

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 451

Chapter 451:

The waterworks started instantly—a full-bodied, operatic wail. “Go away! Bad men! Baaaaad!” Janine sobbed, kicking out as they gently but firmly guided her towards the door.

Eventually, the cacophony of tears and shouts faded.

I sank onto the sofa and let out a long, weary breath.

Lochlan fetched a bottle of water, handed it to me, and sat down close. The heat of him was a solid line against my side. He was quiet for a moment, thinking.

“She looks familiar,” he mused. “I might have seen her somewhere before.”

“Really?” I took a swig of water. “Is that why she was so glued to you?”

It was the only logical explanation. Why else would she have zeroed in on him like a heat-seeking missile?

My gaze drifted down to his waist, the place she’d clung to. Well. Even a woman with a child’s mind apparently had an eye for a good set of abs. The girl had taste—I’d give her that.

“What on earth is she doing with Cary?” I wondered out loud. “I mean, is she his new ‘care assistant’ or something? Please don’t tell me she’s his new girlfriend.” I shook my head, answering my own question. “No. He might be a cheating bastard, but he’s not a creep. Even he has limits.”

Lochlan shifted, leaning into my space. He took my hand, placed it firmly on the exact spot Janine had gripped—his own hand covering mine, holding it there against the fine cotton of his shirt.

“What are you doing?”

“She had a strong grip,” he said. “I think she left bruises.”

“Really?” I played along, raising an eyebrow. “Let’s see the damage, then.”

I pulled my hand from under his and tugged his shirt free from his trousers. I lifted the hem, pretending to scrutinize the skin of his waist. There were faint, fleeting red marks, nothing more. "I see a grand total of zero bruises," I announced, giving his backside a light, playful slap. "Don't be such a baby."

He grabbed my wrist before I could pull away. "Now you have to pay for that."

I laughed. "Oh? What are you going to do, spank me?"

In one smooth motion, he turned me slightly and delivered a single, sharp slap to my arse. It wasn't hard, but it wasn't entirely soft either. It stung, just for a second—a jolt that melted instantly into a wave of pure heat that pooled right where his hand had been.

My laugh caught in my throat.

He used my momentary paralysis to back me towards the sofa. I stumbled against the cushions, and he came down over me, his body covering mine but holding his weight carefully on his arms.

Then he kissed me, and my brain obediently dissolved into a warm, fuzzy static.

His hands were everywhere, skilled and impatient, and it wasn't until a rush of cold air hit my skin that I realized my blouse was gone and my bra was unhooked.

I managed a token, muffled protest against his mouth. "Lochlan... wait."

He broke the kiss, his breath hot on my cheek. "I'll be gentle," he whispered.

Just as I was teetering on the edge, a sound sliced through the heavy air. Lochlan's phone, buzzing insistently on the marble table.

The spell shattered.

I jerked back. "You should take that."

I shoved at his chest, stumbled to my feet, and made a beeline for the bedroom.

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Chapter 452

Chapter 452:

The door clicked shut behind her, leaving me alone in the cavernous, silent living room.

I stared at the blank wood for a moment, then let my gaze drop downwards.

Swearing softly, I adjusted myself with a sigh of profound irritation.

My phone, the culprit, still sat vibrating on the table. I scooped it up, my expression flattening entirely when I saw the name.

“Dad.”

“Lochlan, where are you?” Holden’s voice boomed down the line, all breezy energy.

“In the City.”

“Duh, I know that. I mean whereabouts?”

“Why?” I wasn’t in the mood for his rambling. I was in the mood for a very specific thing currently barricading herself behind a bathroom door.

“Your uncle Aaron just called me, all in a state. Says his daughter’s in London but apparently all alone. He just got a call from some guy claiming to be the building manager where she’s staying, says she’s agitated and crying her eyes out.”

“Is her name, by any chance, Janine?”

“How’d you know? You’ve met her?”

“You could say that,” I replied, my voice dry. “Go on.”

“Well, Aaron’s agitated and worried sick, you see, because Janine can’t take care of herself. Has the mind of a six-year-old, he says.”

“She’s supposed to have someone with her.”

“She did, but Aaron says the manager tried to call the bloke who’s supposed to be staying with her and he’s not contactable. Phone’s off.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Aaron called me, asked me to help watch over her. But I’m not in London at the moment.”

“Where are you, then?”

There was a pause, filled with the distinct sound of hemming and hawing.

“Dad?”

“Well, don’t tell your mum, okay? I’m in Little Paddlington.”

“What on earth are you doing there?”

“They’ve invited me down as a judge for the village fudge festival,” he said, pride seeping into his voice. “The championship round is tomorrow.”

“Your pancreas,” I said flatly. “Mum is going to be incandescent if she finds out you’re within a mile of a vat of fudge.”

“Well, that’s precisely why she can’t know. And you’re not going to tell her, are you, my dear boy? Anyway, I can’t get to the City, so I thought of you.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. The mental image of Janine clinging to me like a limpet, followed by the theatrical tantrum, did not inspire confidence. “What, precisely, do you want me to do?”

“I’ll forward you the address once Aaron texts me. Why don’t you just head over there, keep an eye on her? Aaron’s already on his way in the helicopter. Shouldn’t be more than a couple of hours.”

“You want me to babysit.”

“Yeah. Should be simple enough for you. Just sit there. Read the Financial Times. Make sure she doesn’t swallow a crayon.”

“Why doesn’t Aaron Lockwood call whoever is supposed to be taking care of her? Sort it out himself?”

“I think he is trying, but in the meantime he doesn’t want to leave her alone. He’s in a proper state.”

“Then he shouldn’t have let some man take his daughter to the City in the first place. Why was she even here?”

“He didn’t know. Only found out his wife Gloria brought Janine to London after he got home and she wasn’t there. Apparently he got into a blazing row with Gloria. Sounded pretty fed up on the phone. Anyway, that’s the gist. So, can you help? For me?”

I sighed. I disliked Aaron Lockwood. But my father was asking. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“Attaboy! Knew I could count on you. Oh, and Loch?”

“What?”

“Do try and be nice. She’s just a kid, really.”

After he hung up, I stood motionless for a full minute, processing the abrupt derailment of my evening.

I looked towards the bedroom, listening to the faint sound of running water from the shower. Hyacinth was in there. Naked. Water sluicing over skin I knew was still flushed.

Holding back a curse, I picked up my phone again, my thumbs moving over the screen. “Family emergency. Have to step out. Don’t wait up. Goodnight.”

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Chapter 453

Chapter 453:

The lift doors slid open onto the executive floor with a hushed sigh.

I stepped out and made a beeline for my office.

Almost two hours later, just as I was neck-deep in pivot tables, Lochlan came in, with Kai a respectful half-step behind him.

I scooped up my laptop, pasted on a smile that felt suitably professional and entirely unconvincing, and went out to intercept them.

“Gentlemen,” I said, with a nod that managed to include both and commit to neither.

“Morning, Hyacinth,” Lochlan replied. His gaze dipped to the computer in my hands, then lifted slowly back to my face. Those pale eyes of his, the color of a winter morning, missed nothing. “Where are you off to?”

“Just down to the secretarial pool for a departmental meeting.” I then swiveled my attention to Kai. “I might be down there for a while today, Kai. I’ll leave the commander-in-chief in your capable hands.”

“Of course. No problem,” Kai said with an easy smile.

The social niceties observed, we should have all gone our separate ways. Except Lochlan just... stood there. He didn’t move.

Kai and I didn’t move either. We just stood in the middle of the bloody corridor, forming a perfect, silent, and deeply stupid little tableau.

My smile began to feel as if it were glued on with superglue that was starting to fail. And still, he looked at me.

“Right. See you later.” I turned on my heel and marched off.

I didn’t see him for the rest of the morning. Apart from the obligatory, soul-crushing group strategy meeting at half ten, I buried myself in the secretary’s department. I reorganized filing systems, reviewed correspondence protocols, and offered unsolicited advice on email etiquette.

By eleven, the poor women down there were starting to look genuinely nervous. I caught the sidelong glances.

And I soon found out why.

In the breakroom, two junior girls, fresh from their internships and still bright with hope, were making coffee.

“D’you think she’s down here because she thinks we’re slacking off?” one hissed.

“Probably,” the other moaned. “She gave me such a frosty look last month over the Henderson report. Though she did give me a cupcake afterwards. It was confusing.”

“Oh, you pair of ninnies.” An older woman, Susan from Accounts Payable, bustled in. “Has it not crossed your minds that maybe, just maybe, Hyacinth and the big boss have had a bit of a falling out?”

The juniors gasped. “Have a row with the CEO? Would she dare?”

“Well, according to some very unconfirmed gossip, two weeks ago—that’s Valentine’s week—Hyacinth went head-to-head with that Galina Croft. And the boss chose our Hyacinth. Sent the heiress packing in a right state. Galina’s friends have been spitting feathers about it online, posting photos and calling Hyacinth all sorts in their little private chats. Nasty stuff.”

“But that doesn’t mean it’s true!” one junior argued. “And so what if it is? She’s divorced, he’s single. So there’s a bit of a gap, money-wise. But love doesn’t check bank statements!”

“Yeah!” the other chimed in. “Second marriage? So what? Look at that actress—she married a lord on her third go!”

Susan just gave a knowing, wrinkled-nose smile. “You’re still not getting it. Before, she denied anything was going on. People were betting on the boss and the young and fabulous Mr. Lockwood, for heaven’s sake. But now? The mask has slipped. They’re definitely at it. The question now isn’t if, but what.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I mean, is she the mistress, or is she playing for the full upgrade to wife?”

I stood by the door, my coffee forgotten.

So that was what they’d been whispering about.

Scolding them was pointless. What did I expect? I’d slept with the king of the castle. The court was bound to talk.

I turned and left.

By lunchtime, my social calendar had exploded. I fielded calls from two department heads, a finance director, and a deputy from admin, all suddenly desperate to break bread with me.

Was today National Suck Up to the Boss’s Possible Mistress Day?

In the end, to save my sanity, I told them all to come along. We descended on a modern Italian place. The market manager booked it. The finance director snatched the bill before anyone could blink. The flattery flowed more freely than the Pinot Grigio.

I knew exactly what they were thinking. And I didn’t mind. Let them think it.

I couldn’t control their fantasies, and if the widespread belief that I had the boss’s ear made them return my emails faster and approve my requests without seven rounds of queries, then who was I to complain?

The lunch wound down. We were just gathering bags when my mobile buzzed on the table.

I glanced at the screen and answered.

“Hyacinth,” Lochlan’s voice came down the line, smooth as chilled gin and just as bracing. No hello. No preamble.

“Sir.”

“The steak and ale pie at The Gilded Hare is rather good. Could you pick one up and bring it back?”

I didn’t ask him how he knew I was there. “Of course. Anything else?”

“No. Thank you.”

Around me, my four luncheon companions were engaged in the worst pantomime of not eavesdropping in human history. One was suddenly fascinated by the sugar caddy. Another was pretending to search for something vitally important in a handbag the size of a small suitcase.

I ended the call. “The boss needs a lunch run,” I announced. “Please, don’t let me keep you.”

They all nodded with understanding smiles.

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Chapter 454

Chapter 454:

Back at Velos, I went straight to the CEO’s office.

I paused outside the door, staring at the pale wood. I could just leave it here. Text him. Like a delivery person.

I knocked.

“Come in.”

He was at his desk. The midday light from the floor-to-ceiling windows turned him into a silhouette of concentrated power.

“Your lunch, sir.” I dropped the bag on the nearest table. “You should eat it before it gets cold.”

He closed his laptop, stood, and began to walk towards me.

My hand shot out, fingers closing around the cool brass of the door handle.

I never got to turn it.

An arm locked around my waist. I was pulled backwards, my spine connecting solidly with a chest that felt like it was carved from warm marble. His scent flooded my senses, a dizzying invasion.

A large, warm hand splayed across my ribs, his thumb making a slow revolution against the silk of my blouse. His breath fanned my temple. He held me so tightly I could feel the steady, strong beat of his heart against my back.

I tilted my head away, fixing my gaze on a very interesting patch of paint on the far wall. “You really should go and eat. It’ll be a tragedy if that pie goes to waste.”

“The pie can wait.”

I pushed against his chest. It was like trying to shove a parked Range Rover.

A hand came up to cradle the nape of my neck, tilting my face up, and his mouth descended on mine. A deep, hungry, punishing kiss that stole the air from my lungs and the sense from my head. It was all heat and demand, his tongue sweeping in to claim territory I’d foolishly thought was still my own.

I couldn’t breathe. I could barely think.

Right. Fight back. I found his side, my fingers seeking the hard muscle there, and pinched.

Or tried to.

I might as well have been trying to dent titanium.

I pinched again.

Nothing. Not even a flinch.

What was he made of, reinforced concrete?

All I succeeded in doing was making myself achingly aware of the hand on my waist, which had begun to move in slow, erotic circles, the heat of it searing through my clothes.

My knees started a cowardly softening. The fight drained out of me, replaced by a sluggish, warm capitulation.

I went still in his arms, letting him take what he wanted.

Finally, the storm in the kiss began to subside.

“This,” he whispered against my lips, his voice rough and thick, “is more important.”

Before I could muster a retort, he was kissing me again. This time it was different. He kissed me like he was memorizing a map, charting every response, every soft sigh he could draw from me. It was intense, then gentle. Deep, then sweet.

When he finally released my mouth, I was utterly wrecked. I slumped against him, my forehead resting on his shoulder, gulping in air like a diver who’d been held under for too long.

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Chapter 455

Chapter 455:

And for some reason, thinking of the ocean made me think of that silly, sad mermaid. The one who gave up her voice, her family, her very essence for legs, for a prince, and ended up as sea foam on the waves.

The ultimate cautionary tale about diving in too deep for a man. A story that’s basically just a series of spectacularly bad choices wrapped in a pretty, tragic bow.

Lochlan held me loosely now, his earlier tension gone. I could feel the satisfied ease in his posture. His chin rested on the top of my head.

“Why are you angry with me?” he asked.

I kept my face buried in the fine wool of his suit. “I’m not angry.”

“You’ve been cold and distant all morning. You barely talked to me.”

“I’m just tired. Lots of work.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

He went quiet then, but it was an active, searching sort of quiet. I could feel his gaze on the side of my face.

I thought of this morning. Running into Phil, the daytime doorman at my building. His cheerful, unthinking gossip. “Morning, Ms. Galloway! You just missed Mr. Hastings. Left about twenty minutes ago. With a young lady. Looked a bit... excitable, she did.”

A young lady. From his description—all bouncing curls and wide, childlike eyes—it could only be Janine.

But when he left last night, his text had said it was a “family emergency.” Since when was Janine family?

Hadn’t last night been the first time he’d ever laid eyes on her?

Where on earth had he gone with her at the crack of dawn?

Was that why he’d been late to the office, trailing in almost two hours after me?

I’d sat at my desk all morning, a slow burn building behind my ribs, waiting for him to saunter in and offer some explanation.

But there had been nothing. Just business as usual.

And now he stood here, holding me, asking why I was mad, and he genuinely didn’t seem to know.

Maybe I was overreacting.

Maybe I was constructing narratives and expectations out of thin air, just because we’d slept together once.

I was the one who’d balked at labels, who’d refused to be called his girlfriend, so why would he feel any obligation to account for his time to me?

He probably thought he was respecting my boundaries by not oversharing.

My hand, resting against his side, clenched into a fist.

The brief bite of my nails into my palm was a necessary anchor.

Remember, it said. This is just a no-strings arrangement. A physical diversion. Don't start building a shrine. Don't go handing over the deed to your heart. You know how that story ends.

"You okay?" His voice was closer, a rumble near my ear.

"Fine," I said, pulling back. "Just a bit tired, like I said."

He began to slowly rub my back. "Do you want to go and lie down in the suite for a bit?"

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Chapter 456:

"No, thanks. My lunch hour's over. I've got to get back to work."

I twisted in his grasp and shoved myself away from him. I didn't walk — I fled, yanking the office door open and launching myself into the sanctuary of the corridor.

The burst of speed was impressive, if I do say so myself. Unfortunately, the execution was not. My left heel twisted sideways on the lush carpet with a vile, definitive pop.

A white-hot spike of pain shot up my ankle. I let out a choked gasp.

Hobbling and cursing under my breath, I used the wall as a crutch and shuffled my way back to my own office.

This is what happens. You catch one whiff of the so-called prince, and the universe immediately conspires to make you fall flat on your face. Literally.

By afternoon, I had swapped the treacherous heels for a pair of ballet flats. The ankle was throbbing, but after a frantic raid on the office kitchen freezer for a bag of frozen peas, it had subsided to a persistent, grumpy ache. I could walk — in a careful, rolling gait that made me look like I was imitating a sailor on shore leave, but I could walk.

Just as the clock was ticking towards freedom, Kai appeared at my doorway.

“Just had the final confirmation,” he said. “Next Saturday, the boss is going to the Frankfurt office. For at least a week.”

My heart sank into my unhappy left foot. “Tell me there’s a world in which I can avoid this.”

Kai gave me a sympathetic smile. “You know there isn’t. It’s all hands. They’re picking a team from across the group. The Frankfurt operation is huge — it’s going to be brutal. Get some rest this weekend. You’ll need it.”

I thought of my semi-crippled foot. I thought of the ball I was committed to next Friday, which would no doubt involve more heels and strategic smiling. And then, the very next day, to be hurled onto a plane to Germany. The scheduling was sadistic.

But what truly made my scalp prickle was the sheer, inescapable proximity. At the office, there were walls, desks, meetings — layers of professionalism to hide behind. But a business trip? Shared cars, hotels, late-night strategy sessions, room service. It was a petri dish for intimacy.

I thought of our previous trips, the electric tension that had crackled between us even before anything had happened. And now, with our complicated relationship status? It would be a minefield.

“Hyacinth?” Kai’s voice cut through the spiralling panic. “You’ve gone a bit pale. You alright?”

I snapped back to the present. “Hmm? Oh, yes. Fine. It’s just my ankle — it’s really starting to complain.”

“You’re sure it’s not broken? You should get it looked at properly. Don’t mess about with it.”

“I’m going after work.”

“Go now. I’ll cover for you. If the boss asks, I’ll tell him you’ve gone for a medical appointment.”

“Alright. Thanks, Kai. I owe you one.”

He waved a hand. “It’s nothing. Just go.”

I didn’t need telling twice. I grabbed my bag and made my limping exit.

The injured ankle was my left one, thankfully, so driving was an exercise in careful, one-footed coordination rather than an outright death wish. I drove to a physiotherapy clinic

I'd used before. The practitioner — a formidable woman in her fifties named Maureen, with a grip like industrial machinery — guided me to a treatment chair.

"Let's have a look then." She prodded and rotated my foot with clinical efficiency. "No, the bone's fine. Just a nasty sprain. I'll work some magic with this," she held up a bottle of dark, sinister-looking liniment, "and strap it up. You'll be right as rain in a few days, if you rest it." She bustled off to fetch her supplies.

I pulled out my phone.

The clinic door opened, letting in a draught of cool evening air and the muffled sound of traffic. Another patient, I assumed. A man settled himself into the chair beside mine. A moment later, a faint, familiar scent reached me — something expensive and woody, entirely out of place in this room of antiseptic and muscle rub.

A cold, instinctual dread trickled down my spine.

Slowly, against my own better judgement, I turned my head.

Cary Grant sat beside me. His face was calm, his gaze fixed on me with quiet, unsettling patience.

"Hello, Hyacinth," he said, when it became clear I wasn't going to speak first.

Every muscle in my body locked. I turned my face back to the front and stared blindly at my phone screen, the words swimming into nonsense. My mind screamed a single, furious question: was he following me? What in the absolute hell did he want?

Maureen emerged from the back room, her arms full of fresh bandages. She stopped short, taking in the new arrival. Her eyes did a quick, appreciative sweep over the obvious expense of him. "Can I help you, sir?"

Cary's gaze never left my profile, which I kept studiously turned away. "No."

"Oh." Maureen stared. She looked between me and Cary, then back to me, offered a mental shrug I could almost hear, and came over to attend to me. "Right then, dear, let's get this sorted. Shoe off, foot up here." She patted a worn leather stool.

I obeyed, biting back a hiss as the movement jolted my ankle. "Do your worst," I said, with a bravado I didn't feel. "I can take it."

Famous last words.

Maureen poured a generous measure of the dark oil into her palm, rubbed her hands together, and wrapped them firmly around my swollen ankle.

Oh, sweet merciful heaven.

A white-hot, grinding agony exploded from the joint. My entire body went rigid. I gripped my phone so hard I was certain the screen would crack, and forced my breathing down to shallow, controlled sips of air.

Chapter 457:

Maureen, mistaking my frozen, expressionless horror for stoic endurance, was impressed. “Blimey, you’re a tough one, aren’t you?” she said cheerfully, and increased the pressure.

Stars danced at the edges of my vision. I was fairly certain I could hear the ligaments screaming.

“A bit lighter.” Cary’s voice cut through the haze of my suffering. He had leaned forward, a frown on his face. “You’re hurting her.”

Maureen chuckled, not pausing her torture. “She’s not making a peep! She’s fine. Got a higher pain threshold than most blokes, this one.”

Cary’s eyes met mine for a fleeting second. He looked away, his jaw tightening.

Through the prism of agony, I forced my voice to work. “Will it be fully healed by next week? I have commitments.”

Maureen worked the joint, making me see an entirely new colour of pain. “If you stay off it as much as you can, yes. But you listen to me — no more silly bugging about in heels. You twist this again now it’s weakened, and you’re looking at proper damage. Maybe even a fracture. No joke.”

I summoned a smile that felt more like a grimace. “Don’t worry. I’ll be exceptionally careful.”

“You should just resign,” Cary interjected. “Come back to Mayfair Global.”

I turned my head a fraction and stared directly at the wall.

Maureen, sensing the thick, strange tension in the room, briskly finished up — slapping a poultice that smelled of forest floor onto my ankle and binding it tightly. “There. Come back tomorrow. Four days of this and you’ll be right. Try to keep it elevated tonight.”

“Thank you.” I carefully slid my foot back into my flat, wincing only a little.

I paid at the front desk, then hobbled out of the clinic as fast as my bandaged foot would allow.

I had made it perhaps five paces down the street before a hand closed around my upper arm.

“Hyacinth.” His voice was close behind me.

I wrenched my arm free with a sharp, violent motion.

“Don’t touch me,” I spat, not looking back, continuing my ungainly march towards my car.

He fell into step beside me, easily matching my limping pace. “It’s quite pleasant out. Let’s take a walk.”

I stopped dead and pointed at my bandaged ankle. “Are you out of your mind? A walk? What’s your plan, Cary — paralyse me completely so I have no choice but to listen to you from a wheelchair?”

“There are things I need to tell you.”

“Not interested.” I started moving again.

“I’m getting married. In two weeks.”

I didn’t break stride. “Like I said. Not interested.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to invite you to the wedding.”

“Thanks for the clarification. I wasn’t planning on attending, or sending a gift.”

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Chapter 458

Chapter 458:

“But I do need to talk to you.”

“I don’t think we have anything left to say to each other.”

“Even if it’s about Hastings?”

My hand, which had been digging through my bag for my keys, went still.

Damn it. He knew exactly which lever to pull.

I glanced around, my gaze landing on a public bench a few feet away, wedged between a bin and a newsagent's shutter. It was about as romantic as a bus stop, which was perfect.

"Fine. Five minutes. And if you try to touch me again, I'll use this as a weapon," I said, hefting my heavy handbag meaningfully.

We sat on the bench, an inch of cold painted iron between us.

"I'm sorry," he said, the words coming out stiffly, as though they were unfamiliar in his mouth. "About last night."

That made me look at him.

A genuine, unprompted apology from Cary Grant was rarer than a sincere politician. The man's pride was usually his primary operating system.

He continued, still not meeting my eye. "Just seeing you and Hastings together — I suppose I snapped. I shoved Janine at you because I didn't want you and him heading up to that penthouse alone. Where I knew you'd end up having sex with him."

"It is none of your goddamn business who I have sex with."

"Janine," he ploughed on as though I hadn't spoken, "her mother thrust her at me. Gloria Lockwood. She's agreed to smooth over some significant problems at Mayfair Global, if I look after Janine for a while. Be a sort of companion. Things at the company have been difficult since the fallout with the Abrams family."

I grew impatient. "Fascinating. Truly. The intricate web of your corporate bartering. I still don't care."

"She chose me because she knows I've made my fair share of enemies. She can make them go away. She also knows my engagement to Liz is just a sham."

That did give me pause. I stopped myself from asking what he meant by sham. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"But I wasn't her first choice," he said, and now he turned his head, his eyes meeting mine. They were hard, and strangely earnest. "Not by a long shot. Want to know who she had in mind to care for her precious Janine?"

"Don't tell me it's Lochlan."

"Of course it's him." He chuckled humourlessly. "He's rich, he's single, he's apparently a man with a good heart — which is as rare as unicorn shit in our world. He's the ultimate catch for a damaged-goods heiress. A billionaire babysitter."

I frowned.

“Last night,” Cary went on, “after I stormed out of Lauderdale Tower, I changed my mind. I knew I shouldn’t have left Janine alone, so I went back — but on the way, I got a call from Aaron Lockwood. You know who he is.”

“Janine’s father.”

“Yes. He called and hauled me over the coals for leaving his daughter alone, but then told me not to bother coming back. He’d found someone better to look after her.”

“Lochlan.”

“Yes. And apparently, Janine liked him considerably better than me. Cried and begged her father to let the ‘pretty boy’ stay.” He said the words with a kind of disgusted awe. “So I’m out. Lochlan’s in. And from the looks of it, Aaron is perfectly happy to leave his daughter in Lochlan’s charge. Indefinitely.”

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Chapter 459

Chapter 459:

“He can’t just do that.” A strange, protective anger flared in me. “He can’t just thrust his daughter at a virtual stranger and demand he babysit. That’s beyond rude — it’s selfish and irresponsible.”

Cary smiled, a wry, hollow thing. “Don’t you worry about Lochlan. I’m sure he’s come to some sort of understanding with Aaron Lockwood. Business, favours, future considerations. After all, when have you ever seen Hastings make a losing deal?”

“That’s just your guess,” I shot back, but my voice lacked conviction. Because he had a point.

“I know Lochlan because I know myself, Hyacinth. We don’t make losing deals.”

My mind was a chaotic mess. “Why are you telling me all this?”

He looked at me then, properly, and for a moment I saw something that might have been a shred of the man I'd once loved. "Just to warn you. I know I've treated you horribly. You deserve someone better. Not someone who's just another version of me."

"Lochlan is nothing like you."

"Do you really believe that?"

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

A male voice, cold enough to frost the grimy bench we sat on, cut through the evening air. "That's none of your business."

I turned my head.

Five metres away, standing beside the slowly rotating red-and-white pole of a barber shop, was Lochlan. The dying evening light cast his tall frame in silhouette, but there was no mistaking the glacial set of his features.

"Um—" I stammered, scrambling to my feet and putting distance between myself and Cary.

A completely irrational, panicked guilt flooded through me — the feeling of a wife caught with another man, which was utterly ridiculous, because we weren't married and I wasn't with Cary. But logic had left the building.

Lochlan closed the distance in a few strides and was at my side before I could form another syllable. His palm settled at the small of my back, then slid firmly around my waist, drawing me into the solid warmth of his body.

His face was still a mask of winter, but his voice, when he spoke to me, had softened by a single, crucial degree. "Don't put weight on your injured foot."

I looked up at him.

"Kai told me about your sprain. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not a big deal," I mumbled. "I didn't want to bother you."

His arm tightened around me. "Everything about you is a big deal to me. You never bother me."

Cary cleared his throat pointedly.

Lochlan's eyes shifted to him, the temperature dropping back to absolute zero. "Mr Grant. Good evening. Congratulations, by the way — though I regret I won't be able to make it to your wedding. If you'll excuse us."

Lochlan bent slightly, slid one arm beneath my knees and the other behind my back, and lifted me clean off the ground.

A small, undignified squeak escaped me. "I can walk," I protested weakly, my hands fluttering, unsure where to land.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 460

Chapter 460:

"You can, but you shouldn't." He turned, cradling me against his chest as though I weighed no more than his laptop bag, and began walking.

We had only gone a few paces when Cary's voice rang out behind us. "Hyacinth!"

Lochlan didn't pause. Didn't even slow.

"Remember what I said!" Cary called, the words hanging in the damp evening air.

Lochlan didn't break stride. He carried me straight to the waiting car, where Roy was holding the door open. The man loved gossip more than my grandmother loved a summer fete, so his pointed silence was deafening.

Lochlan deposited me gently onto the cool leather of the backseat. As he moved to close the door, I remembered. "Wait — my car. It's parked just over there."

"Someone will collect it and have it delivered to Lauderdale Tower."

I decided now was not the time to argue about logistics.

Roy slid into the driver's seat, offered a meek "Evening, Hyacinth" in the rearview mirror, and started the engine. The soundproof partition glided upwards immediately.

For a full minute, the only sound was the muted purr of the engine and the distant swish of tyres on wet tarmac. Lochlan was looking straight ahead, his profile carved from stone.

“How’s your ankle?” he finally asked.

“It’s fine. The physio’s quite good. A couple more visits and I’ll be right as rain. No lasting damage.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He turned his head then, those pale eyes fixing on me. The question was no longer about the ankle.

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” I repeated my earlier, feeble line.

“You didn’t want to disturb me, or you didn’t want to talk to me?”

I glanced pointedly at the sealed partition, then lowered my voice anyway, as if Roy could lip-read through solid glass. “I thought we had an agreement – work and personal life, kept separate. At work, you’re my boss. I don’t go whining to my CEO about every little ache and pain. It’s unprofessional.”

“There’s a deadline on that temporary arrangement,” he reminded me.

“Three months, yes, I know. But the deadline hasn’t passed yet, has it? Or did I miss the memo where you unilaterally changed the terms?”

“Why are you so resistant to the idea of being my girlfriend?”

I looked down at my hands. “You know my history. With Cary.”

“I do. And not every billionaire is alike, Hyacinth. Don’t lump me in with the likes of Cary Grant.” There was a sharp edge of pride in his voice – almost insult.

“I know that. Intellectually, I know that.” I sighed. “But you know what they say – once bitten, twice shy. It’s not about logic; it’s about nerve endings. They remember.”

“That still means you think, on some level, that I’ll be like him.”

“Not think,” I corrected, fidgeting with the strap of my bag. “Feel. Fine – maybe. Yes. A part of me is afraid you’ll turn out to be a different flavour of the same rich, complicated, ultimately disappointing recipe. Happy?”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 461

Chapter 461:

Lochlan was silent for a long moment.

Then he reached over and took my fidgeting hand, lacing his fingers through mine. “Then I’ll just have to prove to you that I’m not. Given time, you’ll see I’m nothing like him.”

“Yeah. Totally. Let’s just... take it slow.”

“But meanwhile,” he said, his thumb stroking the back of my hand, “could you stay away from Cary?”

Oh, he was jealous. “I didn’t approach him. He approached me. I’m fairly certain he followed me to the clinic.”

“I’ll have someone look into that,” he said, and the way he said it made it sound like a threat. “What did he want to talk to you about?”

“His wedding. Don’t worry — I already told him I wasn’t going, and he had the good sense not to give me an invitation. Crisis averted.”

“Anything else?”

“No.” I hesitated. “Oh, well. About Janine.”

“What about her?” His tone was neutral, giving nothing away.

I wanted to ask. The questions burned on my tongue. Did you spend the night in her flat? Did you go back this morning? Why were you with her?

I knew, logically, that even if he had, it was only to babysit. The idea of anything else happening between them was ludicrous. But it wasn’t about that. It was about the omission.

A part of me didn’t want to ask — that part thought Lochlan should be the one to volunteer the information. That was what you did when you wanted a serious relationship with someone, wasn’t it? You came clean. And so far, he hadn’t shown any signs of doing so.

“Nothing,” I said, turning to look out the window at the blur of passing streetlights. “I just didn’t know Desmond had a cousin like that.”

“Janine’s parents have kept her very sheltered because of her condition. They’re overprotective. Desmond doesn’t like to talk about her — it’s a sensitive subject for the family.”

“I see,” I murmured.

Silence descended again. He still hadn’t mentioned it. Why not?

The car glided to a smooth halt. We were at Lauderdale Tower.

Lochlan got out, came around to my side, and scooped me up again. He carried me through the lobby — past the doorman, who wisely studied his shoes — and into the lift.

Once we were in the penthouse, he set me down carefully on the sofa. “Stay there,” he instructed, then surprised me by shrugging off his suit jacket and loosening his tie. “I’ll make dinner.”

I blinked. “You cook?”

I had simply assumed a man with his resources kept a fleet of personal chefs on standby.

“The food my family’s cook made when I was growing up didn’t meet my nutritional standards. So I learned. It’s not complicated.”

“Oh,” I said, my mind immediately conjuring visions of poached fish and steamed broccoli — his famously bland, athlete-approved meals. I began mentally scrolling through nearby takeaway options, trying to devise a polite way to suggest that my injured ankle might require the medicinal properties of a good curry.

He paused in the kitchen doorway and looked back at me. He had clearly seen the horror on my face. “Don’t worry. It won’t be bland chicken breast.” Then he disappeared into the kitchen.

Left alone, I kicked off my shoes and settled back into the sofa cushions, flicking on the enormous television with the remote. I scrolled mindlessly through channels, not absorbing a single image or word. My attention kept drifting, pulled magnetically towards the kitchen, where I could hear the soft sounds of him moving about — the clink of a pan, the hiss of oil, the steady chop-chop-chop of a knife on a board.

It was strange. Profoundly, unsettlingly domestic. It felt almost as though we had been married for years, and I had absolutely no idea what to do with that feeling.

About twenty minutes later, he emerged. He had shed his waistcoat, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing the corded muscle of his forearms. In his hands were two plates that looked as though they had come straight from a Mayfair restaurant —

seared scallops perched on a silky cauliflower purée, with a tumble of crispy pancetta and something green and herbaceous. It smelled incredible.

“I didn’t know my fridge contained the building blocks for a Michelin-starred starter,” I said, genuinely surprised. My fridge usually held white wine, questionable cheese, and tonic water.

He smiled, setting a plate on the coffee table in front of me. “Give it a try.”

I took a bite. It was, annoyingly, perfect. The scallop melted, the purée was sinful, and the pancetta added just the right amount of salt and crunch.

“Okay,” I admitted, pointing my fork at him. “You can cook. This is legitimately good.”

He gave a slight nod, as though I had simply confirmed a known fact, and sat beside me to eat his own.

Afterwards, he even cleared the plates.

He came back out drying his hands on a tea towel, but instead of sitting, he crossed straight to the sofa and knelt on the floor in front of me. “Let me see your ankle.”

“It’s fine, really,” I said, instinctively drawing my foot back. “Maureen wrapped it up like a priceless artefact. It’s not going anywhere.”

“I’d like to see for myself,” he insisted.

I extended my leg. He took my foot in both hands, his touch careful as he folded back the edge of my trouser leg. His fingers were warm and sure as they found the strap of the bandage. He didn’t remove it – just pressed gently around the edges, his thumb tracing slow, absent circles over the arch of my foot.

It shouldn’t have felt the way it did. It was a medical inspection. But the focused dip of his head, the heat of his palms cradling my heel, the strange intimacy of him kneeling at my feet – it sent a slow, warm pulse through me that had absolutely nothing to do with tendon damage. I had to concentrate on breathing normally.

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Chapter 462

Chapter 462:

“It’s a bit swollen,” Lochlan announced. “You shouldn’t walk on it for a few days. Not if you want it ready for Frankfurt.”

He slid his arms beneath me and lifted me up, carrying me down the hall and depositing me in the centre of the bed with a softness that belied his strength. He stood looking down at me, his pale eyes dark in the low light. “Do you need help getting into the shower?”

I let out a short laugh. “Oh, very smooth. ‘Let me check your ankle, dear, and by the way, can I assist you in the nude?’ The transparent plot to see me naked needs work, Hastings.”

“Yes,” he admitted, without a hint of shame. “I want to see you naked. I want to be the one making you sigh. I’m being honest about my desires.” He paused, tilting his head. “What about yours?”

I looked at him, and my mind flashed to the first night we’d spent together — the shocking rightness of it, the way my body had seemed to recognise his on a cellular level.

Hell yes, a voice inside me shouted. Why lie? I like his body. I want to sleep with him. Especially when the future is one giant question mark — why not seize the day and enjoy the moment?

I reached up, fisted my hand in the fine cotton of his shirtfront, and pulled him down to me, crushing my mouth against his in a kiss that was all the answer he needed.

We sank into the soft depths of the pillows. His mouth was gentle and devastatingly thorough — coaxing, exploring, drawing responses from me I didn’t know I had to give. His hands moved over me with a familiar certainty, as though he were revisiting a favourite landscape.

I held onto him tightly, my eyes closed, trembling not from fear but from the sheer intensity of sensation. My nails dug into his back, scraping through his shirt, and I heard a faint, gratifying hitch in his breath.

After a long, breathless while, he broke the kiss. He lifted his face just an inch, his breathing slowly evening out.

“It’s getting late,” he murmured against my lips. “I should go.”

What? My mind, fogged with desire, scrabbled for purchase. He couldn’t be serious. He’d just stoked a bonfire and was now checking his watch?

My leg — the good one — hooked around his hip, holding him in place. I glared up at him, all my frustration and want burning in my eyes.

He leaned down and brushed a feather-light kiss to the corner of my mouth. “I don’t want to tire you out. You’re injured.”

Oh, for god’s sake. He was underestimating me. Did he think one night with him required weeks of convalescence? Did he think I was that fragile?

I snaked my arm around his neck, pulled him close, and sank my teeth into the hard ridge of his collarbone.

He inhaled sharply — a sound of pure surprise. Before the sting could properly register, I’d soothed the spot with my tongue and let it trail upward to find the vulnerable pulse at the base of his throat.

His breath stopped entirely.

In the next instant, a large, hot hand slid up the thigh still hooked around him, and his control finally, gloriously shattered.

Outside, a proper March gale had whipped up, rattling the penthouse windows. The wind howled around the building’s corners, its furious song rising and falling — masking the creak of the bedframe, the rhythmic thump of the headboard against the wall, the sounds it was pointless to try and swallow.

The gale raged for a long, long time, both outside and in, before finally, spent, it blew itself out.

At ten minutes to two in the morning, I swam back to consciousness from a state of near oblivion.

I was so thoroughly exhausted I doubted I could wiggle a finger. A deep, liquid satisfaction hummed through every limb, leaving a lazy, sated warmth in its wake. My face felt soft and utterly relaxed. My body, however, felt as though it had been glued to the sheets — a sticky, tacky discomfort that made the idea of moving seem Herculean. I really, genuinely needed a shower.

I made a small, grunting effort to shift — a pathetic, caterpillar-like squirm.

The arm thrown possessively across my ribs tightened. A warm kiss was pressed just below my ear. “Are you planning another escape? Where exactly would you go? This is your home, and it’s the middle of the night.”

I hadn’t been thinking of escape. “I need a shower.”

Lochlan opened his eyes. In the dim light spilling from the en suite, I could see the gleam of them. “I’ll help you.”

“No, no, it’s fine, really!” I said in a rush.

If he helped me again, I would actually perish. I was done. Thoroughly, comprehensively done. Sex with him felt as though my body had received a decade’s worth of oestrogen therapy in a single evening. My muscles remembered every minute of it – especially the considerate, slightly ridiculous part where he’d been so intent on keeping my injured ankle safe and immobile that he’d held it aloft the entire time, one large hand wrapped around my calf, leaving my leg sticking up in the air like some kind of absurd, blissed-out semaphore flag.

Lochlan rolled out of bed and pulled on his trousers. “If you want a bath, I’m going to make sure you get one. You’ll sleep better.”

I clutched the sheet to my chest. “But I don’t want one anymore. I want to sleep.”

He pried my fingers loose.

In the bathroom, the tub was already filled. He had even found my rarely-used bag of rose petals and bath salts, scattering them across the surface where they floated among a modest layer of bubbles.

I sank into the hot water with a groan that was equal parts pleasure and defeat, then looked up at the man standing over me. “Thanks. You should go home now.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 463

Chapter 463:

His handsome face cooled several degrees. He leaned down, his fingers tilting my chin up. “Use me and toss me out? Are you really treating me like a rent boy?”

“I wouldn’t dare.” I shook my head. “This is just mutually agreeable fun between adults. I’m not treating you like a service. And me asking you to leave isn’t me reneging on the deal.”

“If it’s not reneging, what is it? Explain.”

I had nothing.

Lochlan visibly reined in his temper and sat on the wide lip of the tub. “Hyacinth,” he said, his tone softening into something perilously close to hurt. “You can’t just pretend it didn’t happen every single time.”

I felt a twinge of guilt. He had a point. It was a bit shitty. “Well — we should keep it quiet for a while, then. This sort of thing, out in the open at the office, it wouldn’t be good for either of us, would it?”

What I was really thinking was that maybe, after this burst of passion faded, he wouldn’t want it public either. And that would be the cleanest, least messy conclusion. No one gets in too deep. No one gets hurt.

Lochlan was silent for a long moment. “Alright,” he finally said. “We can do that.”

Then he dipped a finger into the water. “I’m feeling rather sticky myself.”

My gaze darted to the separate glass shower cubicle. “You can use that.”

He shook his head, his eyes on the rose petals drifting across the bath. “I want a rose-scented bubble bath, too.” His hands moved to the button of his trousers.

“Fine! I’ll get out.” I grabbed for a bath towel, preparing to make a damp, ungainly exit, and swung one leg over the edge.

The next moment, I was unceremoniously dumped back into the tub, towel and all.

He stepped in and sat, pulling me onto his lap. “We’ll share.”

I was sitting on his thighs, and could immediately feel a certain part of him decisively revising the idea that the evening’s activities were over.

I closed my eyes. This man was going to be the death of me.

The intercom buzzed — a loud, electronic sound that tore through the peaceful quiet of the penthouse.

I jerked awake, bolting upright in bed. Who the hell?

It couldn't be Portia. Portia had the access code.

I scrambled out of bed, my ankle giving a protesting twinge, and hobbled to the video screen. Roy's cheerful, slightly weathered face filled the monitor. I turned to look at Lochlan, who was propped on one elbow.

"Does Roy know you're here?"

"Yes," he said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"You told him? About us?"

"No. But he has access to my location at all times. It's part of his job as my driver."

"Oh, for — what do I do now?" I whispered, panic rising. I was not prepared for a morning-after audience, especially not one as famously gossipy and fond of me as Roy.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 464

Chapter 464:

"I can get rid of him," Lochlan offered, starting to move.

I eyed him. He was gloriously, completely naked, his hair deliciously mussed from sleep and my fingers.

"You cannot go out there like that!" I yelped, lunging to pull him back by the arm. "You stay in this bedroom. Do not emerge. Or I'll—"

"Or you'll what?" he asked, settling back against the headboard.

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"Or I'll be very put out," I finished lamely. "Just — stay."

"Hyacinth, there's no shame in letting others know we've slept together."

“Just stay here!”

I frantically pulled on a silk robe, tied it tightly, and shuffled out to the living room. Taking a deep breath, I pressed the button to grant lift access and stood there attempting to look casual as the doors slid open with their usual hushed sigh.

Roy was holding a large, elegant paper bag. His eyes took in my robe, my damp and probably thoroughly sex-mussed hair, and the general aura of an interrupted lie-in. A slow, avuncular smile spread across his face.

I pasted on my brightest, most unconvincing smile. “Roy! Good morning! What a surprise.”

“Morning, Hyacinth. It’s nine o’clock.”

What?

A flush crept up my neck. “Right. Yes. I seem to have overslept.”

“Not to worry — happens to the best of us,” Roy said, his tone brimming with a knowing kindness that was somehow worse than outright judgement. He held up two paper bags. “Took the liberty of picking up some breakfast from that patisserie you like. Thought you might need the fuel.” Then he wheeled a garment bag into view from behind his legs. “And this is Mr Hastings’s suit. Had it pressed first thing this morning.”

I stared. “Oh.”

I could only stand there, mute and mortified, as he transferred the bags and the hanger into my arms.

“You have a good day now,” he said, with a final, twinkling look, and turned back to the lift.

The moment the doors closed, I let out a stifled groan and thumped my forehead against the cool wall.

“Roy’s gone?” Lochlan’s voice came from behind me. He was leaning against the hallway wall, shirtless and mussed.

I turned and shoved the bags into his arms. “Breakfast. And your clothes.”

Nine o’clock. We’d both be dreadfully late. The gossip mill at Velos, which was already spinning at warp speed about my supposed siren status, would now have concrete, irrefutable evidence to work with.

I showered, dressed, and made a semi-successful attempt to look like a human being who hadn't been thoroughly ravaged within an inch of her life.

Lochlan was in the dining room when I emerged — transformed. Impeccable navy suit, crisp white shirt, hair styled with a touch of product. He looked cool, elegant, and infuriatingly composed.

“Come and eat something,” he called, gesturing to the spread he'd laid out on the table.

I sat and picked at a buttery croissant, but my mind was miles away — fixed on a chemist's aisle and a small, specific box.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 465

Chapter 465:

We'd used protection, but anyone who had ever seen a single episode of Friends knew that condoms weren't infallible. As for the morning-after pill — I had once read that taking it too frequently could wreak havoc on your system.

A fun new layer of anxiety to top off the post-coital glow.

“Are you alright? You've gone pale.” Lochlan leaned towards me. “Was I too rough with you last night?”

“No.” I took a sip of coffee to steady myself. “It's fine. Really.”

I'd deal with it. My own stupid fault for getting carried away.

Lochlan's frown deepened, but before he could interrogate me further, the lift doors hummed open.

Portia strolled in.

My soul momentarily vacated my body.

In a blind, panicked instinct, I reached for Lochlan's arm, trying to shove him into a cupboard, the fridge, anywhere at all.

His hand closed over mine. "It's a bit late for that, Hyacinth."

In the foyer, Portia stood frozen, her large, expressive eyes wide as she took in the scene. Then her shock melted, transforming in a nanosecond into pure glee. A slow, wicked smile spread across her face as she sauntered in.

"Well, well," she purred, her gaze flicking between the pastries and our still-joined hands. "Having a working breakfast, are we?"

I snatched my hand back from Lochlan's as if burned. A laugh, high and brittle, escaped me. "Portia! Hi! This is, um, not what it—"

She held up a hand, cutting me off. "Darling, please. Spare us both the creative fiction."

I gave up. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I come bearing gifts." She placed a chic reusable bag on the table beside the patisserie boxes. "My famous lemon drizzle cake. Freshly baked. Thought you could use a slice of sunshine." She leaned in, slinging a familiar arm around my shoulders and pulling me into a huddle. In a stage whisper that carried perfectly across the room, she asked, "So — when do I get the formal introduction to your boyfriend?"

I moved with lightning speed, clamping my hand over her mouth. "Right! Portia, why don't we just catch up in the bedroom for a sec?" I shot a desperate look at Lochlan. "Sir, please excuse us for a moment. Girl talk."

"Of course. But do be careful, Hyacinth," Lochlan added, his tone laced with a concern that was both genuine and incredibly damning. "Remember your injury."

Portia's eyes, above my still-clamped hand, went incandescent with curiosity. "Injury?" she mumbled against my palm. "What injury? Oh my God, is he into some kind of—"

"My ankle!" I hissed, releasing her and pushing her towards the hallway. "I sprained my ankle!"

"Right, right."

I dragged her to my bedroom door. Then, hand on the doorknob, I realised my mistake.

The state of the room. The tangled sheets, the discarded clothes, the general aura of passionate debauchery I hadn't had a single millisecond to address. It was all in there — a museum exhibit titled What Hyacinth Did Last Night.

I jerked back as if the handle were red-hot.

“What’s wrong?” Portia asked.

“Change of plan! We’ll chat in the study. Better light!”

“Why? We’re literally standing outside your bedroom.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 466

Chapter 466:

I used every ounce of my strength to bodily haul her away from the damning door.

Once inside the study, I closed the door. Portia smoothed down her blazer and fixed me with a look — her cross-examining-a-hostile-witness face, honed across years of courtrooms and countless post-date interrogations.

“So,” she began, perching on the edge of the desk and crossing her legs. “Tell me.”

“It was just sex.”

“I bet it was.”

“No, really. That’s all it is. He’s not my boyfriend.”

Portia’s perfectly sculpted eyebrows shot up. “Oh? So it’s a friends-with-benefits situation? You and the CEO? How very modern of you.”

“Yes. Exactly that.”

“Huh.” She tilted her head, studying me. “Never pegged you for that kind of arrangement. You’re more of a ‘crippling emotional entanglement’ girl, historically speaking.”

“Well, I took a page out of your playbook. You’re the one who’s always saying life’s too short to be stuck with one man’s sock drawer for eternity.”

“Yes, but I never actually thought you’d subscribe to the newsletter. Let alone go for the premium subscription with a man like that.”

I shrugged, a movement I hoped conveyed cool detachment. “It’s better this way. Less complicated.”

“Are you sure,” she asked slowly, “that it’s less complicated?”

I wasn’t sure. Not at all. But I was committed to the bit. “I’m sure.”

“But Hy, Lochlan is not some random barrister or gym bunny you can shag on a Tuesday and ghost by Wednesday without a second thought. He’s your boss. He’s a monolith. You can’t just have a casual fling with a monument.”

I groaned, sinking into the armchair. “I know. That’s why I’ve been resisting this for so long. But he’s just—”

“He’s just so mind-bendingly fit you had to climb him like a tree?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“I hear you. I understand you. But, girl, I worry about you. That’s my job.”

“Don’t worry. I think it’s all going to be perfectly fine.”

“Okay. But let me ask you this — are you absolutely certain Lochlan is on board with this whole friends-with-benefits, just-sex, no-commitment plan? Because I’m pretty good at reading people. And I read him as the kind of man who starts mentally browsing engagement ring catalogues on the second date.”

A cold trickle of anxiety traced its way down my spine. “Then it’s a good thing we’re not dating.”

Portia just looked at me, a world of meaning in her silence.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing.” She shrugged. “Nothing at all, you poor, self-deluding creature. Well, as long as you think it’s working, who am I to judge?”

“Yeah, thanks,” I muttered. “My famously non-judgemental best friend. I know what a Herculean effort it is for you to withhold your opinion.”

“I don’t judge,” she said airily, advancing on me. “But I do require a full operational debrief. So tell me — how is he in bed? Magnificent, I assume. Was it slow and tender, all worshipping gazes? Or fast and furious, just pounding the hell out of you?”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 467

Chapter 467:

“Nope.” I stood and steered her towards the door. “We are not having a play-by-play sex talk at nine o’clock in the morning.”

“Fine. What’s a good time for you, then? Tonight, after work — I’m picking you up for drinks. Just us. No Lochlan, no Josh. And you will tell me everything.”

“Fine,” I grumbled, knowing resistance was futile.

Portia sailed out of the study and back into the living room. Her gaze landed on Lochlan, who was now standing by the window. She gave him a teasing smile. “Bye then, you two. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Lochlan turned. “Goodbye, Portia. It was lovely to see you.”

The lift doors swallowed her, and the penthouse was suddenly, blessedly quiet again. I emerged from the study, all business. “Time for work.”

Lochlan picked up his briefcase. “After you.”

In the lift going down, I formulated my plan. “When we get there, you go up first. I’ll follow in — let’s say ten minutes. No, better make it thirty.”

He gave me a look that sat somewhere between amusement and exasperation. “And how will you explain your lateness?”

“I’ll say I had to stop at the physio to get my ankle re-strapped. It’s a perfectly legitimate medical excuse.”

“What a brilliant cover. Kai will absolutely believe you.”

I ignored the jab. “And no PDA in the office. None. Not a stray glance, definitely no kissing. Business as usual.”

He leaned in, his body caging me against the wall, and brushed a kiss against the corner of my mouth. “Then I’d better make use of the time before we reach the office.”

I shoved him away and hobbled out towards the kerb.

His car was idling by the entrance, but the driver’s seat was empty. Roy was conspicuously absent. “Roy’s got other engagements this morning,” Lochlan said smoothly, opening the passenger door for me.

Right, I thought, sliding into the front seat. His full-time chauffeur has other engagements. He was probably around the corner having a coffee, having been given very explicit instructions to make himself scarce.

Lochlan leaned across me to fasten my seatbelt, his proximity doing nothing to calm my frayed nerves.

When we arrived, I won the silent battle of wills. He went up first, disappearing into the private executive lift. I sat in the parked car for a solid fifteen minutes, watching people come and go, feeling like a teenager waiting for her parents to leave before sneaking a boy in.

Finally, I made my awkward, limping entrance.

The morning passed with an eerie normalcy. Emails flowed, meetings were scheduled, the corporate machine whirled on. Kai popped his head in to drop off some files, gave my bandaged ankle a sympathetic look, and didn’t ask a single question about why I was late.

Which meant he probably already knew.

He had to know. Roy knew. Portia knew. Kai almost certainly knew. I buried my face in my hands.

If — or more likely when — this thing with Lochlan inevitably imploded, I would have to face all of them. Roy’s kind, commiserating eyes. Portia’s I-told-you-so sighs. Kai’s awkward, pitying professionalism.

Lochlan had a power lunch with some Hong Kong investors. Normally, Kai and I would have been there. Today, however, my bandaged ankle provided the perfect get-out-of-jail-free card.

I ate a perfectly pleasant, thoroughly boring salad in the canteen with some of the girls from HR and Finance, laughing along with their gossip while my mind was a million miles away. Or, to be precise, about three miles away — at an NHS walk-in centre.

Last night, in the heat of the moment, precautions had been taken. But in the bleary, steam-filled dawn, in that ridiculous rose-scented bathtub — well, let’s just say the spirit

was willing but the prophylactic was absent. And when you've had my kind of luck, you learn that if something can go wrong, it absolutely will. A one-in-a-million chance might as well be a certainty.

So, after lunch, I texted Kai to say I was popping back to the physio to have the bandage checked, asked him to cover for me, and drove to the clinic.

The doctor wasn't in until half past one. I sat in a plastic chair surrounded by coughing toddlers and people with sprained wrists, feeling like a complete fraud.

When my turn finally came, it was a brisk, impersonal conversation. The doctor — a tired-looking woman with kind eyes — gave me the standard spiel. The likelihood was low, but not zero. Biology is never zero. She wrote me a prescription with the practised air of someone who had done it a thousand times before.

I took the slip of paper, thanked her, and stepped out of the office.

Straight into a wall of expensive suit and frozen displeasure.

Lochlan stood there against the opposite wall, arms crossed.

My heart dropped straight through the linoleum floor. Damn it, Kai.

"Let's talk somewhere else," I muttered, not meeting his eyes.

I glanced along the busy corridor — nurses shuffling notes, patients waiting — and made for the relative privacy of a nearby stairwell. I even peered up and down the concrete flights, like a spy in a bad film, making sure we were alone.

Lochlan followed me in.

"Tell me," he said finally. "Why are you here?"

I looked up and down the stairwell once more, then dropped my voice to a whisper anyway. "I was worried. About — you know. Last night. The last time. In the bath. We didn't use anything."

Lochlan didn't speak for a long moment.

Then, without a word, he simply bent down, slid one arm under my knees and the other around my back, and lifted me clean off my feet.

"Put me down!" I yelped.

Last night in the dark street was one thing. This was a full-blown, mortifying spectacle in broad daylight.

He ignored me utterly and carried me out of the stairwell and straight into the main thoroughfare.

I caught a teenager by the vending machine nudging her friend and pointing, her phone already coming up.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 468

Chapter 468:

I couldn't stop her, so I did the only thing I could. I buried my face in Lochlan's shoulder, hiding my own, letting him take the full force of the embarrassing, paparazzi-style scrutiny.

He marched straight out through the main doors.

His car was parked directly outside, probably on a double yellow line. He deposited me gently into the passenger seat, then got in on the driver's side.

"I haven't collected the prescription yet," I protested weakly, holding up the little slip of paper.

"You won't need it. We're going to handle this another way." He paused, his knuckles tightening on the steering wheel. "I'm sorry. I didn't consider this. It was irresponsible."

"It's not just on you," I said, my own voice awkward. "I'm a fully participating adult. It was a moment. Things got a bit carried away."

I couldn't bring myself to look at him, staring instead at the blur of London streets sliding past the window. I didn't blame him. In that bath, with the steam and the roses and him, I hadn't been thinking about consequences either.

He drove for over half an hour, leaving the dense city behind for the leafier, moneyed outskirts, before eventually turning into the discreet, tree-lined drive of a place that looked less like a clinic and more like a very serene, very exclusive spa.

A subtle brass plaque read: The Hampstead Women's Clinic.

Lochlan spoke briefly with a receptionist, and within minutes we were being ushered to a consulting room by a nurse whose demeanour was so calm it was almost hypnotic.

He moved to follow me in. I planted a hand flat on his chest.

"Absolutely not," I hissed. "You can wait out here."

The consultation was, in essence, not so different from the NHS one. The doctor — a formidable, elegant woman in her sixties named Dr Althea Lido — explained everything in clear, professional terms. The probability was low, but non-negligible. She was very careful not to use the word risk, but that was precisely what it was: a tiny, terrifying roll of the dice. Her solution was a specific combination of vitamins and a plant-based supplement that, taken within a certain window, gently encouraged the body's natural cycle in a way that was far less brutal than the standard emergency pill.

When I emerged, feeling strangely lighter despite the lingering anxiety, Lochlan was waiting. "Dr Lido is the best in her field," he said. "You can trust her."

I nodded.

The drive back to the city was quiet. The gentle motion of the powerful car, the low hum of the engine, the rare warmth of the afternoon sun streaming through the window — my eyelids grew heavy, and I lost the battle, slipping into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I woke to stillness. The engine was off.

Blinking, I found we were parked at the top of a hill, a breathtaking, postcard-perfect view of London's skyline spread out before us. Lochlan's suit jacket was draped over me. I turned my head, still fuzzy with sleep.

Lochlan was sitting in the driver's seat, turned towards me, his elbow propped on the steering wheel. "Hyacinth — if there's a pregnancy. If there is a child, then we have it. I would like that. I like children."

I stared at him, my brain scrambling to process the words. He had to be joking.

I forced a light, dismissive laugh. "There won't be one. Don't worry about it."

"But if there is," he pressed, his eyes searching mine. "What would you do?"

"Well," I said, aiming for flippancy and nailing it, "I'd hunt down and murder the 'if'. Problem solved."

Lochlan looked at me for a long moment. Then he moved.

He cupped my face and kissed me — a deep, consuming kiss that held a hint of frustration beneath its tenderness. When he finally pulled back, his lips still brushing mine, he murmured, “If there is a child, you will marry me. Do you have the nerve for that?”

I went completely rigid. Then I laughed again. “Let’s not worry about things that probably won’t happen.”

I knew he was joking. He had to be. And even if some insane part of him wasn’t, it was a fantasy. His family wouldn’t approve.

So what if his father was a delightful, bear-hugging eccentric who seemed to like me? I had never met his mother. From experience, mothers were the gatekeepers — the tougher judges, the ones who remembered every slight and scrutinised every flaw. What if she turned out to be another Tanya Grant?

No thanks.

We could have fun. We could live in the moment. That was enough — more than enough. Why did everything have to have a bloody destination?

Lochlan’s eyes darkened, that pale ice clouding over for several long seconds. Not wanting the conversation to slide into an argument, I curled my fingers into the silk of his tie and pulled him back into a kiss. It was easier than talking.

My ankle, after three days of Maureen’s brutal but effective ministrations and Lochlan’s strangely diligent chauffeur service to and from the clinic, was finally behaving itself. I could walk without the subtle, rolling gait of a retired pirate.

Lochlan had, without being asked, appointed himself my evening escort to the physio. It was oddly sweet, and also massively inconvenient for my sense of independence.

By Friday, I had dug my heels in — metaphorically, since the physical ones were still firmly in flats. I begged off the weekend. We didn’t need to spend every single day together. That way lay madness, and the swift erosion of my carefully maintained this-is-casual façade.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 469

Chapter 469:

I drove out to my parents' house.

"Dad! Mum!" I called, letting myself in.

My mother appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel. Her eyes performed that quick, head-to-toe scan only mothers can execute — diagnosing emotional and physical wellbeing in a single glance. She then turned towards the garden door and called out, "Jeremy! Put that spade down this instant and go to the supermarket. Get something nice for dinner."

My father shuffled in, beaming at me, his trousers dusted with what I hoped was potting soil. "Of course! Right away."

I hugged my mum. "Thanks, Mum. You don't have to go to any trouble."

She patted my cheek, her gaze softening as she studied my face. "So, living on your own — are you remembering to eat properly?"

"Yes! I'm absolutely thriving. It's all freedom and takeaways and doing whatever I want, whenever I want."

My dad, sitting on the bottom stair and struggling with his shoelaces, chimed in. "Well, your mother's bound to worry. Ever since the divorce, and all that nasty business in the papers, she's been losing sleep over it. Fretting that you're out there all alone, getting trampled on."

"Jeremy!" Mum snapped. She snatched the car keys from his hand. "Never mind, I'll go. You wouldn't know a fresh courgette if it hit you in the face." She turned to me. "Ignore your father, he's talking rubbish. But your grandmother is concerned. She's been talking about introducing you to some nice young men she knows." She looked faintly guilty.

"Mum?" I prompted, suspicion dawning.

"Well," she sighed, "she knew you were coming this weekend. And she's sending someone over."

"Sending someone? What do you mean, sending someone?"

"It's a young man. The son of one of her neighbours in the village, I think. She says he's coming to drop off some fresh fish and vegetables for us — but between you and me, darling, I think it's a terribly transparent setup."

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” I groaned, dropping my forehead onto her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, love. You know I can’t say no to your grandmother.”

“Is he here yet?”

“Not yet. He texted to say he’s on his way.”

I grabbed the car keys back from her hand. “Right. I’m coming with you. I’ll drive.”

Mum smiled. “You can’t run from well-meaning grandmothers forever, you know.”

“Watch me,” I muttered, ushering her out to the sensible, slightly battered family hatchback.

As I drove, Mum tried a different tack. “There’s no harm in just saying hello to the young man. He’s probably perfectly nice.”

“No, thank you. I’m categorically not interested in dating right now.”

“Alright, alright. Well, if not dating, how about a hobby? Something to occupy your time. Just promise me you won’t take up gardening. Your father’s latest experiment with the rose bush—” She let out a long, weary sigh. “It’s bad enough having one black thumb in the family.”

We arrived at the supermarket. Mum commandeered a trolley, and we made a beeline for the fresh produce. I was checking the avocados when a familiar, mellifluous voice spoke from my right.

“Miss Galloway. What a pleasant surprise.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a posessive husband!

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Chapter 470

Chapter 470:

I turned.

Aaron Lockwood stood there, looking profoundly out of place beside a pyramid of discount baked beans. “Mr Lockwood,” I said, my surprise evident. “Hello.”

His gaze drifted past me to my mother.

“This is my mother, Jenna Galloway.” I made the introductions. “Mum, this is Mr Aaron Lockwood. He’s an acquaintance.” Uncle of my boss’s friend, father of the woman who may or may not be my sort-of-boyfriend’s new charge was far too complicated to attempt.

My mother said nothing. She simply stared.

All the colour had drained from her face, leaving her looking pale and strangely fragile. Her knuckles were white where they gripped the trolley handle.

Aaron Lockwood was staring right back at her, his own expression one of dawning, profound shock.

“You’re — you’re Aunt Alison’s daughter, aren’t you. Jenny?”

My mother’s smile was a stiff, terrible thing. “It’s Jenna.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Jenna. Forgive me.” He recovered some of his polished composure, but his eyes were sharp and riveted on her. “It’s been so many years. How’s Aunt Alison? Is she well?”

“She’s very well, thank you,” Mum replied, her voice tight. She was holding herself so still it was unnatural.

Aaron Lockwood’s gaze swung back to me. There was something probing in it that I didn’t like at all.

What in the holy hell was going on? Since when did my mother know Aaron Lockwood? And how on earth did my grandmother know him well enough to be called Aunt Alison?

“Nice meeting you, but we really should get going.” Mum was already turning the trolley.

Aaron Lockwood stepped forward. “Wait.”

A familiar, high-pitched voice trilled from the end of the aisle. “Daddy! Look! All the chocolates!”

Janine Lockwood came barrelling around the corner, her arms laden with several family-sized bags of Dairy Milk. She skidded to a halt when she saw our little group, her eyes immediately narrowing when they landed on me.

“You,” she said, pointing a chocolate-bar-wielding finger in my direction. Her lower lip jutted out. “You’re the bad girl! You took the pretty boy away from me!”

I held up my hands in mock surrender. “He wasn’t a toy, Janine. Remember?”

She wasn’t listening. She latched onto Aaron Lockwood’s arm and tugged hard. “I don’t like the bag girl, Daddy. I want to go. Buy my chocolates and go.”

Aaron looked pained and offered us an awkward, apologetic smile. “I do apologise. We’d better—”

“Of course,” I said smoothly, giving a small wave. “See you.”

He was towed away by his daughter, who was already babbling about wanting every chocolate bar on the display.

The drive home was thick with a silence that was anything but comfortable.

Finally, I couldn’t hold it in any longer. “So,” I began, aiming for casual. “How do you know Aaron Lockwood? He seemed very familiar with Gran.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 471

Chapter 471:

My mother, who had been staring fixedly out of the passenger window, jolted slightly. “Oh, you know, I’ve just seen his photo in those business magazines your father buys. He likes to collect them — all those glossy things about finance and yachts.” She waved a hand vaguely.

It was a terrible lie.

My father’s reading material extended to Gardener’s World and the television listings. He thought the FT was something that happened to your car.

I didn't press her. I knew that tone, that evasive set of her shoulders. Pushing would only make her clam up tighter, and I hated watching the worried crease between her brows deepen.

As soon as we got home, Mum fled to the kitchen.

I busied myself putting the shopping away, but my eyes kept drifting to the closed glass door. Through the frosted panels, I could make out her silhouette — rigid posture, one hand pressed to her forehead, the other holding her mobile phone to her ear. Whatever expression she wore, it was deadly serious.

She was having a conversation she very much didn't want me to hear.

A few minutes later, the kitchen door slid open. My mother emerged looking pale and drained. "Mum, you look exhausted," I said, crossing the room to take her arm. "Go and sit down. Put your feet up. I'll handle dinner." I ignored her protest, guided her to the sofa, fetched her a glass of water, and retreated to the kitchen.

Then the doorbell rang.

I heard my mother get up and shuffle to the door. A beat of silence, followed by voices. One was Portia's — bright and unmistakable. The other one made my knife go still.

No. It couldn't be.

I wiped my hands on a tea towel, pushed the kitchen door open, and stepped into the hallway.

There, framed in the doorway of my parents' semi-detached house and looking about as natural as a peacock in a pigeon coop, stood Lochlan Hastings.

Portia was beaming, a bottle of wine in each hand. Lochlan stood just behind her, holding a large, beautifully wrapped gift box. He was dressed in what passed for casual wear on him — dark jeans and a navy cashmere jumper. He caught my eye for a brief second before turning his polite attention back to my mother.

"Mrs Galloway, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Lochlan Hastings."

My mother blinked, looking from Portia to the stranger. "Hello — hello. Portia, dear, is this your...?"

"My boyfriend?" Portia finished, letting out a peal of laughter. "God, I wish! That's the kind of dream I don't even allow myself at three in the morning after two bottles of Pinot. The disappointment would be too cruel."

"Oh. Then he is...?"

“He’s Hyacinth’s.” Portia paused, winking at me. I frantically mouthed the word no. “New boss.”

“Oh! Right — Hyacinth’s new boss. Of course. She mentioned she’d changed jobs.”

I finally found my voice. “Portia. Sir. What are you doing here?” The sir felt ridiculous in my own hallway, but it was a necessary shield.

“I invited him.” Portia stepped past my mother and into the house. “Hope you don’t mind a couple of extra mouths to feed, Mrs G?”

“Of course not, don’t be silly — come in, please,” my mother said, ushering Lochlan inside with a flustered wave.

“Mum, I just need a quick word with Portia,” I said, my voice strangled. “You two go on through.”

I yanked Portia back by the arm and waited for the front door to close.

“What the hell?” I whisper-shouted. “When you said you were bringing someone to dinner, I thought you meant Josh!”

“I did!” she hissed back. “But he had a last-minute work emergency — some client crisis. You know how it is.”

“So your solution was to just grab Lochlan as a replacement?”

“I didn’t grab him. He found me.”

“How?”

“I was driving out here and I... ran into him on the way.”

“Right. Because he has absolutely nothing better to do on a Saturday than loiter outside your building waiting to cadge an invitation to a suburban meat-and-two-veg.”

“Alright, fine!” Portia threw her hands up. “I called him, okay? To properly thank him for making a huge donation to the women’s legal centre.”

“He did that?”

“Yes. The man was insanely generous — the least I could do was make a polite phone call. And I may have, um, accidentally let it slip that I was on my way to your parents’ house for dinner.”

“And he just invited himself?”

“No! Well, not in so many words. I don’t know how it happened — it just unfolded. One minute we’re talking donation rates, the next he’s asking for the postcode. It was like social jiu-jitsu. I’ve been outmanoeuvred by a master.”

I rolled my eyes so hard I very nearly saw my own brain.

“What is the big deal?” Portia said. “So he’s come to meet your parents. Why are you so worked up? I think it’s sweet. It shows initiative.”

“I think it’s premature and massively unnecessary. And stressful. Mainly stressful.”

“Premature? Josh asked me to meet his parents after we first slept together. This is just dinner.”

“But Lochlan isn’t Josh. And we are categorically not dating. We’ve been over this.”

“Yes, you keep telling yourself that, darling,” she said, patting my cheek. “Look — he’s already in your living room. You’re not going to throw him out. So you can either accept it gracefully and play along, or you can stand out here having a silent meltdown while I go inside and enjoy your mum’s famous pork pie. Your call.”

She turned on her heel and sailed back into the house.

After several deep breaths that did absolutely nothing to calm me, I followed her in.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 472

Chapter 472:

Lochlan was sitting on my parents’ slightly sagging floral sofa, looking completely at ease.

Dad, as per usual, was nowhere to be seen — probably seeking solace among his beleaguered rose bushes.

My mother rose from her armchair, her hands fluttering. “I’ll just go and put the kettle on. Make some proper tea.”

“I’ll help!” Portia chirped, following her into the kitchen. She shot a gleeful, complicit wink at me over her shoulder as she went.

The moment the kitchen door swung shut, my face dropped.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Is this some kind of stress-test for my cardiovascular system?”

Lochlan simply looked at me, those pale eyes perfectly calm. “There’s no need to be nervous. I’m just here to have dinner at my girlfriend’s house. Meet her parents. See where she grew up. Standard procedure.”

The G-word again. It landed like a lead balloon.

“Until my girlfriend agrees to go public,” he continued smoothly, “I have no intention of saying anything that would compromise her. You have my word.”

I stared at him, speechless.

“You are not to say a single word out of line in there,” I finally managed. “Not one hint. You so much as look at me for a second too long and I swear I will — I will bite you.”

A faint smile touched his lips. He leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping to an intimate murmur that skated over my skin. “And where, exactly, do you plan to bite me?”

The low timbre, the glint in his eye — it was utterly inappropriate for my parents’ living room.

“Will you be serious?” I glared. “This is my home.”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Dad ambled into the room, blinking at the stranger occupying his favourite spot.

“Mr Galloway.” Lochlan rose to his feet and extended a hand. “It’s a pleasure. I’m Lochlan Hastings.”

I leapt in. “He’s my boss, Dad — Mr Lochlan Hastings, from Velos Capital.”

“Oh! Hello, Mr Hastings. Yes, of course.” Dad shook his hand with his usual genial, slightly distracted air. He was a man who accepted most things at face value, especially when it saved him from having to think too hard about them. “Hyacinth’s mentioned the new job. Very good.”

My mother returned, carrying a tray laden with a teapot, cups, and a plate of her homemade shortbread. “Please, try one, Mr Hastings. I made them this morning.”

Lochlan took a piece and bit into it. “Mrs Galloway, this is excellent. The perfect balance of butter and crumble. My compliments.”

My mother flushed, half-pleased and half still bewildered. She settled next to my father, who was eyeing Lochlan with the same vague curiosity he usually reserved for a new variety of weed in his flowerbed.

I perched rigidly on the edge of my seat, a fixed smile on my face.

Lochlan reached for the elegant carrier bag he’d brought in. “It was very short notice, coming today — I wasn’t sure what to bring. Then I remembered I had this at home and have been rather at a loss with it.”

He drew out a small, plain terracotta pot.

Nestled in the soil was a single, perfect snowdrop. Three pristine white petals hung from a slender green stem. Cupped within the inner segments, where green is usual, glowed a small, luminous yellow ovary.

Even I knew how rare that was.

“I understand you’re something of a gardening enthusiast, Mr Galloway. I’m afraid I don’t have the knack for keeping such specialised things happy — I’d be very grateful if you’d take it off my hands.”

I stared. I had never told him about my father’s gardening. How on earth did he know?

Dad leaned towards the pot on the table, his hands actually trembling, his nose nearly touching the white petals. “Good Lord — it truly is Elizabeth Harrison. The form, the colour — it’s a perfect specimen!” He looked on the verge of happy tears.

With visible effort, he wrestled his excitement under control. “Mr Hastings, a bulb of this rarity must have been terribly expensive. It’s far too generous. I really can’t accept.”

Lochlan shrugged. “Was it? I’m afraid I’m no expert. A business associate gave it to me, and it’s just been sitting in my cold frame, rather forgotten.”

“Forgotten? In a cold frame?” Dad was horrified. “The drainage! The aspect!” He took a steadying breath. “Well — in that case, perhaps I could look after it for you.”

“That would be a great help,” Lochlan agreed smoothly. “And when it’s thriving, you must let me come and see it.”

“Absolutely! Consider it done!” Dad immediately began photographing the plant from every conceivable angle.

My mother shook her head. “Thank you, Mr Hastings, but you really shouldn’t have. Jeremy’s enthusiasm far outstrips his talent, I’m afraid. That poor thing will be compost within the month.”

“Please, call me Lochlan, Mrs Galloway. And I think having a passion project is important. I have every faith in his dedication.”

I rubbed my temples. This was surreal.

The bizarre, harmonious atmosphere persisted straight through to dinner. My father, in a gesture reserved for state visits and lottery wins, brought out a bottle of his precious, dusty vintage port to share with Lochlan, then proceeded to monopolise the dinner conversation with a comprehensive monologue on peat moss acidity, perlite distribution, and the tragic demise of his prize-winning – in his own mind – courgettes.

My mother’s eyes glazed over halfway through the first sentence. I managed a vague “mmm” or “oh dear” at intervals.

Lochlan, however, seemed genuinely interested. He even asked questions. Dad was in seventh heaven.

I exchanged a look with Portia across the table. She was grinning, thoroughly enjoying every moment of the spectacle. My own attention remained fixed warily on Lochlan, part of me braced for him to casually drop a “so, your daughter and I are sleeping together” into a conversation about fertiliser – or worse, segue into his views on matrimony.

The doorbell chimed.

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Chapter 473

Chapter 473:

We all paused.

My father looked puzzled.

I glanced at my mother, who mouthed, “Your grandma called. The boy had a work emergency. He’s not coming.” I looked at Portia, who shook her head emphatically and mimed zipping her lips.

Then a voice, loud and floral as a garden centre, trilled from the front path. “Jenna! Love! I’ve brought you my lemon drizzle cake! Still warm!”

“Oh, it’s Rhonda.” Mum got up to answer the door.

A moment later, she returned, shepherding our neighbour into the dining room.

Rhonda Higgins was squeezed into a cardigan covered in violent pink peonies, her blonde curls shellacked into a helmet of impressive solidity. She bustled in, spotted me, and her face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Hyacinth! Duck! Look at you!” She thrust the cake tin at my mother and surged forward to envelop me in a cloud of baking-soda scent. “It’s been an age! Your mother says you’re in the city all on your own now. I heard about the divorce, pet – so sorry it didn’t work out, but these things happen, don’t they?” She pulled back, her gaze sweeping the table until it landed on Lochlan, who was, let’s be honest, rather difficult to miss.

Her smile faltered for just a second. She leaned in towards me, delivering what she clearly believed was a confidential whisper but which carried perfectly to everyone present. “Is this your ex-husband, then? The one from the papers?”

“No, Rhonda,” I said. “This is Lochlan Hastings. My boss.”

“Oh!” She blinked, processing this, then gave Lochlan a brisk, appraising nod. “You’re a very handsome boss, aren’t you? What is it you do, then? A modelling agency?”

Lochlan offered a polite smile. “Nothing so exciting, I’m afraid. Rather dull finance.”

“Oh,” Rhonda said again, losing interest instantly.

Without any pause, she announced to the room at large, “My Andre’s just got his CCT, you know – Certificate of Completion of Training. One of the youngest consultants at St Bartholomew’s, he is. A trauma surgeon. Saves lives every day, doesn’t he?”

Lochlan, caught off guard by the sudden change of subject, managed a neutral, “Congratulations. That’s an impressive achievement.”

But Rhonda had already swivelled back to me. “Now you’re shot of that first husband – all that money and nonsense – it’s time to get back out there, lamb! Let me tell you—”

My mother coughed, loudly. “Rhonda, this cake smells divine. Could you give me a hand in the kitchen? I need to find the right plate for it.” She seized Rhonda by the elbow and steered her firmly out of the room.

I turned back to the table and offered Lochlan a weak, apologetic smile. “Rhonda Higgins. Neighbour. Lifelong friend of my mother’s.”

Lochlan simply nodded.

I picked up my fork again, but paused — because Rhonda’s voice carried with crystal clarity from the kitchen, as though she were still sitting right beside me.

“...finally taking some proper time off, Jenna! Can you believe it? The hospital fought him on it, of course — said they can’t manage the trauma ward without him, he’s that indispensable — but I told him, Andre, your health comes first, doesn’t it?”

A pause, presumably filled by my mother making a non-committal noise.

Rhonda barrelled on. “And I was thinking, now that your Hyacinth is — well, available again — it’s the perfect time for the kids to finally reconnect, don’t you think? They always got on so well, didn’t they?”

My mother’s voice came back, considerably fainter. “Well, that’s — I’m not sure she’s...”

“I phoned him this afternoon! He said he’d come just as soon as he could get away — maybe after another surgery or two. We could all have dinner! Tomorrow, perhaps? Or next week? Come on, Jenna. The boy’s waited for her long enough, hasn’t he?”

I shifted in my seat.

Portia leaned in close. “Is this the same Andre who used to tutor you?”

I gave a tiny, tight nod.

Andre Higgins. Five years older than me. While I’d been sweating over my A-Levels, he’d been graduating from medical school. When my mother fell ill a few years back, it was Andre who had been our rock — taking time away from his gruelling junior doctor rotations to sit with us in consultants’ offices, translating dense medical jargon into plain English, explaining scan results with a calm, steady patience I had clung to like a lifeline. He had been a sanctuary of kindness in an absolute nightmare.

But after I married Cary and moved into his glittering, suffocating world, we had naturally drifted apart. I had become a different person, and he had been busy saving lives.

“Hyacinth, I wasn’t aware your social calendar was quite so fully subscribed.”

I turned. Lochlan was looking at me, his smile pleasant, his eyes gentle — the most terrifying expression I had ever seen on his face.

I forced a laugh that came out closer to a cough. “I didn’t know about any of this.”

“Well,” Lochlan said, his smile widening a fraction as something imperceptibly cool crept into his gaze, “now you do. Do you mind if I stick around to observe? I could offer a second opinion. Help you vet the candidate.”

“Will you stop,” I muttered under my breath.

The doorbell chimed.

“Could that be another suitor, I wonder?” Lochlan mused, taking a leisurely sip of port.

I jumped up from the table and fled into the living room just as my mother, looking harried, opened the front door.

A man stood on the step. Tall, though not as tall as Lochlan, with a lean, athletic build — a simple, good-quality navy jumper over chinos, and wire-rimmed glasses that gave him a serious, academic air.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 474

Chapter 474:

Andre Higgins.

His gaze found me immediately over my mother’s shoulder. A genuine smile spread across his face, softening the slight weariness around his eyes. “Hyacinth. It’s been a long time.”

I found myself returning the smile, some old, familiar warmth surfacing. “Andre. It really has.”

He turned his attention to Rhonda. “Mum — you left the keys in the door. And the stove on. The kettle’s boiled dry. Dad sent me to retrieve you before you burn the house down.”

Rhonda clapped a hand to her cheek. “Oh, golly! I forgot! The cake must have distracted me!”

“It’s fine. But Dad’s asking about dinner. He’s getting peckish.”

“Well, you’re here now!” Rhonda declared, seamlessly pivoting. “I was just telling Aunt Jenna we should all have a proper dinner to celebrate your CCT! Catch up properly. What do you say?”

Andre’s eyes flicked to my mother’s politely strained face, then to mine. “That sounds like a lovely idea.”

“Then it’s settled!” Rhonda announced. “I must dash — Tom gets like a bear with a sore head if his dinner’s late. But I’ll pop by tomorrow, Jenna! We’ll book somewhere nice. Somewhere proper. My boy’s a consultant now — we can’t go just anywhere!” With a flurry of waves, she bustled out.

Andre offered my mother and me an apologetic smile before following his mother through the door.

Mum closed it and leaned against it, blowing out a long sigh. She looked at me. “Well — I don’t think we’re getting out of that one, do you?”

“Doesn’t look like it,” I agreed.

After dinner concluded, Lochlan said his farewells to my father with impeccable politeness. “You’ve been a wonderful host. Do let me know how the snowdrop progresses — I’d love to see it when it’s in full bloom.”

“Of course, of course!” Dad beamed — the only person at the table who had enjoyed an entirely uncomplicated and splendid evening.

Lochlan then turned to me. “I’m afraid I indulged in your father’s excellent port rather more freely than I should have. I’m not fit to drive.”

I stared at him. “Call Roy.”

“He’s off the clock for the evening. Family time.”

“Then use a driver app.”

“That could take a while to arrange from here,” he said, not moving, his gaze fixed on me with pointed expectation.

I cursed internally. I shouldn’t have been sipping water all evening.

“Fine,” I gritted out. “I’ll drive you.”

I told my parents I’d run my boss back to the city. My mother looked concerned. “If it gets too late, darling, just stay at your flat. Don’t drive all the way back in the dark.”

I nodded and gave her a quick hug.

Portia climbed into the back of the car. The ride back to the city passed in complete silence. When we reached her building, she ejected herself from the car. “Thanks for the lift! Talk tomorrow!” she chirped, then leaned in through my window and mouthed Good luuuuuck before bolting for the safety of her lobby.

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Chapter 475

Chapter 475:

I drove the rest of the way to Lauderdale Tower and pulled up outside the grand entrance. “We’re here,” I announced.

Lochlan didn’t move. He sat staring out the windscreen at the polished brass fittings of his own building.

“Lochlan,” I said, shifting to a firmer tone. “We’re here. Goodnight.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

“Not going home? Where do you want to go, then — a late-night pottery class? An all-night grocery shop?”

“I’m thirsty.”

“Then let’s go upstairs. I’ll get you some water and you can call it a night.”

He fell silent again — a stubborn, digging-in-heels kind of silence.

“Are you drunk?” I asked.

“No.”

I immediately regretted asking. What kind of answer had I been expecting?

“Alright,” I capitulated. “Fine. You win. Where do you want to go? Just name it.”

He gave me an address in Hampstead. I plugged it into the sat-nav without another word.

We drove in renewed silence. After about ten minutes, we passed a twenty-four-hour convenience store.

“I’m thirsty,” Lochlan announced again, as though the concept had only just occurred to him.

“Right. Pellegrino alright for Your Highness? Or shall I check if they have ambrosia in a can?”

“Pellegrino is fine.”

I pulled over, got out, and marched into the stark brightness of the shop. I found the overpriced water, grabbed a bottle, and went to pay. As I stood at the counter, I glanced out the window just in time to see Lochlan emerge from the pharmacy next door. He got back into the passenger seat, a small paper bag in his hand.

I paid, returned to the car, and handed him the water. He cracked it open and took a long drink.

As I started the engine, I couldn’t help myself. “Are you feeling alright? Did you need something from the chemist?”

His profile was turned away, watching the passing night. “I’m fine.”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. When Lochlan got drunk, he didn’t get rowdy or sentimental. He apparently regressed into a wilful, cryptic child.

I followed the sat-nav’s polite instructions until we turned onto a private, tree-lined road that led to a pair of imposing white gates set into a high perimeter wall. As we approached, a discreet camera swivelled, a light blinked green, and the gates swung open in silence.

I drove through.

The house was a vast, stunning structure of glass and delicate black ironwork, nestled within immaculate, minimalist gardens. I parked on the crushed gravel driveway and we stepped out into the night air — cooler here, scented with night-blooming jasmine drifting

from somewhere in the shadows. Lochlan led the way to a glass door, tapped in a code, and we stepped inside.

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Chapter 476

Chapter 476:

Turning on the lights was like triggering a kind of magic.

The interior was one vast, open space. The ceiling was entirely glass, revealing a blanket of stars between the silhouettes of delicate iron beams. The floor was pale polished concrete, warmed by a few enormous, deeply plush rugs. The furniture was minimal — a handful of statement pieces that probably had unpronounceable Scandinavian names — and everywhere, there were plants. Lush, tropical, thriving plants. A fiddle-leaf fig the size of a small car. A cascade of philodendron spilling from a high shelf. Dad would have absolutely loved it here.

I turned in a slow circle, taking it all in. “Wow.”

Lochlan had already sunk onto a large, low sofa that seemed to have been carved from a single piece of pale wood. He looked entirely at home in this unreal place.

I knew the moment had arrived. There was no avoiding it now. I sat down at the other end of the sofa and turned to face him. “Look — about tonight. I swear on my life, I had no idea any of that was going to happen.”

Lochlan studied the label on his water bottle. “He seems presentable.”

I played dumb. “Who?”

“The neighbour’s son. The newly minted consultant. The one who, according to his mother, is on track to become the most celebrated trauma surgeon in the country. A catch, in the common parlance.”

“Oh, him. Yes, Andre is the absolute pride of Rhonda’s life. The sun rises and sets on his stethoscope.”

“Not just his mother’s pride.” Lochlan’s eyes lifted to meet mine. “Your mother seems exceptionally fond of him too.”

“Even if my mother loves him — which she does — I’m not going to marry someone to make her happy. I don’t feel that way about him. I never have. He’s the boy next door. A family friend. That’s all.”

“I hear you’re having dinner with him.” He reached over and took my hand, turning it over slowly, playing with my fingers.

“Don’t make it sound like a date. Our parents will be there. You heard Rhonda — she steamrolled my mother into it. And finishing his CCT is a huge deal. He’s a friend. I’m going, and I’m taking a bottle of wine as a gift. It’s what friends do.”

“So you’re going.”

“I am.”

“You’re not concerned I might find that difficult?”

“Will you?”

“What if I do?”

“Then I suppose it’s a good thing we never officially defined this, isn’t it? No messy public breakup required.”

He went very still. “You would end things over a dinner?”

“I’ve already had one jealous, controlling husband. If I wanted a repeat performance, I’d have stayed with Cary. It would have been less complicated.”

A long, heavy silence settled over the glass house. I braced myself for anger, for cold dismissal, for the end of whatever this was.

Then, slowly, he nodded. “You make a valid point.”

The tension in my shoulders unlocked so abruptly I almost sagged.

I hadn’t been certain what I’d do if he pushed — if he tried to lay down an ultimatum. The thought of having to choose, of walking away from the confusing, overwhelming pull I felt towards him over something so trivial, had filled me with a bleak, hollow panic. But the thought of letting him dictate who I could have dinner with filled me with a deeper, more fundamental dread. I had been down that road before. It led nowhere I ever wanted to go again.

Luckily, he had backed down.

My gaze drifted to the small pharmacy bag sitting on the glass coffee table. The mystery purchase. “Do you want some water with those?” I asked, nodding towards it.

I moved to get up, but his arm — which had been resting along the back of the sofa — slid down and locked around my waist, pulling me firmly back into the circle of his body. “That won’t be necessary.”

His hand came up to cradle my cheek, his thumb stroking along my jaw. He leaned in, his breath warm and faintly scented with my father’s port. “Hyacinth,” he whispered, his lips brushing mine as he spoke. “You are what I need.”

The kiss was slow and deep and tasted of distant vineyards and immediate, desperate need.

I sank into it — into him — my hands finding their way into his hair as I let him lead, let him take what he wanted. I was pliant, willing, entirely seduced by the combination of his surprising retreat and his current, overwhelming advance.

In one smooth motion he stood, taking me with him — one arm beneath my knees, the other supporting my back — and snagged the pharmacy bag with his fingers as he rose. I looped my arms around his neck, my legs wrapping instinctively around his waist. My face was buried in the curve of his shoulder, burning with a mixture of anticipation and sheer want. My fingers drifted from his hair to the buttons of his shirt, working them open one by one, my teeth grazing the hard line of his collarbone, then lower, over the rapid beat of his heart.

In the wide, silent hallway beneath the starry glass ceiling, he pressed me back against a cool, solid glass wall.

The world outside was dark. In here, the only things that existed were heat and hunger and the slow, fogging patch our bodies made against the pristine surface.

We never made it to a bedroom.

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Chapter 477

Chapter 477:

Morning arrived not with an alarm, but with a chorus of idiotically cheerful birdsong.

I blinked awake, my brain sluggishly processing the unfamiliar ceiling. My head was pillowed on Lochlan's arm, my body mostly on top of his, one leg thrown across his hips. The duvet had slipped down to his waist.

I lay still for a moment, studying the clean, strong lines of his torso in the clear morning light, then carefully extended two fingers to tug the cover back up towards his shoulders.

"Are you cold?" His voice, sleep-roughened, came from above me.

I pointed towards the floor-to-ceiling window, beyond which a small bird was hopping on a branch, its head cocked inquisitively. "We have an audience."

With a fluid movement, he shifted from lying on his back to facing me, his arm reclaiming its place around my waist. I tried to wriggle free. "Time to get up. Work."

He merely tightened his hold, the sheet tangling around us. "It's Sunday."

"Sunday you have things. Important billionaire things. Polo. Or reviewing offshore accounts. Something."

Every muscle in my body was staging a quiet protest — a pleasant symphony of aches in all the right places. I had no intention of becoming another item on his Sunday to-do list.

"Five more minutes. Maybe ten. Let's just lie in."

"You're getting lazy. You used to get up at six in the morning to hit the gym. Even when we were on a business trip with a million items on the agenda."

"We're not on a business trip now." He nuzzled the back of my neck. "And I prefer another form of cardio this morning." His hand, which had been resting on my hip, slid down to caress my backside.

I grabbed his wandering wrist and firmly moved his hand away. "No, thank you. I've had enough of that particular workout. And I'm starving." I threw the duvet off and swung my legs out of bed.

I darted into the walk-in wardrobe and grabbed the first thing my hand touched — one of his crisp white dress shirts. I pulled it on, the fine cotton falling to mid-thigh, smelling cleanly of him. My own clothes from the night before were a lost cause, casualties of what

I was mentally filing under The Glass Wall Incident. I gathered them from the floor, tidied up, and padded downstairs to the breathtaking, sun-drenched kitchen.

I headed for the vast stainless steel refrigerator and opened it more out of habit than hope, expecting the barren, show-home emptiness of a rarely used second property.

I was wrong.

It was stocked. Eggs, a half-full bottle of fresh milk with a use-by date still days away, butter, fruit. Normal things — the kind of things you buy when you plan to be somewhere more than once.

Which was puzzling. Lochlan spent his weekdays at the office and his nights at Lauderdale Tower. When did he have time to be here, to drink milk that would go off within the week?

I scanned the shelves more carefully. There, in the salad drawer beside a bag of rocket, sat a box of expensive-looking sheet masks. The kind Portia was always raving about.

A man like Lochlan didn't buy sheet masks.

I closed the fridge door softly and walked to one of the high stools at the kitchen island, sinking onto it. My mind began painting scenarios I didn't particularly want to see.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been sitting there, staring blankly at the sleek extractor fan, when his voice broke the silence.

Lochlan walked into the kitchen in soft grey trousers and nothing else, his hair still damp from the shower. He looked refreshed and utterly at home. He glanced at the empty countertop. "I thought you were making breakfast."

I stood too quickly. "Oh, I just went for a little wander in the garden. Thought I'd make breakfast, then got distracted."

He eyed the vast expanse of his own white shirt swallowing my frame. "You went into the garden dressed like that?"

"There's no one else here."

He gave my backside a light, proprietary swat that made me jump. "Well, go and have another wander, then. I'll handle breakfast." He turned and opened the refrigerator, pulling out eggs, butter, and a punnet of berries.

I hovered, watching his movements. When he turned to reach for a bowl, he caught me looking.

I instantly pivoted and walked out, affecting a sudden intense interest in the hydrangeas. I didn't actually go back into the garden — wandering around outside in nothing but a borrowed shirt, even with no witnesses, felt absurdly vulnerable.

Instead, I drifted through the ground floor of the glass house, my earlier curiosity quietly curdling into something more pointed. It wasn't that I was snooping. The traces were simply there.

A lacy throw blanket draped carelessly over a sun lounger near the grand piano. A single, shockingly large diamond stud earring glinting on the floor beneath the keyboard. A tube of expensive-looking lipstick — shade Bourgogne — lying beside a stack of architectural digests on the low glass coffee table. They weren't hidden, just casually strewn about. The kind of things left behind by someone who belonged here, who felt comfortable enough to kick off their jewellery and forget their makeup.

The question sat on my tongue, bitter and heavy. Should I ask?

I stood before a wall of glass, watching the clouds drift past. They didn't look peaceful anymore. They looked like stupid, fluffy things that had floated too high and forgotten how to come back down to the messy, complicated earth below.

I returned to the dining area.

Lochlan had laid out breakfast on the glass table: a perfect herb omelette, toasted sourdough with what looked like homemade jam, a bright berry salad, and two glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice. There was even a small, delicate slice of what appeared to be lemon polenta cake.

"This looks incredible," I said, sliding into my seat. I picked up my fork and began to eat, focusing on the food as though it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

Lochlan didn't touch his plate. He sat watching me.

I tried to ignore it, concentrating on separating a segment of omelette. But the weight of his gaze was a physical pressure. Finally, I dabbed my mouth with a napkin and looked up. "What? Do I have jam on my chin?"

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Chapter 478:

“You’ve seen the food in the fridge,” Lochlan said. “The things in the bathroom. You know they don’t belong to me. Yet you haven’t asked about any of it.”

I shrugged. “I assumed it was left by a friend. You seem like the type who has people for things.”

“What friend?”

Here we go. I met his eyes — the pale ones that missed nothing. “I don’t know. A female friend. In your world, are they called companions? Or, in plainer English, fuck buddies?”

The air in the room didn’t just go still — it congealed.

“You think this is my fuck pad?”

I turned to look out at the obscenely perfect garden. “I don’t particularly care if it is. It’s a very nice house. Good light. Excellent security. Top-tier amenities. It would serve the purpose admirably.”

I could feel his anger radiating from across the kitchen island — quiet, potent, and controlled.

He beckoned with one finger. “Come here.”

I stood. But instead of going to him, I turned on my heel and walked towards the hallway with what I hoped was a dignified sweep. “Thanks for breakfast. I’m going to call for a car. I need to get home and change into proper clothes.”

I made it approximately three steps before the world tilted.

One moment I was marching towards freedom; the next I was swept clean off my feet. He scooped me up, one arm beneath my knees and the other behind my back.

“Put me down!” I hammered my fists against his shoulders.

He carried me back into the living area and deposited me, unceremoniously, onto the deep cream-coloured sofa. Before I could even process the indignity, he followed me down, his body caging me in, and his mouth descended on mine.

I planted both hands flat on his chest and pushed. “Stop it!”

But when Lochlan Hastings decided to be serious, my resistance was about as effective as a paper shield against a tsunami. My arms buckled, and his full weight settled over me — warm and immovable. His lips sealed over mine.

He was angry. Well, tough. So was I.

I retaliated the only way I could. When his tongue sought entry, I bit down — hard enough to taste the sharp copper tang of blood.

He flinched, a sharp intake of breath against my mouth.

But he didn't pull back. The madman. Instead, he deepened the kiss, the faint metallic note mingling with mint as his tongue continued its relentless, claiming exploration.

Fine. Two could play at that.

I kissed him back harder, rougher, as though I were trying to win — to prove I couldn't be dominated. I scraped my nails down his back, feeling the muscles tense beneath his shirt. When my hand found the curve of his backside, I dug my fingers in deliberately. It was meant to hurt.

He just groaned into my mouth, the sound vibrating through both of us. His own hands were already busy, mapping my body through the thin silk of his borrowed shirt. He found my breast, his thumb brushing over the nipple, which had hardened into a tight, aching peak. He flicked it — sharp and punishing — then soothed it with a rough palm, the contradiction maddening. He pinned me beneath his weight, his knee nudging my thighs apart, and I could already feel the hard line of his erection pressing against me. The automatic response of my own body was yet another layer of fury.

“Aaaagh—!”

A short, sharp female scream shattered the moment.

We jerked apart.

Lochlan snapped upright and immediately tugged the hem of the shirt down over my thighs. His expression, when he turned towards the source of the sound, was arctic. I had seen frost on headstones look warmer.

I rolled onto my side and buried my burning face into the back of the sofa, willing the cushions to swallow me whole.

Standing in the entry hall was a vision — a young woman with a waterfall of dark hair, two bright pink streaks framing a face of open, astonished delight. She was tall, almost willowy, with the same striking pale eyes as Lochlan, currently wide with shock.

After her initial scream, she had slapped both hands over her eyes. “Sorry! I am so sorry! I didn't mean to!”

The apology was entirely undercut by the fact that her fingers were already sneaking apart, creating two wide peepholes through which she was studying us with rapt fascination.

“Are you quite finished?” Lochlan’s voice could have frozen the Thames.

The girl dropped her hands entirely, her face breaking into a huge, unrepentant grin. “I just wanted to say hello. Hi, brother.” She directed her beaming smile towards the sofa, where I was doing my best impression of a decorative cushion. “And the charming lady is...?”

“Out.” He made a shooping motion with his hand.

The girl pouted. “Fine.”

She turned her smile towards the sofa. “Hi there! I’m Lorna Hastings — this block of ice’s slightly more fun sibling. So, so sorry for the interruption! I thought no one was here. I’ll vanish now. Really lovely to almost meet you!” She gave a little wave, fingers wiggling.

Still face-down, I managed to raise one hand above the sofa cushion and wiggle my fingers in a feeble, half-hearted wave of my own.

Lorna took a few steps towards the door, then paused, her expression shifting to something more hesitant. She chewed her lip for a moment.

“Oh, and — big brother? I just came from Mum’s place. She’s having tea with the Lemons. Talking about — well, you know. Just a heads-up. Maybe brace yourself, yeah?”

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Chapter 479

Chapter 479:

She left, the door clicking shut with gentle finality.

I let out a long, shaky breath and finally peeled my face off the sofa cushion. Pushing myself up onto my knees, I peered out the window. My heart was still doing a frantic tap dance against my ribs.

“So. That was your sister?”

I felt him shift behind me. He made a low sound of affirmation, something between a sigh and a groan. Then his arms came around me, and he rested his chin on my shoulder.

“That was Lorna. She’s supposed to be in Austria. She stays here when she’s in London, which is rare. The feminine traces you found — they’re all hers.”

I nodded. “Right. Got it.”

Part of me was profoundly, pathetically relieved. The mystery of the lipstick was solved.

A much bigger part of me was simply trying to reassemble my dignity from the shards it had been smashed into by a pair of very curious, pink-streaked peepholes. Being caught mid-ravishment by the sister of your — whatever he was — was not something I’d been prepared for.

I tried to get up.

My waist was caught in a firm grip. A large, warm hand slid up my spine, leaving a trail of fire beneath the thin silk, and his breath was hot against my ear.

“She won’t be coming back.”

I twisted to look at him over my shoulder. “Are you serious? She lives here, according to you.”

“She no longer does.” He smiled. “Are you scared?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Is that a challenge? A bit transparent, don’t you think? I’d have expected better from the CEO of a major company.”

“Transparent or not,” he murmured, his lips brushing the shell of my ear, “as long as it works.”

To prove his point, he lightly flicked his thumb over my already erect nipple through the silk fabric. A sharp, delicious shock went straight through me, and I felt a betraying rush of warmth between my thighs. Fine. Two could play at using each other.

I yanked him toward me by his shirt collar. “Well then, let’s see who has the better stamina. Just so you know, I’ve been working out too.”

The next second, the world upended again. I was tumbled backwards onto the deep sofa cushions, and he was over me.

We didn’t leave the villa until the late afternoon light was turning the sky the colour of peach flesh and old gold. Lochlan drove with one hand relaxed on the wheel, looking like he’d just been for a brisk walk in the country.

I, meanwhile, slumped in the passenger seat of his stupidly quiet car, feeling comprehensively dismantled. My body seemed to be operating on an entirely new and confusing set of physical principles — one where my joints had been replaced by over-soaked sponge and my nerves were all singing different, exhausted hymns.

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Chapter 480

Chapter 480:

“We should come back next weekend,” Lochlan said. He glanced over, looking disgustingly vital, as though he’d absorbed all my energy through some carnal osmosis.

I managed to lift a hand, then let it flop back into my lap like a dead fish. “No. No, thank you. I need to recover. Give it a year.”

My voice was raspy. I felt like I’d run a marathon while being expertly and repeatedly distracted. It had been blinding, world-altering, and frankly obscene in its intensity. My thighs were staging a silent protest, and I was fairly certain I’d discovered muscles I never knew existed — all of them now filing formal complaints.

“You’d have more stamina if you exercised regularly.” He reached over and gave my knee a patronising little pat. “We could start with an evening run tonight. Build up your cardio. Consistency is key.”

I turned my head slowly — a movement that required immense effort — and stared at him. A run? I could barely remember how to instruct my legs to walk. The very idea of jogging was a cosmic joke.

I shifted my entire body toward the window and curled up in the seat. “I’m going to sleep for twelve hours,” I announced to the tinted glass. “I have to work tomorrow. Some of us have to labour for a living, you know — in offices, with spreadsheets.”

My words slurred slightly as the hypnotic motion of the car and my profound exhaustion conspired against me. My head lolled against the headrest, and the world faded into a warm, velvety black.

The jerk of the engine cutting off pulled me back to reality. The car glided to a stop outside Lauderdale Tower.

As Lochlan moved to undo his seatbelt, I summoned the last dregs of my willpower and planted a hand firmly on his chest. He looked down at my hand, then up at me, one eyebrow raised.

“I’m not invited up?”

“No. You are going home. To rest. To hydrate.” I leaned over and pecked him quickly on the cheek. “You’ve had a very active weekend. Your work here is done. Good night.”

Then I was out of the car, scrambling into the lobby before my traitorous body could decide that, actually, a nightcap involving him sounded perfect.

I limped into the lift with one hand pressed to the small of my back like an old woman with sciatica. The concierge gave me a sympathetic nod.

Upstairs, I cobbled together some toast for dinner. Then I ran a bath so deep it qualified as a minor territorial sea. I sank into the steaming water with a groan that was about seventy per cent agony and thirty per cent blissful memory.

My phone, sitting on the nearby counter, buzzed once against the tiles.

I ignored it. Peace. Silence.

It buzzed again, more insistently.

With a sigh that created ripples, I stretched an arm out — dripping water everywhere — and grabbed it. The screen glowed in the steamy bathroom light. A message from an unknown number. That was never a harbinger of anything good.

I thumbed it open.

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Chapter 481

Chapter 481:

The message read: This is Jaclyn Lemon.

I shot upright in the bath, water sloshing over the sides.

Jaclyn Lemon. The former head of Velos Singapore. The woman had been so spectacularly bad at her job that Lochlan had fired her right in front of me. The last I'd heard, she had retreated to London to lick her considerable wounds.

What in the name of all that was holy was she doing texting me? We weren't friends. The last look she'd given me could have curdled milk.

Then the next text bubble appeared.

Hyacinth, I hope this isn't too intrusive. I'm trying to coordinate a small family dinner and need to find a slot in Lochlan's schedule. As you manage his diary, I wondered if you might be able to indicate when he's next free? I'd be so grateful.

I stared at the screen. Since when did Jaclyn Lemon say I'd be so grateful?

My thumbs hovered over the phone. The water was going cold. I typed back: I'm afraid I can't give out details of Mr Hastings's schedule. Company policy. I added a polite full stop for good measure.

Her reply was almost instantaneous.

Oh, I completely understand! It's just that it's his mother who's asked me to arrange this. She's terribly keen for us to spend some time together, you see, and she knows how impossibly busy he is.

I froze. The bathwater felt suddenly icy.

Another message followed, quick as a snake.

I know how much he values his work, so I don't want him to waste a single moment. I'd like to accommodate him. I'm not asking for specifics, of course not — no locations or meeting names. Just a rough idea of when he might be free for a social engagement. If it helps, I can give you his mother's number so you can verify the request.

My mind reeled, executing a violent, nauseating somersault.

Vaguely, I recalled Lorna's cryptic warning to her brother that morning. Mum's having tea with the Lemons. No wonder it had sounded familiar. The Lemons. Of course.

My grip loosened. The phone slipped from my fingers, plunged into the bathwater, and vanished beneath a layer of bubbles and floating petals. I lunged for it, grabbed the slippery thing, and hauled it out.

The screen was black. Unresponsive. A small, rectangular corpse.

I blinked, feeling stupidly adrift. The steam swirled around me. I looked down at my poor, waterlogged phone with something approaching pity.

Eventually, I stood up, water streaming off me, and wrapped myself in a bath sheet. I felt numb — and then, a moment later, intensely, sharply not-numb. I picked up the dead phone and dropped it into the bin.

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Chapter 482:

After a night of very little sleep and too much staring at the ceiling, I ate a tasteless breakfast and went out to buy a new phone. The whole process was irritatingly bureaucratic and took far too long. Then I hailed a taxi to my parents' house to collect my car, the one I'd abandoned there on Saturday night.

In the back of the cab, the moment my new phone finished restoring, it rang.

"Hey," I answered.

"You're not at home," Lochlan said. "And your phone was off all night."

I was suddenly, profoundly tired of his preternatural awareness.

I leaned back against the seat and forced my voice into something light and natural. "Oh, yeah. Last night I was in the bath being an idiot with my phone. It took a dive — full submersion, total write-off. I've just been dealing with the thrilling aftermath at the phone shop."

"That was unfortunate. And a little careless."

"Tell me about it. Not my finest hour."

"Where are you now? Would you like me to pick you up?"

"In a cab heading to my parents' to collect my car. Then I'll go straight to the office. I'll see you there." I hung up before he could offer again.

The smile I'd poured into my voice evaporated from my face the instant the call ended, wiped clean.

The taxi dropped me off. Mum was just back from the shops, unloading groceries in the kitchen. Dad, I could see through the patio doors, was hovering over his prized snowdrop on the garden table like a nervous midwife.

Mum shook her head. “He’s been up three times in the night to check on that plant. I told him he should just take a sleeping bag out there and cuddle up with it. Save us all the disturbance.”

I managed a real, if thin, smile. “How’s it looking?”

“Alive, against all odds. It’s a miracle.”

I dropped my bag onto a chair. Mum turned, wiping her hands on a tea towel, and her perceptive eyes did a quick, quiet scan of me.

She took a breath. “So — about you and Mr Hastings.”

“What about him?” I said, too quickly, busying myself with putting the milk in the fridge.

“Is he really just your boss?”

I shut the fridge door and leaned against it. “Um. Yeah.”

It sounded pathetic, even to me. I had never, ever been able to successfully lie to my mother.

She just looked at me, one eyebrow arched in that way that had terrified me as a teenager. “Do you have feelings for him? He’s a remarkable man, Hyacinth — the looks, the brains, the way he carries himself. And you work with him all day.”

“Mum, it doesn’t matter what I think or feel. There’s no future in it.” I pushed off from the fridge. “His mother, apparently, already has a favourite candidate for daughter-in-law lined up.”

Mum watched me, seeing the way I couldn’t quite meet her eye.

She sighed — a sound that was equal parts disappointment and relief. “Oh, Hyacinth. Well, if you know it’s impossible, that’s good, I suppose. I just worry you’ll get one of your ideas into your head and charge ahead regardless of what anyone says. Like before.”

Chapter 483:

She was talking about Cary. I knew, with a certainty that ached, that if she hadn’t been so desperately ill back then, she would have physically barred the door to stop me marrying him.

To this day, she refused to believe I'd married rich, charming Cary Grant because I'd fallen stupidly in love. She was convinced I'd done it as a transaction — to get the money for her heart transplant.

I didn't want to dig up that graveyard. It was done. And given the same choice, I'd do it again to save her.

"Mum, I'm not going to be stupid again," I said quietly.

"Look." She came over and took my hands. Her own were warm and slightly damp from the shopping. "Mr Hastings is exceptional. The tea he brought, that ludicrously expensive snowdrop — it shows he's paying attention. Your father and I aren't fools. But him being good, and him being good for you, are two different things. If his family doesn't accept you, if they look down on you, you'll have a miserable time of it. And a man like that — he won't be short of admirers. We can't afford to trip over the same stone twice."

"I know," I said, looking down at our joined hands. "I know all of that."

"You're not long divorced. There's no rush. And remember —" she squeezed my fingers "— even if you're single for the rest of your life, you've still got me and your daft father."

"I'm not rushing."

Mum let go and returned to the sink, pulling out a punnet of plump, early-season strawberries. She washed a few and handed one to me. "Your father and I can only give you advice. The decisions are yours. That Fortnum & Mason Royal Blend tea he brought is lovely, but I can buy my own. And that snowdrop is far too much. Once your father's managed not to kill it, we'll give it back."

"Okay," I murmured.

I took the bowl of washed strawberries she passed me and sat at the kitchen table. They were so sour they made my jaw ache.

I left my parents' house a while later, having eaten my body weight in under-ripe strawberries. I felt bloated and sour, both inside and out.

I was just heading to my car when a voice called out from next door.

"Hyacinth!"

I stopped, my hand on the car door, and turned. Andre Higgins was emerging from his mother's house, shrugging on a woollen coat over his suit.

"Andre," I said, with a polite, neighbourly smile. "Off to the wars?"

“Just coming off them, actually,” he said, his voice a gravelly rumble. He walked over with a stride that was both purposeful and tired. “I don’t think I have your number,” he stated, pulling out his phone. It wasn’t a question.

I blinked. I knew exactly what he was doing. But he wasn’t a stranger — he was Auntie Rhonda’s son, and our mothers had been friends for decades.

“Oh. Right. Sure.” I took out my new, depressingly blank phone and we awkwardly swapped details, tapping our screens together.

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Chapter 484

Chapter 484:

“Right! Well, I’m running late for work, so I’d better dash,” I said, already turning toward my car.

Andre reached past me and opened the driver’s door with old-fashioned courtesy, bracing a hand on the roof and leaning in slightly. “About that dinner to celebrate the consultancy — which night this week works for you?”

“Oh, gosh, this week is just a nightmare. Completely packed. I’m so sorry.” I plastered on a smile. “But you and Auntie Rhonda and my parents should absolutely go ahead. Have a lovely time. And huge congratulations again, really.”

“Thanks.” He didn’t move from the door. “No problem. But we’ll do it when you’re free. I’d like you there.”

“I’ll do my very best.”

He finally stepped back with a slight frown.

I gave a little finger-wave and reversed off the drive with what I hoped looked like professional haste rather than blind panic.

It wasn’t until I was halfway to the office — stuck at an interminably long set of lights near Chiswick — that I glanced in the rear-view mirror.

The car behind me was a sleek, gunmetal grey Bentley. Very understated. Very expensive. Very familiar.

My stomach did a neat little flip.

Lochlan. What was he doing here? The route from Lonsdale Tower to Velos Capital was a straight shot through the city. This meandering suburban detour ran in the opposite direction entirely. There was no plausible reason for him to be on this road.

Except for me.

The next thought arrived immediately: had he been there long enough to see me chatting with Andre on the driveway? To see Andre opening my car door, leaning in — all that terribly incriminating, neighbourly proximity?

A flutter of anxious guilt began to rise in my throat.

Then I remembered. Jaclyn Lemon's text. Tea with the Lemons. His mother's hand-picked candidate.

The chill of that realisation washed over the anxiety and extinguished it completely. A strange, hollow calm settled in its place.

What did it matter if he'd seen?

I parked in the staff car park. As I stepped out, Lochlan's Bentley glided silently into the CEO spot a few rows over. He and Kai emerged simultaneously.

"Morning, Mr Hastings. Morning, Kai," I said, breezing past them and falling into step beside Kai.

"Morning." Kai mouthed Boss in a bad mood to me the moment Lochlan's back was turned.

The private lift rose to the executive floor.

Lochlan walked ahead of us. He didn't break stride as he spoke, tossing the words over his shoulder. "Kai, you and Hyacinth will switch duties today." Then he was gone, vanishing into his office and leaving Kai and me standing in the hushed corridor like a pair of mildly reprimanded schoolchildren.

We exchanged a look.

"Told you," Kai murmured.

I just shrugged.

I didn't ask what had put Lochlan in such a foul mood. I had a fairly good idea.

"Are you going to be okay?" Kai asked.

“I’ll be absolutely fine.” I gave him a patently false smile and walked back to my own office.

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Chapter 485

Chapter 485:

Once inside with the door shut, I slumped into my chair. My new phone sat accusingly on the desk.

Jaclyn Lemon had been gently but persistently pushing for an answer on Lochlan’s schedule, making it abundantly clear the request came from his mother. I do hope you won’t mind helping, she’d written, as if I were a slightly slow butler. She’d even offered me his mother’s number for verification, and it seemed she had no intention of stopping until she had her answer.

At half nine, I brewed a pot of coffee to his exacting, neurotic specifications and carried it into the lion’s den. He was behind his monolithic desk, pretending to study a financial report. I could tell he wasn’t reading a single word.

I set the cup down on its designated coaster.

“Your schedule,” I announced, activating my tablet.

I ran through the day’s litany of meetings, the transatlantic conference calls, the sacred and immovable blocks of gym time.

When I finished, I looked up.

He was watching me. His pale eyes were intent, focused with that unnerving totality he possessed. The tiny mole beneath the outer corner of his left eye seemed to punctuate his stare.

“Why,” he asked, slicing through the professional pretence he himself had enforced, “have you gone so cold on me overnight?”

Cold? Me? That was rich. He was the one who'd been acting strange all morning, demoting me on a whim because he'd probably seen me talking to a neighbour. He was the one being strange and punitive, and now he had the nerve to level the accusation at me.

"I haven't," I said, and decided to lob the grenade back into his lap. "Oh — before I forget. Miss Jaclyn Lemon has been in touch. She'd like to know when you'll be free this month, preferably within the next couple of weeks. She's extending an invitation to a family dinner. The Lemons and the Hastings. Apparently it's some kind of celebration. A birthday, perhaps."

His hand, which had been reaching for his coffee, stilled mid-air.

"Jaclyn called you?"

"Texted."

"How did she get your number?"

"Beats me."

Maybe she'd bought it on the dark web. Maybe his mother had provided a directory.

"What did she want?"

"I believe I just summarised it for you."

"You're not my secretary. She shouldn't be asking for my schedule from you."

A shrug. "Well, apparently she didn't get the memo about my promotion."

Director, Executive Assistant, Chief Admin Officer — it didn't matter. To women like Jaclyn Lemon, I would always be the help.

"So," I pressed on, businesslike. "When are you free for her?"

"I wasn't informed of any joint family dinner."

"Then you should ask your parents."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to back out?"

"Back out of what?"

"Our arrangement."

"No," I said, feigning surprise. "What gave you that idea?"

“You apparently see no problem setting me up for a dinner with Jaclyn Lemon.”

“It’s a family dinner. What’s wrong with that?”

“You know very well it’s not just a family dinner.”

“I don’t.”

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Chapter 486

Chapter 486:

“It’s a social convention. Such occasions are often a ruse for matchmaking. April marks the beginning of the social season in London.”

“Well, excuse me for being ignorant of your aristocratic, high-class conventions. She told me it’s a dinner. That’s what I think it is, and that’s what I’m telling you.”

“And now I’m telling you it’s a setup. You knew she had designs on me back in Singapore.”

“Yeah.”

And I also knew you used to have a thing with her, I added silently.

“So — knowing all that, you still want me to attend this dinner?”

“I’m your employee, not your chaperone. I don’t dictate who you can or cannot have dinner with.” I paused. “If, on the other hand, you’re asking whether I’m jealous, the only answer I can give you is—”

I walked around the side of his desk, leaned down, placed a hand on his shoulder for balance, and pressed a soft, fleeting kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“—I like our arrangement,” I murmured, my lips close to his ear. “You’re absolutely brilliant in bed. And I’d like to keep it going for as long as possible.”

I drew back just enough to meet his eyes. “However, the moment you decide you’d like to stop, just let me know. I’ll fade away. You don’t have to worry about me being a problem for your future wife.”

His expression hardened into something unreadable and cold. “I don’t have any plans to pick out a future wife.”

“Maybe you don’t. But your parents do.”

“You’ve met my father. He likes you. He can’t wait for you to be my girlfriend.”

“Yeah, Holden’s lovely,” I agreed, and it was true. “But—”

“But what?”

But your mother is having tea with the Lemons and texting me through their daughter, I thought. But discussing whether she’ll like me makes me sound pathetic and eager — and I’d rather chew glass.

“Nothing,” I said, straightening up and smoothing my skirt. “We shouldn’t be talking about this at work. It’s against the rules. I’ve got to get back to it.” I gave his shoulder a patronising pat, picked up my tablet, and walked out.

The rest of the morning passed in a tedious cycle. I buzzed in and out like a worker bee. He never brought up the dinner again.

Jaclyn, however, was politely insistent.

In the end, I simply texted her his direct number — which I was ninety-nine per cent sure she already had — and wrote: I’m not in charge of Mr Hastings’s private social schedule. It would be best to contact him directly.

Then came the business dinner. A special circle of hell, populated by three older investors who seemed to believe a deal couldn’t be consecrated without a blood sacrifice of vintage claret. They were monstrously, relentlessly fond of the bottle, toasting everything from the weather to the decline of the high street with grim, ritualistic enthusiasm.

Kai and I exchanged a glance of shared doom across the table.

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Chapter 487

Chapter 487:

The primary objective: keep all alcohol away from Lochlan, whose tolerance was legendarily, almost endearingly, pathetic. Kai and I would pre-empt any toast aimed at him by hastily proposing one of our own — to “future collaboration” or “the unseasonably good weather.” I even stooped to bribing the sommelier, discreetly, to ensure the glass placed before Lochlan was in fact filled with pomegranate juice dark enough to pass for wine.

I enjoy a glass of wine. I really do. But not tonight.

By the time the torturous meal finally shuddered to a close, my cheeks were burning with a hot, artificial flush. Kai, the poor heroic bastard, had borne the brunt. He had gone a distinct shade of pistachio, muttered a choked apology, and bolted for the Gents’ with a hand clamped firmly over his mouth.

I took a few unsteady steps toward the restaurant’s grand exit, the world tilting on a spongy axis.

Lochlan was suddenly there, his hand a firm bracket around my elbow. He bundled me into the back of the waiting Bentley and slid in beside me, the door thudding shut to seal us in a tomb of quiet luxury.

“I told you not to drink.” His voice was low and tight with an anger he was visibly straining to smother. “Why wouldn’t you stop?”

I let my head loll back against the cool leather and closed my eyes. “You can’t drink. Kai was about to offer his stomach contents as an amuse-bouche. Someone had to do it. That’s my job, remember?”

“You don’t have to keep reminding me that everything you do is just part of your job description. Not because you might, for a single second, actually care what happens to me.”

“I do care about you,” I slurred, peeling one eye open. “You’re the man who signs my pay cheques. If my CEO ends up in A&E with alcohol poisoning, it looks terrible on my CV. I have professional standards.”

He was silent for a beat. When he spoke again, his voice had changed — quieter, more dangerous. “Is this your way of telling me you don’t want to be my girlfriend anymore?”

“Didn’t ever plan on being your girlfriend in the first place.”

A large hand shot out, gripping my chin and turning my face toward his. The motion made the room swim. “What did you say?”

“What’s the problem? You said I could do things my way. That I didn’t have to be responsible. About you.” I poked a finger into the rock-hard wall of his chest. “Truth bomb time. I never really thought of you as a boyfriend. I’m freshly divorced, I’ve got my own money, I’m finally free. Why on earth would I volunteer for another complicated, high-maintenance mess? I’m not a masochist.”

He stared at me. “Was it because of last weekend? Dinner at your parents’ house? Was I being too much? Did I scare you?”

I pushed his hand away from my face and turned my whole body toward the window, giving him my back. “Look,” I mumbled into the glass, “if you’re still having fun, we keep going. If you’re not, we stop. It’s simple. Clean. No harm, no foul.”

I was hauled back around.

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Chapter 488

Chapter 488:

There was no gentleness this time. His kiss was a claim staked in pure anger — a punishment for my insolence. I didn’t resist. My arms lifted to loop around his neck, and I kissed him back because it was easier than fighting.

He broke away, breathing raggedly. “No harm, no foul? I’m already in over my head. If you think you can run from this now, you’re wrong.”

I let my hand drift down from his neck to splay over the taut, defined muscle of his stomach. “I’m not running. I’m having a lovely time.” I traced an idle pattern through his shirt. “And I’d very much like to keep having it — for a while longer.”

He caught my wandering hand in his.

Outside, Kai — pale and wobbling like a newborn giraffe — was being escorted out of the restaurant by two very concerned waiters, aiming unsteadily for the car.

I jerked away from Lochlan, hastily smoothing my crumpled blouse and running a hand through my hair. I lowered the window and waved. “Over here!”

After work, I strong-armed Portia into a retail therapy session.

“So let me get this straight,” she said, holding up a silk camisole I definitely didn’t need. “His mum’s new bestie is his ex-fling from Singapore, and she’s now texting you for his diary? And you’re just — cool with that?”

“I’m the picture of glacial composure,” I said, adding a truly hideous vase to my basket, because why not. “It’s fine. It’s all fine. His mother is just being sociable. In a matriarchal, dynasty-preserving kind of way.”

Portia snorted. “Right. And I’m just being friendly when I tell a girl hitting on my date to get lost. Your optimism is delightful. Truly.”

We rambled through shops until past ten, until my feet ached and my bags were heavy enough to serve as ballast. It did the job. The buzzing, superficial noise of the city and Portia’s gloriously unfiltered commentary pushed the deeper, nagging unease firmly into the background.

I dropped her off, then pointed my car toward Park Lane. I’d promised to spend a few nights at my parents’.

My headlights swept over the familiar parked cars and trimmed hedges — and then caught the figure. A tall, dark shape, leaning against the oak tree by the kerb, illuminated in the warm spill of the old-fashioned streetlamp.

I pulled up, killed the engine, and sat for a moment.

I could just drive past. Pretend I hadn’t seen him.

But that was cowardly, and besides, he’d already seen me.

With a sigh that felt like it came from my shoes, I got out.

“Bit late for a neighbourhood watch shift, isn’t it?”

The lamplight caught the planes of his face, leaving his eyes in shadow. He looked tired. “It’s late. Are you heading out?”

“Heading home, actually.” I hoisted my shopping bags a little higher. “I’m staying at my parents’ for a few days.”

“That’s a long commute.”

“Yeah, well. I’ll manage.” I shifted my weight. “Was there something you needed?”

“Come for a walk with me.”

“Yeah, no. It’s late. I’m tired.”

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Chapter 489

Chapter 489:

He simply stepped forward, took the bags from my hands, and then his fingers closed around mine. “Just a short one. Half an hour. Please?”

“Fine. Half an hour. Then I’m going to bed.”

We walked in silence for a few streets, ending up in the small neighbourhood playground. It was deserted, the swings hanging perfectly still in the yellow glow of a security light. I pulled my hand free and dropped onto one of the swings.

“I’m done walking. I’ve been walking for hours. This is my stop.”

Lochlan set my bags down and came to stand behind me. With a gentle push, he set the swing moving.

The world became a soft, backward-and-forward lull. Peaceful, in a strange way. Every time I swung back, I felt the solid warmth of him — a brief catch before I was propelled away again.

“I went to Hastings Hall today,” he said.

My hands tightened on the cold chains. Ah. So that was where he’d been. His day-long absence from the office suddenly made sense.

The next time I swung back, his hands settled on my waist, steadying me, holding me there for a moment. His lips were close to my ear. “I told my mother I’m with you. And I asked her to keep her goddaughter, Jaclyn Lemon, at a professional distance.”

The swing jerked to a halt as I dug my heels into the bark chips. I twisted to look up at him.

“You never said Jaclyn Lemon was your mother’s goddaughter.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Our families are connected. Her father is my godfather. It’s a tangled old web.” He straightened and gave me another small push. “Mum says she didn’t orchestrate anything. Jaclyn reached out on her own, ostensibly to organise her father’s sixtieth birthday party and extend an invitation.”

I stared at the shadow my feet made on the ground as I swung. “I see.”

“I made it clear Jaclyn is a family friend. Nothing more.”

“And what does your mother think about that clarification?”

“She doesn’t dictate my social life. She was neutral with Jaclyn. She’ll be neutral with you.”

“Neutral.” I paused. “So — does she approve?”

“It doesn’t matter what she thinks.”

I let out a humourless laugh. “Believe me, Lochlan, it does.”

I thought of Tanya Grant, Cary’s mother, and her special blend of polite venom. I had no idea whether things would have lasted with Cary regardless, but her disapproval had been like a constant, low-grade toxin in the room.

He stopped the swing and turned me to face him, his hands firm on the chains on either side of me. “If you’re worried about parental disapproval, don’t be. My father already adores you. My mother will come to understand. But even if they didn’t, it wouldn’t change a thing. The only person who gets to end this, Hyacinth, is you.”

He kissed the corner of one eye, then the other. His lips were warm, his touch unbearably gentle.

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Chapter 490

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 490

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Chapter 490:

It made my eyes prickle. A hot, itchy, dangerous feeling spread through my chest — a confusing tangle of longing and a deep, suffocating ache. He was so certain. So bloody resolute.

I forced my gaze to soften and my body to relax into his hold. “You saying things like that will only make your mum and dad think I’m some kind of siren, leading you astray.”

He smoothed a strand of hair behind my ear. “They won’t. So stop worrying. If anyone gives you trouble, you tell me. I’ll handle it. You don’t need to be afraid of any of it.”

I looked up at him, at his earnest, handsome face in the dim light. “Alright. Okay.”

I stood up from the swing, closed the small distance between us, and wound my arms around his neck. I went up on my toes and kissed him.

I put everything I had into that kiss — all the pretended faith, the manufactured confidence, the willingness to believe his pretty promises. I kissed him like I was all in. He responded instantly, his arms locking around my waist and pulling me flush against him. The kiss deepened, turning hungry and relieved, almost fervent with a kind of victory.

See? Easy. He just needed to feel he’d reassured me, that he’d secured his ground.

We broke apart at the sound of someone’s footsteps, breathing unevenly, foreheads touching.

“Change of venue.” I scooped up my discarded shopping bags, took his hand, and led him back to my car.

He followed — a quiet, compliant giant. I got behind the wheel and started the engine.

He noticed the passing street signs. “I thought my half hour was up.”

“Not just yet.”

I knew a place — a little cul-de-sac near the park, shrouded in trees and blessedly free of streetlights. The kind of spot teenagers probably used. Perfect.

I pulled in, killed the engine and the lights, and we were plunged into a profound, leafy darkness.

I climbed over the centre console and into his lap, facing him, my knees bracketing his hips on the spacious passenger seat. I found his face in the dark, my fingers tracing the line of his jaw, and leaned in until my lips brushed his.

“I’ve always wanted to try this.”

Then I kissed him, pouring every bit of confused, frustrated, desperate feeling into it. My hands tangled in his hair, I bit his lower lip, I claimed his mouth with a kind of frantic ownership.

This, for now, was mine. This brilliant, complicated, beautiful man who looked at me like I held the sun. I could have this, even if it was just for tonight in this dark car.

He made a rough, stunned sound against my mouth, and then his arms locked around me like steel bands, crushing me to him. He let me lead, let me set the frantic and hungry pace, his own responses growing more urgent by the second.

The world outside ceased to exist. The only sounds were our ragged breathing and the wind picking up, shaking the trees around us, branches clawing at the car as though they wanted in.

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Chapter 491

Chapter 491:

The windows steamed up within minutes, becoming our private, opaque cocoon. At one point, my hand — slick with condensation — slid down the glass beside his head, leaving a shaky trail. His hand found mine, laced our fingers together, and pinned it gently against the window.

Sometime after midnight, I lay boneless against his chest, listening to the steady, heavy thump of his heart beneath my ear.

I was a wreck.

He stirred, tucking a strand of my hair back. “Let’s go home.”

I shook my head, nuzzling into his shirt. “No. I like it here.”

It was the truth. In this dark, hidden pocket of the world, with the storm blowing outside, I felt safe. I could pretend this was enough — that this stolen, secret happiness could be sustained, even though I knew with a sinking certainty it was as ephemeral as the mist on the windows.

“So you like cars,” he mused, his lips finding the sensitive spot behind my ear and making me shiver. “I have a motorhome. When I find the time, we’ll go away. You can choose anywhere.”

The fantasy was so sweet it hurt. “You don’t have time. You have a kingdom to run.”

“But we have time now.” His kisses traced a path down my spine, making me arch against him.

The sky was beginning to think about lightening when I finally slipped back into the driver’s seat.

Having sex in a car was both better and worse than I’d imagined. My body felt like it had been through a particularly pleasant industrial accident — every muscle aching in the best possible way.

I drove back to my parents’ house on autopilot, parked, and crept inside like a cat burglar. Shower, scrub away the scent of him and the night, collapse into my childhood bed.

Three hours later, my alarm went off.

I stared at the ceiling, eyes gritty, dark circles probably deep enough to plant potatoes in. But staying in bed felt like admitting defeat. I hauled myself upright.

In the kitchen, the smell of toast and coffee was both comforting and faintly nauseating.

“Hyacinth, what time did you finally roll in last night?” Mum asked, sliding a plate toward me. Her tone was light, but her eyes were radar dishes.

“Just after twelve,” I said, layering butter with intense concentration. A safe lie. They were usually asleep by half ten.

“Oh,” she said, in that way that meant she absolutely did not believe me but was choosing her battlefield. She passed me the jam. “You said you were staying for a bit. Will you be home for dinner tonight?”

“Tonight.” I pretended to think. “Might have to work late. Big project.” I took a huge bite of toast to avoid elaborating.

I could see the faint disappointment cross her face, quickly masked. “Friday, then? You must be free Friday.”

“Friday, Portia’s dragging me to some charity gala thing. A ball. Sorry.”

I knew exactly where she was going with this conversation and was very determined not to go there. I’d already bought and wrapped my gift for Andre — I didn’t have to be personally present for the celebratory dinner.

“Well, Saturday. Surely you’re not working through the weekend.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 492

Chapter 492:

“Saturday — actually, I might have to go on a business trip. Frankfurt.”

“Let me get this straight. You have a party on Friday. And a sudden business trip on Saturday.”

I gave her my most innocent, wide-eyed look — the one that never worked. “The corporate world, Mum. It’s a whirlwind.”

“This Frankfurt trip. You’re going with Mr Hastings.”

I concentrated very hard on my coffee, taking a scalding sip. “Mmm-hmm.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Of course not. There’ll be other people from the office. A whole delegation.”

“Is it absolutely necessary for you to go?”

“Mum, I’m his Director. His right-hand woman. It’s literally in my job description to be right there, handing him things.”

“Hyacinth.” She hesitated, twisting her napkin. “Maybe it’s time to think about a different job. You spend all day — and now it seems all night and half of Europe — with this man. It’s a situation waiting to happen.”

The situation has already happened, unpacked its bags, and fogged up my car windows, I thought.

Out loud, I said, “It won’t. I’ve got it under control.”

I scarfed down the rest of my oatmeal and egg like I was in a competitive eating contest, then fled to my room to change. I think I heard her sigh all the way from the kitchen. The sound of maternal disappointment is remarkably penetrating.

A few minutes later, armed with my bag and a fresh layer of emotional armour, I opened the front door to leave for work.

And nearly walked straight into a man standing on our doorstep.

He was middle-aged, dressed in a tasteful pale sage shirt and trousers that screamed quiet money, one hand raised mid-air as if to knock.

I stared.

What on earth was Aaron Lockwood doing at my parents’ house? Had he taken a wrong turn on his way to a garden centre?

His face lit up with a warmth that seemed both genuine and slightly too much for eight in the morning. “Hyacinth! What a delightful surprise.”

I fixed a polite, rigid smile on my face. “Mr Lockwood. Good morning.”

“I was hoping to see your mother. After our chat the other day, so many memories came flooding back. Jenny was always so—”

“Jenna,” I corrected, my smile straining. “My mother’s name is Jenna.”

He looked momentarily flustered, patting his pockets as if the correct name might be in there somewhere. “Of course, of course. Jenna. Terrible memory these days. A sign of the times, I’m afraid.”

I was deeply confused. The man couldn’t even remember her name correctly — hardly the hallmark of a decades-old friendship. So what was he doing here?

Behind me, I heard the kitchen door swing open.

“Mr Lockwood!”

“Jenna,” he said, turning the full beam of his sentimental charm on her. He presented the gift bag he was holding. “I was in the neighbourhood, heard you lived here, and thought I’d pop in on the off-chance. I hope it’s not an imposition.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 493

Chapter 493:

Mum’s entire body had gone stiff. But her social smile — the one she reserved for difficult clients and door-to-door evangelists — snapped into place. She took the bag without looking at it. “Not at all, what a lovely surprise. Please, come in.” She shot a look at me. “Hyacinth, darling, you’ll be late for work.”

Right. So she wanted me to leave her alone with the vague, romantically inclined, name-forgetting man who had a reputation for cheating. Absolutely nothing strange about that.

“It’s fine,” I said, not moving. “I can let the office know I’ll be a bit late.”

“No, really, you mustn’t keep Mr Hastings waiting.” She made a subtle shooing motion with her hand.

The more she tried to get rid of me, the louder my internal alarm bells clanged.

I pulled out my phone and dialled, my eyes locked on the peculiar little tableau on the doorstep.

Lochlan answered on the second ring.

“Sorry, boss, I’m going to be a little late. We have a guest at the house.”

“A guest.” His voice cooled by several degrees. “Who? Andre Higgins?”

“No. It’s not Andre.”

“Then who is it?”

“It’s Mr Lockwood.”

A long, dead pause followed on the other end of the line. I could almost hear the cogs turning.

“Who?” he finally asked, as though he’d misheard.

“Mr Aaron Lockwood,” I repeated.

“He’s there to see you?”

“He’s an old acquaintance of my mother’s, I think.”

Though even as I said it, the logic strained. Aaron Lockwood, with his Manchester money and his very particular social circle, being chummy with my suburban London mum?

“Right. I see.” His tone suggested he saw a great deal — none of it good. “Keep me posted.”

I hung up, pasted on a hostess smile, and helped usher the unexpected guest into the living room.

He smiled at my mother. “That was Lochlan on the phone, I presume?”

“Yes, he’s Hyacinth’s boss,” Mum said.

Aaron’s smile deepened, turning conspiratorial. “Ah, but surely he’s more than just—”

“Would you like tea, Mr Lockwood?” I cut in, my voice like a cleaver. “How have you been? Are you in London for long? When is Desmond back from Australia? Is your wife enjoying her stay?”

He settled into Dad’s armchair with a wistful look. “Desmond returns next week. I was meant to go back to Manchester last Saturday, but Gloria has some affairs to attend to here. And I — found I wished to linger a few days more.”

He said this last part looking directly at me, and a cold, slimy feeling slithered down my spine.

“Hyacinth, love, go and put the kettle on,” Mum said.

“Right. Yes. Kettle.” I fled to the kitchen, wishing desperately I could leave my ears behind in the living room, tuned and recording.

I made the tea at record speed, sloshing water everywhere, desperate to return before I missed something crucial.

“Hyacinth,” Aaron began as I came back, placing a cup before him with a clatter. His gaze shifted to my mother as if seeking permission. “Might I ask what year you were born?”

Mum answered for him.

“Ah.” He nodded slowly, as if confirming a profound theory. “And the month?”

“April.”

“April,” he repeated, drawing the word out into a sigh of deep significance.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 494

Chapter 494:

“Why do you ask, Mr Lockwood?” Mum’s voice was steady, but I could see the pulse fluttering at her throat.

Aaron just looked wistful, lost in some private archive of memory.

I looked at him, then looked at my mother.

Oh, god. A horrific, soap-opera-worthy idea slammed into me.

Did Aaron Lockwood think I was his secret love child?

No — that didn't fit the you look like my dead wife angle.

Unless his dead wife had looked like my mother? Was this some twisted you remind me of my lost love scenario? Was he here for me or for Mum?

The doorbell chimed — a cheerful sound that felt violently out of place.

I moved like an automaton to answer it.

On the step stood Rhonda Higgins, resplendent in a floral explosion that could have caused seizures, and beside her, Andre.

"Hyacinth, pet! You are home!" Rhonda boomed. "What a lovely surprise!"

Andre gave me a curt nod. "Morning, Hyacinth. Mum said Aunt Jenna has been experiencing dizziness. I've come to check on her."

"Oh, thank you. Do come in." I stepped back.

Rhonda swept in with Andre in her wake. They stopped short at the sight of Aaron Lockwood.

"Jenna, love, you didn't say you had company!" Rhonda boomed, her eyes performing a rapid, appreciative scan of Aaron's obviously expensive, understated clothes.

"Good morning," Aaron said.

Rhonda greeted him with the warmth usually reserved for a winning lottery ticket and immediately began the not-so-subtle excavation. "And you are — ? I don't believe we've had the pleasure, have we?"

"This is Mr Lockwood. An old — friend." The hesitation in my mother's voice was louder than anything Rhonda could have managed.

I could relate entirely. Old friend who? was buzzing in my own head.

I slunk onto the sofa, trying to make myself small. The scene was surreal. Rhonda kept shooting my mother frantic, eyebrow-waggling looks that screamed Explain! Now! Aaron, meanwhile, was the picture of relaxed affability, turning his charm on Andre with polite questions, possessed of the serene confidence of a man who has never had to hurry for anything in his life. Andre, to his credit, answered in his usual brusque, factual way, utterly unimpressed.

I checked my watch. A solid twenty minutes had trickled by in this special purgatory. When would it end? Should I fake a fire?

As if in answer to my desperate internal plea, the doorbell rang again. A profound silence fell over the room. Every head swivelled toward the hall.

I sprang up. “I’ll get it.”

I opened the door. Lochlan stood there, looking impossibly tall and out of place on our floral welcome mat. Over his shoulder, I could see Roy giving me a nod from beside the car.

“Morning, Hyacinth,” Lochlan said, his tone deceptively mild.

I summoned a smile. “Morning, boss. Come in.”

He stepped inside and took in the living room scene with a single, sweeping glance. His eyebrows lifted a fraction at the sight of Andre.

“Lochlan, my boy!” Aaron Lockwood called out, beaming. “Over here, join me.”

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Chapter 495:

Rhonda’s eyes bugged out so far I feared they might roll onto the carpet. Her gaze ping-ponged between Lochlan and Aaron, frantically trying to compute the connection.

Lochlan moved to sit, his posture rigidly polite.

“Right! I’ll just go and make more tea,” I announced, already backing toward the kitchen.

I didn’t make it. The front door, which I’d foolishly left ajar, swung open again.

My father’s voice, unusually grumpy, floated in. “I said I’m fine! You didn’t need to see me home — I’m not an invalid.”

Another voice, lower and stubborn. “You’ve twisted your ankle, Jeremy. You shouldn’t be walking on it alone.”

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“Fine, but I’m home now, so you can go.”

“You need to ice it immediately or it’ll swell.”

I froze. My entire being went numb.

I knew that second voice. I knew the particular, commanding tone of it, even when it was pretending to be helpful.

Into the hallway hobbled my father, his face a picture of irritated discomfort. And right behind him — one hand hovering near Dad's elbow as though poised to catch him — was Cary Grant.

They both stopped dead at the sight of the packed living room. Dad's eyes widened, travelling from Rhonda to Andre to Lochlan, and finally settling on Aaron Lockwood with complete bewilderment.

Cary's gaze locked directly onto me. "Hello, Hyacinth."

I didn't even have the energy for a fake smile. I gave a faint, shell-shocked nod.

Lochlan's voice cut through the stunned silence. "Morning, Mr Grant."

Cary's eyes shifted to him, a flicker of old arrogance surfacing. "Hastings. What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"Uncle Jeremy twisted his ankle at the garden centre," Cary said, emphasising the Uncle as though he had a right to it. "I was passing by and lent a hand."

"I didn't realise you were a gardening enthusiast," Lochlan mused.

"I'm not. I was reviewing floral arrangements for the wedding."

During this bristling exchange, Aaron Lockwood leaned toward my mother and asked in a carrying whisper, "And this gentleman is? He looks rather familiar."

My mother looked as though she wanted the sofa to swallow her whole. "That's Mr Cary Grant. He's — an old acquaintance."

Rhonda Higgins clapped her hands. "Right! Jenna, ducky, we'll pop by another time, shall we?" She yanked Andre to his feet, who had been professionally assessing Dad's ankle and concluded, "It's a mild sprain. Rest it. Ice. No hospital needed."

As he stood, his gaze found me and he gave me a nod. I managed a weak, wobbly smile. "Thanks for coming. Sorry — I don't think I'll make that dinner."

"Another time, then. We could do dinner. A film. Whatever you'd like."

Before I could muster a polite but non-committal reply, Cary Grant cut in.

“Save your breath, Doctor. She’s not interested in you. She’s already sleeping with her boss.”

The words didn’t so much land as detonate.

A stunned, reverberating silence lasted half a second. Then chaos erupted.

“Cary!” I snarled. “Shut your mouth right now!”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” he shot back. “Why hide it? It’s written all over both of you.”

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 496

Chapter 496:

Andre’s head swivelled from Cary to me, his eyes sharpening into a surgeon’s focused intensity. “Hyacinth. Is that true?”

My mother gasped, a hand flying to her chest. “Hyacinth? What is he saying?”

My father, still leaning on his bad ankle, looked utterly bewildered. “With Mr Hastings?”

I saw Lochlan stand up from the sofa. He opened his mouth.

“Don’t you dare,” I barked at him, throwing a hand up in his direction like a traffic officer.

“Well, I never!” Rhonda Higgins boomed. “What a thing to say! But I thought you and my Andre could give it a proper try, didn’t I? Who is this boss man, Hyacinth? Is it true? Is it serious? Is there no chance for my poor, brilliant boy? He’s been pining for years, he has—”

“Mum. Please.” Andre’s voice was tight. His eyes never left mine, demanding an answer.

I looked away.

“Jeremy, do you hear this?” my mother cried, turning to my father, her face pale.

“I hear a lot of shouting is what I hear!” Dad yelled back, confused and angry, his head swivelling between all the players. “Will someone explain what’s—”

“It’s quite simple,” Cary interjected, his voice rising above the din. “Your daughter is—”
“Shut up!”

I crossed the space between us in two quick strides, planted my hands squarely on his chest, and shoved with all my strength.

“Get. Out.”

He was taller and heavier, but he was unprepared. He stumbled backwards, hitting the front door with a solid thud. I didn’t give him a second to recover. I yanked the door open and shoved again.

“Go. Now. And don’t you ever come back here.”

He stared at me for a long, charged moment, old bitterness and stung pride flashing in his eyes. Then, without another word, he turned on his heel and walked out.

I slammed the door shut with a force that made the walls shudder.

I could feel four sets of eyes burning into my back — my parents’ dawning horror and confusion, Andre’s grim, patient inquiry, and Lochlan’s heavy, waiting silence.

Lochlan was the first to recover. He adjusted his cuff. “I should take my leave. This is a family matter. Jeremy, Jenna, my apologies for the disruption.”

He caught Aaron Lockwood’s eye. Aaron hastily chimed in. “Yes, yes, of course. Another time, perhaps.”

Andre finally broke his stare. He took his mother’s arm firmly. “Come on, Mum. We’ll check on Aunt Jenna’s dizziness another time.”

“But, Andre, lamb, we need to—” Rhonda tried.

“Now, Mum.”

The door clicked shut.

Then there were three. Just me, Mum, and Dad in the wreckage of our living room, surrounded by half-drunk tea and shattered normalcy.

My mother sank into a chair, her face ashen. “Hyacinth, love — is what that horrible man said — is it true? Are you and Mr Hastings—” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

Dad hobbled over and put a hand on her shoulder, his brow deeply furrowed. “But I thought you were done with all that, sweetheart. The rich blokes. The flashy types. You said it was all nonsense after Cary.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 497

Chapter 497:

I stood there feeling about sixteen years old and caught coming in after curfew. I didn’t know what to say. Denying it felt pathetic. Confirming it felt like opening a door I wanted to keep firmly bolted.

So I did the only thing I could think of: I pivoted.

“What’s the story with you and Aaron Lockwood, Mum? ‘Old friends’ from where, exactly? He was asking pointed questions about my birthday. That’s not normal nostalgia.”

My mother’s eyes widened, then darted away. My parents shared one of those married-people looks — a silent, uneasy conversation passing between them in an instant.

“Hyacinth, this isn’t about me,” she deflected.

“It is now,” I insisted, crossing my arms. “Because it looks for all the world like you and Aaron Lockwood go way back — a way back I didn’t even know existed. So what is it? Did you used to babysit him? Was he your paperboy?”

I turned to my father. “Dad, do you know anything about this Mr Lockwood?”

He looked at Mum, who looked at the carpet.

Eventually, with a sigh that seemed to come from her shoes, my mother spoke.

“I didn’t know him. Not really.” She paused, choosing her words with obvious care. “It’s your Grandma Alison — she worked for the Lockwood family. For many years. As their live-in housekeeper. When I was a little girl, for a little while, I lived with her at the Lockwood estate. That’s all.”

I thought Grandma Alison had lived in Mousehole her whole life. “So you were — what? Childhood playmates?”

She shot me a sharp, almost offended look. “Don’t be ridiculous, Hyacinth. The children of the help do not play with the young masters of the house. We existed in parallel. He was just someone I’d see in the gardens, or in the big house from a distance. That’s all there is to it.”

“Then why the nostalgic visit?” I pressed, not buying a word of it. “Why the intense curiosity about my birthdate? That’s weirdly specific, Mum.”

“How should I know?” she said, clattering the china together. “The man is sentimental. Maybe he’s lonely and remembering a simpler time.”

She stood up and waved a hand at me. “Now, you’re going to be terribly late for work. Go. Your father needs to ice this ankle, and I need to clean up this mess.” She shooed me toward the door, her body language closing the subject as firmly as I’d slammed the door on Cary.

I went — but my mind was a riot. Her story had the ring of truth, yet it felt like a cover. She was holding something back.

As I got into my car, I thought about calling Grandma Alison.

She loved a good gossip and had a memory like a steel trap. She’d know the real story. But would she tell me? Or was this one of those family secrets everyone had agreed to bury?

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 498

Chapter 498:

As I turned out of my parents' street, a glint of silver caught my eye. A sleek, anonymous-looking sedan was parked a few houses down, familiar in that vague, expensive way. Its windows were tinted to oblivion, giving nothing away. Probably nothing. I pushed it out of my mind.

Given the complete train wreck my morning had been, and the fact I was already catastrophically late, I figured another half hour wouldn't tip the scales from fired to merely crucified.

I drove straight to a 24-hour jet wash, shoved a small fortune in coins into the machine, and gave my poor Fiat the most thorough, vigorous, almost punitive scrubbing of its life. No one needed to know what those seats had witnessed just a few hours before dawn.

I slunk into the Velos office tower well past ten, aiming for a stealthy entrance. But my chair hadn't even had time to feel warm before the internal line on my desk buzzed.

"Could you come in here for a moment, please."

I grabbed an iPad and headed for the CEO's office. "Sorry I'm late. It was an unusual morning."

"What was Aaron Lockwood doing at your house?" Lochlan asked, getting straight to the point.

"I have no idea," I said, which was mostly true. "He just showed up. Said he was in the neighbourhood."

"Didn't you ask your parents?"

"I did. They got evasive. You know how parents are — all oh, old times and just being friendly. But if you're so curious, you should ask Aaron Lockwood yourself. I'm sure he'd love to tell you. And once you know, maybe you wouldn't mind sharing it with me?"

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Great. Thanks."

"And Cary Grant?"

I sighed. "What about him? From what I could gather in the five seconds before World War Three broke out, Dad twisted his ankle and Cary played Good Samaritan. That's it."

"I wasn't aware he maintained contact with your family after the divorce."

"Neither was I. I think it was just a weird coincidence."

“A curious coincidence,” Lochlan mused, leaning back. “Given that Cary’s primary residence and your parents’ house are on opposite sides of London. And for him to visit a suburban garden centre is — out of character.”

“He said he was there to look at floral arrangements. For his wedding.”

I thought briefly of my own non-wedding to Cary — no banquet, no party, no fuss, just a registrar’s office and two signatures. The fact that he was now personally deliberating over centrepieces for Dr Liz Forbes — did that mean she was the real thing?

Lochlan watched me. “The wedding, from what I hear, is being pushed back.”

That got my attention. “Pushed back? Why?”

“The details are unclear. You didn’t know?”

I threw my hands up. “How would I know? I don’t have him on a GPS tracker. If you’re so fascinated by his social calendar, maybe you should ask him yourself.”

“I have.”

“Really? You talked to him?”

“Indirectly. Certain channels keep one informed.”

I couldn’t help a snort. “I didn’t take you for a gossip hound.”

“I don’t actively gossip,” he corrected. “But it’s prudent to keep your ear to the ground. To understand the landscape.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 499

Chapter 499:

“Right, right. Corporate intelligence. So, what’s the word on the street, oh mighty oracle?”

“The rumour is that Cary’s mother is having second thoughts about his engagement to Dr Forbes. She may have another candidate in mind — one she deems more suitable.”

I rolled my eyes. “Typical Tanya. She won’t stop meddling until the day they nail her coffin shut. Let me guess — Vanessa Abrams again? Has she escaped from the loony bin?”

“No, not Miss Abrams.”

“Who, then?”

“That is the part the rumour mill hasn’t yet clarified.”

“And how is the blushing bride-to-be handling all this? Is she storming the Grant family manor demanding an explanation?”

“Dr Forbes is currently delivering a keynote address at a medical symposium in Zurich. She’s due back next week.”

“Career first. Good for her. Let’s see if she makes it back in time for her own maybe-wedding.”

There was a pause. Lochlan studied me. “And how are you feeling about all this?”

“About what?”

“About Cary. The postponed wedding. The possibility it may not happen at all.”

I stared at him. Was he serious? “That is categorically none of my business. Why — are you jealous because he showed up at my parents’ house?”

“Do I have a reason to be?”

“No. Cary is in my past. I’ve moved on.”

“Good to hear.” He nodded, then went in for the kill. “In that case, why were you so reluctant to let your parents know you have moved on — specifically, with me?”

I pointed a finger at him. “Ah ha! There it is. I knew you were circling back to that.”

“And will I get an answer?”

I stared at him. He stared back.

“Fine. I didn’t want them to know about us. Yet.”

“May I ask why?”

“It’s too soon.”

“It’s been almost a year since your divorce was finalised.”

“It’s not about the calendar. It’s about — you. On paper, you are dangerously similar to Cary Grant. And before you give me that look, I know you’re nothing like him. You’re different. But my parents don’t know that. All they see is another wealthy, powerful man from a world they don’t understand, who could hurt their daughter all over again.”

Lochlan opened his mouth, but I beat him to it.

“Did you know my mother told me she’d rather I run off with Portia and take up lesbianism than date another quote-unquote ‘posh billionaire bastard’?”

A flicker of surprise crossed his face. “I — did not know that.”

“Well, now you do. So you’ll understand why I’m not rushing to make announcements.”

Besides, I wasn’t sure this thing between us would last long enough to warrant an announcement, I added silently.

“Did you call me in here just to gossip?” I deflected.

“No.” He picked up a thick folder from his desk. “Could you take this down to Spencer Fields in Operations?”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 500

Chapter 500:

I stepped forward. My fingers had just closed on the cardboard edge when he gave it a gentle tug. I stumbled half a step, brought within inches of him. We were standing so close I could see the tiny mole beneath the outer corner of his left eye and the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw.

For some reason, unshaven Lochlan always jolted my libido more than the clean-cut version. Kissing his stubbled chin was one of my secret fetishes I'd never tell him about.

I looked away with difficulty. "It's the middle of the workday. We've talked about this. There are rules."

He tugged again until our heads were nearly touching. "Come to my place tonight."

"But I—"

"To see the kitten. You haven't visited in days. He misses you."

He'd taken the little furball home — with great reluctance — after I convinced him that a staffed penthouse was better for the kitten than my often-empty one.

"I can visit the kitten." My eyes dropped to his mouth. "But I'm not staying over."

"Is that what you think this is about?"

"I think it's a significant factor."

"And you're opposed?"

"I'm still recovering from the last rigorous workout."

"It doesn't have to be so strenuous," he said, and outlined a few creative and decidedly less athletic alternatives, some involving props.

My eyes widened. "Where did you learn that? I thought you were a — a—"

"A prude?"

"Not the word I'd use. But — well, yes."

Lochlan was usually so well-spoken and impeccably polite that hearing him talk like this left me genuinely stunned. "You were mistaken."

"Clearly. But the answer's still no." I shook my head, trying to clear the dizzying images he'd just put there. "I'm not having sex with you in a house buzzing with a housekeeper, a cook, and a small army of staff."

"I can give them the night off."

"No, thank you. I'll say hello to the cat. The rest of the evening's entertainment is cancelled."

I leaned in, pressed a quick, hard kiss to his lips — savouring the taste — then yanked the folder from his grip and bolted from the room.

As the lift doors opened, I smoothed my face into something neutral and walked into the domain of Spencer Fields.

I found him in his corner office, a space that tried desperately and failed miserably to project power. It was all dark polished wood, overstuffed leather chairs, and sporting memorabilia. Spencer didn't even play sports.

The man himself fit the décor perfectly — a big man, built like a retired rugby player who had retained the appetite but not the metabolism, with a florid, hearty face that clashed with his meticulously trimmed silver hair.

“Ah, Hyacinth! They send the best down, do they?” he boomed, taking the folder from me with a patronising grin that didn't bother travelling as far as his eyes.

He didn't thank me or offer me a seat.

I'd been promoted from CAO to Director. But to this man, I was still a secretary.

I forced a smile from between clenched teeth. “Mr Hastings asked me to bring this to you personally.”

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