

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 401

Chapter 401:

I lifted my head.

Portia was standing in the doorway to the bedroom, holding up a slinky black dress. She came over, flipped me over onto my back, brushed the hair from my eyes, and peered at me.

“What happened? You look like you’ve been run over by a golf cart.”

I just stared at the ceiling, sinking into a weird, blank state. It was like meditation, if the goal of meditation was to achieve a perfect void of emotional numbness.

Portia waved a hand in front of my face. “Don’t do this! You’re scaring me. Talk!”

After a long moment, I spoke, my voice eerily calm. “I bit his throat.”

Portia sat on the edge of the sofa. “Okay. Go on.”

“I felt him up.”

“And?”

“I kissed him.”

“And?!”

“I tried to sleep with him.”

“YES! AND THEN?!”

“He asked me to be his girlfriend. I said no.”

Portia’s face went blank. She knelt up, looming over me. “Why the bloody hell not?”

“That,” I said, my gaze still fixed on the ceiling, “is what I’ve been trying to figure out.”

“What did he say? Or rather, what did you say?”

“I told him I didn’t want a relationship. Just the sex.”

Portia flopped back. “Stealing my playbook, did you? I take it that didn’t go down well.”

I muttered into the cushion. “Never took him for a prude.”

“Oh, well. It takes all sorts to make the world.” She patted my leg, a gesture of supreme pity. “I suggest you move on. Plenty of other fish, etcetera.”

“What are you even doing here?” I asked, finally turning my head to look at her. “I thought you’d be permanently attached to your new boy toy.”

Portia flashed me a smile so sweet it was nauseating. “I came back to change. Into the sluttiest lingerie I brought. For the big night, you know.”

“But you came here with me. Why did you pack slutty lingerie?”

“‘Always be prepared’ is my motto.”

I rolled my eyes and waved a limp hand. “Go. Go away and enjoy your perfect night with your perfect boyfriend. Leave me here to wallow in my tragic, self-inflicted singlehood.”

“Josh is not perfect. He’s immature. Has no real goals. Doesn’t know what he’s doing next month, let alone with the rest of his life.”

“Then why are you still dating him?”

She shrugged. “He doesn’t have a five-year plan, but he’s got a five-star body and is exceptionally fun in bed. For that, I’m willing to overlook minor flaws like leaving wet towels on the bed, failing to understand the concept of a laundry basket, and playing shoot-’em-up video games until 3 AM. Besides, he worships me. It’s refreshing.”

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Chapter 402

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She leaned down and patted my shoulder. “Every relationship is a trade-off, Hyacinth. No one’s perfect. I guess it’s just a matter of whether you like someone enough to be willing to overlook the flaws that come in their particular package.”

She blew me an air kiss. “Don’t wait up.”

The door clicked shut behind her.

I lay there in the new, heavier silence.

A trade-off. A package.

Did I like Lochlan enough to accept the inevitable, monumental baggage that came with him?

I fell asleep before my brain could circle its way to an answer.

I woke up at 8 AM on the sofa, a blanket thrown over me.

My head felt stuffed with cotton wool, my temples throbbing dully. I sat up, yawned until my jaw cracked, and stumbled to the kitchenette for water.

I called the police, answered their follow-up questions in a monotone, and asked after Soraya. The reassurance that she was being held without bail was a small, cold comfort. One less active threat in the world.

I went down to the restaurant for breakfast. The Valentine’s decor seemed even more aggressive in the morning light. I seriously considered stabbing my own eyes out to avoid watching a middle-aged couple across the room feed each other strawberries with grotesque tenderness.

“Good morning.”

The familiar voice, smooth and elegantly pitched, came from beside me. My heart gave a painful squeeze.

“Morning,” I managed, not looking up from my single, miserable black coffee.

Lochlan sat down at the small table opposite me. He ordered eggs, toast, and a pot of tea. He acted with such impeccable, casual normality you’d think yesterday consisted of nothing more than a mildly interesting walk. The bastard.

“Now that Soraya’s situation is... contained,” he said, stirring his tea, “there won’t be much obstacle to my return to Velos Capital.”

“Congratulations,” I said, my voice flat.

“I’d like you to come back. To work with me.”

I nearly choked on my coffee. “Um. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Don’t turn it down on account of what happened yesterday. I believe both you and I are perfectly capable of maintaining a cordial, productive work relationship. We are adults, after all.”

He took a sip of tea, his eyes meeting mine over the rim. “Or perhaps you don’t trust yourself around me? After all, you did admit that you have designs on my body. I would certainly understand if you felt the need to decline the offer because you think you can’t control your lust when we are in the same room.”

I squinted at him. “Reverse psychology? Really?”

A faint, challenging smile touched his lips. “Is it working?”

“I need to think about it.”

“Of course. Take all the time you need.”

I didn’t finish my breakfast. I made my excuses and fled.

Back in my room, I stripped and stepped into the shower, turning the temperature up until the steam filled the small enclosure. The water hammered against my shoulders, but it did nothing to quiet the playback loop in my head.

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Chapter 403

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My brain was stubbornly refusing to focus on the job offer or the arrest of Soraya, choosing instead to broadcast a high-definition highlight reel of the boat.

The memory of his lips was far too hot, a phantom heat that seemed to burn through the spray of the shower. I leaned my forehead against the tiles, my breath hitching as I remembered the weight of him and the way he had looked at me in the sunlight.

It wasn't just the almost-sex, though that had been enough to ruin me for any other man for the foreseeable future. It was the way he had touched me as if I were something precious, even though he was the one who'd pushed me away first.

I realised now that Lochlan was right—which is a devastating thing to admit to oneself while naked and vulnerable—I really couldn't control myself around him.

My hand slid down my throat, tracing the path his tongue had taken, and I closed my eyes as my fingers found the centre of the ache he had left behind. I let out a low, ragged sound that was swallowed by the roar of the water, my back arching as I tried to recapture the feeling of his mouth against my skin.

The release was sharp and left me feeling even more hollow than before.

God damn it, I'd been through such a long dry spell, and opening the floodgate with a man like Lochlan was a tactical error of monumental proportions.

I stayed under the water until my skin was pink and pruned, trying to scrub away the lingering sense of desperation. When I finally stepped out and wrapped myself in a towel, I caught my reflection in the steamed-up mirror.

I looked like a woman who had been thoroughly wrecked and was now seriously considering the logistics of ordering a high-end sex toy.

I checked out of the hotel alone. Portia, of course, was staying on with Josh, no doubt to "explore the local amenities" or whatever euphemism she was using.

I was wheeling my suitcase through the lobby when I saw him. Lochlan was by the doors, looking at his phone. He glanced up as if sensing my approach.

"Off, then?"

"Yep. Back to reality."

"So am I. Kai's bringing the car around." He paused. "It's a long drive back to London. Over five hours. You might as well ride with us."

My stomach did a little flip. Five hours. In an enclosed space with him, after my shower-time... revelations.

"I wouldn't want to impose," I said, aiming for breezy and landing somewhere near strained. "I can get the train. Very scenic. I hear."

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, his tone pleasant but leaving no room for argument. “It’s no trouble. Besides, there are updates on the case. You’ll want to hear them.”

He had me there. The part of me that was still a rational, curious human overruled the part that was a nervous, hormonally charged wreck.

“Fine,” I said, the word sounding like a surrender. “But only for the intel.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Naturally.”

Kai pulled up in the sleek, silent car. He got out, gave me a polite nod, and loaded our bags. Lochlan held the rear door open for me. I slid in, scooting all the way over to the far side.

Lochlan got in beside me, leaving a perfectly polite, yet somehow still oppressive, amount of space between us. Kai got behind the wheel.

We pulled away from the hotel porte-cochère. As we curved around the central fountain, a car suddenly backed out of a parking spot right into our path. Kai swore under his breath and wrenched the wheel. The car executed a smooth, if abrupt, swerve.

Physics took over. I was hurled sideways. My hands flailed for a grip. Instead of the door handle or the seat, I found Lochlan.

He caught me, one arm snapping around my waist, his hand splaying against my ribs. But he didn’t just steady me. He pulled, adjusting my trajectory so I didn’t just slump against him, but spun almost fully into his lap. The hand I’d thrown out to brace myself landed on the solid muscle of his thigh. My chest collided with his. My other hand, in its panic, had fisted a handful of his ridiculously soft jumper at his waist.

I was sprawled across him, nose buried in the wool at his collarbone. His scent wrapped around me like the afternoon mist on the lake.

My breath vanished.

The part of me pressed against his chest felt like it was on fire. Inside, my mind was a silent, shrill scream. On the outside, I was a statue.

Then I realised my fingers were curled perilously close to his inner thigh. I froze, then began a painfully slow, mortified retreat.

Lochlan looked down at me. He didn’t say a word. But his raised eyebrow, the slight narrowing of his eyes, was a whole interrogation.

I wanted to open the door and roll out onto the tarmac.

I tried to lever myself upright, attempting dignified extraction. The arm around my waist tightened, pulling me flush against him again. His breath stirred my hair.

“You okay? Do you need to lie down?”

“I’m fine. Completely fine. Peak condition,” I babbled, finally managing to pry his arm off and shove myself back into my own seat. I smoothed my top, placed my hands primly in my lap, and stared straight ahead, the picture of composure.

Except my cheeks were burning with a blush so violent it probably glowed in the dark.

“Apologies, Boss, Hyacinth,” Kai said from the front, his voice tight. “That car came out of nowhere.”

“Not your fault,” I squeaked, clearing my throat. “Really. All good.”

The offending car, having caused the chaos, now drove sedately past us, heading for the hotel entrance. It was a white luxury sedan. As it passed, the rear window slid down halfway.

Inside was a woman. Strikingly beautiful in a sharp, maintained way, age rendered ambiguous by excellent care and, no doubt, excellent money. Her gaze swept across our car. It landed on Lochlan with the focus of a laser sight.

Lochlan stared back, his face an unreadable slab of granite. The moment stretched, thick with silent communication I wasn’t privy to, then the car glided past.

“Who was that?” I asked.

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Chapter 404:

“No one important,” Lochlan said, his tone dismissing the subject entirely.

I let it drop.

He updated me on the case. Soraya had been formally arraigned. Charged with the murder of Benjamin Moss and the attempted murder of Nicky, Portia, Josh, and me. She was remanded in custody.

“She could still walk,” I said. “Good lawyers, doubt, time-lapse.”

“It’s unlikely.” He then told me about the Duke of Albemarle, Soraya’s secret backer and biological father. Faced with the choice between protecting his deranged daughter or saving his family’s centuries-old reputation from utter ruin, he had chosen the latter. He had withdrawn all support, financial and political.

Soraya was done.

I listened, impressed and a little unnerved. He’d dug so much deeper, moved pieces on a board I hadn’t even known existed. “You know, without you, I’d have probably just made her angrier. I wouldn’t have beaten her.”

He acknowledged this with a slight tilt of his head. “We made an effective team.” Then he pounced. “Since that’s the case, have you given any more thought to my offer? Coming back to Velos Capital?”

“Um, I’m still thinking.”

“The role would be different. Chief Administrative Officer was always too limited. I’m thinking Director of Strategic Integration. You’d have oversight of the merger process, your own budget, a seat on the interim steering committee. The compensation package, of course, would reflect the increased responsibility.”

He named a figure that made my ears ring. Then he listed the perks: car allowance, a discretionary fund, stock options that weren’t just decorative.

It was a dream. The power, the money, the sheer respect of it.

The only snag was sitting beside me.

“It’s... a very compelling offer,” I managed. “I just need a bit more time.”

“Take what you need.”

I fell silent, staring out at the blurring countryside.

The job was everything I’d ever wanted professionally. The only catch was that accepting it meant willingly walking back into the orbit of Lochlan, day after day, with my recently rediscovered libido screaming in my ear. Could I sit in meetings with him, discuss budgets and strategy, and not remember the feel of his mouth on my neck, the hard line of his body under mine?

Control yourself, I ordered my brain. You’re a professional woman, not a hormonal teenager.

The argument with myself was exhausting. The emotional whiplash of the last forty-eight hours, the low hum of the car, the sheer weight of the decision—all conspired against me. My eyelids grew heavy.

The last thing I was aware of was the gentle rocking of the car.

I suppose the giant boulder of Soraya's various death threats had finally been lifted from my chest, because I fell into a sleep so profound it probably could have been classified as a medical emergency, and I didn't wake up until the muffled hum of the motorway gave way to the aggressive, stop-start symphony of London traffic.

I drifted back to consciousness in that confused, velvet fog where you aren't entirely sure what year it is or whether you've successfully transitioned into a higher plane of existence. My brain was still firmly convinced I was back at the hotel, so I reached out with a blind, fumbling hand to nudge Portia, hoping to get her to shut up or move over.

Instead of the familiar, comforting softness of my best friend's cleavage, my palm made contact with something that felt suspiciously like a warm, leather-bound book or a particularly well-upholstered piece of gym equipment.

I frowned, my fingers performing a confused, wandering pattern across the surface.

"Portia, where have your tits gone?" I muttered. "Have they finally decided to flee the country after all that abuse?"

The chest was harder, smaller, and significantly more masculine than anything Portia had ever brought to the table.

"Hyacinth," a voice said.

It was a low, resonant, and entirely too magnetic sound that vibrated right through the hand I still had firmly planted on his pectoral muscle. My fingers froze instantly, coming to a dead stop directly over a small, distinctively firm peak that was most definitely not a lace-covered nipple.

I woke up properly then. In fact, I didn't just wake up; I was jolted into a state of absolute, wide-eyed terror that felt like being plunged from a peaceful cloud directly into a vat of boiling water.

I didn't dare open my eyes, but I could feel his breath as he leaned slightly closer to me. My face began to burn with a heat that could have probably powered a small village for a month.

I felt like I was pinned against a sheet of hot iron, and the sensation was causing my blood to surge and my skin to sizzle from my fingertips all the way down to my toes. I was going to be well-done if I didn't move immediately.

I gritted my teeth and made an attempt to scramble out of his arms and back to my own side of the car. I may have overdone the effort, however, as the movement resulted in a spectacular, kaleidoscopic display of gold sparks behind my eyelids that was so convincing I didn't even have to pretend I was about to faint. I slumped back slightly, holding my head until the world stopped spinning.

When I finally risked a glance at him, Lochlan was sitting there with a tiny smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Sorry," I managed. "I was... I was miles away. I thought you were Portia."

"I noticed," he said, the amusement in his eyes enough to make me want to crawl under the floor mats.

I spent the next several minutes staring intensely out of the opposite window, pretending to be absolutely fascinated by a delivery van and a particularly drab stretch of the Westway.

Then the realisation hit me with the force of a physical blow. Had I actually been lying down? I mean, really lying down?

I risked a lightning-fast glance at the two long, expensive-looking legs next to me and then quickly covered my eyes with one hand. I'd been using his lap as a mattress, hadn't I? Of course I had.

The car eventually slowed to a halt, and I climbed out with the kind of frantic energy usually reserved for escaping a burning building. I stood on the pavement and looked up, expecting to see the familiar, slightly chaotic entrance to Portia's flat, but instead I was staring at the sleek, intimidating silhouette of Lauderdale Tower.

I leaned back into the open door and frowned at Lochlan. "This isn't where I live."

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Chapter 405

Chapter 405:

"It is where you live now," Lochlan said. "I'm taking back Velos Capital, and you are getting the penthouse back as a corporate perk. It's a standard arrangement for senior staff."

"But I haven't actually decided to come back and work for you yet."

“You can think about it while you’re staying here. Consider it a bit of a sweetener to the deal. Even if you later decide that working for me is a terrible idea, you can just treat this as a temporary base until you find something else.”

“But—”

“Besides, Portia and her boyfriend seem to be in the middle of a very enthusiastic heat, so are you quite sure you want to go back to her flat and spend your evenings being the third wheel to a couple who can’t keep their tongues out of each other’s mouths?”

I hated him in that moment, mostly because he was absolutely right. The man knew exactly how to close a deal, and the thought of hearing Josh’s eager, puppy-like whimpering through the thin walls of Portia’s bedroom was enough to make me reconsider.

“Goodnight, Hyacinth.”

I gave Lochlan a brief, awkward wave as Kai pulled the car away, and I stood there for a moment, watching the red taillights disappear into the London drizzle.

When I finally turned toward the lobby, I hesitated, my thumb hovering over the biometric reader. I pressed it down, and the device let out a soft, welcoming blip as it turned green.

I took the lift up to the penthouse, my heart doing a strange little dance in my chest.

Lochlan must have sent a cleaning crew in after the police had finished tossing the place, because everything looked pristine and undisturbed.

I stripped off my clothes and stepped into the shower, letting the hot water wash away the last of the road grime and the lingering sensation of Lochlan’s chest under my hand.

Afterwards, I padded to the fridge, grabbed a bottle of water, twisted the cap off, and downed half of it in one go. The icy liquid was a shock to the system, a feeble attempt to quell the peculiar, low-grade fever that thinking about Lochlan seemed to induce.

I shoved open the balcony door and sank into a lounge, letting the London breeze try to clear my head.

I replayed the trip—every stupid, dangerous, weirdly intimate moment of it—and our parting. Did he think I was ungrateful? An emotional gold-digger who took his help and then bolted at the first sign of complications?

He’d pulled me from the wreckage, figuratively and nearly literally, and I’d given him a “cheers, mate” and a swift exit.

And now he was offering me my old job back. Well, a promoted version of it. A bribe, clearly.

Going back to Velos Capital meant voluntarily stepping back into his orbit. A gravitational pull I knew was dangerous. Could I do it?

I spent the next two days in a state of luxurious paralysis, lounging around the place, agonising, and actively avoiding calls from Lochlan.

Salvation, of a sort, came via Portia.

“Darling, I’m on my way back to London,” she announced. “With Josh in tow.”

“Josh. Of course. I’d begun to think you’d forgotten my number, replaced by his.”

She chuckled, an awkward, guilty little sound. “Oh, don’t be like that.”

“I’m not being like anything. I’m stating facts. What’s wrong? You sound like you’ve been caught keying a client’s Bentley.”

There was a pause. “It’s just... we’ve decided to move in together.”

I sat up. “Bloody hell. Congratulations. This is the first serious relationship you’ve had in what, a geological age?”

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Chapter 406

Chapter 406:

“It’s not that serious,” she protested, which was her default setting for anything involving emotion that lasted more than a week.

“If you’re willing to share a bathroom with a man who I’m fairly sure still believes a ‘quick rinse’ constitutes a shower, it’s serious.”

“Well, alright, kind of. I don’t know what happened. He just looked at me with those big, doleful eyes and I couldn’t say no. You know the ones.”

“I do.”

I could hear her hemming and hawing down the line. “Spit it out, Pierce.”

“Well, his place is a shoebox with two other overgrown undergraduates, so there’s no room for me there.”

“Ah. So you want him to come and live with you at your lovely, spacious flat. The flat I’m currently occupying.”

“Well... yes.”

“I see.”

A strange calm settled over me. It was the calm of a decision being made for you, however inconveniently. “Well, that works out nicely. I forgot to tell you my good news.”

“What good news?”

“I’m going back to Velos Capital. And my disgustingly generous boss has reinstated my tenancy of the penthouse at Lauderdale Tower. So, you see, problem solved. You won’t have me as a third wheel, cramping your style and judging Josh’s cereal choices.”

The relief in her voice was palpable, quickly swamped by a wave of guilt. “Oh, Hyacinth, that is good news. God, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to spring this on you.”

“No worries. Hey, I’m happy for you. Seriously. Josh seems... nice.”

And you haven’t let a nice thing within a ten-mile radius for years, I added silently. I wasn’t about to be the barnacle on the hull of my best friend’s first proper relationship.

“I’ll have my stuff picked up from your flat today. Consider the premises evacuated.”

“Thanks, Hyacinth.”

“What are friends for?”

We chatted a while longer and hung up.

“Well,” I said to the pigeon on the railing, who looked unimpressed. “That makes the decision for me, doesn’t it?”

I’d have to set boundaries, though. Maybe I needed a contract. Something legally binding. A “Strictly Business, No Sex” clause. Or, if I was being honest, a “Strictly Professional During Work Hours, After-Hours Activities Subject to Negotiation” addendum.

My bottom line was embarrassingly simple: I wanted to sleep with him. But I didn’t want to date him.

Could Lochlan agree to such a clinical, carnal arrangement?

I was suddenly, startlingly, aware of whose playbook I was rifling through. Contracts. Terms. Clearly defined boundaries—I was trying to draft a Cary Grant special.

He was the one who’d believed every human entanglement could be managed with clauses and penalties. And look how brilliantly that had worked out for us.

I shook my head, physically dislodging thoughts of my ex-husband.

Picking up my phone, I thumbed a text to Lochlan: Alright. I’m in. Coming back to Velos. But we need to talk first.

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Chapter 407

Chapter 407:

The boardroom of Velos Capital was never a warm place, but today the temperature seemed to have dipped several degrees below polite. Sunlight streamed in through the floor-to-ceiling windows but did nothing to warm up the frosty atmosphere around the mahogany table.

I sat at the head, listening to the carefully couched concerns of seven people whose job it was to oversee governance, and whose survival instinct had finally kicked in after Soraya’s little performance.

“The market,” began Ezra Gilchrist, our longest-serving director and a man who pronounced “liquidity” with more reverence than his wife’s name, “needs reassurance, Lochlan. Stability. The brief... unpleasantness with Ms Warren highlighted a vulnerability in the public perception of the company’s leadership.”

“By ‘unpleasantness,’” I said, keeping my tone mild, conversational, “you mean her fraudulent takeover attempt, embezzlement, and subsequent arrest. Let’s call a spade a spade, Ezra.”

A ripple of discomfort.

“Quite,” he conceded, adjusting his glasses. “But the fact remains, the connection between you and Ms Warren was... personal. It blurred the lines. The financial press is already speculating. To prevent any perception of future instability, we believe a clear signal is required.”

I leaned back, steeping my fingers. I’d seen this coming. “And what signal would that be?”

Miriam Feldstein, sharp as a tack and just as likely to draw blood, took over. “We want a commitment from you. For the next twelve months. A moratorium, if you will, on any new personal entanglements that could become public and, by extension, a corporate liability.”

I almost laughed.

A moratorium. On personal entanglements. As if one could schedule such things like a quarterly review.

“You’re asking me to remain celibate for the good of the share price,” I said, deadpan.

“We’re asking for discretion,” Miriam corrected, though her eyes held a glint that said she knew exactly what she was asking. “No dating. No public appearances with a partner. A year of focused, unimpeachable leadership to rebuild confidence. It’s not an unreasonable ask, given the circumstances.”

It’s a profoundly stupid ask, I thought.

As if the absence of a woman in my life was a guarantee of stability. Soraya hadn’t been a girlfriend; she’d been a viper I’d willingly let into the nest for the sake of...

But I could see the calculus from their perspective. Lochlan Hastings, married to the job. It was the narrative they wanted, a neat bow on a messy situation.

Hyacinth’s face flickered in my mind. The idea of explaining this particular board mandate to her was almost worth the trouble, just to see the spectacularly derisive look she’d give me.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, the words a non-committal courtesy. It was the corporate equivalent of “we’ll see.”

“We’d prefer a firmer commitment,” Ezra pressed.

“And I’d prefer a board that didn’t mistake my personal life for a corporate asset,” I replied, the politeness in my voice thinning to a veneer. “You have my answer. I’ll think about it. Now, if we’re done rehashing my non-existent love life, perhaps we can discuss the Q3 projections from the Madrid office.”

The meeting limped on, the point made but not conceded.

Afterwards, in the sterile quiet of my office, I poured a whisky I didn’t really want.

The whole affair was tiresome. A year. It was nothing in the grand scheme, a blink. And yet the imposition of it, the sheer audacity of the request, grated.

My private life was the one kingdom I’d fought to keep separate. Now the board wanted to plant their flag in it.

My mobile buzzed.

“Lochlan,” my mother said when I answered. “I’ve just had a rather illuminating conversation with Galina Croft.”

Ah. So that was done. “I take it dinner next week is off the agenda.”

“Not just next week. Permanently. She was charming about it, of course. A torrent of compliments about you. But she did mention you spent the entirety of your time in Applewick with another woman. A Ms Galloway.”

There was no point in prevaricating with Jennifer Hastings. She had a sociologist’s eye for social lies. “Hyacinth was there on business. We had matters to discuss.”

“‘Matters,’” she repeated, the word pregnant with academic scepticism. “And are you and Ms Galloway discussing these ‘matters’ in an ongoing capacity?”

“No, Mother. I’m not dating Hyacinth.”

“Why not?”

The bluntness of it almost made me smile. Why not, indeed. Because she’d rather chew glass than be the “billionaire’s girlfriend” again.

“Because she hasn’t said yes,” I said, giving her the simplest, truest part of it.

A pause on the line. “I see. And do you intend to keep asking?”

“That,” I said slowly, “is a more complex question than your tone implies. And before you get any ideas, I need you to promise me something. Do not approach her. Do not invite her for tea. Do not, under any circumstances, attempt to ‘assess’ her. It would startle her away, permanently.”

“You think I’d be that obvious?”

“I think you’re my mother, and your version of subtlety is quoting Durkheim to make a point about seating arrangements. Promise me.”

She sighed. “Very well. I shall refrain from conducting field research. But Lochlan, if this is the person who finally breaks through that calculated reserve of yours, I would like to meet her before I’m too old to appreciate the phenomenon.”

“Noted.”

I set the phone down.

Two conversations, two different fronts, both circling the same impossible subject. The board wanted a monk. My mother wanted a wedding. And I wanted a woman who viewed the trappings of my world as a gilded cage.

As if on cue, my phone lit up with a new text.

Hyacinth: Alright. I’m in. Coming back to Velos. But we need to talk first.

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Chapter 408

Chapter 408:

Morning at the office arrived with the subtle charm of a dentist’s appointment.

I'd just settled into my ludicrously expensive ergonomic chair, taken a bracing sip of terrible coffee from the kitchen, and was contemplating the existential void of my inbox when he came in.

Lochlan.

There he stood, suited and booted, a vision of corporate severity, his expression as warm and approachable as a frozen lake.

My brain immediately time-travelled to last night.

He'd come to the penthouse to talk over the new job, all polite focus and measured tones. When I'd laid out my grand "strictly professional relationship" rule, he'd accepted it without so much as a raised eyebrow. Just a calm, considering nod and a "that seems reasonable."

Reasonable.

It was weirdly, infuriatingly disappointing.

I'd mentally prepared for a fight. I'd braced for him to get all domineering, to declare in that low, certain voice of his that he didn't want "strictly professional," that he could handle a purely carnal arrangement.

Hell, I'd even steeled myself to propose it. One time, I'd reasoned. Just to get it out of my system. You always want what you can't have, right? The theory was, once you've had it, the obsession should fade.

But no. He'd just agreed.

The closest we'd come to contact was an almost-hug when he'd leaned past me to press the lift call button, his suit jacket brushing my arm. All in all, a professionally satisfying but sexually barren evening.

That must have been why, after he'd left, my subconscious decided to stage a full-scale rebellion.

In the hazy theatre of my dreams, someone was kissing me, alternating between fierce possession and slow, devastating tenderness. His lips were soft, his hands were those impossibly long, clever fingers, and he mapped my body until I was utterly, shamelessly pliant. A human puddle.

It was obscenely vivid.

Waking up this morning felt like a betrayal by my own hormones. I sat in bed, replaying the sensory details. The face in the dream had been blurred, but the identity of its owner wasn't a mystery.

It was pathetic. Was I so sexually deprived that Portia moving in with her golden retriever had triggered some latent nesting-and-mating instinct in me? Appalling.

"Morning, Hyacinth."

Lochlan's voice, cool and real, yanked me out of the reverie.

I plastered on a smile I hoped looked more "efficient employee" and less "woman who dreamt you gave her multiple orgasms."

"Boss. Good morning."

He gave me a brief, impersonal nod and swept into his office without a backward glance. The door clicked shut.

I let out a breath. So, we were doing this. The professional pantomime.

Fine. I could do professional. I was the queen of professional. My libido could go sit in the naughty corner.

"Morning, Hyacinth!" Another voice, warmer this time. Kai was heading towards his desk, a stack of files in his arms.

I turned and flashed him a genuine smile. "Kai. Look at you, holding the fort. It's good to be back."

"It's good to have you back," he said, setting the files down. "Properly, I mean. Things have been... eventful."

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 409

Chapter 409:

“That’s one word for it,” I said, leaning against my desk. “So, talk to me. What’s the mood? I saw the head of HR scuttle into the inner sanctum looking like he was going to his own execution.”

Kai lowered his voice, casting a glance towards Lochlan’s door. “Cleaning house. Soraya’s little takeover bid didn’t happen in a vacuum. She had help. Inside. People who took her money, or believed her promises, or were just stupid.”

He shrugged, a sombre look on his usually cheerful face. “Now the boss is back in the driving seat, and he’s checking the rear-view mirror. Some heads have to roll.”

I followed his gaze. The HR director had been in there for over forty minutes. Judging by that marathon session, it wasn’t just a few heads. It was a whole bowling alley.

I wasn’t summoned to the royal presence until mid-afternoon.

When I entered, Lochlan was standing by the floor-to-ceiling window, his profile outlined against the grey London sky. He was staring at his phone, slipping it into his pocket as if he’d just ended a call.

“Boss. What do you need?”

“You’ll accompany me to the hospital shortly,” he said, turning.

“The hospital? Is everything alright?”

“A visit. To see a patient.”

Right. Cryptic. My favourite.

I collected my bag and followed him down to the car, where Roy gave me a sympathetic nod.

We were halfway there when Lochlan spoke up. “Pull over here, please, Roy.”

We stopped outside a florist. Lochlan got out and went inside. I watched through the window as he surveyed the blooms, his tall frame looking oddly out of place amongst the riot of colour.

He emerged a few minutes later carrying a bouquet. My eyebrows tried to meet my hairline.

He was holding lilies. A huge, fragrant bunch of stark white lilies.

I waited until he was back in the car, the cloying scent already filling the space. “Boss, can I ask who we’re visiting?”

“An old acquaintance.”

Old acquaintance. How old? Were they on their deathbed? Was this some kind of morbid final gesture? Because I thought lilies were for the graveyard.

I decided silence was the better part of valour and didn’t ask again.

Roy navigated the rest of the way to a private hospital. The entire journey, Lochlan carried those lilies with an air of absolute unconcern.

We walked through sterile corridors, past nurses’ stations. I saw at least three nurses eye the bouquet, their mouths tightening. I saw the “No Flowers” sign on the wall. They clearly saw it too, but something—probably the sheer, unassailable force field of Lochlan’s authority—kept them from intervening.

That, or he literally owned the building.

With him, it was a coin toss.

We finally reached a VIP room. Lochlan pushed the door open and I followed, my professional smile at the ready.

It faltered almost immediately.

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Chapter 410

Chapter 410:

I had trouble reconciling the polished, confident headshot from the company directory with the woman in the bed.

Sherry McCullers. Head of the New York office. Efficient, reliable Sherry, who Lochlan had trusted to hold the fort across the Atlantic. Also the woman who had lured him to New York and sold him out to Soraya.

Now, she was a patchwork of suffering. A bandage wrapped her head, her leg was suspended in a cast, and her face was a canvas of yellowing bruises and angry purple blotches. She looked shattered.

My first, horrifying thought was that Lochlan had arranged this. I shot a glance at him, but his face was impassive as he walked to the bedside and carefully, almost tenderly, arranged the lilies on her side table. The scent immediately grew stronger, a funereal perfume.

He looked down at her. "Sherry. How are you holding up?"

Sherry turned her face towards the window, the movement clearly painful. It was hard to read her expression through the damage.

"Boss." Her voice was a rasp.

"I brought flowers."

A bitter, choked sound escaped her. "I see that."

"You wanted to see me," he prompted. "Isn't that why you called?"

"I'm... I'm sorry," she whispered, still not looking at him. "I never meant... I didn't want to betray you."

"The apology is rather late, Sherry. What's done is done."

"I had my reasons!" she said, the words bursting out with a sudden, weak ferocity.

"I know you did. It's the same reason for the current state of your face, I assume."

She flinched as if struck. "He didn't mean it."

"Didn't he?" Lochlan shifted, putting his hands in his pockets. "Your son. Mike, isn't it? Not the sharpest tool. A dedicated follower of fashion, particularly the one where you lose other people's money at the roulette table. Racked up a debt so large the casino enforcers were talking about permanent anatomical revisions. And along came Soraya. Such a helpful woman. She could make those nasty men go away, in exchange for a little favour. Setting up your CEO. You took the deal."

Sherry had begun to cry, silent tears tracking through the bruises.

"But then Soraya was arrested," Lochlan continued. "Your part in it came out. You lost your job. But Mike's troubles weren't over, were they? He went right back to the tables. Thought the golden goose was still laying. When the enforcers came back, he came to you.

You'd lost your position, your income. You said no. And he expressed his disappointment. With his fists."

"I'm sorry," she sobbed again. "I didn't give her any real secrets, Lochlan, I swear. Just access, just... timing."

"I know. That's the only reason you are not currently in jail awaiting trial for conspiracy and gross breach of fiduciary duty. Because I know that, I've decided not to press charges."

Sherry's breath caught, a flicker of pure relief breaking through the misery on her bruised face. "Thank you."

"Mike is being admitted to a residential rehabilitation facility tomorrow morning. It has excellent security. He won't be leaving until his therapists are confident his gambling addiction is managed."

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Chapter 411

Chapter 411:

"Oh, God. Thank you." Her shoulders slumped as if a physical weight had been lifted.

"That's why you called me, isn't it? Not to apologise. To get your son sorted."

Sherry had the grace to look shamefaced.

"Now, you just focus on getting well," he said. "You'll need your strength. After all, once you're discharged, you'll have the considerable task of rebuilding your career ahead of you."

"What?"

"I've put the word out. To every headhunter, every board, every firm in this city and several others. Anyone who hires you will be making a conscious enemy of me."

Her breath hitched. “But... why? You said you believed me!”

“I believe you didn’t give her core secrets. I do not forgive you for selling me out. Did you think a simple ‘sorry’ wiped the slate clean? There’s always a price, Sherry. Consider this yours.”

He turned and walked out of the room.

I stood frozen for a second, my mind reeling, before scrambling to follow him.

We walked down the corridor in silence.

I was stunned. It was ruthless, cold, and brutally calculated.

As if reading my mind, he spoke without looking at me. “Do you think I was too harsh?”

“No. If I were in your shoes, I’d have done worse.” Probably. But I’d never had someone betray me before.

I wanted to ask about Leo—no, Jason Rivers—about what Lochlan had done to him, but I was suddenly afraid of the answer.

Instead, I fell back into the role of assistant. “Where to next, boss?”

“Dinner,” he said, checking his watch. “With Desmond. He’s in town.”

“Ah, Mr Lockwood.”

A flood of entirely irrelevant thoughts immediately hijacked my brain.

Desmond Lockwood. The man was a genetic lottery winner, an alpha among alphas. Just the sheer presence of his chest muscles had probably inspired sonnets and bad life choices in equal measure.

He was also, let’s be honest, a large part of the reason I’d spent a good chunk of my earlier tenure at Velos Capital quietly convinced Lochlan was gay. The way Desi acted around him, all easy physicality and devoted loyalty, had painted a very specific picture in my head.

Now, with the definitive knowledge that Lochlan’s tastes ran very much to the female persuasion—specifically my own—it threw the whole Desmond equation into a confusing new light. Was Desi not gay either? Or was he tragically, epically gay and utterly in love with his best friend, destined for a lifetime of unrequited pining?

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Chapter 412

Chapter 412:

“Hyacinth,” Lochlan’s voice cut through my mental fan fiction. “You’ve been thinking awfully hard for an awfully long time. A penny for them?”

I arranged my face into a mask of pure, guileless innocence. “Me? Oh, I was just thinking what’s for dinner.”

He reached out and tapped a finger lightly against my forehead. “Liar.”

Roy drove us to the restaurant, a place nestled in a hidden garden square in the heart of Mayfair. It was one of those London miracles—a pocket of rustic, picturesque charm behind a high brick wall, all climbing ivy and soft lantern light.

As soon as we stepped inside, the manager, a man with a professionally unctuous smile, glided over. “Mr Hastings, what a pleasure.”

His gaze slid past Lochlan to me, and his face lit up with genuine recognition. “Mrs Grant! What a delight to see you again. It’s been such a long time since you and Mr Grant have dined with...”

The “us” died on his lips as his brain finally caught up with his mouth. His eyes widened in dawning horror.

My own smile froze solid.

Damn it. I had been here before. Many times. With Cary.

Lochlan turned his head. “It seems you’re a regular.”

“I haven’t been here in ages.”

“Is that so?” he asked, one eyebrow lifting a millimetre.

“Absolutely. Totally forgot about this place.”

“I see.” Lochlan turned back and just started walking, forcing the mortified manager to scramble ahead to guide us.

The restaurant was as beautiful as I recalled, all exposed beams, stone floors, and the gentle sound of a water feature somewhere. We crossed a little wooden bridge over a koi pond. It was achingly familiar.

“Hyacinth,” Lochlan said, his tone casual. “What’s behind that pavilion over there?”

“That’s...” I began automatically. “It’s the bird-watching alcove.”

I caught myself, frowning in what I hoped was convincing confusion. “Hmm. You know, I really can’t recall. What is it?”

“Forgotten?” he pressed.

“Totally. Like I said, I hardly ever came.”

“Just as well. It doesn’t look like much of a view anyway.”

The manager, sweating slightly, ushered us to a private room and opened the door with a flourish.

Inside, sprawled in a chair by the open window, was Desmond Lockwood.

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Chapter 413

Chapter 413:

He was on the phone, one booted foot propped on the windowsill, and he was in full flight. “—because if you think that’s an acceptable way to run a fucking site, you’ve got another thing coming, you absolute melt!”

He was dressed in a black knit polo and white trousers, an outfit that screamed “yachting casual” but on him looked like something a pirate king would wear to relax. He was a walking, swearing testosterone bomb.

Lochlan took two steps into the room and stopped dead. He turned to the hovering manager. “We’ll take a different room.”

“Of course, sir, right away.”

Lochlan turned, his hand finding the small of my back to guide me out. His touch was brief, purposeful, and sent a wholly inappropriate spark straight up my spine.

Desmond, having concluded his call with a final, creative curse, stubbed out his cigarette and bounded over, his anger evaporating into a broad, rakish grin.

“Shit, mate, you should’ve said you were bringing Hyacinth! I’d have aired the place out properly. Can’t have a lady breathing in my toxic fumes. Absolutely, let’s move.”

I gave him a genuine smile.

We were settled in a new, smoke-free room. Once we’d ordered, Desmond leaned forward, his elbows on the table, eyes gleaming with unabashed curiosity.

“Right then. Hospital visit done? All business concluded? Good. Now, you have to give me the proper gossip. The headlines are all ‘ruthless CEO reclaims empire,’ but I want the director’s cut. How bad was it with the Soraya situation?”

Lochlan gave a condensed, clinical summary that made the whole near-death experience sound like a mildly inconvenient board meeting.

When he finished, he fixed Desmond with a dry look. “You came all the way to London just for the gossip?”

Desmond’s smile turned sly. “Only half-right, mate. I’m not just here to receive gossip. I’m here to deliver some.”

“Don’t you have anything better to do with your time?”

Desmond reached out and threw a heavily muscled arm around Lochlan’s shoulders, pulling him into a sideways hug. “Lochy-Loch, you wound me. I had a flight to Australia booked. I changed my entire itinerary, lost a fortune in cancellation fees, all to grace you with my presence. This is love, you utter bastard. Where’s your gratitude?”

I busied myself with my water glass, taking a strategic sip to hide my expression. I couldn’t help it. My eyes flicked between them.

Could anyone blame me for my past assumptions? The physical ease, the devotion, the nicknames. It was definitely way more than just casual bromance.

Lochlan shoved his arm off. “Get to the point.”

“Heartless sod,” Desmond chuckled. “Alright, alright, down to business. You know Gloria was in Appleby last week.”

“I know,” Lochlan said evenly. “I saw her car leaving the hotel.”

My stomach did a little dip. So that was the woman in the sleek car. Gloria Lockwood.

Desmond took a swig of his drink. “Have you ever heard of The Keystones?”

Lochlan’s brow furrowed. “Of course. It’s that consortium. Less a business network, more a cult for the ethically vacant.”

“Well, Gloria is a member. Only found out myself recently. You remember when Tanya Grant came crawling to the family for help with her precious son?” Desmond’s voice was laced with contempt. “Gloria’s price for that help was that Cary Grant accept her invitation to join the little club.”

At the mention of Cary’s name, Lochlan’s gaze flicked to me. I studied a particularly fascinating knot in the wooden table, pretending I hadn’t heard.

Desmond gave a cold laugh. “But Cary’s not a complete idiot, is he? Told her where to shove her invitation. So that was that. Or so I thought. Then this Soraya mess explodes, and Gloria is suddenly very, very interested. What do you want to bet she’s looking at Soraya as her next recruit?”

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Chapter 414

Chapter 414:

Lochlan was silent for a moment, thinking. “It doesn’t matter. Whatever she does, it won’t get Soraya out.”

“You need to make sure of that, Lochlan,” Desmond said, all humour gone from his face. “If that psycho gets out, she’s coming for you. And she’s coming for your Hyacinth.” He nodded at me. “For me and the family, the more powerful people Gloria ropes into her little web, the harder my job becomes to contain her.”

“Soraya will not escape justice,” Lochlan stated. “And for what it’s worth, I don’t see Soraya being anyone’s puppet, not even Gloria’s. She’s too clever. If she’s forced to play along, it’ll be a game of her own making.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.”

“Excuse me for a moment.” I stood.

I needed air more than a bathroom. I weaved through the restaurant and out into the enclosed garden. As I paused by a cluster of ferns, I pulled out my phone and called the only legal expert I trusted who wouldn’t sugar-coat things.

Portia answered on the second ring. “Good news or bad?”

“Worse than bad. Soraya might possibly get a get-out-of-jail-free card from a cult.” I gave her a rapid-fire summary of what I’d just heard.

There was a moment of stunned silence on the line. Then Portia erupted. “You are kidding me. That bitch! After everything?” I heard a clatter, probably her putting down a fork in disgust. “My appetite is officially ruined. This is an outrage.”

But then, true to her lawyerly form, she took a steadying breath. “Right. Okay. But we have Lochlan. He’s not exactly a slouch. Legally... a trial like this can be dragged out for years with the right—or rather the wrong—legal team and influence. I don’t think she’ll walk, not ultimately. But this Gloria woman could cause serious delays. Make the whole process a bloody nightmare.”

“Is there anything we can do?” I asked, feeling useless.

“Not ‘we’ yet, but ‘I’ can start digging,” Portia said, and I could almost hear her cracking her mental knuckles. “Let me see what I can unearth on this Gloria Lockwood. See what we’re really dealing with. And don’t worry about The Keystones. Cult, club, whatever it is, if it’s got members, it leaves a paper trail. I’ll find it.”

I was about to reply when I heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps on the gravel path behind me.

“Gotta go. We’ll talk later.” I ended the call.

I turned, expecting to see Lochlan, and found myself face-to-face with a complete stranger.

Well, almost.

He was a man in his mid-fifties, I'd guess, wearing glasses and a very well-cut suit. He had a bookish, gentle handsomeness about him, the kind that ages gracefully without a hint of the dreaded middle-aged spread.

I racked my brain, certain I'd never seen him before, but he was staring at me with an intensity that was borderline rude, his expression caught somewhere between thoughtful and wistful.

"Can I help you?" I asked, my tone polite but with an edge that clearly added, because you're staring.

He seemed to snap out of it, blinking. "Oh. My apologies. It's my first time here, I'm afraid I've gotten turned around. I saw someone and thought I might ask for directions."

That was plausible. The garden was a maze. "It is easy to get lost. Which room are you looking for?"

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Chapter 415

Chapter 415:

"The Willow room."

I knew it. "Go back onto that covered walkway." I pointed. "Walk straight, it's the third door on your left."

"Thank you, that's very kind." He made a move to leave, then hesitated, turning back to me. "Forgive me, but... are you from London?"

"No." And I wasn't going to tell him where I was from.

He didn't take the hint. "How old are you?"

That was it. The warning beep became a full-blown siren. “I think you should focus on finding your room,” I said, my voice cooling several degrees. “You’re wasting your time.”

He had the decency to look chastened. “Please, don’t misunderstand. I mean no harm. It’s just... I had a daughter. If she had... survived, well, she would be about your age. I imagine she might have been as lovely as you.”

I stared at him.

What.

In the name of all that’s holy, what.

My reservoir of politeness, never bottomless, ran completely dry. That was it. I didn’t care if he was the King of England. That line was disgusting. Worse than Toby Saltzman’s leering, because at least he was honest about being a perv. This “my dead daughter” routine was just a more sophisticated brand of creepy.

I didn’t utter another word. I just turned on my heel and walked away, leaving him standing there. Let him find his own damn Willow room.

My pace was brisk as I headed back along the winding path towards my own room. I was so wrapped up in my irritation that I almost walked straight into the man rounding the corner.

I skidded to a halt.

Now it was my turn to stare.

“Mr Hastings. Hello.”

“Hyacinth! Hello there!” Holden Hastings beamed at me, a bear of a man with unruly silvering hair and a warmth that felt like a physical force. He was dressed expensively but carelessly, as if he’d rather be in hiking gear.

I was momentarily thrown. He remembered my name. We’d met just once.

“Oh, of course I remember you. You’re my son’s right-hand woman! I’ve heard all about you,” he said, as if reading my mind. His smile was genuine, his eyes crinkling. “I wanted to thank you, personally. For sticking by Lochlan through all this recent nonsense. Velos has had a rough few months, and he says you’ve been an absolute rock.”

I was, against my will, faintly flattered. “Not at all, just doing my job,” I demurred, wondering just how much “all about you” entailed.

Did Lochlan actually sit down for cosy chats with his dad about his admin staff? It seemed wildly out of character.

“Now, about that dinner,” he began. “I know you had to cancel last time because of work, but—”

At that moment, Mr Dead-Daughter from the garden caught up to us. “Holden! You know this young lady?”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a posessive husband!

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Chapter 416

Chapter 416:

“Of course! Lochlan’s Chief Admin Officer. Sorry, Director now, isn’t it? Congratulations!” Holden said, clapping me on the shoulder with a force that rattled my teeth. “Hyacinth Galloway. Fiercely capable. This is Aaron Lockwood, Chairman of The Irwell Group.”

My brain short-circuited for a second. The Irwell Group. Aaron Lockwood. Desmond’s uncle.

I turned, my smile now professionally polished and airtight. “Mr Lockwood. My apologies, I was rather short with you earlier.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “No, no, the fault was entirely mine. It was an impertinent question.”

“Not at all,” I lied smoothly, then turned back to Holden. “Well, I won’t keep you both from your dinner. Enjoy your evening. I should be getting back.”

“Nonsense!” Holden boomed, already pulling out his phone. “No need for you to trail all the way back. I’ll just call Lochlan, tell him to haul himself over to my room. You come with us. Aaron won’t mind, will you, Aaron?”

“Not in the least. It would be a pleasure.”

“Of course. That’s very kind,” I said.

Inside, my thoughts were considerably less polite.

I fell into step beside Holden, who was already chatting away about the restaurant's wine list. We reached the Willow room and sat down to a lavish spread.

Aaron Lockwood turned his gentle, unnerving gaze back to me. "Hyacinth. That's a lovely name. Your parents' inspiration? And do you have a boyfriend?"

I felt my soul leave my body for a brief, peaceful second. When it slammed back in, the social imperative was clear. Earlier, I could afford to be rude to a random weirdo. Now, he was a business titan and Desmond's uncle.

"My grandmother, actually," I said, managing a tight smile. "She's fond of the flower."

I ignored the second question, taking a pointed sip of water.

Aaron nodded. "A good name. It signifies constancy, rebirth. And from what Holden says of your resilience, it seems fitting."

"Thank you." I picked up my water glass, using it as a protective barrier, and tried to become one with the upholstery.

He was still looking at me. Holden cleared his throat, a low, warning sound.

Undeterred, Aaron pressed on. "About that boyfriend, Hyacinth. I have a nephew, you see. A very fine young man. Still single."

I choked. The water went down the wrong pipe, sending me into a coughing fit that was half genuine shock, half performance art to buy time.

And that was the precise moment the door opened. Lochlan and Desmond walked in.

Holden looked at the new arrivals, his gaze lingering on Desmond with what could only be described as profound paternal dread. "Lochlan. Come and say hello to your Uncle Aaron."

Lochlan moved forward. "Mr Lockwood. A pleasure."

Desmond breezed over to Holden. "Uncle Holden! Look at you. Distinguished as ever. Ageing like a fine, roguish wine."

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 417

Chapter 417:

Holden fixed him with a stern, sorrowful look. “Desmond, you shouldn’t be gallivanting down here so much. You’re not a boy anymore. Your uncle is already trying to find you a nice girl. It’s time to think about settling down, starting a family.”

Desmond’s smile turned wicked. He slung a muscular arm around Lochlan’s shoulders, pulling him close. “Oh, I’m quite settled. I like it right here. I only ever want to gallivant with Lochlan. He’s much more fun than any girl.”

I watched, transfixed, as the phrase “gallivant with Lochlan” seemed to physically assault Holden Hastings. His face lost a shade of colour.

Aaron Lockwood gave a delicate, uncomfortable cough. “Now, Holden. The children have grown. Lochlan and Desmond are both splendid men. The, ah, specifics of their preferences... well, we mustn’t be old-fashioned about these things.”

Holden’s face turned a fascinating shade of puce. He looked at his son, who was not, I noted, shrugging off Desmond’s proprietorial arm, and a wave of despair seemed to wash over him.

Then, suddenly, his gaze snapped to me.

I had been huddled in my chair, sipping my water, a silent spectator.

His eyes lit up with the fervent zeal of a man spotting a life raft. “My Lochlan is perfectly normal!” he declared, pointing a dramatic finger at me. “He likes women! Everyone at the company says he’s dating Hyacinth here!”

The glass froze halfway to my lips.

He didn’t. He absolutely did not just throw me under the bus to prove his son’s sexual orientation to a room full of people.

All eyes were on me.

I shook my head so violently I nearly gave myself whiplash. “No! Absolutely not! That is a complete and utter rumour, Mr Hastings! A vicious, unfounded piece of gossip!” My voice was several octaves too high.

Holden gave a knowing, paternal chuckle. “Now, now. No need to be shy. I know what I know.”

I was speechless.

Sure, I’d heard the whispers at Velos. When you become the only director under thirty, aside from the CEO himself, and you share a history of surviving corporate attacks and have a penthouse he pays for, people talk. But to have the founder’s father canonise the rumour was a career nightmare of epic proportions. I’d be a laughing stock, or worse, a target.

In desperation, I turned a wide-eyed, pleading look on Lochlan. Fix this. Now.

Calmly, he reached up and removed Desmond’s arm from his shoulders.

Then, instead of creating any helpful, clarifying distance, he walked over and sat down in the empty chair right beside mine.

“Dad, please don’t tease Hyacinth. The rumours at the office are already a nuisance for her. If they get any worse, she’ll resign. And I’ve only just managed to convince her to stay.”

He paused, his gaze sliding to me, laden with a fondness that seemed to heat the air between us.

“With me.”

Every word was technically a clarification. Every word was also fiercely protective. Every word, consequently, made everything a hundred times worse.

I felt my cheeks flush, the heat crawling up my neck.

Was he serious? Was that his idea of clearing things up? That look, that tone... a passing stray cat would have taken one glance and assumed we were in the middle of a torrid affair.

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Chapter 418

Chapter 418:

Desmond flung himself into the chair on Lochlan's other side. "Loch! We had a pact! A lifetime of defying society and our parents together! And then Hyacinth comes along, and you just... straighten up? Without me?" He clutched his chest dramatically. "I'm devastated. This is betrayal. I object! You can't be with her! It's her or me, Lochlan. Choose!"

I watched this display from inches away, utterly gobsmacked.

So... what? I was the other woman? I'd stolen his... husband?

The mental gymnastics were giving me a headache.

Holden Hastings was having a full-blown, silent coronary. His eyes looked like they were trying to escape their sockets. A fine sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead. "Aaron!" he barked, his voice strangled. "Get a grip on your nephew! Take him home this instant!"

"Now, now, don't get overwrought," Aaron soothed with one of his soft sighs. "Desmond's kidding. He's just having a bit of fun."

"A bit of fun?" Holden sputtered. "Don't you give me that! It's easy for you to be flippant—your family isn't the one that's... you know!"

Aaron looked genuinely puzzled. "Isn't the one that's what?"

Holden looked like he might actually combust. He seemed to be weighing the merits of physically throwing both Lockwoods out of the window.

Desmond leaned forward. "Uncle Holden, please, don't be cross. My feelings for Lochlan are real. Our families are so close. If you'd only consider letting him marry into the Lockwood family, I'd cherish him. I really would."

That did it.

With a roar, Holden snatched up the small bone china plate from in front of him and hurled it at Desmond's head. "GET OUT!"

Desmond ducked with the ease of long practice. The plate sailed past his ear and shattered against the wall behind him with a terribly expensive sound.

Holden was on his feet, ready to charge.

Aaron leapt up to intercept him, putting himself between the furious father and his gleeful nephew. “Holden, breathe! He’s a wind-up merchant, he always has been—it’s just a joke.”

“A JOKE?!” Holden bellowed, trying to get around him. “He stays away from my son!”

He then turned his wild, pleading gaze on me—the only seemingly sane person in the room. “Hyacinth. You and Lochlan. You make it work. You hear me? You absolutely cannot lose to a man.”

I blinked. “I... what?”

How had the narrative looped back to me? I was just a spectator to this insanity. “Mr. Hastings, Lochlan and I really aren’t—”

He cut me off with a decisive chop of his hand. “Enough. I know the truth. Don’t worry about a thing. You just focus on the relationship. Any problems, you come to me.”

Once again, I was rendered speechless. No one had ever mentioned that Lochlan’s father was this... magnificently unhinged.

Aaron, having successfully calmed Holden back into his seat, offered a conciliatory smile. “You know, I was just telling Hyacinth I had a nephew to introduce her to. Little did I know she was already spoken for by your boy.”

Holden shot him a venomous look. “Your nephew doesn’t want a girlfriend. Buy him a boyfriend. Several. Just keep him away from my son, and we’ll all be happier!”

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Chapter 419

Chapter 419:

“I was under the impression Desmond liked women,” Aaron murmured, looking genuinely uncertain. “That’s why I thought he and Hyacinth—”

“Is matchmaking a particular hobby of yours, Mr. Lockwood?” The question came from Lochlan.

His tone was perfectly polite, but it carried an undercurrent of something cold—a subtle warning that froze the air at our end of the table.

Aaron turned his gentle gaze from his son to Lochlan. “Sorry. I had no idea Hyacinth was your girlfriend. When I saw her in the garden earlier... I don’t know, something about her reminded me a little of my late wife. It stirred old feelings, that’s all.”

Lochlan’s brow furrowed slightly.

I just stared, completely thrown. His late wife? I shot a frantic glance at my own reflection in the glass of a nearby window, as if I might suddenly see a ghost looking back.

Across the table, Desmond’s and Holden’s previously animated faces went carefully, pointedly blank.

A heavy silence descended on the room.

There was no sympathy on Desmond’s face. None of the fond sadness you might expect from a nephew hearing his uncle remember a beloved aunt.

If I was reading his expression correctly—and I was pretty sure I was—it looked a hell of a lot like pure disgust.

Well. This was awkward.

Holden cleared his throat. “The world’s full of people with passing resemblances. Doesn’t mean a thing.”

“Yes,” Aaron agreed, nodding and letting out another of his soft, sighing breaths. “Of course.”

I kept my eyes on my plate, but my mind was racing.

There was a story here. A big, ugly, family-sized story lurking behind Aaron’s sentimental sighs and Desmond’s silent revulsion.

The rest of the meal passed in a kind of polite, strained détente.

When we finally emerged from the room, I instinctively hung back, letting the others form a little procession along the covered walkway. The two older men led, followed by Lochlan and Desmond walking side by side in a silence that felt more communicative than any conversation.

I thought I felt someone watching me, which was strange, because everyone else was ahead of me. I glanced back several times, saw nothing, yet the feeling did not go away.

Outside the restaurant, Holden clapped Aaron on the shoulder. “Come back to the house for a nightcap, Aaron. Jennifer’s away—I’ve got the place all to myself.”

He’d barely finished the sentence when Desmond piped up, his grin back in full force. “Brilliant idea. I’ll come too. Always prefer a proper house to a hotel. Might even kip on Lochlan’s sofa.”

I could see Holden’s fingers twitch, probably imagining them around Desmond’s throat.

Seeing the storm about to break, Desmond held up his hands in mock surrender. “Alright, alright, I’m going! No need to get your tweed in a twist.”

He darted forward, leaned in close to Lochlan, and whispered something fast and low into his ear. They were bent so close together it looked almost as if they were kissing.

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Chapter 420

Chapter 420:

“DESMOND LOCKWOOD, YOU LITTLE SHIT!” Holden bellowed. He lunged, but Desmond, for all his size, danced back fast, laughing.

“Lochie!” he called over his shoulder as he retreated towards a waiting car. “Left you a little present at your place! When I’m back from Australia, I’m taking you on a proper holiday!” He blew a kiss Lochlan’s way.

Holden bent down, wrenched off his loafer, and hurled it at Desmond’s head. It sailed past, landing on the pavement with a thud.

A man materialized from the driver’s seat of Holden’s car, sprinted to the boot, and produced a fresh pair of shoes with the efficiency of a pit-stop crew.

I watched, half-embarrassed, half-fascinated.

“Put your shoe on,” Lochlan said to his father, his voice a flat line of exhausted patience. He gave a curt, polite nod to Aaron Lockwood. “Mr. Lockwood. Goodnight.”

I quickly muttered my own goodnights to the two older men, who were now engaged in a hissed debate about Desmond's upbringing, and scurried after Lochlan.

During the car ride back to Mayfair, my head was buzzing with questions. What was the real story with Aaron's wife? Why did Desmond look like he wanted to vomit when his uncle got sentimental? What poisonous little gem had Desmond whispered to my boss?

I desperately wanted to ask. The gossip-hound in me was on high alert.

But asking about the Lockwoods felt like opening a door, and I was terrified Lochlan would use that opening to walk right into a conversation I absolutely did not want to have. The one where his father had all but appointed me as the official converter of his son's perceived wayward sexuality. The "you-two-should-date" conversation.

My stomach clenched at the thought.

I chanced a glance at him. He was leaning back, eyes closed, but the tension in his jaw betrayed that he wasn't sleeping.

The car glided to a halt outside Lonsdale Tower.

Lochlan opened his eyes, the streetlight casting shadows across his face. "Could you come up with me for a moment?"

I shook my head automatically. "It's late. I should really get home."

"I'm not going to eat you," he said, a faint thread of amusement in his voice. "I need your help with something."

"What kind of something?"

"A personal something."

I flicked my eyes towards Roy in the driver's seat, trying to transmit a silent SOS. Roy, the traitor, stared fixedly ahead, perfecting the art of being both blind and deaf to employer-related awkwardness.

"Can't Roy help?" I tried.

"I think this is more in your wheelhouse," Lochlan replied, already opening his door.

"What is in my wheelhouse?" I hissed, scrambling out after him as the chill night air hit me.

"I can't be sure until we look."

“You’re not making any sense.”

“It has something to do with Desmond.”

“What?”

He started walking towards the lift, and I had to hurry to keep up. “He said he left me a gift. At my place.”

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Chapter 421

Chapter 421:

A dozen horrific possibilities flashed through my mind, all sourced from Portia’s horror movie marathons. “What, you think it’s dangerous? A bomb?”

“No. But I don’t particularly want to be alone if it’s a naked woman springing out of a giant box.”

I stumbled. “Do you honestly think that’s the kind of gift Desmond would give you?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him. And I don’t want to be alone and legally defenseless when it happens.”

I followed him into the lift. “And what do you expect me to do? Offer her my cardigan?”

“I expect you to be a witness when I call the police to report a home invader.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

The lift ascended to his penthouse. When the doors opened, we stepped into a living area that was the epitome of austere, masculine luxury. All clean lines, muted tones, and priceless art. No giant boxes. No suspicious ribbons. No naked women.

“See?” I said, a wave of anticlimax washing over me. “It’s fine. He was winding you up. Can I go home now?”

Lochlan didn’t answer. He was scanning the room like a soldier in hostile territory.

Then he moved silently towards his bedroom door, which was slightly ajar. He pushed it open and disappeared inside.

He came back out a moment later.

“There’s something in there,” he said, his voice low.

“Something? What kind of something?” My heart did an unpleasant little skip.

He walked over, draped an arm around my shoulders, and steered me gently but firmly towards the bedroom. “Something moved. Under the bed. You should go and look.”

I stopped dead, twisting to stare up at him. “Me?”

He was serious. He wanted me—a person who considered a large spider a home invasion—to investigate a mysterious, bed-dwelling creature.

“Hyacinth,” he murmured, his breath warm against my cheek. The arm around my shoulders tightened just a fraction. “I’m afraid.”

He sounded it. His voice was a low, helpless rumble. He was suddenly a giant, lost puppy. A six-foot-plus, billionaire puppy who could probably bench-press a car.

“I’m also afraid!” I squeaked, trying to wriggle out of his hold.

He easily reeled me back in. This time, he turned me and wrapped both arms around me, pulling me back against his chest. I felt absurdly small, enveloped in warmth and expensive wool. His lips were dangerously close to my ear again. “If you run, what will I do? I’m relying on you for protection.”

My ear was on fire.

“Call Kai,” I managed to say. “He’d wrestle a crocodile if you asked him to.”

“Kai’s in Edinburgh. Hyacinth, be brave. You can do this.”

He propelled me towards the ominous king-sized bed.

My mind conjured a bestiary of horrors: rats with evil, gleaming eyes, scuttling spiders the size of tea saucers, multi-legged centipedes, leathery bats.

The space under the bed was a dark, fathomless abyss.

“Go on. Have a look,” he encouraged, giving me a nudge in the small of my back.

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Chapter 422

Chapter 422:

I inched forward ten centimeters.

Then shuffled back twenty.

I heard a soft, stifled chuckle behind me.

“Could you at least describe what you saw?” I asked, my voice trembling with faux calm.

“It moved.”

Everything moves! Ghosts move! Poltergeists move! That was not a description!

I was getting genuinely annoyed now.

“Alright, let me think.” He paused, then whispered with palpable unease, “It was... fuzzy. Small. I don’t like fuzzy things.”

Fuzzy. Small.

A rat.

It was definitely a rat. The fuzzy tail. The horrible, twitching whiskers. My blood ran cold.

I took a deep, fortifying breath, spun around, and grabbed his forearm with both hands.
“Boss. Let’s call building security. Right now.”

I tried to bolt. I didn't even make it a step. A firm hand landed on my waist, holding me in place. Lochlan looked down at me, all contrived innocence and helplessness. "How about we face it together? I'll go with you."

Seeing no escape, I gritted my teeth. "Fine. Together."

We approached the bedside like a bomb disposal unit. I knelt down, then efficiently slid off one of my stilettos, gripping it like a makeshift hammer. Lochlan bit his lip, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. "Formidable weapon. Picked that up from my dad, did you?"

I was too tense for a joke.

"Alright, alright." He reached out and gave my hair a quick, reassuring ruffle. "No more teasing." He pulled out his phone, switched on the torch, and aimed the beam slowly under the bed.

My heart was pounding in my throat.

Then, we heard it.

"Meow."

A tiny, plaintive sound.

The beam of light found the culprit, cowering in the far corner.

It was a small, fluffy ball. A tiny face with huge, round eyes, a pink button nose, little stump legs, and fur that was a glorious gold on its back, fading to snowy white on its chest and belly.

All the fear drained out of me in an instant. I dropped my shoe.

"Oh, you perfect little thing," I whispered, my voice shifting into a register I didn't know I possessed. I leaned closer, gently wiggling my fingers. "Hello, sweetheart. Don't be scared. Come here."

The kitten, however, was having none of it. The sudden beam of light and the two giant faces peering at it were clearly too much. It pressed itself further into the corner, a tiny, trembling fortress of fluff.

I sat back on my heels. "It's too spooked. I'll pop out and get some cat food, maybe some treats. That should lure it out."

I started to get up, brushing dust from my knees.

Lochlan stood as well, but instead of moving away, he just sank down to sit on the edge of his immaculate bed. “You like it, then?”

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Chapter 423

Chapter 423:

“I love cats.”

I thought of Skipper and Pebble, my two childhood cats who’d ruled our house with iron paws. “Who could resist something that adorable?”

Then, practicality reasserted itself. “But where on earth did it come from? How does a kitten just appear in a penthouse?”

“My guess? It’s Desmond’s idea of a gift.”

I turned to stare at him. “But you just said you don’t like ‘fuzzy things.’ Why would he give you a cat?”

“I didn’t say I don’t like them,” he corrected. “I said I appreciate them better from a safe distance. A respectful distance.”

A laugh bubbled out of me. “Aw. The almighty CEO is afraid of a little pussycat.”

He reached out and flicked my forehead with a gentle finger. “I’m not afraid. They’re just... agents of chaos. They shed fur on everything. They shred furniture. They have a blatant disregard for personal property. And they mark their territory.”

“I think you’re describing dogs for that last part.” I grinned.

“I’ve known cats who do it,” he insisted, and I remembered Skipper rubbing her scent glands on every corner of the sofa. Okay, he had a point.

“Hyacinth.”

He said my name again, and something in his tone made me still.

“Yes?”

I was standing; he was sitting on the bed. I was looking down at him, which was a rare occurrence. He gazed up, and his eyes in the half-light were deep and warm, like dark water somehow stirred with light. It was a disconcerting, suddenly intimate feeling, as if the floor had tilted.

“Do you want it?”

“Want what?”

“The cat. Do you want to keep it?”

I shook my head. “Desmond gave it to you. He’d be devastated if his grand romantic gesture for you ended up with me.”

“Desmond and I,” Lochlan said, holding my gaze, “it’s not what you think. What my father thinks.”

“I know,” I said, and I did.

“Do you really?”

“Yes. You’re not gay.” I shrugged. “As for him... well, his performance art is award-winning, but I’m reserving judgment.”

“He’s not gay either,” Lochlan said flatly. “But he acts that way deliberately. It’s a strategy. To draw certain kinds of attention, and more importantly, to deflect other, more dangerous kinds.”

I turned this over in my mind. “You mean... like, if he declares he’s a red-blooded, woman-loving heterosexual, someone will immediately try to marry him off and control that part of his life? Sort of like your dad’s attempts with you?”

“Something like that. Though my father’s meddling is more of a spontaneous hobby. For Desmond, it’s a calculated defense. He can’t afford to have his personal life, his choice of partner, controlled by certain relatives.”

“Aaron Lockwood?”

“Him, and others. A marriage for Desmond isn’t just a marriage. It has implications for the entire Irwell Group structure—questions of inheritance, of succession.”

“Ah. Like the show Succession.”

“Exactly.”

My phone vibrated with a persistent buzz.

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Chapter 424

Chapter 424:

I didn’t recognize the number. “Hello?”

“Ms. Hyacinth Galloway?”

“Speaking.”

“Hi, it’s Darren from Couriers R Us. I’m at Lauderdale Tower with a delivery for you. You’re not in, so I’m checking—shall I leave it with the concierge or just at the penthouse door?”

My mind went completely blank. I hadn’t ordered anything. “Delivery? From who?”

“The company name is, uh...” There was a faint rustle of paper. “Pleasure Principle Ltd. It’s a, well, the label just says ‘Personal Massager Unit.’”

The silence that followed wasn’t just silence. It was a vacuum, sucking all the air and dignity out of Lochlan’s bedroom.

My face ignited, a hot, prickly flush spreading from my hairline to my collarbones.

“Just... just leave it at the door,” I stammered, my voice strangled. “The door is fine. Thank you.”

I jabbed the end call button with a force that nearly cracked the screen.

The ensuing quiet was a living thing, thick and humid with my utter mortification.

I couldn't look at him. I stared fixedly at a very interesting spot on his minimalist grey duvet.

I felt, rather than saw, his posture shift.

He hadn't heard the company name, but "Personal Massager Unit" delivered in a bored courier's voice was about as subtle as a fire alarm.

"You know," Lochlan said, "you really don't need toys."

That did it.

The embarrassment curdled instantly into pure, defensive fury. I whirled on him. "Oh, I don't, do I? A woman has needs, boss. And since you're apparently not willing to step up and take the toy's place, my shopping choices are my own business!"

His eyes darkened, all traces of amusement gone.

In one fluid motion, his hand shot out, wrapped around my wrist, and pulled.

I lost my balance and landed sideways on his lap, one of his arms anchoring me firmly in place.

He was staring at me with an intensity that felt like a physical touch.

"I'm willing," he said, his voice low and rough, stripping away all pretense. "God, Hyacinth, you have no idea how willing I am. But I don't want to be a replacement for a battery-operated device. I want to be your boyfriend. I want the title. I want the whole damn thing."

Boyfriend.

The word landed like a lead weight in my gut, sending a cold wave of something that felt suspiciously like panic through the heat of my anger.

It brought with it the ghost of other titles. Husband. Wife. The claustrophobic feeling of being someone's possession, of expectations piling up like legal documents.

"Why? Why does it have to be a 'thing'? Why can't it just be... us? Without the label, without the... the interference from your father, or the board, or anyone else?"

"Because 'just us' is a fantasy," he shot back, his grip tightening slightly. "It doesn't exist. There are always labels. 'Colleagues.' 'Friends with benefits.' 'Secret affair.' I'm tired of the wrong ones. I want the right one."

“The right one comes with strings!” I argued, trying to push against his chest, which was like trying to move a marble statue. “It comes with expectations, with people like your mother wanting to have lunch, with people like Soraya seeing me as a target! It comes with... with losing parts of yourself!”

I was thinking of Cary, of the way my own identity had slowly been sanded down to fit the role of “Mrs. Grant.”

“So your solution is to hide?” he countered, frustration edging into his voice. “To have a drawer full of gadgets and pretend that’s enough? To keep me at arm’s length with a bloody contract?”

“It’s a good solution! It’s clean!”

“It’s cowardly.”

I shoved hard against him, and this time he let me go.

I stumbled to my feet, putting the width of the bed between us, my breath coming fast.

“The kitten’s starving. I’ll run out for supplies.”

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Chapter 425

Chapter 425:

I bolted.

Downstairs, I hailed a taxi. “Any 24-hour pet supply store, please.”

As we drove, I googled, found one, and directed the driver.

Inside the brightly lit shop, I moved on autopilot, grabbing a small bag of kitten food, some pouches of wet food, a shallow dish.

Then, standing in the aisle, I hesitated. The thought of going back up to his flat, facing him again with the ghost of that argument hanging between us—I couldn't do it.

I pulled out my phone, opened a delivery app, and ordered a cab to take the shopping bag to Lochlan's address.

In my own taxi home, I went online and ordered proper kitten milk, more specialized food, a soft bed, a litter tray—the works. All to be delivered to Lochlan's address.

I hit “pay” and stared out at the passing night.

Why was I doing this?

It was his cat. Desmond's bizarre gift to him.

But the image of that tiny, scared fluffball under his stark, modern bed was too much.

If he asked me again tomorrow to take it... would I have the strength to say no?

The next day in the office, the air was strained. We were impeccably professional, which was worse than any argument.

During a mid-afternoon lull, I snagged Kai for a coffee in his office and told him about the kitten.

“Does Desmond always bring the boss... presents?”

Kai nodded. “Pretty much every time he's in town. Leaves something ridiculous. It's why half the accounting department still has a running betting pool about them.”

“And? Is there anything to bet on?”

Kai laughed. “Of course not. The boss? Please. As for Desmond... he had a girlfriend, years ago. Serious one. It didn't end well. Since then, he's just leaned into the whole... persona.”

“So it's a calculated act.”

“The Lockwood family dynamics are a radioactive soup. Nothing Desmond does is ever just for fun. There's always a layer to it.”

This was my opening. “Speaking of the family... Aaron Lockwood. His current wife isn't the first. There's a story there, isn't there?”

Kai's eyes lit up with the pure flame of the well-informed gossip. He stood, walked to his office door, closed it quietly, and came back, pulling his chair closer.

“Story? It’s not a story. It’s a horror show. A proper upper-crust bloodbath.”

“Go on.”

And so, Kai told me. About Aaron’s first wife, a close friend of Lochlan’s mother, vibrant and beloved. He described her, heavily pregnant, taking her young son out for an afternoon, and the catastrophic, freak car accident that killed them both.

My skin crawled.

Aaron Lockwood saying I reminded him of his late wife... the sentimental sighing.

Ugh.

Kai took a sip of his coffee. “You know why Desmond is the heir, even though he’s just the nephew?”

“Why?”

“The child Gloria and Aaron have is... a bit slow.” He looked at me to make sure I caught his meaning. I did. “And they only have that one child. The family had to look to the next in line.”

“I can’t imagine Gloria being happy about it.”

“No, she’s not. She’s been trying to have Desmond removed from the picture ever since. Metaphorically, and, some say, not so metaphorically. The man has survived more ‘unfortunate accidents’ than a cartoon character.”

For the rest of the day, the Lockwood saga echoed in my head.

If I were that first wife, I’d be haunting the lot of them.

And it solidified, with cold, hard certainty, the conviction that had been brewing since my divorce: nothing good—nothing—ever came from marrying into that kind of money.

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Chapter 426

Chapter 426:

I slammed the front door shut, didn't bother with a greeting, strode into the pristine living room, reached into my inner jacket pocket, and slapped the stack of glossy photographs down on the glass coffee table with a crack.

Tanya Grant, perched on the edge of a silk settee, flinched as if I'd fired a gun.

Her eyes darted from my face to the damning evidence.

She scooped the photos up with trembling, manicured hands, her breath catching in a shallow gasp as she glimpsed the top one.

It was enough. She didn't need to see the rest—the intimate selfies, the laughing shots with various handsome, vacuous young men half her age, some brave or stupid enough to be captured in states of undress.

She fumbled them, turning the stack over to hide the images, then clutched them to her chest like a guilty child.

A wave of nausea rolled through me. It wasn't the content, though that was distasteful enough. It was the sheer, fucking carelessness of it.

"Are there... are there other copies?" she whispered.

"Of course there are other copies," I snapped, the irritation boiling over.

I shoved my hands in my pockets to keep from sweeping the entire vile display onto the floor. "Now that Gloria Lockwood has leverage, you think she'll use it once and throw it away? She's a fucking collector. This is just the first edition."

My mother's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. She looked pathetic. She looked trapped.

The familiar, weary anger settled in my bones.

"I'm cleaning this up for you once. Do not ask me to meet that woman on your behalf again. I don't care if she has a thousand copies stashed in a vault. This is the only favor you get."

"But your father..." she began, her voice rising in panic. "If he finds out, he'll kill me."

I let out a short, humorless laugh. “You overestimate how much he cares, Mother. As long as it’s discreet and doesn’t embarrass him publicly, you could take up pole dancing for all he’d notice.”

She blanched.

We both knew it. My father kept his mistresses in apartments in other cities, other countries. An open secret. Tanya knew. Alaric knew she knew. And he had the serene, brutal confidence of a man who holds all the financial cards, knowing his wife would never dare make a scene.

The dynamic was sick, and standing in the middle of it made my skin crawl.

The thought curdled into something darker. Maybe the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. Maybe Hyacinth had seen the rot in the core of this family, in me, and had been absolutely right to run.

“What did she want?” Tanya asked finally. “Gloria. What was her price?”

My mind flashed back to the restaurant.

I hadn’t expected to see Hyacinth. But there she was, moving through the garden with Lochlan and a group of men.

I’d recognized Holden Hastings, Lochlan’s father, his body language radiating a genial, proprietary warmth towards her.

Was she meeting Lochlan’s parents? Had their relationship moved on to that serious stage?

She’d looked... vibrant. A healthy glow on her skin, an ease in her posture I hadn’t seen in years.

She had rebuilt a life, a good one it seemed, in the rubble of what we’d had.

“Cary?” Tanya’s voice pulled me back. “What did she want?”

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Chapter 427

Chapter 427:

“She wants to set me up with her daughter.”

Janine Lockwood. Very pretty. Delicate features, like a porcelain doll. And behind the pretty eyes, a profound simplicity—a mind that moved at its own, slow pace.

She was a child trapped in an adult’s body.

I remembered Gloria at the restaurant, physically turning her daughter’s face away from the window, pointing a red-tipped nail at me. “Do you like him, darling? Would you like to play with Cary? Be his special friend?”

Tanya exploded. “What? No! Absolutely not! That girl is an imbecile! A literal retard! You cannot be seen with her!”

I eyed her with cold disgust. “I already have a fiancée. In case it’s slipped your mind, Mother.”

“Right! Of course! Liz!” she said, latching onto the lifeline. “You have Liz. So you told her no. You turned her down.”

“Obviously, I turned her down.”

Liz Forbes. My practical, level-headed therapist-turned-fiancée. Our wedding was next month. A mutually beneficial arrangement to silence her conservative family and stabilize my public image.

How would she react to this? She’d likely dissect it with clinical precision, note the power play, and file it under “non-issue.”

Would she be jealous?

The thought was almost laughable. Liz was my partner, not my lover. She wouldn’t burn with the possessive, fiery jealousy Hyacinth was capable of.

“But if you said no,” Tanya wrung her hands, “what if she gets angry and... and sends...”

“She won’t send the photos to Father,” I cut in.

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I agreed to the other thing she asked for.”

“What other thing?”

“That’s none of your business. My suggestion to you is to cut ties. All of them. If Gloria can get these photos, others can too. I’m not your permanent clean-up crew.”

She looked petulant. “But... you know your father has his... distractions. It’s only fair I have some entertainment of my own.”

“But this isn’t the first time your ‘entertainment’ has caused trouble, is it? Vanessa Abrams. She threatened you with something similar, didn’t she?”

Tanya looked away, a tell as good as a confession.

“I should’ve known. You hated her after her little stunt landed you in a cell. Yet you kept pushing her at me. Of course she had dirt on you.”

“She promised she wouldn’t tell,” Tanya mumbled defensively. “She’s not a problem anymore.”

“Not because of your brilliant diplomacy,” I scoffed. “Because her family finally had the sense to lock her up.”

I turned and headed for the door.

“Wait, Cary, come back! What shall I do?”

“Get rid of them. All of them. Do it before Father gets back to London. If you don’t, I will. And you won’t like my methods.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 428

Chapter 428:

The restaurant was the kind of understated place Portia favored—all neutral tones and soft lighting where you could have a scandalous conversation at a normal volume. I’d just finished ordering when she swept in.

She took one look at my face, which I'd tried to school into an expression of normalcy, and promptly lost it.

She started laughing the moment she slid into the booth.

It wasn't a delicate chuckle. It was full-bodied, shoulder-shaking laughter that didn't stop until a concerned waiter hovered nearby, probably wondering if he needed to call for medical help or an exorcist.

I seriously considered leaning over and smothering her with a napkin.

"Stop laughing," I hissed.

Portia wiped tears from the corners of her eyes, gasping for air. "Sorry. I can't. I just can't help it."

We put in our orders. As the waiter retreated, Portia's composure dissolved again into little snorts and giggles, like a faulty pressure valve.

"I said stop it."

"Sorry," she gasped, not sounding sorry at all. "But it's just so damn funny."

"It was a mistake," I said through gritted teeth.

"Yeah," Portia wheezed. "I'll say." She struggled to form a sentence through her mirth. "I'm... I'm curious to see it. Have you brought it? For show and tell?"

"No," I said flatly. "I threw it away."

I thought of the "Personal Massager Unit."

When I'd finally turned the thing on in the privacy of my own bedroom, it had vibrated with the intensity of a geological event. It rattled my teeth and produced a low, threatening drone like a distant chainsaw. It was less a discreet pleasure aid and more an industrial tool you'd use to loosen stubborn bolts.

Using it would have required noise-cancelling headphones and a waiver from my neighbors.

Portia finally got her breathing under control, though her eyes still sparkled with evil glee. "You poor, sheltered thing. You're like a virgin when it comes to shopping for this stuff, aren't you?"

I shot her a look. "Well, I never had much need for them."

Portia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I know all about the legendary magnificence of Cary Grant in bed. You’ve mentioned it. Once or fifty times.”

I’d never kept secrets from Portia, and during my marriage, when conversation with Cary ranged from stilted to stormy, the one consistently impressive thing had been our physical connection.

It wasn’t that I liked gossiping about sex. It was just that, sometimes, it felt like the only tangible, positive thing in that relationship to talk about—especially when his idea of a romantic anniversary was forwarding his secretary’s email about jewelry choices.

“Don’t worry,” Portia said, her tone shifting from teasing to mission-oriented. “Leave it to me. I’m going to show you the way. Forget online. The sizes are always a lie and the pictures look nothing like the real thing. We’re going to a proper shop. I know a place.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“I need to go there myself anyway, pick up a few things.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 429

Chapter 429:

I couldn’t resist teasing her back. “Now that you’ve got your live-in boyfriend, you still need toys?”

Portia looked at me as if I’d asked if she still needed oxygen. “Who says you can’t have both a boyfriend and toys? Josh and I can use them together. More fun that way. There’s this one—”

“Okay!” I cut in, holding up a hand. “I don’t need the operational details.”

“What’s the matter? Suddenly shy?”

“No, I just don’t want to ruin my appetite with your graphic play-by-play before the main course arrives.”

“Hey,” she said, faux-offended. “Just so you know, my sex talk is always appetizing.”

A young waiter passing by with a water jug stumbled slightly, his ears turning pink. Portia smiled sweetly up at him and batted her eyelashes.

“Stop sexually harassing the service staff,” I said dryly. “Or I’ll tell Josh.”

“Go ahead,” she said, unconcerned. “He knows. He doesn’t mind. He thinks it’s funny.”

I sighed. “Good grief. You’ve really landed a tolerant one this time, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. He’s doing well so far. We’ll see.”

It was the “we’ll see” that did it. I felt a familiar pinch of worry. “Please don’t tell me you’re already thinking about dumping him.”

“I never said I was dumping him.”

“But you’re thinking about it.”

She shrugged, a fluid, elegant movement that conveyed a universe of ambivalence.

“What’s wrong?” I pressed. “Did he leave the toilet seat up again? Use your expensive face cream as shaving gel?”

“No,” she said, toying with her cutlery. “It’s just... this idea of a long-term boyfriend. Someone who’s just there. All the time. You wake up, he’s there. You go to bed, he’s there. You try to have a shower in peace, he’s there wanting to join you. It’s... constricting. Makes me feel like I’m being slowly wrapped in cling film. I can’t breathe.”

I stared at her. “You’ve only been shacking up for, like, a month.”

“Yeah. A month is enough to make me start to feel the walls closing in.”

“God. Poor Josh. He’s going to cry actual, genuine buckets when you eventually break his heart.”

“I’m not doing it yet. And don’t you say a word to him. Promise?”

“I won’t. Promise.” My loyalty was to Portia, even when I thought she was being an emotional commitment-phobe. “Your self-sabotage is your own business.”

“Anyway, enough about Josh and my alleged intimacy issues.” She rummaged in her bag and produced a sleek, black card, sliding it across the table to me.

I picked it up. It was heavy, matte, with just a simple, embossed logo. “What’s this?”

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Chapter 430:

“Membership card,” Portia said. “We’ll need it later.”

“For a sex shop?” I blinked at it. “They have membership cards? What for, a loyalty scheme? Buy nine vibrators, get the tenth half price?”

“Not just that. They have new product launches. Exclusive previews. It’s a whole thing. I visit at least once a month.”

“I had no idea it was such a... committed hobby. Why do you keep going back? Don’t the old ones... work anymore?”

Portia gave me a look of profound pity. “Don’t you get bored of using the same old thing all the time?”

I stared at her. “I... uh.”

After dinner, Portia navigated us to our destination.

It was close, a short drive into a warren of streets behind the main commercial drag. The shop was tucked down a quiet, cobbled mews—a pretty little townhouse nestled between a boutique and a discreet art gallery.

It was called The Silver Dove.

Out front were tasteful arrangements of white hydrangeas and eucalyptus. The large windows were lightly frosted, emitting a soft, pearlescent glow. Anyone walking past would assume it was an expensive aesthetic clinic or a very exclusive florist.

About half an hour later, I emerged blinking into the evening air, feeling like I’d received a very rapid, very thorough education in advanced engineering. My brain was slightly overloaded.

Portia followed, looking supremely satisfied.

We both carried discreet, elegant black bags.

“Right, I’m off,” Portia said, giving me a quick hug. “I need to get home and road-test the ‘Duetto’ with Josh. It’s for couples. Synchronized. Apparently, it can be controlled via an app on your phone. The future is now, my friend.”

I shook my head, laughing despite myself. “Give Josh my... regards.”

I drove home in a thoughtful silence, the bag on the passenger seat feeling both illicit and oddly empowering.

Back in my penthouse, I took the bag to my bedroom.

With a sense of ceremony completely at odds with the situation, I carefully unpacked my selections onto the duvet.

My original intention had been a simple, foolproof vibrator. But Portia’s enthusiasm was contagious, and the sheer, staggering variety on offer had been... educational.

I’d fallen behind the times. It wasn’t just about different shapes and sizes anymore. There were toys designed for simultaneous pleasure, controlled by smartphone apps with ludicrous names like “BlissLink.” There were elegant, jewelry-like arousal gels that promised to heighten sensitivity with ingredients I was pretty sure weren’t available at Boots.

I saw things made of glass, of silicone that felt like cloud, of polished stone. There was even something called a “clitoral air pulse toy” that looked like a futuristic sea anemone and operated on a principle Portia explained with aerodynamic hand gestures that left me both fascinated and slightly alarmed.

I was sitting cross-legged on the floor, frowning at the instructions for the amethyst wand in my hand, trying to decipher the difference between “Ethereal Pulse” and “Crescendo Wave” settings, when the intercom buzzed.

I jumped, my heart lurching into my throat.

Chapter 431:

I looked up at the wall panel, and there, rendered in high-definition digital video, was Lochlan’s face.

I scrambled, grabbing at the various devices and boxes, shoving them haphazardly back into the black bag. I kicked the bag under the foot of the bed, smoothed my hair, took a deep breath that did absolutely nothing to calm me, and went to answer the door.

I pulled it open, mustering what I hoped was a convincingly irritated expression. “Boss. What is it?”

He was standing there, holding the tiny kitten against his chest. The kitten looked perfectly content, purring into his expensive cashmere jumper.

“Roy’s gone home,” Lochlan stated, as if this explained everything.

I blinked. “Okay. What about Kai?”

“He has a date.”

“...And?”

“It has no one to look after it,” he said, nodding at the kitten. “And it’s... redecorating my living room. I believe it used the rug as a substitute litter tray.”

I stared at him, then at the innocent ball of fluff in his arms. It mewed softly.

I was off the clock!

But then the kitten turned its big, round eyes on me, and my resolve crumbled.

I sighed, reached out, and took it. It immediately burrowed into the crook of my arm. “Fine. Come in.”

He stepped inside, setting down several bags I hadn’t noticed—the cat food, litter, and bed I’d ordered. “Thanks for these.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered, nuzzling the kitten’s soft head if only to avoid looking at him.

“You seem to know what you’re doing.”

“I had two cats when I was a kid. They were tyrants.” I put the kitten down on the sofa, where it immediately began investigating a cushion.

“I haven’t had dinner,” Lochlan announced, wandering into my living room with a casualness that set my teeth on edge. His gaze did a slow, assessing sweep of the space. “The kitchen is a disaster zone. I think it worked out how to open the fridge. I’m not sure how, but I’m fairly certain every ingredient in there is now... compromised.”

I eyed the kitten, now batting harmlessly at a tassel on a throw. “Right,” I said flatly. “What do you want to eat?”

“Whatever you have is fine. I’m not fussy.”

Yeah, right. “How about takeout? I know a great Thai place.”

“Can’t trust takeout. You never know the provenance of the ingredients. Or the hygiene standards of the kitchen staff. One sneeze over the pad thai, and it’s a biological hazard.”

I closed my eyes for a second, summoning strength. “Fine. I’ll cook.”

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Chapter 432

Chapter 432:

I trudged into the kitchen, the kitten trotting at my heels.

I opened the fridge, briefly considered revenge-steak—something decadent and against all his health principles—but couldn’t muster the energy for a fight. I settled on a quick lemon and herb grilled chicken breast with roasted asparagus and a simple quinoa salad. Wholesome. Boring. Get-him-out-the-door food.

A little while later, I called out, “It’s ready.” Now eat it and leave.

Lochlan appeared at the dining table as I was setting down the plates.

“I’ll just get the dressing,” I said, turning back to the kitchen.

I’d just picked up the little jug of lemon vinaigrette when I heard a high-pitched, startled “Mew!” from the direction of my bedroom.

My bedroom.

Where I’d stashed the—

I slammed the jug on the counter and sprinted.

But I was too late. By the time I skidded into my bedroom doorway, he was already inside.

Lochlan was crouched by the foot of the bed, gently scooping up the kitten, which had clearly tried to climb the black bag I’d shoved there and succeeded only in pulling it over.

The bag had spilled open.

There, on the floor, buzzing with a cheerful hum and inching its way across the polished wood like a demented pink-and-blue robot caterpillar, was the “Ethereal Pulse” wand.

Next to it, the elegant box for the clitoral air pulse toy lay on its side, its tasteful but unmistakable artwork on full display.

Lochlan had the kitten secure in one hand. His brow was furrowed. He was looking at the vigorously vibrating wand, then at the box.

I felt my soul gently detach from my body and float towards the ceiling. My vision whited out at the edges.

This was it. This was the final ruin of my dignity. There was no coming back from this.

Lochlan looked up from the buzzing wand, his gaze meeting my mortified, wide-eyed stare.

“What,” he asked, “is this?”

I forced my eyes open. The scene hadn’t magically transformed. He was still there, holding a purring kitten and staring at my buzzing, pink-and-blue wand as it inched towards his shoe.

“Oh, that,” I began. I wet my lips, my brain frantically scrabbling for plausible deniability. “That’s a... a portable massager! For muscle aches. You know—shoulders, arms, lower back... calves. Very versatile.”

“Ah,” he said, nodding slowly. “Sounds convenient.”

“Yes! Exactly! So convenient. Because it’s small. Compact.”

“Do you think I’m a child, Hyacinth?”

“Huh?”

“A ‘massager.’ Fine. I believe you.”

I lunged forward, snatching the still-vibrating wand from the floor and fumbling for the switch.

The blessed silence that followed was almost as loud as the buzzing had been.

I scooped up the incriminating box and the stray instructions, shoving them back into the black bag.

Thank God—thank every deity in the sky—the kitten had only managed to drag out the one item. Small mercies.

I shoved the bag deep under the bed, far out of sight and mind, and sprang to my feet. “I’ll take the kitten. You should go and eat. Your dinner’s getting cold.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 433

Chapter 433:

I reached for the cat, plucking it from his arms, creating a necessary, furry barrier between us.

Lochlan, mercifully, didn’t push it. He just gave me one last, lingering look that seemed to see right through my skull, then turned and walked out of the bedroom.

I stayed hidden in there for a solid ten minutes, pressing my cool cheek against the kitten’s warm fur, trying to will my heartbeat back to a normal rhythm.

When I finally emerged, I had crafted what I hoped was a firm, final line in the sand.

“Boss,” I said, my tone deliberately bright and dismissive. “I’ll look after the kitten tonight. You should head home. Get some rest. Sleep well. Goodnight.”

Lochlan remained where he was. “I can’t go back there. The living room floor has been turned into a biohazard site.”

“Hire a cleaner,” I said breezily. “I hear some offer a 24-hour rush service. Very discreet.”

“There would still be the... smell.”

“Get an aroma diffuser. Something pungent. Eucalyptus.”

“My bedsheets are also shredded.”

I stared at him, then down at the tiny, fluffy creature now chasing its own tail on my rug.

“This is a kitten. It’s probably four months old. It’s not the Incredible Hulk.”

“You’re welcome to come back with me and see the crime scene for yourself.”

“No, thank you.”

A beat of silence. Then he said it. “Can I stay the night here?”

“There are plenty of hotels in central London,” I replied instantly.

“All booked.”

“All of them?”

“Every last one.”

We stared at each other across the room.

I saw it in his eyes now. The amusement was gone, replaced by a simple, unwavering determination.

He wasn’t asking because of a fictional feline-induced disaster. He was asking because he wanted to stay.

But why now? He was the one who’d insisted on a “title,” on being a “boyfriend,” before anything else. What had changed? Was it the sight of the toys? Had his masculine pride been stung by the implication that I needed, or preferred, a battery-operated substitute? Was this a competitive impulse?

The thought was both ridiculous and—okay, I’ll admit—a little bit hot.

“May I stay?” he asked again.

“I, uh...” I stammered. “I just think... two of us, alone here, a man and a woman... it’s not really appropriate, is it?”

He closed the distance between us in two silent strides. “You’re bringing up propriety now? A little late, don’t you think? On that boat on the lake, when you had your hands all over me, you didn’t seem too concerned with propriety.”

I had no comeback. My mouth was dry. He had me, and he knew it.

“I... I need to get the kitten settled,” I muttered, escaping to the spare room.

I set up the little bed, put out food and water, and then just sank down onto the floor beside the cat, watching the tiny thing investigate its new surroundings.

My mind churned.

I looked at the kitten, who was now meticulously washing one paw. “What do you think? Should I do it?”

“Yes.”

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Chapter 434

Chapter 434:

The voice came from directly behind me.

I jolted, my spine going rigid. I’d been sitting so long my legs had gone numb, and when I tried to stand, I wobbled precariously.

A tall shadow fell over me, accompanied by the scent of my own shower gel. Strong hands slid under my arms and I was lifted effortlessly off the ground.

My face was suddenly level with an expanse of bare chest, visible through the parted V of a black silk dressing gown.

He’d showered.

He was wearing a robe.

Where did he get a robe? Did he bring an overnight bag? Was the whole thing premeditated?

Every coherent thought evaporated. My breath hitched—a purely physical reaction to the sheer, unabashed masculinity of him standing there, holding me, smelling of my bathroom and looking like every forbidden fantasy I’d ever tried to suppress.

He carried me out of the room as easily as if I were the kitten, kicking the door closed with his foot. From inside, we heard a tiny, puzzled “Mew?”

He took me to the master bedroom.

His old bedroom, technically. My current bedroom. And now, apparently, it was about to become our bedroom, at least for the night.

“Wait.” I managed to choke out, my voice thin.

“Wait for what?” he asked, not breaking stride.

My heart was hammering so fast it felt like a hummingbird trapped in my ribcage. I took a deep, stealthy breath, then let it out slowly, trying to anchor myself. “No strings. No responsibility. Okay?”

Lochlan’s eyes narrowed just a fraction, the only sign that my words had landed.

He didn’t answer immediately. He just looked at me, his gaze steady and unnervingly patient.

The silence stretched. It went on so long I started to wonder if we’d both fossilize here.

“Okay,” he said finally, giving a nod. “We’ll do it your way. Whatever makes you feel secure.”

I stared at him, genuinely stunned. The agreeable creature before me bore no resemblance to the stubborn, strategically-minded man I knew. “You agree? Really?”

“Really.”

He carried me into the room, where motion-sensitive floor lights glowed to life, bathing the space in a soft, honeyed gloom.

He didn’t take me to the bed, which was both a relief and a new kind of torment. Instead, he sat down in the large, butter-soft leather armchair by the window, settling me sideways across his lap as if we were about to have a fireside chat.

“I understand your concerns,” he began. “I respect your perspective. And I’m willing to accommodate it.”

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Chapter 435

Chapter 435:

My inner monologue was screaming. I understand that my perspective is fundamentally flawed! I understand that sitting on your lap in a dark bedroom is the polar opposite of “no strings”! This is all very, very wrong!

But he was being so bloody reasonable. How could I argue with that?

“Thank you,” I heard myself say. “Thank you for understanding.”

He smiled then—a slow, devastating curve of his lips that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. “I respect you. I understand you. So, don’t you think it’s only fair that you respect my perspective, too?”

My internal ten-stage early-warning system began to flicker and smoke. This was a trap.

I swallowed. “Your perspective?”

“Exactly. You have your views, I have mine. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

“...Fair,” I conceded.

“You don’t want responsibility. That’s fine. But my personal philosophy is that I need to be responsible towards someone I care about. That’s not wrong either, is it?”

I took a sharp breath.

Yes, definitely a trap.

Seeing my panic, he smoothed a hand down my back in a gesture that was probably meant to be soothing but just sent a fresh volt of awareness straight through my spine. “Don’t be nervous. I’m not trying to trick you, and I won’t push you. Just hear me out. You have all the time in the world to think it over.”

I knew I should get up. I should flee. But I was trapped by his logic and the warmth of his hand. “Go on.”

“I need a girlfriend. Primarily to stabilize the situation with my parents. Given my aforementioned philosophy, my intention with a girlfriend would be a long-term, committed relationship, ultimately leading to marriage. I need to be upfront about that.”

My stomach did a complicated flip. Marriage. The M-word. The one that spelled the end of freedom.

“But,” he continued, his thumb making a slow, absent circle on my hip, “I won’t demand you want the same thing. You don’t want the responsibility? Fine. The final choice is always yours. If you change your mind later, the door’s open. So, we each operate by our own code. How does that sound?”

I tried to make sense of it.

It sounded as if... he was the landlord saying, “Live in this luxury penthouse rent-free, see how you like it, buy it if you want, no pressure,” while vowing to never show another buyer the place. There wasn’t a deal this sweet in the whole world. Not even those scammy crypto schemes promising ten-thousand-percent returns.

And yet... the offer, the sheer, illogical generosity of it, made something deep and foolish inside me clench with want.

“I’ll... think about it,” I said finally.

“Fair enough. Take your time. How about half an hour?” He gave my backside a light pat. “You can think about it in the shower.”

The word “shower” hung in the air, instantly charging the room with a new, steamy kind of tension.

My face, which had been cooling, flushed hot again. I wanted to protest, to say something sharp, but the truth was, we’d sailed far past the point of plausible retreat. Backing out now would just make me look cowardly, and I’d be damned if I let him think I was a coward.

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Chapter 436:

I slid off his lap and headed for the bathroom.

Under the blast of hot water, I did indeed think.

I thought about his absurd, generous, terrifying proposal.

I thought about the look in his eyes, which wasn’t manipulative but horrifyingly sincere.

I thought about the fact that nothing in life—especially not a man who looked like that and talked about marriage—was ever free. You couldn’t just “trial run” a relationship with a

billionaire CEO. There would be interest. There would be hidden fees. There would be emotional compound interest that would bankrupt your soul.

I emerged from the bathroom after only ten minutes, a towel wrapped tightly around me, my mind made up.

It was tempting—so wildly tempting—but no.

“Lochlan, I—” I began, stepping out into the bedroom.

The chair by the window was empty.

He was gone.

A wave of relief washed over me, so strong it made my knees feel weak.

Good. He’d left. For whatever reason—maybe he’d come to his senses, maybe he’d gotten another urgent call—he was gone.

This was for the best. This was the universe intervening, saving me from my own terrible, hormone-driven judgment.

I let out a long, shaky breath, the tension slowly leaching from my shoulders. I pulled on some pajamas, climbed into the big, empty bed, and let myself sink into the mattress.

The relief was the dominant feeling.

But it was quickly followed by a stupid, stubborn trickle of disappointment. Then annoyance at myself for feeling disappointed. Then a weird, hollow feeling that maybe I’d just missed out on something important, something life-altering.

The events of the day caught up with me all at once. My eyelids grew heavy, the conflicting feelings blurring into nonsense, and I drifted off.

I was dreaming something warm and formless when a voice, low and real, cut through the fog.

“You fell asleep?”

“...Hmm? What!” My eyes flew open.

Lochlan was sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning over me. His warm breath fanned across my cheek.

He was still in the black silk robe, but leaning forward had caused it to gape open, revealing a tantalizing V of skin from the strong column of his throat down to the shadowed hollow of his collarbones. The dim light sculpted him like a statue.

“You... came back?” I managed to whisper, my gaze fixed on his face, then helplessly dropping to his mouth.

His eyes were soft in the darkness, but with an intensity beneath that felt like a physical pull. He leaned in a fraction closer. “I went downstairs. For... supplies.”

My eyes flicked to the nightstand. A small, square box sat there.

“You went out in that?” I asked, my brain latching onto the most irrelevant detail.

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Chapter 437

Chapter 437:

“Of course not. I got dressed.” He paused. “So. What’s your answer?”

“My an—answer. I, uh...” My mind was a scrambled mess. I lifted a hand to my temple, as if I could press the thoughts into order.

My wrist was captured. His fingers wrapped around it and he pinned my hand gently to the pillow beside my head. “We had a deal. No backing out now. Yes or no. Give me your final answer.”

His breath was scorching. The feel of his long, elegant fingers circling my wrist sent a memory-echo of a hundred dreams shivering through me—dreams where those same fingers had traced very different paths.

“I...” The word was a struggle.

My own breathing had turned ragged and hot. The scant inches between us hummed with a shared, combustible heat.

“Still deciding?” he murmured.

The pad of his thumb brushed over my lower lip—a devastating caress. His eyes had darkened to the color of a storm-churned sea. His lips were so close now I could almost taste them. “Do you want me to decide for you? I will. But if I do, you can’t take it back.”

His voice pushed every latent fantasy, every repressed craving, to a screaming peak.

My chest rose and fell rapidly. My internal chant—you don't like him, this is just lust, be rational—shattered into a million useless pieces.

Rationality was for people who didn't have Lochlan Hastings in their bed looking at them like that.

"Yes."

The word was barely out before his mouth was on mine.

There was no more thinking, no more debate.

There was only this: the shocking, perfect fit of his lips, the hot slide of his tongue against mine, a kiss that was desperate and deep and tasted like inevitability.

It was hungry, a little wild, as if we'd both been starving for this without admitting it.

My free hand flew up to clutch the back of his neck, holding him to me.

He released my wrist to cradle the nape of my neck, tilting my head, deepening the kiss from frantic to something slower, more molten—a deliberate and thorough claiming.

My heart wasn't just beating. It was trembling.

My hand, now freed, slid from his neck down over the firm plane of his chest. Without breaking the kiss, I found the loose tie of his robe and tugged. The silk sighed open. My palms skated up over the hot skin of his shoulders, down the defined ridges of his spine, learning the landscape of him.

He was all solid muscle and smooth skin, so much better than any dream.

I must have made a sound—a gasp against his mouth—because he broke the kiss, just for a second. His eyes searched mine, dark and hungry.

Before I could form a thought, his mouth was on me again, but lower this time—on the frantic pulse at the base of my throat, then lower still.

My head fell back into the pillows as a sharp, sweet shock arced through me. "Lochlan—"

His name was a fractured sound, instantly swallowed by his returning kiss, deeper and more consuming than before.

The world had narrowed to this bed, to his weight and his warmth, to the trail of fire his mouth was tracing down my body, to the exquisite, shocking promise of his touch.

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Chapter 438:

His hands—those intelligent, commanding hands I’d watched sign billion-pound deals—were now doing something infinitely more devastating, mapping my skin with a reverence that made my breath catch.

He was everywhere, and yet not quite where I needed him most, the exquisite torture of his patience drawing a thin, wanting whimper from my throat.

Lochlan shifted his weight, his eyes never leaving mine as he moved between my thighs.

“I was there when you went inside The Silver Dove,” he said, his voice a low, rough vibration that I felt in my own chest.

What?

I tried to speak, but he pressed a thumb against my lower lip to silence me.

“I watched you choose them,” he continued. “I watched you wonder if they would be enough. I’m going to make sure you never have to look at a piece of plastic again. I’m going to make you forget you ever thought you needed anything else.”

He didn’t wait for a response.

He lowered himself, his chest brushing against my breasts with a friction that made my toes curl.

The skin-to-skin contact seemed to electrify him. He didn’t just touch me; he gripped me as if he feared I might evaporate if he loosened his hold even slightly. He seemed to be trying to absorb me through his pores.

“You are so soft,” he whispered against my ear, his breath hot and ragged. “I have spent every hour since I met you imagining exactly how this would feel. It’s worse than I thought it would be. I think I might die if I have to stop.”

I didn’t want him to stop.

He moved his hands beneath my hips, lifting me to meet him.

When he entered me, he didn't do it with the careful hesitation of a new lover. He did it with the desperate, absolute intent of a man claiming his own soul.

I gasped, my fingers digging into the muscles of his arms, but he only pulled me closer. He wanted no space between us. He wanted to merge our heartbeats into a single rhythm.

"Look at me, Hyacinth," he commanded.

I opened my eyes and saw a terrifying level of devotion in his gaze.

He began to move, his pace fast and unrelenting. He was trying to memorize the internal map of my body in a single night.

He was efficient and devastating. Every stroke was calculated to draw a specific sound from my throat. He watched my face for every flicker of pleasure, his own expression one of intense, almost painful concentration.

When he reached his limit, he didn't pull away. He surged into me, his body shuddering with a violent intensity as he came. "You are mine," he murmured, the words lost against my skin as he buried his face in the crook of my neck.

Six a.m.

I swam back to consciousness through layers of warm, heavy satisfaction.

My hand shifted, my palm sliding over smooth, firm skin. A leg that was thrown across some solid object twitched, sending a delicious ache through muscles I'd forgotten I owned.

I let out a soft groan.

Chapter 439:

Okay. So. While the preview in the stone bothy had been... informative, the full, uncut, feature-length experience was something else entirely.

And I had serious questions.

Had he, like me, been on an extended hiatus from all things carnal? Or was his dry spell measured in geological epochs? The stamina was... notable. I felt thoroughly, gloriously wrecked.

I peeled my eyes open. The room was grey with pre-dawn light.

Carefully, like defusing a bomb, I extracted my leg from where it was hooked over his hip. I began the slow, meticulous process of disentangling myself from his arms, inching towards the edge of the bed until I could sit up.

I paused there, waiting for the world to stop spinning, before gripping the mattress and pushing myself upright.

My legs immediately buckled, doing a convincing impression of overcooked spaghetti. I clung to the bedpost.

Right. Okay.

Gathering my dignity—which was scattered across the floor with my clothes—I padded barefoot to retrieve my discarded bathrobe.

I slipped it on and turned to survey the battlefield. The tangled sheets. The distinct, red marks scoring his chest—my handiwork. A flush of heat washed over me.

He was still asleep. Deeply, peacefully asleep.

I executed a swift, silent retreat.

In the bathroom, I let the robe fall and faced the full evidence in the mirror. The constellation of marks on my skin, from my collarbone down to my thighs, prompted a long, silent, and profoundly flustered stare.

I washed up quickly, the hot water soothing the pleasant aches.

Dressing felt like a covert operation in my own home.

I fed the kitten, who blinked at me sleepily, and then I fled my own penthouse, leaving Lochlan naked and sleeping in my bed.

Nine a.m.

I'd been at my desk for a full two hours.

After my great escape, I'd driven straight to the office. I didn't even know why I'd escaped, except that the way he'd looked at me last night, the intensity of the sex... it all felt overwhelming.

My skin still felt sensitive, almost bruised by the memory of his touch. He had been so ravenous, as if he were trying to satisfy years of starvation in a single night.

I realized now that his sudden compliance might have been a tactical retreat. He'd stopped pushing for a commitment because he realized that by giving me what I thought I wanted, he could finally get close enough to make himself indispensable.

He was playing a long game, and I had walked straight into his trap.

Or was I overthinking?

My mind was like a tangled ball of yarn chewed by a very confused cat. I was replaying scenes on a loop, my body humming with a persistent, mortifying awareness, while my brain screamed questions about protocol, expectations, and whether I should have left a note.

Then, they arrived.

Chapter 440:

Lochlan came in, looking disgustingly fresh and put-together in a crisp charcoal suit, with Kai trailing behind him, tablet in hand.

I pasted on a smile of professional blandness. "Morning, boss."

His pale eyes found me immediately. That was normal.

What wasn't normal was the way they held mine for a beat too long. His gaze dropped to my mouth for a fleeting second before returning to my eyes, and a faint, knowing smile touched his lips.

"Morning, Hyacinth. You're in early." His tone was polite, but there was a new, low warmth woven through it—a private cadence meant for my ears alone. It was the vocal equivalent of a hand brushing the small of my back in a crowd.

Kai's cheerful "Morning, Hyacinth!" was followed by a pause, and his next question had a perceptive edge. "You're in before the sun's properly up. Everything alright?" His eyes flicked towards Lochlan's closed door, then back to me, curious and appraising.

My brain, screaming for a diversion, seized on the first thing it saw. "Your tie. It doesn't go with that suit at all."

He looked down. "It doesn't? But I thought... What color would you suggest? This is a navy pinstripe, so maybe a..."

Mission accomplished, but it was a temporary fix.

If Lochlan kept looking at me like that—like he was a starving man and I was a five-course meal he was patiently waiting to devour—it wouldn't just be Kai who noticed.

I stared blankly at my computer screen, the words blurring into nonsense.

He'd said nothing about last night.

Was that a good sign or bad?

A knock at the door jolted me from my spiraling thoughts. I hastily smoothed my expression into something resembling professional competence. "Come in."

Lochlan entered, closed the door with a soft click, and in two strides was beside my desk, placing a paper bag on it. The scent of warm pastry and good coffee immediately filled the space.

"You fled the scene of the crime without sustenance," he said.

"Oh, I, um..." Was that accusation I detected in his tone?

His hand came up and gently tucked a stray strand behind my ear, the gesture so unexpectedly tender it stole my breath. He'd never done anything like that before.

"Sit. Eat," he instructed.

I sank back into my chair.

He perched casually on the edge of my desk, one leg braced against the floor, effectively boxing me in.

I took a hesitant bite of the muffin. When a crumb clung to the corner of my mouth, he reached out and brushed it away with his thumb, his touch lingering for a heartbeat on my skin. A jolt went through me.

"Stop that," I whispered, swatting his hand away. "This is the office."

"There's no one else in here."

"We agreed. Professional during work hours."

Chapter 441:

"We agreed on 'no strings.' We never explicitly outlawed incidental contact. Unless you'd like to draft an amendment?"

"You're just being pedantic."

He didn't deny it. He just smiled.

He watched me eat with an open, fond intensity that was utterly new and deeply disconcerting. It was a look completely out of character for the CEO, and it made my stomach do a foolish, delighted flip even as my cheeks burned.

To break the spell, I gestured with the coffee cup. “Thanks for this. It’s really good. Where’s it from?”

“A café I passed on the way. The coffee’s good?”

“Yeah, much better than the swill in the canteen or the breakroom pod stuff.”

“Let me try.”

He leaned down from his perch on the desk, cradled my face in his hand, and kissed me. It wasn’t a brief peck. It was a soft, searching kiss that tasted of the coffee I’d just drunk and something uniquely, essentially him.

My first instinct was to push him away—office, professionalism!—but the thought dissolved as his mouth moved over mine.

My hand, which had risen to his chest to shove, instead fisted in his crisp shirt. I kissed him back.

The sound of the door opening was like a bucket of ice water.

“Hyacinth, I’ve got the—” Kai’s voice cut off.

I broke away with a gasp, scrambling back in my chair.

Lochlan straightened up slowly, calmly, but not before Kai got a full, crystal-clear view of what we’d been doing.

His eyes widened to saucers. “I... forgot. The door—” he stammered, backpedaling so quickly he bumped into the doorframe. “Later! I’ll come back later!”

He vanished, pulling the door shut with a force that shook the wall.

Silence descended. I stared at the closed door, then at Lochlan, who merely raised an eyebrow, looking utterly unrepentant.

So much for keeping it professional.

An hour later, I decided to brazen it out. I marched to Kai’s office with a file of my own, determined to act so normally that it would rewrite reality.

We discussed merger timelines and due diligence checklists. It was all perfectly professional.

Just as I was turning to leave, he finally brought it up, his voice hesitant. “Hyacinth... the boss. You and him...?” He trailed off, waving a hand vaguely.

I opened my mouth. Nothing came out. What could I say? We’re not dating, it’s just spectacular, commitment-free sex?

Kai hurried to add, “I’m not prying. Really. It’s just... you’re not going to resign, are you? Because of... whatever this is?”

The genuine concern in his voice snapped me out of my panic. “No,” I said, forcing a reassuring smile. “No, I’m not resigning. Everything’s fine.”

Chapter 442:

The rest of the morning passed with an eerie, business-as-usual calm.

It figured. Once Lochlan was in work mode, a troupe of naked showgirls could perform the can-can on his desk and he’d probably just ask them to move aside. His ability to compartmentalize was frankly supernatural.

He had a client lunch booked. I promptly delegated it to Kai, citing “other pressing matters.”

The moment the clock hit one, I was out the door. I grabbed a quick, solitary sandwich, then made a beeline for a pharmacy.

Last night we’d used protection, but my internal calendar was screaming that I was slap-bang in the middle of my fertile window. I wasn’t taking any chances.

I bought the little pill, tucked it into my bag like a secret, and headed back to the office.

The executive floor was quiet. I went to the kitchen to make a coffee. My phone rang just as I was about to leave. Portia’s name flashed on the screen. I set my mug down and perched on a nearby stool.

“Hey,” I answered.

“Darling,” Portia purred. “So? First impressions? How did it perform?”

What? How did she know—?

Oh, wait. She was asking about the toys.

I gave a deliberately vague, non-committal answer. “It was... good. Really good.”

Portia’s grin was practically audible. “I told you! Life-changing, right? A whole new universe of pleasure unlocked?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, thinking of the specific, human skill set involved. “It definitely has... notable capabilities.”

“Of course it does! That’s the beauty of it. Unlike a man, it doesn’t get performance anxiety or fall asleep immediately after. It has no flaws.”

“Well, one flaw,” I mused, my mind still firmly on Lochlan.

“What? What flaw?”

“I’m a bit worried about the potential for addiction.”

There was a delighted pause on the line. “Wow. It must have been absolutely earth-shattering for you to be worrying about addiction after just one night. I’m so proud.”

I took several large, strategic gulps of coffee. If only she knew.

“I’m just glad you liked it. Anyway, listen. Next Friday. I’m taking you to a fabulous cocktail ball. Secured two tickets. It’s the place to be—all the right people will be there.”

My personal interest in schmoozing at black-tie events hovered around zero, but Portia was right. These things were networking petri dishes, and that’s exactly why she’d wrangled the invites. “Sure,” I agreed. “Sounds good.”

I hung up and pulled out my phone to make a note in my calendar for next Friday.

A warm breath stirred the hair at my crown. Two arms, clad in fine grey wool, appeared on the counter on either side of me, caging me in. The hands resting on the marble were long-fingered and familiar.

Oh, bugger.

Lochlan’s voice, a low murmur meant only for my ear, washed over me. “I appreciate the glowing review.”

His breath was a hot brand on my cheek. Every inch of my skin instantly prickled with a furious, betraying blush.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Why was the man who was supposed to be wining and dining a client currently draped over my back in the office kitchen? And more importantly, how much had he heard?

I twisted around. "Eavesdropping is rude, you know."

"It wasn't intentional. You were just... very engrossed in your conversation."

"It was a personal call. You shouldn't be listening."

"So I can't take a personal interest in my girlfriend's conversations?"

The word, so casually deployed, made my spine stiffen. "I'm not your girlfriend."

"But we agreed, didn't we? We each play by our own rules. You want no strings, no attachment. Fine. My rule is that I get to call you my girlfriend. You have to be fine with that. That's the deal."

"Not here!" I hissed, gesturing at the kitchen. "This is the office. People will talk!"

Chapter 443:

"People have been talking since the day you came back. Probably before."

"Yeah, but that was just speculation! Rumors! Gossip! This is..."

"This is real," he finished for me, his pale eyes holding mine. "So what are you so afraid of?"

"I just don't... I'm not ready for the entire company to look at me and see 'the boss's girlfriend,' okay? Can we please, for the love of God, just ease into it?"

He studied me for a moment, then gave a slow, conceding nod. "You need time. I understand."

"Thank you."

"But I can't wait indefinitely. How long do you need? To accept me. To accept this. To accept that you are my girlfriend."

"A year."

"No. Too long."

"Fine. Six months."

"Still too long."

"Three months, then. That's my final offer."

He shook his head. “Too long.”

I stared at him. “You’re not going to give me any time at all, are you?”

“I’ll agree to three months, if you give me a kiss.”

“What? Here? Now?”

“Yes. Here. Now.”

“It’s the middle of the office!”

“There’s no one else here.”

“There are security cameras!”

“I control the security feed. I can have the tape erased.”

“Someone could walk in at any second!”

“Then I suggest you hurry.”

I stood on my toes, leaned in, and planted the most perfunctory, dry peck on his lips, pulling back immediately. “There. Done. Happy now?”

“That was not a kiss.”

“Don’t push me, Lochlan.”

“Fine. I’ll add it to the list.”

“What list?”

“The list of things you owe me. A proper good morning kiss, for starters. You left this morning without so much as a note. Then there’s the lunch break kiss, which you’ve just welched on. And we mustn’t forget last night, when you pleaded exhaustion after round three. I was quite prepared to—”

I lunged forward and clapped my hand over his mouth. “Shut. Up.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners. He pressed a soft, warm kiss into my palm before I could snatch it away.

After he left, I slumped back against the counter, listening to the hum of the fridge.

Holy shit.

Who was this man? Where was the cool, collected, politely aloof CEO who held the world at arm's length?

This was someone else entirely. Someone clingy, and possessive, and negotiating for kisses like a hormonal teenager.

What was I getting myself into?

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Chapter 444

Chapter 444:

The workday finally limped to a close.

Just as I was packing up, my phone buzzed with a message from Portia: "Dinner at mine. Josh's birthday. Be here or be square."

I typed back a quick "On my way" and headed for the lift.

The footsteps behind me were measured and familiar. I didn't need to turn around.

"Hyacinth. I was thinking dinner. There's a new place in Mayfair I'd like to try with you."

I jabbed the lift button, staring at the descending numbers. "Sorry. Can't. Prior engagement. It's Josh's birthday—I'm going to Portia's."

I could feel Lochlan's gaze on the back of my neck, but I refused to turn.

The lift arrived with a soft ding. We stepped in. He stood beside me, his expression as still and unreadable as a frozen lake.

When the lift stopped, he stepped out without a word.

Was he mad? Or was he mentally adding another entry to his mysterious ledger?

The drive to Portia's took half an hour, not counting the emergency supermarket detour she demanded. "We're out of tonic! And limes!" I also picked up a birthday present for Josh.

By the time I pulled up outside her building, I was running an hour late.

Josh answered the door, wearing a floral apron that was somehow both absurd and endearing on his tall frame. “Hyacinth! Good to see you.” He beamed.

“Happy birthday, Josh.” I handed him the gift and the bags of groceries.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have! Thank you!” He took everything, ushering me in. “Come in, come in, Portia’s just—”

I stepped into the living room and stopped dead.

On the sofa, looking perfectly at home, was Lochlan. He was watching some nature documentary on the TV, a glass of what looked like sparkling water in his hand.

“You—” I spluttered, completely thrown. “What are you doing here?”

He turned his head. “Portia invited me for dinner.”

I just stared. Like hell she did.

Portia emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her own, much cooler-looking black apron.

She caught my glare and shrugged. “Did you know your boss owns this building? This year’s rent just got magically waived. Funny how that works.”

I closed my eyes for a second. “I do now.”

Lochlan stood up. “You left this in the office.”

He walked over and held out my favorite cashmere cardigan, the soft grey one I’d draped over my chair.

His fingers brushed mine as I took it, and he didn’t let go immediately. His thumb stroked a slow, deliberate line across my knuckles. “It was getting cold. Thought you might need it.”

Portia dropped the potato in her hand. It hit the floor with a solid thump and rolled under the coffee table. Josh’s eyes widened. His gaze ping-ponged between Lochlan, me, the cardigan, and my no-doubt flaming face.

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Chapter 445:

“Right,” I said, my voice strangled. “I’m going to help in the kitchen.” I shoved the cardigan back at Lochlan and fled.

Josh moved to follow. “I’ll help too!”

Portia shot out an arm, barring his way. “No. You stay out here. Watch telly. Bond with our... generous landlord.” She shoved him back towards the sofa, then followed me into the kitchen, slamming the door shut.

She leaned against it, arms crossed, eyes gleaming. “Spill. Now. What in the name of all that is holy is going on between you two?”

“Nothing,” I said, grabbing a lettuce and attacking it with unnecessary violence. “It’s a cardigan. I left it at work.”

“Don’t you lie to me, Hyacinth Galloway,” she hissed, pointing a celery stalk at me. “I’m your best friend and a qualified legal professional. Do not make me use my cross-examination skills on you in my own kitchen.”

I sighed. “Fine. We sort of... slept together. Last night.”

Portia’s mouth formed a perfect O. A high-pitched squeak escaped her before she clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes comically wide above them. She did a little silent-scream jump, then grabbed my shoulders. “I knew it! I knew it! Finally!”

“For God’s sake, keep your voice down!” I whispered fiercely.

“Okay, okay!” she whisper-yelled back. “But details! How many times? Positions? On a scale of ‘meh’ to ‘religious experience,’ how was he?”

“Portia, it’s Josh’s birthday. We are not having this conversation now. Focus on the food.”

She pouted but relented, picking up a knife. “Fine. But you are not getting out of this. Later. We will have a full debrief.”

The table was set, and I realized the only empty seat was the one right next to Lochlan. I shot a lethal look at Portia, who just gave me an innocent, wide-eyed smile.

Josh remained cheerfully oblivious.

I sat down. To my immense relief, Lochlan behaved impeccably. No lingering touches, no significant looks. He was the model of a polite dinner guest.

“I heard from my sources today,” he said. “Gloria Lockwood paid a visit to Soraya at the detention center.”

Portia leaned forward. “And? Did it work? Did she manage to do anything?”

“It appears not. Soraya has already entered her guilty plea. The evidence is irrefutable. Short of orchestrating a prison break, there’s very little anyone can do at this stage. The visit appears to have been... pointless.”

Portia snorted. “So the mighty Gloria Lockwood isn’t so mighty after all.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. She’s in London now, by the way. You should both be aware. She’s here to recruit for The keystones, and London’s social season is the perfect hunting ground. I’m concerned she might try to approach either of you. Hyacinth, because of your connection to me. Portia, because your evidence was so pivotal in the case.”

A cold trickle of unease ran down my spine. “I have zero interest in joining her creepy secret society.”

“Same,” Portia chimed in. “I’ve got enough on my plate.”

Josh placed a protective hand over Portia’s. “Don’t worry, Mr. Hastings. I won’t let any shady women near her.”

Portia smiled and leaned over to give him a quick, proud kiss on the cheek. It was sweet.

After dinner, Josh insisted on clearing everything away. He made multiple trips, ferrying plates and glasses to the kitchen.

I nudged Portia with my elbow as we watched him. “It’s his birthday, and you’ve got him doing all the cleaning. Some girlfriend you are.”

She just grinned. “Hey, I cooked. That’s love. Besides, I got him a present he’s really going to like. Hey, Josh! Come here.”

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Chapter 446

Chapter 446:

Josh emerged from the kitchen. Portia thrust a sleek shopping bag into his hands. “For you, birthday boy.”

Josh's face lit up with a smile so genuine it was almost blinding. "Portia, thank you!" He peered into the bag, his delight growing. "Oh, wow! I love this brand." He pulled out a soft, heather-grey cashmere blend sweater from a notoriously understated but exorbitant luxury label.

"Try it on," Portia said.

He shucked off his apron, then grabbed the hem of his t-shirt and pulled it over his head.

My eyes, entirely against my will, flickered across his exposed torso.

Huh. I'd always thought of him as lanky, all long limbs and eager energy. But without the loose shirt, he was... surprisingly defined. Lean muscles corded his stomach and arms. He wasn't bulky, but he was clearly someone who took care of himself.

A low, quiet voice spoke directly into my ear. "Enjoying the view?"

I forced my gaze down to my wine glass. "I wasn't looking at anything."

Lochlan's whisper was a private, velvet-wrapped threat. "If you enjoy looking at the male form, we can go home. I'll let you look your fill."

I reached up and pushed his face away from my ear. "No, thank you. I'm all set."

Josh ran his hands down the soft fabric. "I love it. Thank you, Portia." He leaned in and kissed her.

Portia smiled against his lips, then pulled back to murmur, loud enough for our corner of the room to catch every word, "I got you something else, too. A little black G-string. I want you to put it on for me later."

That was my cue. I shot up from the sofa as if launched. "Right! That's our signal. Time to go! Wonderful evening, happy birthday Josh, thanks for having us, bye!" I was already speed-walking towards the hall.

Josh called after me, "Goodnight! Thanks for the coffee beans, Hyacinth!"

Portia followed us to the door, catching my arm for a second. "We'll talk later."

Outside Portia's building, the cool night air was a relief. I'd had more than one glass of wine, which meant driving was off the table.

I pulled out my phone, opening a ride-share app.

My phone was plucked from my hand.

I whirled around. “What are you doing?”

Lochlan simply held out his other hand, palm up, in silent invitation.

I stared at it, then at his impassive face. I placed my hand in his. His fingers closed around mine.

He started walking, tugging me gently along beside him.

At first, it was just his hand enveloping mine. Then, subtly, his fingers shifted, lacing through mine until we were properly, intimately holding hands.

The night breeze seemed to carry the scent of him, and I felt dangerously lightheaded.

It was nice, but... after several blocks, I cleared my throat. “Are we walking all the way back to Mayfair?”

Lochlan glanced down at me, stopped, and pulled out his phone. He made a call, and within ten seconds, Roy was smoothly pulling the car to the kerb beside us.

We got in. Lochlan settled back into the leather seat and said, “Roy, raise the partition, please.”

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Chapter 447

Chapter 447:

“No, that’s not—” I began, but it was useless.

A dark glass panel slid up silently, sealing us off from the front seat. The spacious car suddenly felt incredibly small and private.

My whole body went tense. Again? Tonight? In the car? This was madness. I was still sore from last night. The human body had limits, and mine was waving a white flag.

I inched closer to my door, putting as much distance between us as the seat allowed.

“Everything alright?” Lochlan asked, his tone one of polite concern. He shifted closer, reaching out to feel my forehead. “You feel warm.”

“I’m fine,” I said, dodging his touch. “Just... sit properly. You’re crowding me.”

He slid an arm around my waist and hauled me effortlessly onto his lap. “Is this better?”

I let out a strangled sound.

“Just relax. Lean on me and rest. I’ll wake you when we’re home.” He pressed a gentle hand to the back of my head, guiding it to his shoulder. His other hand found the sore muscles at the small of my back and began to knead them with a firm, perfect pressure.

Every instinct told me to stay rigid, to maintain some scrap of independence.

But his fingers were magic on my aching body, and the solid warmth of him, the clean, familiar scent of his skin... it was a potent combination.

Against my better judgment, the tension began to seep away. My eyelids grew heavy.

The next thing I knew, the car was stationary and the digital clock on the panel read 12:30. We’d been sitting there for a while. I stirred, blinking. “Sorry. I must have dozed off. I’m just... a bit tired today.”

“The apology is mine. I shouldn’t have been so... insistent last night.”

“Right. Well...” I scrambled off his lap and opened the car door for some non-suggestive air.

He got out, shrugged off his suit jacket, and draped it over my shoulders. We walked into the lobby of my building together.

It was only as we approached the lifts that I came to my senses. “Wait. This is my place. What are you doing here? I meant it—I really am tired.”

“I’m not here with an agenda. The cat. It’s still at your place.”

“Oh. Right. I forgot. When are you taking it home?”

“You like cats more than I do. Do you want to keep it?”

I thought about it. “I’d love to. But it wouldn’t be fair. My childhood cats, Skipper and Pebble, they had a whole village to roam. Locking a kitten alone in a flat all day while I’m at work... I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“What if you could bring it to work?”

I stared at him. “You’re serious?”

“Why not? Plenty of companies have ‘bring your pet to work’ days.”

“That would be nice.”

My steps faltered.

Standing directly in front of us, waiting for the lift, were Cary Grant and a young woman in a pale pink and white dress.

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Chapter 448

Chapter 448:

Lochlan merely raised a brow. “Good evening, Mr. Grant.”

Cary’s reply was just as cool. “Good evening.”

His gaze—those intense eyes that had once commanded my full attention—shifted from Lochlan to me. They landed on the suit jacket draped over my shoulders, Lochlan’s jacket, and stalled there for a fraction of a second too long.

A subtle tightening of his jaw was the only sign it registered.

I offered him nothing more than a slight, impersonal nod, the kind you’d give a vaguely familiar neighbor.

My attention was snagged by the girl at his side. She was staring at Lochlan with an unblinking, rapt fixation, a flush of excitement on her pretty cheeks.

Lochlan said, “I thought you’d moved out.”

“I have,” Cary stated, his voice flat. “I’m helping Janine settle in. She’s just taken a place here.”

Lochlan gave a curt nod, the social minimum. I had no intention of talking.

The lift arrived with a soft chime.

Lochlan's hand settled firmly on the small of my back, guiding me in. Cary and the girl got in after us.

Just as the lift door slid shut, a pale hand shot out, small fingers wrapping around Lochlan's forearm.

I startled, my head snapping towards Cary's companion.

Lochlan's eyes cooled instantly. "I'd ask you to let go, please."

But the girl didn't release him. She just gazed up, her expression one of simple, open delight. "But you're so pretty," she announced, her voice light and curiously uninflected, like a child's. "I want to play with you."

I stared. Looking at her clear, guileless eyes and hearing that youthful cadence, the pieces clicked.

I turned my glare on Cary, my disgust overriding any residual awkwardness. "I thought you had a fiancée. What are you doing with this... this girl?"

Calling her a woman felt wrong.

A slow, ugly smile spread across his face. "Why? Are you jealous?"

I looked at him with the purest contempt I could muster. "I'm just asking you to have some basic human decency. For once."

The girl was beautiful, there was no denying it. But if her mental age was as young as she sounded... the idea of Cary with her made my skin crawl.

Cary's smile faltered, then disappeared altogether. "That's what you think of me? You think, what, she's my girlfriend?"

"No?" I pointedly eyed his hand, firmly holding hers. "Then what is she?"

"She's—" He caught himself. "She's none of your business."

"Janine," he said, his voice taking on a coaxing, nasty edge. "Do you like this pretty boy?"

Janine nodded vigorously, her gaze still glued to Lochlan. "I like him. He's so pretty. Like a doll."

Cary put a hand on Janine's shoulder and gave her a gentle push towards Lochlan. "Go on, Janine. Go and play with the pretty boy. I'm sure he'd love to take care of you."

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 449

Chapter 449:

I was speechless. What. The. Actual. Hell.

Janine giggled, delighted, and made to wrap her arms around Lochlan.

Lochlan sidestepped her, his face a mask of disgust. "Mr. Grant!"

The lift doors opened on our penthouse floor. Lochlan took my hand and steered us around the two of them without a backward glance.

"Wait!" Janine cried out, her voice plaintive. She scurried after us like a lost puppy.

I looked back just as the lift doors began to close. Cary was still inside, leaning against the mirrored wall.

He met my horrified gaze and gave a slow, mocking wave as the doors slid shut.

He was gone. He'd just... left her here.

"Is he insane?" I hissed, my blood boiling.

Janine had caught up, beaming at Lochlan as if he were the sun. She took another eager step towards him.

Lochlan retreated, pulling me with him, and used me as a human shield. He held up a stern hand. "Stop. Stay right there."

Janine froze instantly, obeying the command with the compliance of a young child.

I looked at this beautiful, vacant-eyed girl staring adoringly at Lochlan, and felt a headache begin to pound behind my temples. I wanted to drag Cary back by his hair and throttle him.

Swallowing my rage, I forced my voice into a gentle, patient tone. “Janine, right? Do you have a phone? We could call your mummy or daddy to come and get you.”

“Mummy said I should go with Cary,” she replied, as if reciting a lesson.

Her mother said that? My shock must have shown on my face. I glanced back at Lochlan and saw my own grim understanding reflected in his eyes.

“We should take her down to the concierge,” Lochlan said. “Let Noel handle it. He can call Cary and have him come back to collect his... charge.”

“Okay. You make the call.”

I went to quickly check on the kitten while Lochlan summoned Noel Pritchett, the building manager.

Noel arrived, his professional smile in place, and tried to engage Janine. “Which unit are you in, miss? Let’s get you home.”

Janine wanted nothing to do with Noel. She shied away from him, hiding behind Lochlan.

Lochlan stepped away.

She followed.

I stared.

Lochlan gave Noel Cary’s number. “Call him.”

We could hear Cary’s voice, lazy and unconcerned, through the speaker. “Tell my ex-wife to look after her for a bit. I’ll come and get her when I’m free.”

The line went dead.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a posessive husband!

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Chapter 450

Chapter 450:

Noel called again.

Straight to voicemail. Cary had switched his phone off.

What the hell?

Did Cary expect me to babysit his... whatever she was?

Janine darted behind Lochlan and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist like a starving octopus.

Lochlan's eyes narrowed.

I'll give him credit—he only flinched a little.

But the displeasure that settled on his features was immediate and profound. He reached down and pried her hands off. "No."

It was like telling the tide not to come in.

The moment he stepped away, Janine just beamed and latched right back on, this time clutching his arm.

He detached her again, taking a longer stride towards the sofa.

She giggled and bounded after him.

It was like watching a very tall, very expensive matador being chased by a jubilant, brightly dressed bull.

I couldn't help it. A snort of laughter escaped me.

Lochlan shot me a look over his shoulder, those pale eyes narrowed. The message was clear: Help. Or you're next.

Alright, alright. Wiping the smirk off my face, I moved in.

"Okay, Janine, game's over," I said, adopting the tone you'd use with a dog that's got hold of your slipper. I got a firm grip on her forearm. "He's not a toy. You can't just hug people like that without asking, alright?"

Janine's face screwed up. All her focus switched from Lochlan to me, the fun-ruiner.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked, and wrenched her arm with a shocking, violent strength. It wasn't just a pull. She threw her whole weight into shaking me off, then shoved both hands hard against my shoulders.

I wasn't prepared for it. The force sent me stumbling backwards, my heels skidding on the polished wood. I windmilled my arms to keep my balance and only managed to stay upright by crashing hip-first into the edge of an armchair. A sharp pain lanced through my side.

Brilliant.

She stood there, puffing herself up. "You're a big, mean bully!"

I righted myself, one hand pressed to my throbbing hip.

I felt my free hand curl into a fist. Not to hit her—God, no—but just to contain the volcanic surge of irritation that was rapidly melting my amusement.

Lochlan turned to Noel. "Go and find out which unit she belongs to. Have her taken back."

Noel made a call and summoned a couple of security guards. They moved in.

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