as explode through the weakened section, landing in a cacophony of splintered wood and snarling rage on the path between us and our escape route.

"Run!" I shrieked.

Josh stumbled in his haste to put Portia behind him, nearly sending them both into the river. I managed to grab her arm and haul her back from the brink.

Spotting a gnarled, conveniently slanted tree, I dragged Portia with me and scrambled into its lower branches, bark scraping my palms. Josh, showing more presence of mind, bundled the paralysed Nicky over the low riverbank to take cover below.

I was clinging to the trunk like it was a life raft in a churning sea, and I saw the dog begin to stalk towards a horrifyingly exposed Josh.

"Josh! For God's sake, move!" My voice cracked with panic, shooting up an octave. So much for cool under pressure.

Before Josh could figure out a direction to run to, a voice cut through the chaos. It came from the direction of the house—calm, deep, and utterly authoritative. It didn't shout. It commanded.

"Bruno. Fuss. Platz."

The effect was instantaneous. The monstrous dog, Bruno, skidded to a halt. Its head swivelled towards the voice, its snarling subsiding into a confused whine. It took one uncertain step back towards the ruined gate.

"Hier," the voice came again.

With a last, reluctant glance at Josh, the dog turned and trotted back towards the garden, its tail lowered.

I stared in stunned silence. Did the dog understand German? Or was it just supremely sensitive to authority? The whole thing defied logic.

Portia, still trembling, pointed a shaky finger at the now-retreating beast. “What the hell just happened?”

“No idea.”

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## **Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!**

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

### **Chapter 380**

Chapter 380:

Our little drama had not gone unnoticed. Doors were opening, faces were appearing in windows. A few people from the opposite bank had wandered out to enjoy the free spectacle.

A hot wave of pure social mortification washed over me. Fantastic. We hadn’t been mauled, but we were going to die of embarrassment, suspended in a tree. A fitting end.

Then I realised I’d underestimated the universe’s commitment to my humiliation.

The ruined garden gate was pushed open properly from the inside. Two men walked out, one of them the source of the calm voice that had just saved us. My gaze, which had been locked on the now-penitent hellhound, flicked up.

And stuck.

I clung to the tree, my expression probably one of profound bewilderment. Had the adrenaline broken something in my brain? Was I, in this moment of peak stress, conjuring up a rescue fantasy featuring the most improbably tailored man in England?

While I was busy having a minor internal crisis, Portia's dreamlike whisper floated up from below. "Hyacinth. Do you see that?"

"I see it."

"Is it real?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Lochlan stood on the path, impeccably dressed in what looked like a cashmere coat over a suit that had never known a wrinkle. He surveyed the scene: me koala-ed to an oak, Portia dishevelled behind me, Josh looking bewildered but intact, Nicky clinging to his side.

A faint, pained frown touched his brow as his hand rose to massage his temple, as if staving off an impending headache.

He said something quietly to the man beside him, who nodded and went to secure the dog. Then Lochlan turned and walked towards my tree. He stopped, looked up, and extended a hand.

"You can come down now."

Humiliation, hot and complete, rooted me to the spot. I didn't move. Coming down would mean acknowledging this had happened, and I was seriously considering just living in the tree now.

"Hyacinth. That branch isn't going to hold out much longer," he said.

I looked at the branch under my knees. It did sound worryingly creaky.

Right. Fine.

With as much dignity as I could muster—which was none—I attempted to manoeuvre. It was a cat-like revelation: I was brilliant at climbing up in a blind panic, but the mechanics of getting down were a complete mystery.

I was stuck.

"Oh, for God's sake," I muttered to myself.

Lochlan moved closer. "Let go. I've got you."

I had little choice. I let go of my death-grip on the trunk and sort of half-slid, half-fell.

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## Chapter 381:

His arms went around me, one catching under my knees, the other around my back, and he lifted me down as if I weighed nothing. My feet hit the path, but my legs, wobbly from adrenaline and shame, immediately buckled. He held on, pulling me firmly against him to steady me, and for a second we were enveloped in a proper, full-bodied hug. I could feel the fine wool of his coat, the solid wall of his chest.

I pushed back hastily, putting a foot of cold air between us. “Thanks. I’m good.”

He released me, but I saw it. The slight tightening of his lips, the way his eyes crinkled at the corners. He was suppressing a laugh. Bastard.

“Oi, Lochlan!” Portia called from her tree. “A little assistance? Or do you only rescue damsels in primary-coloured knitwear?”

He glanced over at her without moving. “You can just jump, Portia. It’s barely six feet.”

She huffed and said some uncomplimentary things about his lineage.

Josh, having clambered up from the riverbank with a mud-splashed Nicky, was already rushing over. “I’ve got you, Portia! Just drop, I’ll catch you!”

I turned back to Lochlan, brushing bark dust from my jeans. “So. What are you doing here? Slumming it?”

He mirrored my casual tone. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“Sightseeing trip. Country air.”

“Same here.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? This feels a bit Country Life for you. I’d have thought you’d be on a yacht off Corfu, or brooding in a Swiss chalet.”

He looked at me then, a direct, unreadable look that held a meaning I couldn’t quite grasp. “This,” he said quietly, “is exactly the kind of place for me right now.”

A tug on my sleeve. Nicky, her face pale, was whispering. “Can we go? Please?”

Right. The mission. “We should go,” I said to the group.

“A moment,” Lochlan said.

Before I could protest, his hand closed around mine. He didn’t ask. He just started walking, pulling me with him back towards the house with the broken gate.

“What are you doing? Let go, Lochlan, we’re leaving!”

He didn’t answer, just led me through the gate and into the dim hallway of the cottage, closing the front door on the bewildered faces of my friends. He didn’t drag me far, just into a small, book-lined study off the hall.

“What is this?” I snapped, yanking my hand free.

He didn’t touch me again. He just stood between me and the door, his expression serious now, all traces of amusement gone. “We need to talk.”

“About what? My climbing technique?”

“About why you’re really here. About the girl with the scar. About Soraya.”

My heart skipped a beat. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“Don’t,” he cut in. “Just listen. You need to back off, Hyacinth. Stop this. Pack up and go home. Soraya isn’t just vindictive. She’s more dangerous than you can possibly know.”

A bitter, cold understanding washed over me. Of course. He wasn’t here by accident. He was here to run interference. To protect her. The jealousy was sudden and acidic.

“I’m not investigating anything,” I lied. “We’re just—”

“You’re a terrible liar,” he stated flatly. “I know about the police files, the questions you’ve been asking. I know you went to see Nicky Forrester. This isn’t a game. Soraya has killed before. She won’t hesitate to do it again. Leave it to me. I’ll deal with her.”

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## Chapter 382

Chapter 382:

“You’ll deal with her? Why, because she’s your problem? Your mess to clean up?” I snapped, my temper flaring. “Thanks for the warning, but I’m capable of fighting my own battles. You don’t get to tell me what to do. You’re not my boss anymore.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “No. I’m not. But I still care about what happens to you.”

I scoffed to cover the stupid little leap my heart gave. “Yeah? You’ve got a funny way of showing it. Hot and cold doesn’t begin to cover it, Lochlan.”

“I know. I know I’ve handled this... badly. All of it. And I will make it up to you, I promise. But that has to wait until this is over.”

“It’ll be over as soon as I find the body,” I shot back.

“You’re not going to find Benji’s body.”

The certainty in his voice stopped me cold. “So you have been digging up the same dirt,” I said slowly.

“Yes. And I know more than you do. If you go out there with that girl today, you won’t find Benji. It’s more likely you’ll end up just like him.”

A chill went through me, but I lifted my chin. “I’m not unprepared. I’ve got pepper spray, the police on speed dial, and I’ve got Josh.”

“Josh.” The disdain in his voice was unmistakable. “That’s useless when you don’t even know who your enemy is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He told me then, quickly and quietly. It wasn’t a long explanation, but it was enough to make the ground feel unsteady. I processed it, the new pieces clicking into a much uglier picture.

“But if that’s the case, I still have to go,” I said finally. “Now more than ever.”

“Hyacinth—”

“Now that you’ve told me, I’m prepared. I won’t be walking in blindly.” I took a step closer, looking up at him. “Besides, you’ll be there. Watching me. Won’t you?”

He looked at me for a long, silent moment. Finally, he gave a single, reluctant nod. “Yes.”

“Then I’ll be fine.”

He sighed. “If you insist, fine. But you have to watch out. Tell Portia and that boy Josh to be alert. Keep your phone on at all times. I should let Kai come with you.”

He frowned. “Fine. But when you reach the orchard, that’s the moment she’s most likely to—”

“Lochlan,” I interrupted his uncharacteristic nagging, leaned up, and kissed him. “I’ll be fine. I know you’ll be there.”

I pulled back and walked out before he could react.

Nicky, Portia, and Josh were huddled by the gate. Nicky’s eyes were wide with anxiety.

“You were in there a long time,” she said, her voice thin with worry. “What was that about? Who is he? What’s he doing here?”

“He’s just an old... acquaintance. Just here for the views. Don’t worry about him.”

Lochlan had followed me out and was leaning in the doorway, his gaze resting on Nicky with a quiet intensity that made her flinch and look at her shoes.

“He’s... he’s not coming with us, is he?” she whispered.

“No.” I didn’t look back at him. “He’s not. Let’s go.”

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## Chapter 383

Chapter 383:

I watched Hyacinth walk away.

Every instinct screamed to call her back, to fold her into my arms and lock her somewhere safe until this was over. But I’d already made that mistake once, making decisions for her without her input. It had cost me dearly.

So I just stood there and watched her walk straight into the lion’s den.

Kai materialised at my elbow, his voice low. “Now that Hyacinth is involved, do we alter the plan?”

“No,” I said, my gaze still fixed on the empty lane. “We proceed. In fact, her showing up like this could work in our favour. Makes the bait more convincing. It’ll draw Soraya out faster.”

I turned and walked back into the overgrown garden. Bruno was pacing in his reinforced steel cage, a low whine in his throat. His handler, a wiry man in his fifties named Donnelly with a face like weathered oak, gave me a grim nod.

“I don’t know what got into him, sir. He’s never reacted like that, unprovoked. It’s not his training.”

I studied the dog. Bruno, a Belgian Malinois, muscles coiled beneath his dark fur. The memory of him charging at Hyacinth, of her terrified scramble up that tree, sent a cold jolt through me.

“He was provoked,” I said quietly. “Just not by anything we could see.”

Donnelly followed my line of thought. “You think he caught a scent? But... he was trained as a police cadaver dog. Specialised. Human remains. He’s disciplined. He doesn’t attack the living without a command.”

I nodded. I’d borrowed Bruno precisely because I knew his capabilities. “We’re moving the timetable up. We start now.”

“You’re paying the rate,” Donnelly said with a shrug, unlocking the cage. “We go when you say.”

“Get him in the car.”

Kai had the black Range Rover ready. Donnelly and a now-calmed Bruno took the back seat. I slid into the passenger side. “Follow Josh’s vehicle. The silver SUV. Don’t get close. I don’t want them knowing they have a shadow.”

Kai nodded, pulling smoothly away.

As we drove, my mind drifted back to the conversation that had set all this in motion three days ago.

The Duke of Albemarle, Charles Chapman, was in his late seventies, propped up in a mahogany four-poster bed in a cavernous, draughty room that smelled of antiseptic and death. He was a skeleton in a silk dressing gown, his skin like parchment.

“You’re protecting a murderer, Your Grace,” I’d said, dispensing with all preamble. This wasn’t our first meeting. “And in doing so, you’re about to destroy your own legacy.”

His watery eyes fixed on me with unsurprising obstinacy. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Soraya is my daughter. My only remaining child. I have to look out for her.”

“Have you ever wondered why she’s now your only surviving child?”

“What... what do you mean?”

“Your son Edward. The coroner’s report you buried lists the real cause of death as overdose. You had him cut off from every dealer in the county. You banned him from travelling overseas. Who had the means and the motive to keep him supplied? Who was conveniently positioned inside a prison to source his favourite drug of choice?”

“You... No, you’re lying. She wouldn’t...” he’d wheezed, but his eyes flickered.

“And Henry? His car was found wrapped around a tree after an illegal race. Three witnesses place a woman matching Soraya’s description at the rally that night, the one that goaded him into running.” I leaned in slightly. “You’re not a fool, Charles. You’re just choosing to lie to yourself. Because the truth is too vile to face.”

He’d begun to shake, a tremor in his frail hands. “You have no proof. Slanderous speculation—”

“I have enough. Enough to give to the Times, the Mail, every tabloid that would feast on this for a year. ‘Duke’s Secret Daughter Linked to Heirs’ Deaths. Peerage Faces Oblivion.’”

“You wouldn’t,” he growled.

“They’ll dig up every skeleton, real and metaphorical. Your family name won’t just be tarnished, it’ll be synonymous with monstrosity and decay. And when I prove she killed that boy all those years ago—which I will—the title will be forfeit. It ends with you. The Chapman line, remembered only for the murderess it produced.”

The colour had drained from his face completely, leaving him a ghastly grey. He tried to speak, but only a choked, wet sound emerged. He clutched at his chest, his body seizing in a fit of violent coughs that rattled his entire frame. He fumbled for the oxygen mask, his movements panicked.

For a long minute, the room was filled with the sound of his desperate, ragged breaths and the hiss of the tank.

I waited, unmoved. Some truths required a visceral reaction.

When he'd recovered enough to lower the mask, his voice was a shattered whisper. "You... you would ruin... my family name... for vengeance?"

"This isn't vengeance. It's containment. You created this problem with your guilt and your chequebook. Now you can help solve it." I'd lowered my voice, offering the only bargain left. "Tell me the location of the orchard. The one you told her about. Where she would have gone to hide a body. You give me that, and I can keep your name out of the final act. The connection can die with her. Your legacy gets to keep its dignity, such as it is."

He'd stared at me, his eyes wide with a turmoil of terror, guilt, and a crushing, final defeat. His lips trembled. "I... I will have to think about it."

Kai's tense voice broke the reverie. "Boss. Update from Klaus. Soraya's vehicle has left the city. She's heading in this direction."

I looked ahead at the distant speck of Josh's SUV, carrying the woman I loved into a trap I'd helped set.

"Good," I said. "Let's make sure we're there to meet her."

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## Chapter 384

Chapter 384:

Nicky led us to the last cottage in the village, a tired stone box with a slumped roof. The garden was a wild tangle of weeds and old tools. She slipped through the creaking gate.

An old woman sat on a stool by the door, peeling potatoes with a sharp knife. "Nicky? Is that you, love?"

"Yes, Gran. I've brought some friends. They wanted to see the real countryside."

The woman's wrinkled face broke into a wide, gummy smile. "Lovely! Come in, don't stand out in the cold!"

She herded us into a small, cluttered living room that smelled of damp and old biscuits. She bustled about, putting the kettle on.

“I’ve just made a fresh batch of scones,” she announced, bringing out a plate of lumpy, flour-dusted buns.

“They look amazing,” Portia said, her voice full of false cheer.

“Don’t you dare,” I muttered under my breath, barely moving my lips.

“Right,” Portia sighed, folding her hands in her lap.

“Would you like one, dear?” the old woman asked me, pushing the plate forward.

“No, thank you. I’m not very hungry,” I said, offering a polite smile.

“I’m on a cleanse,” Portia added quickly.

“I don’t really like scones,” Josh mumbled, looking at his shoes.

Nicky had taken one. She looked at our untouched plates. “Oh. Are you sure? They’re really good.”

“Quite sure,” I said. “So, is Nicky’s uncle about? We were hoping to say hello.”

Her grandmother waved a dismissive hand. “Bob? He and Maureen are over at Little Smeaton for a wedding. Won’t be back till tomorrow.”

Nicky’s shoulders slumped. She shot me an apologetic look. Dead end.

Time to pivot. “It’s a beautiful area,” I said, turning to the old woman. “We passed some lovely old orchards on the way in. Do you know of any round here? The really old, neglected ones are so picturesque.”

The woman beamed with pride. “Oh, of course! There’s the Old Carfax orchard, just west of the village. Been there since my grandfather’s day. No one’s tended it properly for twenty years.”

Nicky cut in. “Gran, what about the other two? The one near Hobbs’ Farm, and the big one over by Miller’s Brook?”

Her grandmother blinked, confused for a second. “Other two? Oh... oh, yes. Must be getting old, my memory’s not what it was. Yes, those too.”

I stood up. “Thank you so much for your help. We should probably get going if we want to see them in the light.”

“Oh, must you?” the old woman said, her face falling. “I was about to do lunch. You could stay.”

“Yes, you should stay,” Nicky added, her eyes on me. “We could set off after. It’s no trouble.”

“Better to get it done,” I said. “It’s February. The light fades fast. We should try to see all three before sunset.”

Nicky rose slowly. We said our goodbyes and filed back out to Josh’s SUV.

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## Chapter 385

Chapter 385:

“Which one’s nearest?” I asked as Josh started the engine.

“The one by Hobbs’ Farm,” Nicky said quietly, staring straight ahead. She gave Josh terse directions.

The drive was silent. Nicky sat in the passenger seat, her head bent over her phone, thumbs moving rapidly. In the back, Portia’s phone buzzed against my leg.

About twenty minutes in, Nicky rustled in her bag. She pulled out a tin of peppermints, popped one in her own mouth, then turned to offer it. “Travel sickness,” she said. “They help.”

“I’m alright, thanks,” I said.

“Oh, go on. They’re really good. Fresh.” Her insistence was soft but oddly persistent. “Really. Everyone should have one.”

Josh exchanged a glance with me in the rear-view mirror, then took one. “Cheers.”

Portia glanced at me too, then took one with a shrug. “Fine.”

Feeling the weight of Nicky's expectant stare, I took the last mint.

Nicky watched us all until we'd swallowed, then put the tin away and turned back to the window.

The satnav eventually announced our arrival. We turned onto a rough track, the SUV lurching through deep ruts. Rain hammered the roof.

We'd entered the last of the three orchards. In the stormy twilight, it was a nightmare scene: endless rows of gnarled, black trees, their branches like claws against the bruised sky.

"There's supposed to be a keeper's shed," Nicky said, her voice flat.

Josh peered through the watery gloom. "I see it."

He pulled up beside a low, brick shed with a corrugated iron roof. No lights were on inside.

"Quick dash," I said.

We piled out into the slashing rain and sprinted for the door. It was unlocked. We stumbled into the damp, dark space. The smell was of rust, wet earth, and rotten apples.

Josh found a light switch. A single bulb flickered on, illuminating a tomb. Cobwebs draped piles of mildewed sacks. A broken spade leaned in a corner. A thick layer of dust coated everything. No one had been here for years.

"Well, this is a bust," Portia said, hugging herself. "Now what?"

The first wave of dizziness hit me then—a sudden lurch that made the room swim. I put a hand on the wall to steady myself.

"Whoa. Head rush," Josh said, his words slurring slightly.

My gaze snapped to Nicky. She had pulled down her mask. The brutal scar on her face was fully visible in the ugly light. All the shyness was gone, wiped clean, replaced by a terrifying, blank calm.

She looked at each of us, and her lips formed three silent words. I'm so sorry.

"The... mint." Josh grunted, swaying. "It was... the..."

He didn't finish. His eyes rolled back and he collapsed. Portia slid down the wall next to him with a sigh.

The darkness rushed up to meet me.

The last thing I saw was Nicky's remorseful face.

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### Chapter 386

Chapter 386:

The darkness wasn't complete. It was a thick, cottony haze where sound came first.

The crunch of tyres on gravel, close by. Then the creak of the shed door opening. A damp, rain-smelling draught.

A tense silence stretched, broken by a woman's voice. It was light, easy, and laced with a venom so casual it was chilling.

"Nicky Forrester. Long time no see. You're still as grimly predictable as ever. I suppose I should thank you for not disappointing me."

Nicky's response was a strained, hoarse whisper. "I did what you asked."

"Ah, yes. The bait. And you want your payment, I suppose? How much?"

"No." Nicky's voice cracked. "I don't want money. I want you to give him back to me."

A beat of silence, then a soft, incredulous laugh. "What?" The laugh grew, full of mocking pity. "Darling, he's a skeleton. Because of you, he's sleeping with the fishes in that icy pond. What exactly am I supposed to hand over? A souvenir rib?"

"It wasn't me," Nicky mumbled.

“Not you? Did you get a head injury along with that charming scar? Shall I refresh your memory? You came to me, snivelling about your drunk father’s debts. You wanted my help. I said I wanted to see Benji. And you called him. You knew why I wanted him. But you dialled the number anyway.”

Silence. Silence so complete you could hear a fly clearing its throat.

“Then,” the woman continued, her voice a cruel singsong, “I gave you a choice. Strip for my friends, or dump Benji. You chose to dump him. You shouted at him, told him he was ruining your life. You sold him out, then you threw him away.” The woman sighed. “Of course, Benji always did have a tiresome streak of nobility. I offered him a choice. He chose you, the snivelling little mouse. So I had to make him see you for what you are.”

Nicky made a small, wounded sound.

“Remember the final choice, Nicky? Him or you? You were so scared. Such lovely tears. You said you didn’t want to die. You said you wanted him to save you. And he did. He was saying your name when he stopped breathing. You killed him as surely as if you’d held the rock. Do you ever feel even a twinge of guilt, or are you just hollow inside?”

Nicky’s voice, when it came, was eerily calm. “I just want to see him again. Will you take me to him?”

A disappointed sigh. “No fight at all. Pathetic. Fine. If you want to visit the grave, come on. I haven’t got all day.”

“What about them?” Nicky asked.

“You drugged them, like I said?”

“Yes.”

“Then they’re out for the count. Don’t worry your pretty, scarred little head about it. I’ll deal with the clean-up later.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Oh, developing a conscience now? How quaint.”

“It’s just that plenty of villagers saw them with me.”

“I see. Fine. In a few hours, someone—well, several someones—who look very much like them will be seen driving away. They’ll disappear conveniently on the road back to London. Neat, tidy, and completely unconnected to you or this orchard.”

“You’re going to kill them.”

“Don’t sound so shocked. You already handed them to me on a plate. You don’t get to clutch your pearls now. Come on. I need to be back in London for dinner. Alibis don’t build themselves.”

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## Chapter 387

Chapter 387:

Footsteps. The shed door closed with a soft thud. The sound of two sets of footsteps receded into the drumming rain.

I sat up. My head was perfectly clear.

Across the dusty space, Portia was already on her feet, brushing off her jeans. Josh pushed himself up from the floor, looking bewildered.

We looked at each other in the jaundiced light.

“You get all that?” I asked.

Portia held up her phone. “Every beautifully damning word. Crystal clear.”

Josh held up his own. “Me too. Backup.”

I nodded, pulling my own phone from my pocket. “Triple-bagged.”

The mints had gone into our mouths and straight back out into tissues the moment Nicky looked away. A clumsy bit of sleight-of-hand, but effective.

Josh shook his head, his brow furrowed. “Okay, someone please explain. How did you know?”

“Later,” I said, already moving to the door and peering out into the sheeting rain. Two vague shapes were moving towards the densest part of the orchard. “Right now, we have a body to find. Let’s move. And for God’s sake, try not to splash.”

We moved.

The rain had slackened to a miserable drizzle, but the damage was done. The ground was a quagmire, and two sets of footprints—one neat and decisive, the other shuffling—led away from the shed like a dotted line on a map.

We followed, with Portia and me holding our phones low, cameras silently rolling.

The tracks led us to a large, reed-choked pond at the orchard's lowest point. The water was the colour of stewed tea.

And there they were.

Soraya and Nicky stood under the skeletal branches of a giant willow. At its base, the earth had been freshly, roughly dug. A dark, ragged hole gaped.

Nicky was staring at that hole, transfixed. "Can you hear that?" she whispered, her voice dreamlike. "He's saying he's cold. So cold."

"Hear what? Are we doing ghost stories now?" Soraya scoffed, taking a few elegant steps forward. She gestured at the hole with the toe of her impeccably clean boot. "There you go. That's where your precious Benji's been keeping cool all these years. Happy now?"

Nicky drifted forward as if pulled by a string. "There's something... I didn't tell you before."

"Oh?" Soraya's tone was bored. "What now?"

Nicky leaned closer, her voice dropping to a murmur. Soraya bent her head to listen.

It happened fast.

Nicky's hand shot out, clamping like a vice around Soraya's wrist. Her other hand came up from her pocket, a short, sharp kitchen knife glinting dully in the grey light. She drove it straight for Soraya's throat.

"You can go down and keep him company!"

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## Chapter 388

Chapter 388:

We froze where we stood, about twenty feet away, partially hidden by a thicket of brambles.

Soraya reacted with animal speed, twisting away. The blade, aimed for her neck, sank deep into the muscle of her shoulder instead. A raw, shocked scream tore from her, utterly unlike her usual controlled tones. The sound was brutally human.

Nicky, seeing she'd missed the kill, yanked the knife free. Soraya was scrambling back, but Nicky still had her wrist. The second stab was a wild, hacking arc. Soraya threw up a hand to block it. The knife plunged straight through her palm.

The scream that followed was pure agony. It echoed through the dripping trees.

None of us moved. Portia's phone was steady, still recording. Josh made a low sound in his throat. My own heart was hammering, a cold, sick fascination holding me in place. An eye for an eye. A knife for a... whatever she used on Benji.

"Nicky, please!" Soraya sobbed, blood streaming from her hand, seeping from her shoulder, staining her cream coat a shocking red. "I'll give you money! Anything! Just stop!"

The fear on her face was pristine. Absolute. She was finally feeling a fraction of what she'd doled out.

"I told you," Nicky said, her voice still eerily calm. "I don't want money. I want your life. You have to die."

She twisted the knife still embedded in Soraya's palm. Soraya shrieked again, her body bowing with the pain.

Nicky wrenched the blade free. This time, she dropped Soraya's wrist and went for her throat, her small body fuelled by a terrifying, single-minded strength. She shoved Soraya back against the willow, her hand closing around Soraya's neck, pinning her. The knife rose high, poised for a final, plunging strike.

Soraya writhed, gagging, her good hand clawing uselessly at Nicky's arm. It was like watching a sparrow fight a rat. There was a horrible inevitability to it.

"I'm sorry! Please, don't!" Soraya wept, her face blotchy with terror and rain. She looked pathetic. Broken. Just like Benji must have been.

Nicky's eyes were empty. All the pain, the guilt, the fear, had burned away, leaving only this cold, final purpose. The knife reached its apex.

"NO!" Soraya screamed, squeezing her eyes shut.

The knife started down.

A stone, small and sharp, shot out of the darkness from the trees opposite us. It struck Nicky's wrist with a nasty, precise crack. Nicky cried out, her fingers spasming. The knife tumbled into the mud.

She stared at her stinging wrist for a split second, then dove for the weapon.

That second was all Soraya needed. A surge of pure survival instinct. She shoved Nicky away with her bleeding, ruined hand and stumbled, then ran—a lurching, desperate sprint away from the pond.

Nicky snatched up the knife and took off after her, a silent, white-clad avenger.

Soraya, bleeding and disoriented, didn't see the ground fall away. One step she was on the bank; the next she was plunging into the black water of the pond with a heavy splash. She surfaced, gasping and choking, flailing towards the centre.

Nicky didn't hesitate. She ran straight in after her, the water swallowing her legs, her waist. She lunged forward, grabbed Soraya's ankle, and pulled. "Just die! We'll die together!"

Soraya screamed again, a waterlogged, bubbling sound. She kicked frantically, trying to dislodge the hand dragging her down, but Nicky held on with the strength of the truly damned. Soraya's movements grew weaker, more sluggish. Her head dipped under the surface. It came up, gasping, then went under again, for longer this time.

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## Chapter 389

Chapter 389:

Splash.

A figure cut through the pond with clean, efficient strokes. It was Kai. He dove under, emerged with Soraya's limp form, dragged her to the bank and dumped her unceremoniously on the mud, then turned and went straight back for Nicky.

I glanced towards the trees where Kai had emerged. Lochlan stood there, a dark silhouette against the grey. He met my gaze and gave a single nod.

"Josh, get over here and help!" I snapped, breaking our frozen tableau.

We rushed forward. The next few minutes were a messy, grunting blur of hauling sodden, unconscious women further from the water's edge.

On the bank, we had two problems: one unconscious attempted murderer, and one unconscious actual murderer. Both were blue-lipped and not breathing.

I looked at Soraya, sprawled in the mud, blood still oozing from her shoulder and her perforated hand. I felt a profound, visceral disgust. "I am not touching her," I announced.

Portia followed my gaze and shuddered. "Absolutely not. I'd rather kiss a sewer rat."

We looked at Kai, who was efficiently checking Nicky's airway while pointedly ignoring Soraya. He pretended not to notice our stares. Fine.

We all looked at Josh. His eyes widened. "Do I have to?"

"You're the one with the first aid cert, aren't you?" Portia said.

With a grimace of supreme distaste, Josh knelt beside Soraya. He tilted her head back, pinched her nose, and delivered a few rescue breaths with the enthusiasm of a man licking a toilet seat.

It did the trick. Almost immediately, Soraya jerked, her body convulsing as she vomited pond water onto the ground.

Josh sprang back. "Done!"

From nearby, Nicky, who Kai had positioned on her side, also coughed violently, expelling a torrent of murky water.

In the distance, the faint but unmistakable sound of sirens began to weave through the orchard.

"Who called the police?" I asked, though as soon as the words were out, I looked at Lochlan and knew the answer.

“Right,” I said to Portia, shaking water off my own hands. “Make sure you hand over the video and the audio. The whole unedited horror show.”

“Obviously,” Portia said, clutching her phone. “This is going to be the most satisfying evidence submission of my career.”

Lochlan walked over to me, his eyes doing a quick, assessing sweep from my muddy shoes to my dripping hair. “Are you alright?”

“Peachy,” I said. “Just another Saturday afternoon.”

His gaze moved past me to the freshly dug hole under the willow. The grave.

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Chapter 390:

“Was this your original plan?” I asked him.

“No. The plan was simpler. I’d found the orchard. I was going to use the cadaver dog to locate the remains, then tip off the police anonymously.” Lochlan looked back at me with disapproval. “I knew you were looking into Nicky. I just didn’t expect you to put it all together quite so fast. I thought I’d be digging up bones before you’d even found the right village. You shouldn’t have put yourself in the middle of it.”

“There was no real danger,” I countered.

“She tried to drug you.”

“But you warned me. And I was already suspicious of her. We were on guard. She didn’t succeed.” I was tired, cold, and in no mood for a lecture.

He looked like he had a whole checklist of my reckless behaviours to run through, but I cut him off.

“Besides,” I said, nodding towards where Nicky was now sitting up, shivering and vacant, “she was so eager to show us the way. The stage was set. I couldn’t very well walk off in the middle of the performance, could I?”

Lochlan’s expression turned thoughtful. “She was working with Soraya the whole time.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “It was all too neat. She bought my ‘distant cousin’ story instantly, no questions. She was a little too ready to lead us to the orchard. But only after taking us to her gran’s first.”

“A delay tactic.”

“Exactly. I’m guessing that’s when she texted Soraya that the pigeons were on their way.”

He nodded just as the first police officers crashed through the undergrowth, their hi-vis jackets a shocking yellow against the gloom.

An hour and a half later, we were in the stark, fluorescent-lit chaos of the local police station. We’d been separated, our stories taken in different rooms.

I told mine, straight and simple, and handed over the digital evidence. Portia did the same. We were eventually released, pending further enquiries.

The three of us stumbled out of the front doors into the night, a bedraggled, mud-caked trio. My shoes were ruined, my hair was a disaster, and I could still smell the pond.

And there, leaning against his stupidly clean car, looking like he’d just stepped out of a boardroom rather than a crime scene, was Lochlan. Unruffled. Composed. Infuriating.

“So,” I said, walking over. “What now?”

“Now,” he said, “Soraya will be charged with the murder of Benjamin Moss, and the attempted murder of you three. Nicky will be charged as an accessory and for attempted murder as well.”

“Will it stick? Benji’s been dead over a decade.”

“They’ll find forensic evidence linking her to the remains. And if not, there’s Nicky’s testimony. And your recordings are rather compelling.”

I nodded, too tired to think. The adrenaline had left a hollow, shaky feeling in its wake.

Lochlan’s arm came around my shoulders. “Come on. You need food. And a change of clothes.”

I let him steer me towards the car.

Message 2 from Noa: Dear ones, did you know that God has known us since we were in our mothers’ wombs? (Jeremiah 1:5). Many times we think of God as someone distant, when in truth He has known us since before we were born and formed each of us with care (Ephesians 1:4). God loves us and has been present with us in every moment, every sad moment and every happy moment of our lives. Buuut, even though He’s by our side,

He can't do anything if we don't give Him permission to work in our lives — if we don't ask Him. We can only receive from that love, that healing, that salvation if we accept it. It's a decision we can make at any moment, accepting Him as Lord and Savior, through faith in Jesus Christ. (Romans 10:9)

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## Chapter 391

Chapter 391:

The car was warm and silent. I didn't even remember the drive. One moment we were in the damp, flashing lights of the police station car park; the next we were pulling up under the portico of The Manor Hotel. The clock on the dashboard said it was nearly midnight.

We took the lift up in a weary silence. Outside the door to our suite, Portia stopped. Josh hovered behind her, looking at her with those big, earnest puppy-dog eyes.

"I've, uh, I've got a room just down the hall," he said, his voice hopeful.

Portia looked at me. She mouthed "sorry," then took Josh's proffered hand. "Don't wait up," she said, and let him lead her away.

I shrugged. Good for them. At least one of us was getting something pleasant out of this catastrophic day.

I swiped the keycard and pushed the door open, then turned to Lochlan, who stood waiting in the corridor. "Right. Well. Goodnight then."

"Goodnight."

I stepped inside.

Alone. Finally, blessedly alone.

I peeled off my filthy, mud-caked clothes, leaving a trail of forensic evidence from the door to the bathroom. I nearly wept with relief when I sank into the deep, steaming tub. The hot, fragrant water almost undid me. My muscles turned to liquid and my eyelids grew impossibly heavy. I think I actually dozed off for a minute, my chin slipping under the bubbles.

Eventually, pruned and reluctant, I climbed out. I wrapped myself in the hotel's fluffy white bathrobe, didn't bother with pyjamas, and padded barefoot into the main room.

The plan was simple: attack my hair with the dryer, then face-plant into the nearest pillow and not move for forty-eight hours.

The plan died an immediate death.

Because sitting in the armchair by the darkened window, looking for all the world like he owned the place, was Lochlan.

He turned his head as I emerged. “You were in there so long I was starting to worry you’d drowned. The food’s getting cold.”

My gaze snapped to the small dining table. Two place settings. Silver domes covering plates. A bottle of red wine breathing beside two glasses.

I looked back at him, then at the door I was pretty sure I’d locked.

The adrenaline was long gone, leaving only a dull, surreal acceptance. It was too late to scream.

“How did you get in here?” I asked, my voice raspy from the steam.

“I own the hotel.”

“Of course you do. Do you make a habit of breaking into your guests’ rooms, or is it just a special service for me?”

“Just you,” he said, without a hint of irony.

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## Chapter 392

Chapter 392:

I rolled my eyes, too bone-tired to muster proper anger. Besides, my stomach chose that moment to let out a loud, undignified growl.

The smell of food was undeniable. I walked over, sat down, and lifted the dome. A perfectly cooked cheeseburger and a mountain of skinny fries. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I demolished it without another word.

Lochlan watched me eat.

"Aren't you having any?" I asked around a mouthful, then answered my own question. "Oh, right. You probably consider this a heart attack on a plate."

A slight, fleeting smile touched his lips.

I wiped my mouth with a napkin, the beast in my belly finally pacified. "Right. Thanks for the room service. Truly. Now, if you don't mind..." I looked pointedly at the door.

He didn't rise. He just reclined further in the armchair. "There are things I need to tell you."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow? Or, better yet, the day after tomorrow? When my brain might be semi-functional again?"

"Don't you want to know about the smell in Nicky Forrester's house?"

That got my full attention. "How do you know about that? You've never been there."

"I haven't. But the police have. And I have sources."

I sighed, a long, weary exhale. "Okay. Fine. What was it? I'm taking it your 'sources' ruled out a dead cat."

He didn't answer immediately. His eyes drifted to the bottle of wine on the table between us, then back to me. A silent prompt.

I sighed again, louder this time, plucked a glass, poured a healthy measure of red, and held it out to him. "There. Happy? Now spill."

He took the glass. "Thank you." He swirled it, sniffed it, took his damn time.

I sank back into my own armchair, poured a glass for myself, and waited.

Finally, he spoke, but it wasn't what I wanted to hear. "Come over here." He patted the seat of the sofa next to his chair.

I remained where I was. "No, thanks. My hearing's fine. I can hear your ominous revelations perfectly well from here."

"I'm not talking unless you come here."

“For God’s...” I got up, stomped the three steps over, and perched awkwardly on the edge of the sofa cushion, facing him. I had to sit sideways. “Happy? This had better be worth the arthritic posture.”

He looked at me then, a deep, meaningful look that seemed to cut through the bathrobe and the fatigue.

“I’ve missed you,” he said, his voice gentle.

The words were simple. Quiet. They felt like a little hook, delicately catching something behind my ribs. My breath hitched. I was too tired to armour up properly.

He leaned in. The subtle, expensive scent of him wrapped around me. I didn’t move. My eyes traced the line of his lips, his throat, the hint of collarbone above his shirt.

I consider myself a woman of good principles and solid willpower. I am not easily flustered. But he was testing every ounce of my resolve. If he got any closer, my already frayed morals were going to snap completely.

I jerked back, putting air between us, dispelling the fizzy, dangerous warmth that had started to gather under my skin. I pressed my fingers to my temples.

Right. Yes. This is just fatigue. And a prolonged lack of any decent, non-homicidal male company. That’s all.

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## Chapter 393

Chapter 393:

I cleared my throat. “The smell, Lochlan. Focus.”

He looked faintly disappointed but didn’t try to close the distance again. “The old woman you met in the village. The one Nicky claimed was her grandmother.”

“She wasn’t?”

“No.”

“Then who was she?”

“A local woman Nicky hired. To play the part.”

I was confused. “Why?”

“Because her real grandmother passed away.”

The pieces slammed together with a sickening finality. “Oh, God. The smell.”

He nodded.

A wave of nausea rose, followed by a cold, horrified pity. I glanced at the empty plates. “You let me eat first. You knew telling me this would...”

“I thought it was preferable, yes.”

“But why?” I stammered. “Why would she... live with that?”

“From what the police have pieced together, her grandmother died about two weeks ago. Nicky lived alone with her. The grief, the guilt she was already carrying... it seems to have triggered a psychotic break. A state of denial. She simply didn’t... attend to the situation. She hired the woman to play her grandmother not for your benefit, but for her own. A way to maintain the delusion that nothing had changed. The hired woman did it for the money but refused to stay in the house, for obvious reasons. She apparently tried to convince Nicky to arrange a proper burial, but Nicky wouldn’t hear of it.”

“She’s gone mad,” I whispered.

“I think she’s been suicidal for a long time,” Lochlan said quietly. “When Soraya contacted her to draw you out, she saw it as her final purpose. A chance for revenge, and then an end.”

I took a long, fortifying drink of wine. “And her grandmother? Now?”

“The police and the coroner are handling it. There will be a burial.”

“And Nicky? She tried to kill Soraya. On film.”

“Her lawyer will argue diminished responsibility. Temporary insanity, exacerbated by extreme grief and a decade of psychological trauma.”

I shuddered, seeing Nicky’s blank, dead eyes as she raised the knife. “She looked... hollowed out.”

“We all underestimated how much she loved Benji,” Lochlan said.

“It wasn’t love,” I corrected him, the words coming out harder than I intended. “It was guilt. She abandoned him. She knows she’s complicit in his death. That’s not love.”

Lochlan studied his wine. “Sometimes, the two are impossible to separate.”

“No. I think it’s perfectly clear. You either love someone, or you don’t.”

I stood up, the bathrobe tightening around me. “Now, I really do have to sleep.”

He rose. But he didn’t head straight for the door. He paused, his gaze drifting to the window and the twinkling lights of the hotel gardens below.

“This place does a rather famous afternoon tea,” he said, his tone casual. “I’m told they do something special for it this time of year. The week of the fourteenth, particularly.”

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Chapter 394:

The week of the fourteenth. Valentine’s Day.

He didn’t say it. He just laid the date out like a card on the table, watching to see if I’d pick it up.

My heart gave a single, hard thump against my ribs. I kept my expression neutral. “I’m not much for tiny sandwiches and scones. All that fuss.”

“It doesn’t have to be fuss.” He turned back to me, and his eyes were far too perceptive in the soft light. “It could just be... quiet. A pause. After everything.” He took a half-step closer, and his voice dropped, losing its casual edge for something more intimate. “Hyacinth, about us—”

“Lochlan.” I cut across him, my own voice sounding strangely flat. “I’m exhausted. My brain is full of holes and the only thing I want to commit to right now is my mattress. Goodnight.”

I walked to the door, opened it, and stood holding it, looking fixedly at the opulent corridor wallpaper.

For a second, he didn't move. I could feel the weight of his gaze on my profile, the unasked question hanging in the air between us.

Then, with a quiet, acquiescent nod, he walked to the door.

"Sleep well, Hyacinth," he said softly, and then he was gone.

I closed the door, locked it, and slid down until my back was against it, drawing my knees up to my chest.

The fatigue was a physical weight, pulling at my eyelids. I pushed myself up, stumbled to the bed, and fell into it.

The problem of Lochlan—his subtle hints, and the terrifying possibility of "us" again—felt like a mountain to climb. And I was out of oxygen. Not tonight, I thought, burying my face in the cool pillow. That's a problem for tomorrow's Hyacinth.

I woke up in the afternoon, groggy and disoriented.

I called Portia. "Lunch? I'm starving."

"Can't. Couples' massage with Josh. The hot stone one. It's very... intensive." Her voice was a purr of satisfaction.

I hung up. Traitor.

I ordered room service, ate a sad club sandwich staring at the wall.

Coming downstairs was a tactical error. The hotel had fully committed to the theme. Vases of violently red roses stood on every surface. Heart-shaped foil balloons bobbed pathetically from the concierge desk. There were pink ribbons on the bannisters and a scent in the air, something sickly sweet. It was in your face, and it was everywhere.

I dodged a couple too busy trying to swallow each other's tonsils to watch where they were going, and fled through the revolving doors.

Outside was no better.

The weather, in a rare act of cosmic cruelty, was perfect. Crisp, clear, with weak but flattering February sunlight. The hotel gardens, the spa terrace, the picturesque paths—all were dotted with couples. Holding hands, laughing at unfunny private jokes, feeding each other bits of overpriced pastry.

One pair was even having a professional photoshoot by the frozen fountain, the woman draped in a pashmina, the man looking smug. It was a live-action advert for a life I currently wanted no part of.

I fled the hotel grounds entirely, wandering into the village lanes, taking turns at random. My only navigational principle was to avoid displays of affection. See a couple linking arms? Instant left turn. Hear shared laughter from a cosy pub window? Cross the street.

At this rate, I'd probably walk all the way back to London before I found a patch of ground not contaminated by coupledness.

Chapter 395:

Tired, footsore, and thoroughly grumpy, I spotted a small convenience store that looked blessedly unromantic. No roses in the windows, just posters for lotto draws and energy drinks.

I ducked inside, the bell jangling. If Portia was abandoning me for her young stud, I'd need supplies for the long, lonely drive back.

I grabbed a basket and stalked the aisles, grabbing things at random. A multipack of crisps. Bottled water. Chocolate bars. Tissues. I wasn't really looking, just filling the void with consumer goods.

A lot of the items had bright yellow stickers: "COUPLES DISCOUNT — BUY ONE GET ONE HALF PRICE."

A petty, sour little thrill went through me. Fine. I'm not a couple. But I'll take your discount, you smug, marketing bastards.

I plonked my overflowing basket on the counter. The cashier was a boy, maybe twenty, with floppy hair and a friendly, open face.

"Big shop," he said cheerfully, starting to scan. "Stocking up for a romantic getaway?" He winked.

"For a solitary drive of profound introspection," I corrected, deadpan.

He laughed, not put off. "Right, right. Well, you've got the snacks for it." He finished scanning, his eyes flicking to me as he packed. "You know, if you're sticking around, there's a decent pub quiz at The King's Head on Wednesdays. Could use a smart teammate. If you're... at a loose end."

It was a sweet, clumsy attempt. I felt a hundred years old. "That's very kind," I said, handing over cash. "But I have a strict policy against forming new human attachments before five PM. Doctor's orders. Something about my aura."

He blinked, then grinned. "Fair enough. Well, if the aura clears up..."

“I’ll bear it in mind,” I lied, hoisting my heavy, plastic-bagged burden.

I walked until my arms ached, finally stopping at a small, pretty bench by a reed-fringed lake to rest.

The scenery was objectively beautiful. The water, the hills, the weak sun making everything glow. Two swans glided past in serene, coupled harmony. A pair of ducks bobbed alongside, quacking what sounded like marital bickering.

This country is not friendly to singletons, I thought morosely.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

Lochlan sat down on the bench beside me, not too close.

I didn’t reply. I braced myself for another round of “something special for the fourteenth.”

“It’s the police,” he said instead.

That got my attention. “What do they want now?”

“Some follow-up questions about yesterday. Clarifications.”

“I’ll call them when I get back to the hotel.”

My throat was dry. I dug into one of my bags, pulled out a bottle of mineral water, and cracked it open. And, because I was raised with manners, I offered him one. He took it. “Thanks.”

His eyes drifted to the bulging carrier bags at my feet. “What’s all this for?”

“Supplies. For my drive back to London.”

“You’re leaving?”

Chapter 396:

“Well, I’m not going to be Portia’s third wheel while she and her young stud re-enact Lady Chatterley’s Lover in the thermal suite, am I?” I shrugged.

Lochlan said, “We could drive back together. I’m leaving soon, too.”

“And abandon Galina?”

“She’s down here sketching. Landscapes. ‘Capturing the bleached winter light,’ I believe she said.”

“Yeah. Right.” My voice was flat.

A faint, amused smile touched his lips. “Is that a hint of jealousy I detect?”

“No. That’s a textbook example of sarcasm. Different tonal quality entirely.”

The weird smile stayed on his face. He was looking at me with an expression I couldn’t quite decipher.

“Why are you grinning like that?” I asked, suspicious.

He just tilted his chin towards my open shopping bag. “I didn’t realise those were considered essential driving supplies.”

I looked down. “What?”

And then I saw it. Nestled among the crisps and chocolate, several brightly coloured boxes I definitely hadn’t consciously selected. My brain processed the words: Extra Thin. Ribbed. Stimulating. One even had a cartoon strawberry on it.

I sucked in a sharp breath. What in the actual...

Damn it. The “Couples’ Discount” shelf. I’d just grabbed things in a petty fury. I hadn’t been looking.

I hastily shoved the offending boxes deep into the bag.

“Just grabbed them by mistake,” I muttered, my face heating.

“By mistake,” Lochlan repeated, his voice laced with a puzzled amusement. “Several times, in several... intriguing varieties.”

I was tongue-tied. Any explanation would just make it worse. I gave up.

Seeing some mallards dabbling at the lake’s edge, I grabbed the loaf of bread I’d also inexplicably bought, stood up, and marched over to them. A distraction. I hoped he’d take the hint and be gone by the time I turned around.

I crouched, tearing off chunks of bread and tossing them to the ducks, my back to the bench.

When the bread was gone, I stood, my knees complaining.

I turned around, and he was right there. Not on the bench. Directly in front of me.

Startled, I reared back. My foot caught on a gnarled tree root snaking across the path, and I stumbled, arms windmilling. Lochlan's hand shot out, yanking me forward by my wrist before I could pitch backwards into the lake.

The momentum was all wrong. I crashed into him, a full-body impact that knocked the air from my lungs, and he grunted as we both went down, him landing hard on the ground with me on top of him.

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## Chapter 397

Chapter 397:

He went very still. His breath hitched. One arm was wrapped around my waist, holding me firmly against him. My other hand was splayed on his chest. My lips were inches from the warm skin of his neck, where his shirt collar had shifted.

A wave of thirst—of a very different kind—washed over me. My mouth went dry. A completely inappropriate, primal part of my brain thought, I could just... bite. Right there.

My head felt foggy, dizzy. My hand on his chest shifted, fingers curling slightly against the solid muscle, starting a slow, treacherous journey upwards.

From somewhere down the path, the clear sound of approaching footsteps and laughter cut through the haze. I snapped back to reality like a rubber band. I yanked my hand away as if burned and scrambled off him, getting to my feet in a clumsy rush.

"Are you okay?" I asked, breathless.

He sat up slowly, wincing. "I'm fine," he said, but his voice was low, slightly raspy. "Did you hit your head? I heard a thud."

"You could be concussed. We should get back to the hotel, find a doctor."

"If you really want to make it up to me," he said, looking up at me, "say yes."

"Say yes to what?"

He tilted his chin towards the lake. I followed his gaze.

There, tied up at a small wooden jetty, was a charming, old-fashioned rowing boat. And walking away from it, with what looked suspiciously like deliberate speed, was the retreating back of Kai.

“What?” I said, stupidly.

“Come with me.” Lochlan got to his feet, brushed the gravel from his coat, and held out his hand.

Before I could summon a logical objection, I took it.

He led me down to the jetty and handed me into the small, green-painted wooden boat. It had burgundy cushions on the seats and looked absurdly romantic.

I sat down like I was in a trance.

Lochlan untied the rope, pushed us off from the jetty with a deft shove of his foot, and then took up the oars. He settled into the rhythm with an easy, practised grace that was frankly annoying. The smooth pull, the shift of his shoulders under his tailored coat, the defined tension in his forearms as he gripped the wood. It was all very proficient.

I just sat there and watched him for a while.

I didn’t know he could row. But it shouldn’t have come as a surprise. The man probably had a private tutor for it at Oxford.

He rowed with quiet, steady strokes, taking us away from the bank, away from the coupled-up ducks and the lingering saccharine smell of the hotel gardens. The sounds of the world faded—the distant laughter, the quacking, the rustle of amorous squirrels.

He rowed until the bank became a blur of grey and green, and then it disappeared entirely, swallowed by a soft, rolling mist that had crept over the lake.

It was like being transported.

The water was glassy, the air still and cool. Tendrils of fog twirled and drifted around us, muffling sound, softening edges. The weak February sun filtered through in hazy, muted shafts of light. It was dreamlike, ethereal, and utterly silent.

It felt as if we were the only two people left in the entire, mist-shrouded world.

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## Chapter 398

Chapter 398:

My heart, which had been rattling around my ribcage like a panicked bird, gradually calmed. The constant, low-grade hum of anxiety about Soraya, about Nicky, about Benji's bones, just... faded into the white noise of the mist.

I felt myself go soft. The tension that lived in my shoulders, my jaw, my spine, began to melt away without any conscious effort.

I took a deep, clean breath of the damp air and let it out slowly.

I leaned over the edge of the boat, the polished wood cool against my palms, and put out a hand to trail my fingers in the water. It was chilly, a sharp, bracing cold that seemed to cut through the last of the mental fog. It felt clean. Purifying, even.

I stared at my own reflection in the rippling, dark surface. It kept shifting, breaking up into fragments, then slowly reforming. It was mesmerising.

When was the last time I just sat and did nothing? I wondered, watching my watery doppelgänger. When did I last feel safe enough to not be constantly worrying, scheming, or looking over my shoulder?

It was hard to remember that I'd been sitting in a prison cell just over three months ago.

Is it really over? Is she gone? Will they actually put her away?

My reflection offered no answers, just a placid, quiet face staring back from the depths.

"Careful." A strong hand closed around my upper arm and hauled me gently but firmly back from the edge. "Lean any further and you'll be taking an unplanned swim."

The boat rocked with the motion. I was pulled off balance, stumbling backwards, and landed squarely in his lap, my back against his chest. Again.

My cheek was pressed against the fine wool of his coat. I could feel the solid warmth of him, the steady thump of his heart under my ear.

My own heart gave two frantic, rebellious kicks against my ribs, like it was trying to escape.

I lifted my head. My forehead brushed the line of his jaw, the sensitive skin of his neck. My gaze landed on his throat. His Adam's apple bobbed slightly as he swallowed.

I don't know what came over me. Maybe it was the dreamscape, the isolation, the feeling of being untethered from consequences. Maybe it was just months of celibacy and stress culminating in a catastrophic lapse of judgement.

My arm came up, hooking around his neck. My lips parted. I tilted my head up and pressed my mouth to the base of his throat and bit down.

Lochlan's entire body went rigid against mine. His breath hitched, then came out in a ragged, uncontrolled rush.

It was like a spell had broken—or perhaps one had been cast. The dreamy peace burned away, replaced by a sharper, more urgent electricity.

As if possessed, as if this misty world had its own rules where nothing counted, I let my inhibitions dissolve.

My hands began to move. I traced the line of his jaw, slipped my fingers into his hair, slid my palm down over the hard plane of his chest, growing bolder, more desperate with every touch.

A large, warm hand cradled the back of my neck. It tilted my face up.

A heartbeat later, his mouth was on mine.

It wasn't a gentle kiss. It was a conquest. Hot, demanding, and fiercely hungry. His lips and tongue claimed mine with a single-minded intensity that stole the air from my lungs and any thought of retreat from my mind. He kissed me like he was starving, and I was the only thing that could sate him.

It was overwhelming. I couldn't have pulled away if I'd wanted to.

"Mmm." I managed a muffled sound of protest—or maybe encouragement—and pushed back against him.

I nipped at his lower lip, then sank my teeth gently into his tongue when it swept into my mouth. My arms tightened around his neck, and I kissed him back with equal fervour, tasting him, learning the rhythm he was setting and then challenging it.

He groaned, a deep, rough sound that vibrated through me.

His fingers tangled fiercely in my hair, while his other hand swept down my back, over the curve of my hip, and pulled me tighter against him. His mouth left mine to blaze a

trail down my neck, his teeth scraping lightly over my pulse point before his lips found the sensitive hollow of my collarbone, just above the neckline of my top.

I bit down on my own lip to stifle a moan. My eyes fluttered shut. I arched against him, my hips rocking instinctively.

My hands went to the buttons of his shirt. I fumbled them open, my palms sliding over the hot skin of his chest, the defined ridges of his abdomen, my touch growing bolder, descending lower.

My fingertips were just brushing the waistband of his trousers, my own heart hammering so loudly I was sure the swans could hear it, when his hand snapped out and closed around my wrist, stopping me.

He buried his face in the curve of my neck. I could feel the rapid, heavy flutter of his pulse against my skin, the heat of his breath. He was holding himself perfectly still.

Slowly, he lifted his head. His eyes, dark and blazing, met mine. His voice, when it came, was shredded and rough.

“Does that mean you want me?”

His face was backlit by the diffuse, grey-gold February light filtering through the mist. It haloed his hair, sharpened the lines of his face. He looked like something carved and vital.

My mind, fogged with desire, stuttered. What did he just say?

“Hyacinth,” he repeated, his gaze holding mine prisoner. “Do you... want me.”

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## Chapter 399

Chapter 399:

I nodded.

Of course I wanted him.

I'd wanted him since the first confusing, electrifying moment I'd laid eyes on him, a want I'd immediately shoved into a mental lockbox because I was still technically, messily married to Cary.

I'd wanted him every time he'd appeared, like some unnervingly competent ghost, to pull me from disaster—from those thugs at the Kingfisher, from social ruin, from lecherous clients who thought my divorcee status was an open invitation.

The wanting had become a physical ache that night in the stone bothy, a live wire left sparking and unattended.

My hand, which he'd stopped, now flexed against the hard heat of him straining against his trousers. I gripped him through the fine fabric, the message blatant and unmistakable.

Lochlan grunted, a low, strained sound, but he didn't move to take what I was so blatantly offering. His body was a tense wire under mine.

"Be my girlfriend," he said.

My head shook. A reflex.

His handsome face darkened immediately, all the heated softness hardening into confusion and frustration. "Why not?"

I hadn't even realised I'd done it until I saw his expression change. My brain, swimming in hormones and the aftermath of his kiss, took several long, sluggish seconds to form a coherent sentence.

"I want you," I said, my voice throaty. "Right here. Right now."

He frowned, a deep crease forming between his brows. "I want more than that."

"We can keep going at the hotel," I offered, my fingers tracing the shape of him, feeling him jerk in response.

I'd fantasised about this more times than I'd admit, and in more locations. His bed, my bathtub, that absurdly large desk in his office, the back of his stupidly luxurious car. Frankly, I'd have taken him right here in this wobbly, romantic cliché of a boat.

The thought of my shopping bags, of the inadvertently purchased condoms, flashed through my mind. Maybe it hadn't been a mistake.

"I don't just want sex with you," he stated, his voice tight with restraint. "But I only want sex with you."

He stared at me. "I want you to be my girlfriend. Officially."

I sighed. “Can’t we just be booty-call partners? Sex buddies? Friends with very, very good benefits?”

I cringed internally even as I thought about it. The idea of “dating” Lochlan, of being his official, acknowledged girlfriend, paraded in public, made my skin prickle with a familiar, claustrophobic dread.

Because, let’s be brutally honest, beneath the polished manners and the monkish diet, he and Cary were cut from the same obscenely expensive cloth. Both were rich, devastatingly handsome, preternaturally successful men who were used to the world bending to their will.

And yes, fine, that was apparently my type. Sue me.

And with that territory came the inevitable personality flaw: an innate, unshakeable need for control. Cary’s was a bludgeon—domineering, volatile, a series of shouted orders. Lochlan’s was a scalpel—polite, reasoned, veneered in impeccable courtesy, but a decision made unilaterally for “your own good” was still a decision made without you.

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## Chapter 400

Chapter 400:

I knew this. I’d sworn off billionaires for this exact reason. There’s no such thing as a sweet, unassuming billionaire. They’re all, at their core, used to being in charge. And the attendant baggage—the Vanessas and Sorayas of the world, the stalkers, the vengeful exes, the constant danger—was a price I was no longer willing to pay.

And yet.

And yet, my physical reaction to him was a raging, independent force that steamrolled every rational objection my mind could muster.

“I don’t understand,” Lochlan said, his confusion giving way to a sharper edge. “Soraya is handled. The danger is over. You’re here, in my arms, and you’re saying you want this. Why would you refuse what comes next?”

“Because I don’t want ‘what comes next,’” I said, pulling back slightly, the cold air rushing in between our heated bodies. “I’ve just spent months clawing my way out of one life dictated by a powerful man. I’m not signing up for a sequel.”

“It wouldn’t be like that.”

“You can’t promise that. You decided we were over to protect me. You’ll decide other things, big and small, because you’ll always think you know best. I don’t want another shadow over my life, Lochlan. I don’t want to be ‘Lochlan Hastings’s girlfriend,’ a target, a subject of gossip, a piece in your chess game.”

“Don’t you trust me to protect you?”

“It’s not about trust! It’s about wanting a simple, uncomplicated life where I make my own choices! Can’t we just... enjoy this? I know you want me. God knows I want you. Let’s just do that. Have amazing, mind-blowing sex and not overthink it into some grand romantic epic with a doomed footnote.”

I leaned in again, trying to recapture the heat. I kissed the line of his jaw, my hand resuming its journey south.

But he wouldn’t be sidetracked. His hands came up, not to pull me closer, but to gently, firmly, grasp my shoulders and set me back.

The rejection was a cold shock.

“No,” he said. “Not like this.”

He didn’t say anything else. He just... shut down. He re-buttoned my coat, smoothed my hopelessly tangled hair with his hands. Then he picked up the oars, turned the boat, and began to row us back towards the shore.

Half an hour later, we were back at the hotel.

The ride in the lift was done in suffocating silence. The doors pinged open on my floor. I stepped out, my legs feeling weirdly disconnected, like they belonged to someone else.

“Wait.” Lochlan’s voice stopped me. He held out my plastic shopping bags, retrieved from the bench. I’d forgotten all about them.

Right. My groceries. My pathetic, discount condom-filled attempt at self-sufficiency.

I took the bags without a word, not even a “thanks.” I just turned and walked down the corridor, my steps unsteady. I walked in a daze, right past my door, only stopping when the corridor ended at a blank wall.

I stood there for a moment, blinked, then turned and shuffled back, correcting my course like a poorly programmed robot.

I finally got into my room. The bags slipped from my numb fingers and hit the floor with a rustling thud. I stood there, empty-handed, feeling utterly vacant.

My body moved on autopilot, tracing a weird, loopy path around the room before I finally collapsed face-first onto the sofa.

“Hy? What’s wrong?”

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