

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 501

Chapter 501:

He flipped open the folder. “Ah, yes — the joint venture with the Humphrey Group. Big, traditional player. I have lunch with their chairman every month, you know. I’d like to introduce you.”

I said nothing and waited.

As expected, he carried on: “Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot — the club is men only, no girls allowed. You know how it is.” He spread his hands in a helpless gesture.

As if I’d buy that. I nodded and smiled and internally cursed the man.

He wasn’t even a committed misogynist — he simply hated me because he believed I’d gotten the director’s job by sleeping with the boss. I was sorely tempted to say: Well, if you think Lochlan promoted me over you, why don’t you have the guts to confront him instead of playing passive-aggressive games with me?

He glanced me up and down with a leer. “You know, Hyacinth, I think you’d be a big help to us in the joint venture.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“The JV is still in its early stages. There’s a lot of back-and-forth to hammer out the details.” He waved a hand as if to spare me the minutiae. “I was thinking you could make an excellent liaison with the Humphrey Group.”

I was surprised he was actually offering to work with me. Not that I needed it — technically, he was not my superior. I was his. But it was a sudden offering of an olive branch.

Nice. But also suspicious.

“I’m sure that would be an interesting opportunity, Spencer.” I always made a point of using his first name. “But my plate’s rather full right now. Besides, once the discussions reach their final stage and the actual work begins, it will reach my department naturally. As you know, I’m in charge of mergers and acquisitions.”

“Yes, yes, I’m aware.” Spencer sounded incredibly sour even when he tried to hide it. “But since you’ll be involved later on, why not get a head start?”

I grew more curious by the second. Where was he going with this? “Why me?”

“You’re terrific with the — ah — interpersonal side of things. A smooth operator. I’m sure you’d keep everyone playing nicely.”

Interpersonal side of things. Code for: you’re decorative and chatty, not a serious corporate player. You have a nice smile and the right assets for schmoozing.

Out loud, I said, “That’s very kind of you to say, but my dance card is rather full with the Petrocon filing. I’m sure you can find someone from Legal or Comms who’d be better suited.”

“But you’re uniquely suited. The liaison on their side is someone you know.” His expression carried a studied casualness I didn’t trust for a second. “You worked with her before, in Singapore.”

I had a sinking feeling — confirmed the very next instant.

“It’s Jaclyn Lemon. I’m sure she’d appreciate a familiar, friendly face.”

“Her father sits on the Humphrey board,” Spencer continued, watching my face like a fat hawk. “She has considerable influence. Maintaining a positive working relationship with her will be crucial for Velos. I trust that won’t be a problem?”

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The gauntlet was thrown. I could refuse, look scared, and confirm every not-up-to-it assumption he held. Or —

“Well, when you put it like that, how can I refuse? It does sound important.” I took a step closer to his desk. “Of course, acting as primary liaison for a venture of this potential scale will require dedicated resources.”

He opened his mouth, but I didn't give him the chance. "I'll need an expanded discretionary budget for client relations. And I'll be pulling two analysts from your pool to support the data side full-time. I assume you can fast-track those approvals, since you're so keen for me to start?"

His smile faltered for a nanosecond. "Well, I — the budget is rather tight this quarter, and the analysts—"

"Spencer," I said, leaning slightly on his desk — a power move I'd learned from Cary. "If this partnership is as valuable as you say, and if my interpersonal skills are the key to unlocking it with Jaclyn, then surely the investment is worth it? Unless you think we can risk the venture on a shoestring and a junior secretary?"

We haggled. He pushed. I pushed back. It was a brief, tense little skirmish. In the end, with palpable reluctance, he agreed.

As I turned to leave, he couldn't resist one final venomous dart.

"You know, Hyacinth—" His voice oozed false sympathy. "I only mention this because I consider us colleagues."

I paused, a questioning look on my face.

"There's talk, you see. The Lemon and Hastings families are very old friends. There's always been — an expectation. Of a union. I just thought, giving you this time with Jaclyn — well, it might help you adjust to the future. It's always good to be on friendly terms with the boss's wife, don't you think?"

"That's oddly considerate of you, Spencer. But if I were you, I'd worry less about the boss's future wife and more about the boss's current director. She's just secured a bigger budget and two of your best analysts. Have a lovely day."

I closed the door behind me.

The instant I was back on the executive floor, Kai materialised at my elbow. "I just heard. Jaclyn Lemon. She's coming to work at Velos."

"Your intel is slightly off. She's working with Velos, not for it — on the Humphrey Group joint venture." I relayed the bare bones of Spencer's little setup.

Kai looked worried. "You're taking this very calmly."

"I've had half an hour longer to process than you have," I said dryly.

“Hyacinth, I know you and the boss — you have something. But I told you before, he and Jaclyn have history. She never got over him. Now she’s back, and she’ll know about you. She’s going to make things difficult.”

I took a sip of bitter coffee. “Let her.”

“You say that now.”

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Chapter 503:

“I’ll say it then too,” I interrupted. “Look, Kai — she’s nursing a broken heart and a bruised ego. That’s her business. She can try to make trouble. But I’m not a passive spectator in my own life. I don’t do victim.”

I gave his arm a reassuring pat and walked off.

But the subject of Jaclyn Lemon refused to go away.

In the span of a single morning, the rumour mill at Velos Capital achieved warp speed. By lunchtime, it seemed every floor, every water cooler, every sandwich queue was buzzing with the same delicious scandal.

“I heard Mr Hastings’s parents are her actual godparents. They basically already consider her family.”

“The story is, both he and his brother were mad about her, but Lochlan stepped aside. So tragic.”

“Who’s prettier, d’you think? Hyacinth or Jaclyn?”

“Depends on who you ask.”

“So — do we think he’ll ditch the new model and go back to the classic?”

I told myself to ignore it. To keep my head down and do my work.

But the human heart is a rebellious, stupid organ. It doesn’t listen to logic. Every whispered snippet, every sideways glance felt like a tiny paper cut. By the time half five rolled around, the cumulative effect had settled into a dull, pervasive ache in my chest.

The idea of him with her in the past — a shared history I knew nothing about — shouldn't have mattered.

But it did, with a petty, grinding insistence.

I looked at the closed door of his office, imagined a younger Lochlan with a younger Jaclyn, and felt a wave of such pure, irrational annoyance that I grabbed my bag and left without a word.

Back at my flat, I changed into the softest, oldest joggers I owned and was just contemplating whether to drown my sorrows in wine or ice cream when the intercom buzzed.

I took a deep, steadying breath and went to answer it.

Lochlan stepped out of the lift looking unfairly good. "You didn't wait for me," he accused, as though I'd broken a fundamental law.

"My contract stipulates a five-thirty finish. You didn't announce any mandatory overtime." I walked toward the kitchen, needing to put a counter between us.

He followed.

Before I could even think about putting the kettle on, his arms were around me — turning me — and his mouth was on mine. It wasn't a gentle hello. It was a claiming, hungry, fervent kiss that melted my bones and scrambled every coherent, miserable thought in my head.

His hands slid under my top, palms hot against my skin, kneading my waist and pulling me flush against him until I was breathless and clinging to his shoulders.

"I thought we were going to see the kitten," I managed to gasp when he finally let me up for air, my voice shaky.

He chuckled — a low, satisfied sound — and nipped at my lower lip. "We are." He set me back on my feet, took my hand firmly in his, and led me out.

My head was still spinning.

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## Chapter 504

Chapter 504:

We drove to Lonsdale Tower in a comfortable silence, his thumb tracing idle circles against my hand the whole way. It felt possessive. Reassuring. For those twenty minutes, I let myself believe the office gossip was just noise.

Then we walked into his penthouse, and there she was.

Perched on the edge of a cream linen sofa as though she'd been styled for a magazine shoot — a vision of understated wealth and cool composure — was Jaclyn Lemon.

A flash-freeze went through me. All the warmth from the car, from his kiss, was instantly sucked out into the vacuum of space.

Jaclyn's eyes were locked with laser intensity on our joined hands. I could see the effort it took to keep her smile in place. She rose gracefully. "Lochlan, hello. And Hyacinth — so nice to see you. It's been a while." Her voice was smooth, pleasant. Reformed.

"Hello." I tried to pull my hand free.

Lochlan's grip only tightened, his fingers lacing more firmly through mine. "How did you get up here?"

"Your housekeeper was kind enough to let me wait inside."

At that moment, said housekeeper bustled in from the kitchen with a tea tray. "Oh, Mr Hastings, sir — Ms Lemon said she had an urgent delivery for you. I hope it's all right that I let her in."

Jaclyn produced a thick, cream envelope from her bag. "I was just in the neighbourhood and wanted to drop this off personally. An invitation to Papa's birthday. I know you said you'd come, but he insisted on the formal card. Tradition, you know."

Lochlan took the envelope with his free hand. "There was no need. My attendance was confirmed."

"I know. But Papa appreciates the ritual." She clasped her hands demurely. "He also asked me to convey that he'd like you to come for tea before the party. He says you've become a stranger — don't just show up for the cake and champagne."

"I'll check my schedule," Lochlan said, non-committally.

"Please do. Oh, there's one more thing." She glanced at me with a smile. "My parents have suggested that at my age, I should try independent living. So I've taken a unit here in the tower, a few floors down. It's so much closer to the Humphrey Group offices. I do hope that won't be — awkward for you." Her eyes flicked to me again, and this time the polite mask slipped just enough to reveal a glint of sharp, challenging curiosity. "I hope you'll be fine with it?"

Oh, I'm fine. I'm absolutely dandy. My boss's ex — whom his mother loves, who is now my colleague — has just moved into his building. What's not to love?

Out loud, I kept my tone light. "If Mr Hastings has no objection, then it's hardly my place to have one."

Lochlan's brow furrowed slightly. He looked down at me, his pale eyes searching my face, which gave nothing away. Then he looked back at Jaclyn. "You're free to live wherever you choose. It's not my business."

Jaclyn's smile gained a fraction more warmth — a hint of victory.

A wave of disappointment washed over me.

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Then Lochlan raised his voice, addressing the housekeeper. "Mrs Ainsley, could you please pack a bag for me? I'm going to stay at Hyacinth's place for a while."

You are? I stared at him.

He stared back. "I am."

Jaclyn's smile disappeared. It migrated to Lochlan's face. "I'm free to live wherever I choose. That is, if you don't object."

"Well, it's fine, I suppose. You do own the place. But where are you going to sleep? I've sort of given the guest room to Portia — told her she can come and stay whenever she likes. But I guess now that she's shacking up with Josh, she won't need the room anymore."

"It's fine. Leave the guest room for her. I'll just stay with you."

"What, in the master bedroom?"

“Yes, in the master bedroom.”

“But—”

Lochlan had been gently steering me past the living room and down the hallway, pointedly ignoring Jaclyn, who stood rooted to the spot. For a man of his manners to ignore a guest in his own home — not even bothering to say goodbye — was beyond rude. I kind of loved him for it.

We hadn’t gone far when a little ball of fluff came careening around the corner. In just a few days, the kitten had plumped up noticeably, its stubby legs making it look as though it were hopping like a bunny when it believed it was sprinting. It skidded to a stop at our feet, looked up with enormous eyes, and let out a tiny, demanding mew.

I was still processing the moving in bomb, but the sheer cuteness was a potent distraction. Warm breath brushed my ear as Lochlan leaned close. “See? I told you he missed you.”

The kitten mewed again and tilted its head, gazing up at me with blatant adoration.

My heart melted instantly. I sank into a crouch and extended a hand. “Here, kitty kitty.”

The little creature butted its head against my fingers, purring like a miniature engine.

“He still needs a name,” Lochlan said, crouching beside me, his shoulder brushing mine. “You should choose one.”

I considered the fluffy body, the round belly, the general air of edible softness. “He’s all plump and doughy, with that little white tummy. Let’s call him Custard. Like a custard bun.”

Lochlan was silent for a long moment. I turned my head. “What? You don’t like it?”

He shook his head slowly. “No — it’s perfect. It’s a brilliant name.” He reached around me, his hand covering mine as we both petted the newly christened Custard. “You hear that? You’re Custard now.”

The kitten meowed his approval.

A voice sliced through the peace. “He’s so precious. But I never thought you’d be one for pets, Lochlan. You were always so fastidious.”

I rose and turned.

Jaclyn stood a few feet away, her smile back in place, though her eyes — as they flicked to the kitten in my arms — were cool.

“Jaclyn,” Lochlan said without looking up. “Your habit of assuming you know everything about me has always been your Achilles’ heel. I’d work on that.”

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## Chapter 506

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A flash of something raw, wounded, and furious crossed her face.

“Hyacinth,” Jaclyn tried again. “I was wondering if you might be free tomorrow. I’ve been away from Mayfair for so long, everything feels unfamiliar. Would you be willing to show me around? Do a little shopping?”

Her mouth said: Pretty please.

Her eyes said: Go on — I dare you to accept.

I met her eyes with a bright, vacant smile. “Of course. That sounds lovely.”

“Splendid! Oh, and I brought you a little something.” She gestured toward the living room.

“How thoughtful — you really shouldn’t have.” I set Custard down, his little needle-claws catching on my tights, and followed her. Back on the sofa, she produced a small robin’s-egg blue box from her bag. Inside was a pair of exquisite, delicate drop earrings. Diamonds and platinum, no doubt. They were tasteful, expensive, and utterly not my style.

“I adore them,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Here, let me help you put them on,” she offered, shifting closer.

Her perfume invaded my airspace. I let her do it, half on the lookout in case she tried to strangle me with the chain.

“Dinner’s served!” Mrs Ainsley announced from the dining room doorway, looking slightly ill at ease. “Sorry, sir — I didn’t know you’d be entertaining tonight. Shall I set an extra place?”

I looked up. Lochlan was standing in the hallway doorway, holding a squirming Custard in his arms like a furry football. He looked pointedly at Jaclyn, who didn’t take the hint.

“I’m starving,” she declared, pressing a hand to her flat, Pilates-honed stomach. “I’ve been running all around town delivering invitations. Daddy does so love his paper invites — terribly old-fashioned.”

I looked at Lochlan. He looked back.

His pale eyes said, quite clearly: Shall I get rid of her?

My eyes replied, with a shrug I hoped was possible to convey via eyebrow: It’s your house and your ex. Your decision.

The decision was taken out of his hands when Mrs Ainsley bustled up to Jaclyn and said, “I do hope you like jellied eels, Ms Lemon. It’s the chef’s special tonight.”

“Oh, I love them,” Jaclyn trilled, with the conviction of someone who had probably never let the gelatinous stuff pass her lips. She turned to Lochlan. “I hope I won’t be intruding?”

Lochlan — damn it, this was the moment when I most hated his compulsively, pathologically good manners — shifted Custard in his arms. “It’s fine.”

So the three of us sat down for dinner.

Lochlan pulled out my chair. Then, after a nanosecond of hesitation that I alone probably noticed, he pulled out Jaclyn’s.

I watched from the corner of my eye, smoothing the heavy linen napkin across my lap. There was no denying that a sour, ungenerous part of me curdled.

Lochlan was raised to be a gentleman — I knew that — but did he have to be so damned polite to a fault? Couldn’t he have been, just once, for me, a tiny bit of an arse?

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Part of me couldn't help wondering what Cary would have done if one of his exes had invited herself to his house and attempted to cadge a dinner invitation. His answer — if he hadn't already had security throw her out onto the pavement — would most likely have begun with one word and ended with another, and neither would have been printable. There was a brutal simplicity to it that I sometimes missed.

As I moved my head, I felt the gentle sway of the drop earrings.

You idiot, they seemed to whisper with every swing. You've accepted a bribe from the enemy. And now you have to wear the damn things or look churlish.

A man in full livery — I swear he materialised out of thin air like a Jeeves ghost — poured wine for us. Lochlan nodded his thanks but didn't touch his glass.

Jaclyn swirled her ruby-red drink. "So, tell me about working at Velos Capital, Hyacinth. What's it like?"

I took a slow sip of water. "It's fine."

"It's impressive," she pressed on. "How you've adapted to the Velos world. Not everyone could keep up with the pace here — or with Lochlan."

"Hyacinth isn't keeping up with anyone, Jaclyn," Lochlan interjected. "She's in her own league. On every level."

Jaclyn's smile tightened at the corners. "Oh." She recovered by turning her blade on me again. "Well, we'll be working together soon. I do hope you'll show me the ropes."

I gave her a smile that showed just a fraction too much teeth. "Oh, I'm sure you don't need me to show you anything. You used to be the head of the Singapore company, after all. Surely you know the ropes."

Jaclyn offered a self-deprecating little laugh. "But I made a mess of it, didn't I?" She looked directly at Lochlan, her eyes wide and — I had to admit — artfully remorseful. "I was hoping we could start afresh. In terms of working together, I mean. I know I've made plenty of mistakes, but I'd like — I'd like a chance to prove I've changed."

Lochlan finally looked up, his frown minimal but present. "What do you mean, you and Hyacinth are working together?"

Jaclyn raised one eyebrow. “Didn’t you know? Hyacinth and I will be working together on the joint venture between the Humphrey Group and your company. Spencer Fields arranged it.”

Lochlan’s gaze swung to me. “Is that true?”

I nodded, the earrings swinging. “Spencer set it up. He thought my interpersonal skills would be an asset.”

“He should have run it by me,” Lochlan said, his tone dropping a degree.

“Oh — has there been some sort of mix-up?” Jaclyn said. “But I do hope we can work together, Hyacinth. We’re already familiar with each other, and we’re both girls, aren’t we?” She gave a light, comradely laugh.

“I’ll have to think about it,” Lochlan said.

Jaclyn, wisely, chose to retreat and flank. She nodded and gestured toward the dish in the centre of the table — a rich-looking game pie. “Oh, I forgot how much you loved venison, Loch. Did you hunt this yourself?”

I looked at Lochlan. “I didn’t know you hunted.”

“I used to,” he said, meeting my eyes. “I don’t anymore.”

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## Chapter 508

Chapter 508:

Jaclyn wasn’t done mining the nostalgic seam. “Do you remember that summer at Sandringham, Loch? When you and Daddy got so terribly lost after the shoot and came back covered in mud? Mummy was furious, but you charmed her with that story about the pheasant. You’ve always had a way with our parents.”

She turned to me with a smile so sweet it could induce a diabetic coma. “Our families are so terribly intertwined. It’s like a Jane Austen novel, isn’t it? All these connections one simply can’t escape.”

I eyed the gravy boat and fantasised about upending its contents over her expertly highlighted head.

The fantasy was interrupted by a plaintive meow.

I looked down. Custard was winding himself between the chair legs, butting his head softly against my shin and gazing up with huge, hopeful eyes. I bent down to pat him, the earrings swaying with the movement. “Easy, boy. You’ve already had dinner.”

“What a cute kitten,” Jaclyn chirped. “Is it yours, Hyacinth?”

I looked up. Hadn’t she asked this before?

“It’s ours,” Lochlan said.

Jaclyn let out a light, tinkling laugh. “A kitten? Lochlan Hastings — the man who once called my Pekingese a shedding nuisance — is keeping a kitten?” Her eyes swung to me. “My dear, what have you done to him? It must be so rewarding to have such a softening influence. He was always so fiercely focused before. I suppose it’s quite a change of pace.”

“You’re quite wrong. She hasn’t softened me at all. She’s made me far more focused. I now have significantly clearer priorities about what — and who — is worth my time and protection.”

That shut her up for a while.

The rest of dinner proceeded in a kind of glacial politeness. Finally, Jaclyn dabbed her lips with her napkin and declared she really must be going. She thanked Lochlan for dinner with a graciousness that made my teeth ache, then floated toward the door.

But she couldn’t resist a parting shot.

“It’s so convenient, really — my temporary flat being just two floors down in Lonsdale Tower. I do hope I can pop up and pick your brain about the joint venture sometime, Loch. I’m so terribly keen to do a good job this time.”

“I’m afraid I won’t be here,” Lochlan said. “I’ll be staying with Hyacinth.”

“Oh.” She gave an awkward laugh. “Good night, then.”

The door shut with a soft click.

Lochlan turned, leaning back against it, and looked at me. “Right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

I blinked. “Go where?”

“Your place.”

I stared. “I thought you were kidding. That it was just an excuse to keep Jaclyn from planning little neighbourly pop-ins.”

“I don’t like lying.” He pushed off from the door and walked toward me, stopping close enough that I had to tilt my head back to find his face — to find that tiny mole. “I said I’d be staying with you.”

“So you’re really coming to stay with me.”

Panic began a low hum in my veins. This was moving too fast.

“Last I remembered, it was you who reminded me that I own the property.”

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## Chapter 509

Chapter 509:

“But — but you can’t just move into my flat,” I spluttered. “What if my parents show up one day? Besides, there are a dozen other places. I’m sure you’ve got a pied-à-terre on every decent street in Chelsea.”

“I don’t recall purchasing a dozen.”

“Well, there’s the glass house! You could go there. Or you could go back to your parents’ place. Or you could just stay—”

“I could also stay here. Two floors above Jaclyn. And you’d be completely fine with that, would you?”

I looked away, suddenly fascinated by a non-existent flaw in my nail polish. “I didn’t say that. Don’t twist it. You just — you do whatever you think is best.”

I didn’t hear an answer.

“Good night,” I muttered to the floor, and before he could say another word, I snatched my bag from the sideboard and walked out.

The lift doors closed.

I let out a shaky breath and thumped my head against the mirrored wall. “You utter, utter coward,” I told my reflection.

The night stretched on — deep and silent and utterly intolerable.

Back in my own flat, the familiar space felt all wrong. I paced. I made tea and didn’t drink it. I picked up a book and put it down after reading the same paragraph five times without comprehending a word. I was a charged wire, buzzing with a restless, irritable energy.

I kept looking at the foyer, half-expecting, half-dreading to hear the lift doors open.

I took out my phone about forty-seven times, my thumb hovering over his name. What would I say? Sorry I fled the scene of our relationship? Or: Changed my mind — do come over and complicate my entire life?

By ten o’clock, a cold, leaden feeling had settled in my stomach. Three hours had passed. He wasn’t coming.

I told myself it was for the best.

I took a savage, scalding shower. I went to bed, determined to be an adult. I closed my eyes and forced my breathing into a slow, regular rhythm.

It was useless.

He invaded everything. The clean smell of my sheets somehow reminded me of his skin. The darkness behind my eyelids replayed the look on his face when he said It’s ours — the way he’d laced his fingers through mine right in front of Jaclyn.

I flipped onto my side, hugging a pillow to my chest.

Right. That’s enough. Stop moping. He’s not coming. He’s just a very good-looking, very clever bloke you’ve shagged a few times, who also happens to be your boss. That’s all. You want to sleep with him. You don’t want to date him. Remember that. Now go to sleep.

I commanded my body to relax. I arranged the duvet. I found the optimal sleeping position.

Forty-seven minutes later, I sat bolt upright in the pitch black.

I swung my legs out of bed, stomped out of the bedroom, snatched my car keys, and tramped toward the foyer.

And stopped dead.

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## Chapter 510

Chapter 510:

Leaning against the wall just outside the lift — still in his dinner trousers and shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows — was Lochlan. A small overnight bag sat at his feet. He looked up as I burst out, my hair wild, my eyes probably blazing, dressed in my pyjamas.

We stared at each other in the dim hallway light.

“You,” I finally managed. “What are you doing here?”

He pushed himself off the wall. “You said I should do what I thought was best,” he said quietly. “I thought it was best to be here.”

He’d been waiting. For hours. Not forcing his way in, not demanding — just waiting.

“Going somewhere?” He looked down at the car keys in my hand.

“I couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d go for a drive. Clear my head.”

Lochlan’s lips quirked.

Flustered, I took an awkward step closer. “How long have you been out here? Why didn’t you just knock? Or come in?”

“Because I was waiting for you to let me in.”

“Well, you sort of let yourself in. You could have used the intercom.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d want to answer — wasn’t sure if I’d be met with open arms or a locked door. And,” he smiled, “it’s nice to see you haven’t yet revoked my lift privileges.”

“You own the place,” I muttered.

He stepped closer. His hands cradled my face, tipping it up to his. His handsome, frustrating face filled my vision, and his mouth — cool from the hallway’s overzealous air conditioning — found mine.

The kiss was soft and questioning, and it held a quiet certainty that unravelled me completely. It told me he’d been waiting. It told me he’d wait longer. It told me he wasn’t going to force his way in, but he wasn’t going away either.

I made a half-hearted struggle, a muffled sound of protest against his lips — and then I sank into him. My hands slid up his back, feeling the solid warmth of him through his shirt, pulling him closer. I was gone. Hopelessly, utterly gone. I thought, with a last flicker of coherent wit, that this man would be the death of my better judgement.

We stayed like that for a long time, tangled together in my doorway.

When he finally began to deepen the kiss — his intensity shifting from patience to something more claiming — I gently bit his lower lip. He stilled, breaking away with a shaky exhale, and rested his forehead against mine, his eyes closed.

“Do you still need to go for that drive?”

“No,” I whispered. The keys felt ridiculous in my hand.

“I appear to be homeless,” he murmured, his nose nudging against mine. “Any chance of taking in a stray?”

I sighed. “I suppose I could tolerate you for a night or two.”

Taking his hand, I led him into the living room. “The sofa, or the guest room.”

Lochlan eyed the chic but compact sofa. “The sofa is a bit — abbreviated for me.”

“Fine. Guest room it is.”

He just looked at me. “But that’s Portia’s room.”

“Portia isn’t coming.”

“I’ve developed a new sensitivity,” he said, utterly deadpan, “to unfamiliar pillows.”

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Chapter 511:

“You didn’t have this delicate constitution when we were hopping between hotel suites on business trips,” I pointed out.

“It’s a recent development.”

I refused to budge. “It’s the guest room or the sofa. Pick one.”

He took a step closer. “No chance of a third option? Sharing a room?”

“No. Not until my thigh muscles have recovered from the last time. Doctor’s orders.”

He considered this for a moment, then gave an accepting nod. “Okay.”

I led him to the guest room. “You used to own the place.” I waved a hand at the perfectly made-up bed and the en suite door. “You know where everything is. Good night.”

I retreated to my own room, shut the door, and leaned against it.

He was right there. One wall — maybe eighteen inches of plaster and brick — away.

What was he doing? Where was he going with this? More pressingly, why in the name of all that was sane had I said yes?

The questions chased each other in frantic circles until my brain felt bruised. Eventually, exhaustion overpowered anxiety and I fell into a fitful sleep.

Morning arrived with the gentle cruelty of my alarm clock. I fumbled it into silence, rubbing grit from my eyes. The usual mental checklist began: coffee, toast, shower, dress. I shoved my feet into slippers and shuffled out of bed, my brain still booting up — approximately forty per cent operational.

I opened my bedroom door and stopped dead.

The scent hit me first. Not just coffee, but the rich, salty, heavenly smell of frying bacon and the sweet, caramelised note of maple syrup. My stomach gave an undignified growl.

“Morning. Wash up and come eat.”

Still on autopilot, I shuffled out into the open-plan living space toward the source of the voice.

Lochlan was wearing a simple white t-shirt and soft grey joggers, looking fresh from a shower and possibly a punishing session in the home gym. The morning sun caught the edges of him, making him look like some magazine spread titled *The Billionaire At Home*. He was grinning at me, a plate of perfectly arranged bacon, eggs, and pancakes in his hands.

The table was set.

“You’ve been busy,” I croaked, my voice still sleep-ravaged. I glanced toward the open gym door. My own fitness aspirations had lasted roughly as long as a New Year’s resolution.

I sank into a chair, inhaling deeply. It smelled like heaven on a plate.

I forked a piece of bacon. “High sugar, high fat? What happened to your monkish steamed-fish-and-broccoli regime?”

I watched as he placed his own plate down. It held a single, plain bagel. His coffee was black — no milk, not even a solitary sugar cube hovering nearby.

“I made these for you.” He sat opposite me. “You like bacon.”

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 512

Chapter 512:

“I do. Thanks.” I took a bite. Then another. It was sublime — crisp and yielding, with a hint of something peppery and extraordinary. “What did you do to this? This bacon came from my fridge, I’m sure of it, but I don’t remember it being this — transcendent.”

He shrugged. “A little technique.”

I watched him, a pang of something suspiciously like pity cutting through my bacon-induced bliss. “Why do you eat like that?” I blurted out.

“Like what?”

“Like carbohydrates and fat are your enemies. Like flavour is a personal affront.”

He paused, his gaze dropping to his plate. For a long moment he was quiet.

“I have a control issue,” he said finally. “With food.”

“What, you mean like binge eating?”

“It’s worse than that.” He looked up, meeting my eyes. “You know how, for some people, one drink is too many — and a thousand isn’t enough?”

I nodded.

“The same principle applies to me. With food. Once I start, the mechanism in my head that says enough — it doesn’t function.”

“You mean you can’t stop?”

A single nod. “I don’t do things by halves, Hyacinth. My brain doesn’t seem to be wired for moderation. When I was a boy, it was food. I’d eat past hunger, past comfort, just — because it was there. The switch wouldn’t turn off.”

“Does that mean you were — a chubby kid?”

Another nod. He looked away, out the window, but not before I caught it.

Was he — blushing? A faint, barely-there flush high on his cheekbones.

Oh, this was priceless.

I raised a hand, schoolgirl-style, unable to contain a grin. “May I see some photographic evidence, please?”

“No.”

“Come on! No photo, no proof. I just can’t picture it. I can’t picture you as a child at all, to be honest. You probably emerged from the womb fully formed and in a Savile Row suit. There must be albums stashed in an attic somewhere.”

“There are,” he conceded. “But I’m not showing them to you.”

“Why not?”

“They’re at Hastings Hall.”

“Is that the family pile?”

“It is. Where my parents are currently in residence.” He leaned forward slightly, his pale eyes holding mine. “If you’re interested, I could take you down there — that is, if you don’t object to meeting them.”

“Maybe another day.” I swiftly changed the subject. “So, no desserts for you, then? Ever? No ice cream? That’s a tragically sad life, Loch.”

“It’s better than the alternative. I once gorged myself so badly I ended up in hospital. Stomach pump.”

“That really doesn’t sound like you.” The man I knew was all control, precision, icy command.

“Then I found the gym. And the switch flipped there instead. It became the focus. The all-consuming thing.”

“So now you obsess over workouts instead of food.”

He nodded. “Some people can take things or leave them alone. I’ve never been one of them. For me, it’s always more, or nothing at all. I learned early that if I don’t choose my fixations very carefully, they choose me. The gym is the safest vice I’ve found.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 513

Chapter 513:

I gave him a thumbs-up. “Good for you. I don’t have that kind of discipline. If someone told me to give up chocolate for life, I’d rather be fat than chocolate-deprived.”

He smiled a little. “You’d still look beautiful, if you put on weight.”

I rolled my eyes. “Liar. But seriously — how do you manage it? I used the gym here exactly twice before my legs developed a mind of their own and walked me directly to the fridge. I haven’t switched the treadmill on for weeks. I think it’s judging me.”

“We could do it together, if you like. I could wake you at five. We could run around the block if you’d rather not use the treadmill.”

I held up a hand — universal sign for halt. “Five a.m.? Are you a sadist? No, thank you.”

I turned my attention back to demolishing the small, perfect mountain of pancakes. The syrup was real maple, the butter was French, and the guilt was beginning to creep in. Here I was, shovelling down culinary sin while he nibbled on what looked like dehydrated beige cardboard.

Suddenly, I became acutely aware of my own eating habits. Did I look greedy? Was there syrup on my chin? Had I eaten one slice of bacon too many?

“Does it bother you?” he asked.

I glanced up, a forkful of pancake midway to my mouth. “Does what bother me?”

“My — tendency. To fixate on things. The gym. The food.”

I considered this as I chewed. “No. It doesn’t bother me. In fact, I’m wildly jealous. I wish I had a fraction of that discipline.”

“What if my fixation is on something else?”

“Like what?”

“Like relationships.”

“Oh?” I said, the syllable coming out slightly strangled.

“I said earlier it’s all or nothing with me. That’s true for my work. For my workouts.” He paused, holding my gaze across the sunlit table. “And for my relationships.”

Slowly, I set my fork down. The clink of silverware on china was very loud.

“Oh.”

“I know you understand what I’m talking about.”

With some difficulty, I swallowed the bite of pancake that had suddenly turned to concrete in my throat. “I think I do. But — you said you were okay with our arrangement. Just sex. No strings. You agreed.”

“I lied,” he said simply.

I stared at him accusingly.

He gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I never claimed to be an entirely honest person.”

“But—” I floundered. “I thought it was going well. This way. I thought we were—”

Having fun? Managing? Not terrifying each other?

“Jaclyn’s reappearance has upset you,” he said. “I can tell.”

“No, not really. She’s just a minor nuisance.” I wasn’t jealous of her. At all.

“I want to assure you — when I’m with you, I’m with you. And no one else. No amount of Jaclyns is going to change that. But I need you to understand the terms. My terms. I don’t do halfway.”

“Okay. Noted.” I picked up the fork.

“In truth, Jaclyn’s obsession with me isn’t really about me.”

“Oh?” I set the fork down again. Pointless to pretend I was still eating.

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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## Chapter 514

Chapter 514:

“She used to be involved with my brother.”

I blinked. This was new information. “I didn’t know you had a brother. Is he older or younger? As good-looking as you?”

Lochlan sidestepped my deflection. “Jaclyn is somehow under the mistaken impression that I stepped aside because of my brother, and that I still have feelings for her. That’s why she’s being so persistent.”

“Oh,” I said out loud.

But my brain was already sprinting ahead, snagging on the critical detail — stepped aside.

That wasn't the same as ending it. Stepping aside implied sacrifice, yielding, a door left ajar rather than firmly shut. It made a considerable difference between whether he'd given her up unwillingly or whether he'd simply moved on.

Lochlan looked at me then — really looked — his pale eyes holding mine with an intensity that made the breakfast table feel like a confessional. "There are some things you should know," he said slowly. "About me. And my family."

I sat up straighter, my spine going rigid. "Oh." The syllable came out thin and reedy.

The grave set of his face wasn't his usual mild, composed mask. The corners of his lips were turned down at a more severe angle than I'd ever seen, and his hands were working the edge of his napkin — folding and refolding the linen into anxious creases. A nervous tic. I'd never seen him nervous before.

Tension radiated off him in palpable waves, and I seemed to absorb it by osmosis, because suddenly my own chest was tight and my hands clammy. What was he doing? Why all these sudden revelations about his personal life? Was he about to unveil some kind of secret — the kind that changed everything?

The man had seemed so above board, so transparently and irritatingly honourable since the day we met. What skeleton could he possibly be hiding in his immaculate walk-in wardrobe?

He began —

The intercom buzzed.

"I'll get it!" I shoved my chair back so fast it nearly toppled, shooting to my feet with record speed.

I would have welcomed Bigfoot at the door. I would have welcomed a Jehovah's Witness. I would have welcomed anything that extracted me from the strange, tense confessional atmosphere coagulating around the breakfast table.

I saw the face on the intercom screen and muttered, "Speak of the devil." I pressed the release button all the same.

A short while later, the lift doors slid open to reveal Jaclyn's immaculately made-up face, and behind her, Roy's apologetic one.

"Morning, Hyacinth!" Jaclyn said brightly.

"Morning," I said, with considerably less cheer.

I looked at Roy, who shrugged behind Jaclyn's back. "I was on my way to pick up the boss," he explained, low-voiced. "Ran into Ms Lemon here. She said she's working together with you now?"

"Something like that." I stepped aside. "Come in, please."

Jaclyn glided past me. Her gaze snagged on the dining area, on the man rising slowly from his chair.

"Morning, Lochlan."

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

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### **Chapter 515**

Chapter 515:

"Morning." His tone was clipped and unwelcoming. "What brings you here?"

Jaclyn turned to me. "I came to find Hyacinth, actually. Thought we could have breakfast together — my treat. There are some work things I'd like to pick her brain about."

"You can do that during office hours," Lochlan said. "This is her personal time."

"Oh. Sorry — I just thought, since we'll be working together anyway — I didn't mean to intrude."

"It's fine," I heard myself say. "Thanks for the invite, but as you can see, I've already eaten." I gestured at the breakfast debris.

Lochlan turned to me. "Are you riding to the office with me?"

"No, I need to wash up first. You go ahead."

He nodded, then stepped forward and kissed me.

The kiss was brief — barely a second. But I was acutely conscious of the two pairs of eyes on us the entire time.

Lochlan pulled back. “See you later.” He walked past Jaclyn with a barely civil nod and stepped into the lift. Roy nodded at me, then followed his boss. The doors slid shut, leaving me and Jaclyn alone in the sudden silence.

I cleared my throat. “Would you like some breakfast? There’s still—” I waved vaguely at the remains.

Jaclyn glanced at the table. “No, thank you. I don’t eat bacon. Too greasy.”

“Oh.”

More silence. It stretched, viscous and uncomfortable. I cast a longing glance toward my bathroom.

Jaclyn looked around the flat with an expression I couldn’t quite read. “It’s a nice place you’ve got here.”

“It’s not really mine. Corporate perk. I only live here.”

“Would you like a tour?” I asked, and immediately wanted to unsay the words. Why had I offered a guided walkthrough of my life to this woman?

But Jaclyn said, “Yes, I’d love to,” with such genuine eagerness that I found myself already moving down the hall.

I showed her the living area, the balcony, then the gym. She paused at the doorway, her gaze sweeping over the full range of equipment.

“I had no idea you were such a gym rat.”

“I wish. I seldom use this place.”

She glanced pointedly at the towel draped over the rack, still slightly damp. “Looks like you just used it.”

I walked over and picked it up. “This isn’t mine. Lochlan worked out here earlier.”

“Ah. So you and Loch — are living together?”

It was none of her business, yet I heard myself say, “It appears so. Yeah.”

She nodded. “I used to live with him, you know. Not an easy man to live with.”

“Oh.” I hoped the dead-flat tone of that single syllable conveyed, with crystal clarity, that I had absolutely zero interest in hearing about Lochlan sharing a home with another woman.

Jaclyn turned to face me fully. “Look, can we talk?”

I nodded and ushered her back to the living room. I knew this was coming.

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## Chapter 516

Chapter 516:

She sat — or rather gingerly perched on the very edge of the sofa — her posture rigid, her fingers twisting together in her lap. A full two minutes crawled past before she finally spoke.

“Look, I know this is going to sound abrupt. And I have no right to ask you this — I know that. But I really can’t just let it go.”

I waited.

She took a breath. “I’ve made a mess of things. I know that. In Singapore, I was — I thought I was untouchable. I thought my family name, my connection to the Hastings, my history with Lochlan — I thought it all meant I didn’t have to try. And I was wrong.”

She looked up at me, and I was startled to see something that might have been genuine moisture in her eyes. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. A lot of work on myself. Therapy, even. And I know you probably don’t believe me, and I don’t blame you, but I really am trying to turn over a new leaf — to be a better version of myself.”

I said nothing. My face, I hoped, was a polite, unreadable mask.

“I’m not asking you to step aside,” she continued, her voice gaining a little strength. “I wouldn’t insult you by asking that. But I am asking — I just want a fair chance. A fair

competition. I want to show Lochlan that I've changed, that I can be the person he always wanted me to be. And I wanted to tell you that directly, because I don't want there to be any underhandedness between us. I want to do this properly."

I studied her for a long moment.

She looked sincere. She probably even believed she was sincere.

"It's not my place to say yes or no," I said eventually. "If Lochlan wants to be with you, he will be. If he doesn't, nothing I say or do is going to change that. And frankly, nothing you say or do will, either."

"I know. I know that. I just — I wanted to run it by you. To be transparent. I hope there are no hard feelings."

"None at all."

She was actually a much milder breed of the clingy ex than I'd been expecting. Desperate, yes, and deluded, and condescending even when she thought she was being kind. But she wasn't Vanessa. Cary's unhinged ex hadn't asked for a fair competition — she'd tried to kill me. Literally.

I arrived at the office forty-seven minutes later than usual. Kai looked up from his terminal as I approached.

"Morning."

"Morning. Is Lochlan in?"

"Boss is in the conference room. Meeting with a group of people." Kai glanced toward the closed doors down the hall, his expression faintly puzzled. "Hasn't said who. But they look like imported types, if you know what I mean."

"Imported how?"

He shrugged. "The way they're dressed. Very—" He searched for the word. "St James's. Old money tailoring. But a bit deliberate."

I nodded and was about to turn away when Kai added, quietly, "Ms Lemon's in there too."

I stopped. "Is she now."

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Chapter 517:

“She arrived with them.” His tone was neutral, but his eyes flickered to mine with something that might have been sympathy.

“Thanks,” I said. “Good to know.”

I walked to the conference room. The doors were closed, the blinds angled just enough to obscure the interior without looking deliberately secretive. Through the gap, I caught fragments — the low rumble of male voices, the precise cadence of Lochlan in business mode, and occasionally, rising above it all, the crystal-clear trill of Jaclyn’s laugh.

When she’d left my flat that morning, she’d said nothing about coming to Velos.

My hand hovered near the door handle.

Technically, I had a legitimate reason to interrupt. The Petrocon filing needed Lochlan’s signature before noon, and I was the director responsible. I stood there for perhaps ten seconds.

Then I turned and walked away.

At 10:23, my third cup of coffee ran dry. I abandoned my office and headed for the break room, where the machine hissed and gurgled and produced a passable espresso that I immediately adulterated with an obscene amount of milk.

I was leaning against the counter, sipping and wincing, when I heard the footsteps — multiple sets, moving down the hallway with the relaxed rhythm of a meeting just concluded.

I poked my head around the open doorway.

Lochlan walked at the centre of a small cluster of men, five of them, all dressed in the understated armour of serious wealth. And right beside him, keeping pace effortlessly in heels, was Jaclyn.

She spotted me.

“Hyacinth!” she called out, lifting a hand in a small wave. “There you are. Come over.”

I had approximately one second to decide whether to pretend I hadn’t heard and retreat into the break room.

But Jaclyn was already beckoning, the men had turned to look, and Lochlan's pale eyes had found mine.

I walked over, coffee cup still in hand, and arranged my face into something professional.

Jaclyn turned to the group. "Gentlemen, this is Hyacinth Galloway, our Director of Mergers and Acquisitions at Velos Capital." She said our with such easy ownership that I almost checked to see if she'd acquired a name badge while I wasn't looking.

The men turned their collective gaze on me. I felt it the way you feel a physical weight — assessing, measuring, placing me in whatever internal hierarchy they carried in their heads.

One of them, a silver-haired man with the ruddy complexion of someone who spent weekends shooting things, gave a slow nod. "Awfully young to be a director, isn't she?" he said, with an accent that pointed somewhere toward France.

Before I could open my mouth, Jaclyn laughed lightly and said, "Which is just more proof that at Velos, we value talent over protocol. Other companies may promote based on age or seniority, but here we let the best person take the job, regardless of how many birthdays they've had."

I smiled and nodded, because that was the expected response.

Chapter 518:

Since when was Jaclyn Lemon the official spokesperson for Velos Capital's HR philosophy? Since when was she we? She'd been fired. For incompetence. She no longer worked here.

She answered my last unspoken question by turning to me with that bright, inclusive smile. "These are Lord Alistair Wincanton, Sir Geoffrey Thorpe, Mr Philip Davenport-Haigh, Mr James Courtenay, and Mr Edward Addington." The names rolled off her tongue as though she'd known them all her life — which she probably had. "They're very interested in what Velos has achieved in such a short time."

I nodded politely at each in turn. "A pleasure to meet you all."

Lochlan spoke up. "Ms Galloway is one of our most valued assets. She's brought immense expertise to the table since joining the executive team."

Philip — a slender man with clever eyes and a watchful stillness — turned to me. "M&A, eh? Have you heard the rumours about Deutsche Industriebank and CommerzWest?"

"I haven't, no."

He nodded slowly. “They’re in exploratory merger discussions. No term sheet yet. Only senior partners and advisers are in the loop at this stage.”

Jaclyn interjected smoothly, “I heard a private equity consortium may try to muscle in on the action. KKR and CVC are circling, apparently.”

Philip’s eyebrows rose. “Really? Where did you hear that?”

“My cousin sits on the advisory board at Rothschild. He mentioned it in passing at a family dinner last weekend. Nothing’s confirmed, of course, but where there’s smoke, you know.”

Lord Alistair grunted. “That’s often the case. Though I don’t see why everyone’s getting so exercised about this one. It’s not exactly defence or AI, is it? It’s construction. Bridges and buildings. Dull as ditchwater.”

Jaclyn laughed. “Construction’s always hot if you know where to look. Velos’s financial statements from last year proved that rather conclusively, I think.” She glanced at Lochlan.

He gave an affirmative nod. “The sector’s been undervalued for years. Everyone’s chasing the next AI unicorn while ignoring the fact that physical infrastructure isn’t going to build itself. The backlog in European transportation projects alone represents a decade of work.”

Sir Geoffrey cut in impatiently. “That’s all well and good, but back to this German business. What about government approval? What’s the Board of Trade saying?”

“I’ve got an uncle who plays golf with the deputy director of the Board,” Jaclyn said. “I’ll give him a call and see if we can get a sense of which way the wind’s blowing. These things are always about timing, aren’t they? Knowing when to move.”

James Courtenay, a square-jawed man, nodded approvingly. “Good. Once you know, update me, will you, dear? I’d like to get ahead of the action. If this merger goes through, there are certain stocks I think will take a hit. Now’s the time to dump them quietly, before the news breaks.” The men exchanged knowing glances. A low ripple of laughter passed through the group.

I stood among them, but not quite of them, listening to unfamiliar names and unknown connections weave together around me.

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## Chapter 519

Chapter 519:

After a while, I stepped back from the group. “If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I have a deadline to meet. A pleasure meeting you all.”

They nodded dismissively, already turning back to their conversation.

I retreated to my office and closed the door. The numbers on my screen blurred. I read the same line four times. It might as well have been Ancient Greek. My brain was still in that hallway, watching Jaclyn Lemon play hostess to men with double-barrelled surnames and hereditary titles, listening to her drop family connections with effortless fluency.

I told myself I didn’t care.

By half twelve, my stomach was growling and my concentration was shot. I saved the file with an apologetic mental note to revisit it later and stood up.

His office door was open. Empty. His jacket was gone.

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Lochlan and I hadn’t formalised a lunch arrangement, but somewhere over the past few weeks, it had quietly become an understanding.

I turned and found Kai in his office. “Where’s the boss?”

“Out at lunch. With the same group from this morning. I booked Le Coeur d’Or.”

“Ah. Right.”

“Do you know who they are?” he asked. “The men, I mean.”

I nodded and rattled off the names I’d been given. When I finished, Kai gave a thoughtful nod.

“No wonder.”

“No wonder what?”

“I overheard one of them in the toilet earlier,” Kai said. “On the phone. Couldn’t help catching some of it. He was talking about an investment. Half a billion, from the sound of it.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. And that’s just one of them. If he’s talking about putting that kind of cash into Velos, no wonder the boss is handling this personally.”

“I see.”

“Jaclyn brought them in this morning. Arranged the whole thing, from what I gather.”

“Is she at lunch with them?”

“Yes.”

I nodded.

“You okay?” Kai asked.

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Kai just looked at me.

“I’m fine,” I said again. “It’s just business. She brought in big potential investors. That’s good for the company. Good for all of us.”

Kai nodded slowly. “If you need anything—”

“I know. Thanks, Kai.”

I retreated to my office and spent the next two hours doing absolutely nothing productive.

At half past three, a knock on my doorframe made me look up. Lochlan stood there, one hand resting on the frame. “Got a minute?”

“For you? Always.” I waved him in.

“There’s an event tonight. A benefit. Charitable fundraising. The investors I met with today are hosting it, and they’ve asked me to attend.”

I pulled up his schedule on my screen. “I don’t see anything pencilled in.”

“It’s last minute. I’ve just secured several very substantial commitments from these men. I feel obliged to say yes.”

“Of course you do.” I nodded. “You should definitely go. It’s the right call.”

“I want you to come with me. We’ll drink a little. Maybe dance a little. It won’t be all business.”

Before I could tell him I didn't dance, another knock fractured the moment.

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## Chapter 520

Chapter 520:

Jaclyn stood in the open doorway, her expression apologetic. She flashed a quick, bright smile at me, but her eyes were already moving past me to Lochlan.

“So sorry to interrupt,” she said, stepping into my office without waiting for an invitation. “Lord Alistair just rang. He has some questions about Velos’s wind farm operations, and he specifically asked for you, Loch. Would you mind giving him a call back? He’s keen to get the figures before the benefit tonight.”

Lochlan rose from his chair. “I’ll take it in my office.” He turned back to me. “Let me know about tonight.”

I nodded. He left. Jaclyn did not leave with him.

“So,” she said, “I gather you’ve heard about the benefit tonight.”

“Yes.”

“I do hope you’ll come.” She settled herself into the chair Lochlan had just vacated. “There’ll be plenty of interesting people to meet. A marvellous networking opportunity.”

“I’m considering it.”

“You really must come.” She leaned forward. “It’s going to take two of us to watch Lochlan’s drink intake, you know. He can’t really tolerate alcohol — gets tipsy after just one and a half glasses.”

She winced slightly. “The unfortunate thing is that it doesn’t show. His face stays the same — no flush, no slurred speech. You’d only know he was drunk by the completely out-of-character way he starts behaving.”

I thought of the time he'd handed me his room key card instead of his credit card at a client dinner, utterly sincere and completely oblivious.

Jaclyn was watching my face. Her smile widened slightly. "So you've seen him drunk, then? Isn't he kind of adorable when he's like that?"

She gave a little laugh. "I remember this one Christmas dinner — he was still at university, and my uncle Charles kept plying him with vintage port. Lochlan ended up on the floor in the children's playpen, trying to build a castle out of Play-Doh. Absolutely adorable. I took pictures. I can show you." She reached for her phone.

"There's no need," I said. "Really."

"Another time, perhaps." She paused. "So can we count on your attendance tonight? Lochlan was telling me earlier how much he wants you to get to know the investors properly. Some of them will become our largest shareholders, after all. After Lochlan, of course."

"Actually," I said, "no, sorry. I can't make it. I've just remembered I've got things to do tonight. Already pencilled in."

"Oh." Her face fell. "Lochlan will be so disappointed. He was really hoping you'd be there."

"I'm sorry. Really can't be helped."

"Another time, then." She stood and smoothed her skirt. "There's one more thing I wanted to run by you, actually. Since we're being open with each other."

"Sure." What else could I say?

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Chapter 521:

"I've known these investors for a very long time. Some of them are old friends of my papa's. They're rather old-fashioned, I'm afraid — they only really do business with people they know, people they trust. And, to be perfectly honest, Velos is still a relatively young company here in London. A bit of an unknown quantity. Lochlan's focus has been so heavily overseas for the past several years, and the old guard here — well, they're cautious. They like to have connections they can rely on."

I nodded.

“So they’ve insisted,” she continued, “as a condition of their investment, that I take a seat on Velos’s board.”

I stared at her.

“Don’t worry,” she said quickly. “It’s just a non-executive directorship. I won’t be involved in the day-to-day operations of the company. God knows I’m not good with all the minutiae of actually running a business.” A self-deprecating laugh. “It’s just that the investors feel more comfortable knowing there’s someone they trust in the room.”

“Of course.”

“So we’ll be colleagues of a sort,” Jaclyn said brightly. “I do hope that’s all right with you.”

“Of course it’s all right.” My voice sounded remarkably steady. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Why would it bother me?”

“Well.” She spread her hands. “I’ll be working quite closely with Lochlan on the investment side. I’ll be seeing him daily. Some women might find that — uncomfortable.”

“Lochlan sees dozens of people every day. Hundreds, sometimes. I don’t keep a roster.”

Jaclyn laughed airily. “No, of course not. I just wanted to make sure there was no misunderstanding between us. No hard feelings.”

“No hard feelings at all.”

“Good. I’m so glad we had this little chat. Now I really must dash. I need to pick up a dress from Seraphina Volant, then get my hair done for tonight. And then I have to run and collect Lochlan’s suit.”

“Lochlan has a suit,” I said. “He has closets full of them.”

“Oh, yes, but tonight’s benefit attendees are more of an artistic crowd. They’d expect something less business-like and more — whimsical.” She smiled. “I found the most wonderful velvet jacket for him. Deep aubergine, very slim cut. He’ll look absolutely devastating.”

“I’m sure he will.”

“Well, must run. See you tomorrow!” She waved, and was gone.

Half an hour later, my phone buzzed. Lochlan's name on the screen.

Benefit tonight. Are you coming?

I typed back: Sorry, can't make it. Already have dinner plans with Portia.

Three dots appeared, vanished, appeared again. Then: Another time.

Yes, another time.

I set the phone face-down on my desk and pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes.

Later, I stared at the television. Strictly Come Dancing was on. A professional dancer in sequins was guiding his celebrity partner through a rumba — his hand splayed across her naked lower back, pulling her close, their bodies aligned from chest to hip. His fingers moved in slow circles against the fabric of her dress. The intimacy of it was almost uncomfortable to watch.

He'd said there'd be dancing at the benefit tonight.

Was he dancing with her now? Were they seated at the same table, sharing plates of whatever ascetic, Michelin-starred nonsense passed for dinner among the artistic elite? She probably subsisted on birdseed and steamed vegetables — no trouble at all conforming to his puritanical diet.

I checked the time. 8:47.

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## Chapter 522

Chapter 522:

What were they doing now? Bidding on some ridiculously ugly sculpture for charity, heads bent together in knowledgeable debate about the relative merits of Hirst and Koons? Was he drinking? How many glasses had they pressed into his hand? Would she be the one to notice — to slide her hand under his elbow and guide him gently toward the exit? Would she take him home? To his penthouse? To hers?

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I should have gone with him. I should have put on something ridiculous and glamorous and walked into that room with my head high and my hand in his. I should have let them

all see that he was mine — that their shared history and family connections meant nothing against the simple fact that he had chosen me.

Instead, I was here, on my sofa, watching other people dance and waiting for a text that wasn't going to come.

The lift doors slid open without warning.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Who had lift access to my flat?

Lochlan stumbled out.

He wasn't falling — not quite — but his usual fluid grace had deserted him entirely. His movements were slightly uncoordinated, his weight shifting unevenly as he navigated the short distance from the lift to the living room. His tie was loosened, yanked down and slightly askew, and the top three buttons of his shirt were undone.

He looked devastating. He looked like he'd been dressed by another woman.

I rose from the sofa and moved toward him. His eyes found mine — glassy and slightly unfocused — and his face broke into a slow, unguarded smile.

"You're here."

"It's my flat." I reached him just as his foot caught on the smooth marble and he listed sideways. My hands caught his arms, steadying him. "How much did you drink?"

"Enough." He leaned into my grip, his weight substantial and warm. "Had to make the rounds. Only way to get out of there early."

I looked past him toward the lift. No one else. Just him.

"Why did you leave early? Was the party boring?"

"It was fine. But I wanted to come home to you."

I half-supported, half-dragged him to the sofa and deposited him onto the cushions. He went willingly, his long limbs folding awkwardly as he sank into the upholstery. His eyes were glassy, his gaze drifting slightly, and though his face showed no flush, his cheeks were hot when I pressed my palm against them.

I started to rise. "I'm going to get you a wet towel."

His hand caught my wrist and pulled me down onto his lap. "No. Later. Stay with me."

I stayed.

His thighs were solid beneath me, his chest warm against my back as he curled around me. He rested his chin on my shoulder and exhaled slowly, unevenly, the wine on his breath mingling with the clean, familiar scent of his skin. His hand found my back and began to move in slow, repetitive strokes — up and down my spine.

“Sorry,” he said eventually, his voice muffled against my shoulder.

“For what?”

“For not running it by you.” His thumb traced lazy circles between my shoulder blades. “Jaclyn’s appointment to the board. The investors sprung it on me, caught me by surprise. By the time I could object, the board had already overruled me.”

“It’s fine.”

“Is it?”

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## Chapter 523

Chapter 523:

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t it be? She brought in a huge amount of money. A directorship is the least you could offer.”

He was quiet for a moment, his hand continuing its slow, steady movement against my back.

“This morning,” he said. “The conversation we were having. Before Jaclyn barged in.”

“Yeah?”

“We never finished it.”

“It’s fine. We can talk another time, when you’re sober.”

He lifted his head from my shoulder and caught my chin with his free hand, turning me to face him. “No,” he said. “I want to talk now.”

“Fine.” I hadn’t realised getting drunk turned Lochlan chatty.

“There are things you should know about me. Things that might change how you think about me. I’m not the perfect man you seem to think I am.”

I almost laughed. “But you are.”

He was. He was so impossibly, infuriatingly perfect that standing next to him sometimes felt like standing at the edge of a very deep cliff. The class, the money, the suavity, the effortless command of every room he entered. He had all of it, and I had — well, my sparkling personality. My carefully maintained independence. My stubborn refusal to admit that I was already in over my head.

He shook his head slowly. “I told you about my tendency to fixate. Food first, then the gym, then work. But I never told you where I got it from.”

“Okay.”

“I got it from my mother.”

I thought of Mrs Hastings. I’d never met her, but I’d spent a little time with his father, Holden Hastings — a boisterous bundle of sunshine.

“What’s her fixation?”

“Not is.” His voice dropped. “Was.”

I went very still. “What?” I’d thought his mother was still alive. I’d never heard otherwise.

Lochlan was looking at me, but he wasn’t really seeing me. His gaze had turned inward, focused on something distant — something only he could perceive. “I’m not talking about Jennifer Hastings,” he said. “I’m talking about my birth mother.”

I stared at him. “What?”

He smiled — a bitter, wounded curve of his mouth that I’d never seen before. “Jennifer’s not my birth mother. I was adopted.”

“What?” was the only response I could manage.

“If Jaclyn knew about this, she’d drop me like a radioactive bomb. The Lemons are old money, old blood. They trace their lineage back to the Conqueror. Marrying a foundling would be unthinkable.”

“But she doesn’t know.”

“No. She doesn’t.” He paused. “No one knows. Not even my siblings. Except me, and my parents. And now you.”

But I didn’t really know. Not the whole story.

Lochlan’s lips moved, but no words came. I watched him struggle — his jaw working silently, his throat contracting as if he were trying to swallow glass. His breath had gone shallow and uneven, and a fine sheen of sweat had broken out along his hairline. His fingers, still resting on my back, curled inward, pressing against my spine with unconscious tension.

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Chapter 524:

Whatever this was, it was costing him — not just to speak of it, but to even approach the memory. An internal battle was raging behind those pale eyes. I could see it in the rigid set of his shoulders, the slight tremor of his hand, the way his gaze had turned inward to a place I couldn’t follow.

“I saw you,” he said finally. “This morning. At Velos. The way you stood in that hallway — part of the group but not really part of it. Slightly apart, slightly separate. Like you were waiting to be found out. I know what that’s like.”

I stared at him. “Do you?”

“Believe me, I do.” His laugh was soft and bitter, nothing like his usual composed self. “For almost thirty years, I’ve been living a sham. Pretending to fit in when I don’t really fit in. Pretending to be one of them. And all the while knowing that if the truth about me ever came out, my business associates, the investors eager to pour money into Velos, even the waiter serving cigars at the Athenaeum Club would turn up their noses. I was never truly one of them. I never will be.”

I took his hand and stroked my thumb across his knuckles. I didn’t know what else to do.

He suddenly gripped my hand so hard it was almost painful. “Let’s run away together.”

“What?”

“Run away. Away from London, from the country, from everyone we know. We’ll go somewhere warm — somewhere with sunshine year-round. Somewhere with those little tricycles that sell ice cream. I know how much you love ice cream.”

“Um, yeah, sure. But what about your work? Your company?”

“I don’t need work. I only need you.”

“You’re drunk. Let’s talk about this another day.”

“I am not drunk.” A pause. “I’m slightly intoxicated.”

“This is not the time to be pedantic.”

He ignored this, still holding my hand in that desperate grip. “But maybe you won’t want to go. After you know.”

“After I know what?”

“The truth about me. The real truth.”

I waited.

His lips parted again, and again that internal struggle manifested. I could see him fighting to form the words, pushing against some invisible barrier in his throat. His jaw clenched, unclenched, clenched again. Sweat beaded at his temples. Whatever secret he was trying to confess, it was clearly a significant one.

Suddenly, I didn’t want to hear it.

I gently pushed his shoulders back against the sofa cushions and rose from his lap. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“No. No bed.”

“Come on. You’ve got work tomorrow.”

“I don’t like that bed.” He gestured vaguely toward the guest room. “It’s the same as mine — same brand, same model, same mattress.”

“Not the same. I couldn’t sleep in that bed.”

“Fine. You can take the sofa, then.”

“The sofa’s worse.”

I stared at drunk Lochlan, who had somehow regressed into a nine-year-old. “What do you want, then?”

“I want your bed. It used to be mine, you know. I have a right to it.”

I huffed out a laugh despite myself.

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## Chapter 525

Chapter 525:

He was half-slumped, half-sitting on the sofa, his face tilted up toward mine — so earnest, so childlike, and yet still so utterly irresistible. I looked at his beautiful face, at that mouth I’d kissed so many times and somehow never grown tired of.

I leaned down, looped my arms around his neck, and pressed my lips to the warm, vulnerable column of his throat. “Fine,” I murmured against his skin. “No bed, then. How about — we shower together? You smell of wine.”

His breath caught. I felt his throat move against my mouth as he swallowed.

“Is that a yes or no?” I asked.

He found my mouth with his. His hands slid into my hair, angling my head back, and he kissed me like he was trying to devour me — desperate and demanding and so utterly unlike his usual careful restraint that I nearly forgot to kiss him back.

He broke the kiss just long enough to scoop me into his arms, rising from the sofa with a steadiness that belied his earlier stumble. I wrapped my arms around his neck and let him carry me to the bedroom, to the bathroom, to the vast glass shower cubicle I usually reserved for solitary, utilitarian purposes.

The water came on hot and abundant, cascading from the enormous rainfall showerhead. Steam billowed up around us, fogging the glass and filling the space with warm, scented vapour.

His jacket was the first casualty, discarded on the bathroom floor. His shirt followed, then my clothes, then everything else, until we were pressed together under the hot stream of water — skin against skin, nothing between us.

He was different tonight. All his usual careful control had been washed away. He touched me like he was starving, like he’d been holding himself back for months and had finally,

finally been given permission to do what he wanted. His mouth traced a hot, wet path from my throat to my collarbone to the swell of my breast, and when his teeth grazed my nipple, I gasped and arched into him.

“You have no idea,” he said against my skin, his voice rough and barely recognisable, “how long I’ve wanted to stop pretending.”

“I think I might,” I managed.

His hands slid down my ribs, my waist, my hips, gripping hard enough to bruise. I didn’t care. I wanted the marks. I wanted evidence in the morning that this had happened — that he’d finally let go of whatever invisible leash he kept himself on.

He lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, my back pressing against the tiles. Hot water streamed down over both of us as he pushed inside me with a single smooth motion that made us both gasp.

“Is this—” His voice broke. “Is this okay?”

In answer, I pulled his mouth back to mine and kissed him with everything I had.

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## Chapter 526

Chapter 526:

The rhythm he set was urgent and demanding — nothing like the controlled, generous lover I’d grown accustomed to. This was need, pure and unvarnished, stripped of all his usual careful attention to my pleasure. Not selfish, exactly, but consuming. He moved inside me as though he were trying to merge us into a single entity, as though he couldn’t get close enough, deep enough, as though even this weren’t enough to satisfy whatever hunger had been unleashed.

I clung to him, fingers digging into his shoulders, my breath coming in sharp, uneven gasps that mingled with the steam and the drumming water. The pressure built slowly and inexorably — a coil winding tighter and tighter in my core until I thought I might shatter from it.

When I finally came, it was with his name on my lips, his mouth against my throat, and his body shuddering through its own release moments later, his forehead pressed hard against mine.

Well past midnight, I was carried to bed on legs that had officially filed a complaint with the rest of my body. Wrapped in nothing but a bath sheet, my skin flushed a deep, translucent pink from scalp to toes, I was thoroughly, comprehensively ruined.

“I’m so thirsty,” I mumbled into my pillow.

Lochlan — who had somehow retained enough motor function to locate and don his dressing gown — disappeared and returned moments later with a glass of water. I drank it greedily, feeling sensation slowly trickle back into my extremities.

The mattress dipped as he settled beside me. I turned my head and was confronted with the vision of him propped on one elbow, his robe gaping open to his waist, his chest still damp and gleaming in the low lamplight.

“Showering together is good.” His fingers traced lazy patterns on my spine. “We should do that every day.”

I closed my eyes and played dead. “I’m so tired. I need to sleep.” I felt like I’d worked a double shift and then climbed fifteen flights of stairs.

“Go ahead.” His voice was a low murmur against my shoulder. “I can do all the work.”

His mouth found my back, trailing slow, open-mouthed kisses down my spine. His hand slid along my hip, my thigh, pulling me gently toward him.

I grabbed the pillow and held on for dear life. Whoever said drunk men can’t perform had clearly never met Lochlan Hastings.

I wasn’t surprised when Jaclyn asked me out for lunch. I was about to refuse — I was tempted to tell her that if she wanted to win back Lochlan, her best strategy was to spend time with him instead of me. It wasn’t as if I would graciously step aside just because she was pleasant enough to me. That wasn’t how any of this worked.

Then I looked up the restaurant, and I caved. I am, after all, only human.

I texted Lochlan to tell him about lunch with Jaclyn. His reply came two minutes later, a single word: Fine.

The curtness was the only indication of his displeasure. I set aside my phone and wondered, not for the first time, what it would take to make him really lose it. Had he ever thrown a punch in anger? Shouted at anyone? Thrown something? He probably had bodyguards for that sort of thing.

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## Chapter 527

Chapter 527:

It was an unfair comparison, but it was hard sometimes not to make it. Cary had been a volcano — all explosive fury and scorched earth. Lochlan, on the other hand, was an iceberg: ninety per cent of him submerged, drifting with a serene indifference that made you forget how much damage he could do if you got too close.

I pushed the thought aside and grabbed my bag.

Jaclyn had good taste. Not just in men, apparently, but also in food.

She'd already ordered when I arrived — a selection of dishes that managed, miraculously, to satisfy both her evident need for Instagram-worthy presentation and my simple, peasant desire for actual flavour. Jaclyn herself ate approximately four leaves of her already minuscule organic salad.

"I like your perfume," she said, dabbing her lips with a napkin. "What is it? Chanel No. 5? No, wait — it's lighter than that. Jo Malone's Peony and Blush Suede? Or perhaps Byredo's La Tulipe?"

I took a satisfied bite of pasta. "Superdrug's own brand. Wild Rose. Three ninety-nine."

Jaclyn's eyebrows lifted a fraction of an inch. "Oh. Where do you get that?"

"Superdrug. There's one on Oxford Street, but the one on Kensington High Street is less crowded."

"I didn't know Superdrug sold perfume. I've never been to one."

"They sell everything. Shampoo, toothpaste, paracetamol, fake tan. It's a magical place."

Jaclyn laughed — a small, uncertain sound. She clearly couldn't tell if I was joking.

We ate in silence for a moment. I savoured my pasta. Jaclyn relocated a single tomato from one side of her plate to the other.

“Hyacinth,” she said finally. “Can I ask you something personal?”

I swallowed. “You can ask.”

“Do you see a future with Lochlan?”

I chewed. “I’m just taking things as they go. No fixed plans.”

Jaclyn nodded thoughtfully. “Do you think you’d be up for it? The role, I mean. Of being Mrs Hastings?”

“I didn’t realise there was a job description.”

“There’s always a job description. A man in Lochlan’s position, with his social standing — there are certain expectations. Functions that his future wife would need to perform.”

“Such as?”

“Networking, for starters. Maintaining relationships with his important acquaintances. Hosting dinners, attending charity galas, knowing which events matter and which are just time-wasters. Then there’s the diplomatic side of things.”

“Of course there is,” I said drily.

She didn’t pick up on the sarcasm. “Being a calming presence, a social lubricant. Knowing when to speak and when to simply smile and say nothing. And then there’s the family aspect. The Hastings are old stock — they have traditions, expectations about how things are done. The woman who marries into that family would need to navigate all of it.”

I took another bite of pasta, chewed slowly, and swallowed. “You should really be talking to Lochlan about this. He’s the one who makes the ultimate hiring decision for the role of Mrs Hastings.”

Jaclyn opened her mouth to respond — and stopped. Her eyes widened, fixed on something just below my collarbone. I followed her gaze. The collar of my blouse had shifted, the gap revealing a small patch of skin on the side of my neck.

Skin that was marked.

Jaclyn’s face went very still. I adjusted my collar slowly and met her eyes with a bland smile.

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## Chapter 528

Chapter 528:

She didn't speak for the rest of the meal.

We left the restaurant after she paid. The escalator was one of those long, gently descending ones that gave you plenty of time to start having ideas. I stood two steps below Jaclyn, watching her from the corner of my eye, half-prepared in case she decided to eliminate the competition once and for all with a well-timed shove.

That's when I saw her.

The girl with the woman's body and the child's mind — the one I'd seen with Cary. She was coming down the escalator, glancing around, her face bright with the simple pleasure of an outing.

Janine Lockwood.

Beside her stood a woman. I couldn't look away. She was beautiful, of course — flawless makeup, clothes that screamed designer without needing to show a logo. But there was something else, something that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I had the uneasy feeling I'd seen her somewhere before. But where?

Jaclyn noticed my fixed expression. "Hyacinth? Do you know them?"

"Not really."

They came closer. Janine's face lit up with recognition, then twisted into something petulant. "Bad girl!" she called out, pointing at me. "Bad, bad girl!"

The woman beside her turned sharply, her eyes locking onto me with an intensity that made me want to check my exits. "You know this lady, Janine?"

"Know her! Bad girl! Took the nice boy away! Won't let me play with him!"

I faced Janine. "Miss Lockwood."

Her lower lip jutted out. “I want the nice boy. The pretty one. You took him.”

“I didn’t take anyone.” She was talking about Lochlan. “He made his own choice.”

“Bad!” Janine’s voice rose. “Bad girl!”

Then, without warning, her hand shot out toward me. I sidestepped smoothly, letting it pass through empty air where my shoulder had been. Janine’s momentum carried her forward — her foot caught on the edge of the escalator step, and she pitched downward, arms flailing, a high, piercing scream tearing from her throat.

The woman beside her lunged, one hand grabbing Janine’s arm while the other shot out and seized the nearest solid object for balance.

Which happened to be Jaclyn.

Jaclyn let out a shriek of her own as the woman’s weight yanked her off-balance. My hand caught Janine’s other arm, my feet braced against the step, and I pulled — hard.

Between the three of us, we managed to haul Janine back from the brink. She stumbled against the railing, chest heaving, face ashen. The whole thing lasted perhaps four seconds. It felt like an eternity.

“Janine!” The woman’s hands were already moving over her, checking for injury. “Janine, look at me. Are you hurt?”

Janine didn’t respond. Her eyes were wide and empty, staring at nothing, her whole body trembling violently. She made small, keening sounds.

The woman pulled Janine close, and Janine buried her face against her shoulder, sobbing in great, heaving gasps.

“I think Miss Lockwood is in shock,” I said quietly. “She may need a doctor.”

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## Chapter 529

## Chapter 529:

The woman's head snapped up. Her eyes met mine, and the look in them made me want to slowly back away — or reach for a heavy club. Then, without a word, she turned and guided Janine away, her arm wrapped protectively around the girl's shaking shoulders.

Jaclyn exhaled shakily beside me. "That," she said, "was Gloria Lockwood."

I turned to her. "You know her?"

"She used to be friends with Jennifer. Lochlan's mother." Jaclyn was still pale, her hand pressed to her chest as if checking her own heartbeat. "I saw her at parties when I was a child. But she and Aunt Jennifer seem to have drifted apart over the years. I don't see her at Hastings events anymore."

"I see."

Jaclyn's eyes were still fixed on the spot where Gloria had vanished. "She's not someone I'd want to be on the wrong side of."

"Why not?"

"There are — stories. Gloria Lockwood has a reputation for ruthlessness. Whatever she wants, she gets. It doesn't matter what it costs, or who gets hurt along the way. She just—" Jaclyn made a sweeping gesture, as if clearing a table. "Removes obstacles."

I thought of Aaron Lockwood — Gloria's husband — who had shown up at my parents' house uninvited, asking strange questions. He'd seemed affable enough, but with a wife like Gloria, could he really be as harmless as he appeared? And when, I wondered, was my mother ever going to tell me what the hell was going on with her and Mr Lockwood.

The afternoon was a write-off.

By half past two, I was running on fumes. I'd just returned from the finance department, and the lift ride back to my floor was a blur. I leaned against the wall and let my eyes drift shut, just for a moment.

My phone buzzed.

"Hyacinth," Kai said, his voice low and slightly harried. "Can you go wake the boss? He's taking a nap in his office. I'm stuck down here with the auditors and they won't release me."

"On it."

The lift opened onto the executive floor. I walked past Kai's empty office and stopped in front of Lochlan's. I knocked once, perfunctorily, and pushed the door open.

"Lochlan, time to—"

The words died in my throat.

His office was empty, but the door to the private lounge was ajar. I could see into the small space beyond, including the bed. Could see him standing on one side of it.

And Jaclyn Lemon standing on the other.

She was wearing a tiny vest top. Her cleavage was on full display, and it was quite obvious she wasn't wearing a bra.

The air in the room smelled familiar. Perfume. My perfume. The cheap Superdrug Wild Rose that Jaclyn had pretended not to know about at lunch.

Lochlan's face was like carved marble — cold and furious. Jaclyn's was something else entirely.

They both turned as I pushed the door fully open.

"Hyacinth." Lochlan moved toward me in two quick strides, his hand reaching for me.

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Chapter 530:

I stepped back into the main office and held up a hand. "Kai sent me. You've got a meeting in half an hour. I just came to let you know." My eyes flickered toward the lounge — toward Jaclyn, who was making no move to cover herself or leave. "So. I'll just — be going."

I turned and walked out. I made it maybe three steps before Lochlan caught up with me.

"Hyacinth." His hand closed around my elbow. "Wait."

I stopped. I didn't turn around.

His other hand came up to rest on my shoulder, and then he was turning me, guiding me — and suddenly we were inside my own office with the door closed, his arms around me

and his face buried in my neck. He inhaled deeply. I felt the breath against my skin, felt him breathe in my scent.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “She came in without knocking. I thought she was — I woke up and she was just there. In my room. We didn’t do anything. I swear to you, Hyacinth, nothing happened.”

“I know.” I lifted my hands and stroked his back. “I know, Lochlan.”

And I did.

I just hated that it still worked. That even knowing it was a trap, even trusting him completely, the sight of her in his private space — wearing my perfume, half-dressed and triumphant — had landed like a punch to the gut.

Lochlan pulled back, his hands framing my face. “Tonight. I’ll fix this tonight. I’ll get rid of her.”

“Maybe,” I said, “next time you could lock the door when you take a nap.”

“Noted.”

I leaned back in his arms and gave him a long once-over — from his hair, slightly dishevelled from sleep, to his collar, perfectly intact, to his chest, visible through the open buttons of his shirt. No lipstick marks. No hickeys.

I nodded, satisfied. Then I leaned in and pecked him on the cheek.

My hand slid down and slapped his backside. Hard.

He jumped, his eyes going wide with shock.

I laughed. “Off you go. You’ve got a meeting, and you need to deal with the half-dressed woman in your lounge before the senior partners arrive.”

The drive to Hastings Hall took just over two hours, which gave me plenty of time to think about what I was going to say.

Not that it required much thought.

I pulled into the gravel drive and killed the engine. I was just getting out of the car when another vehicle pulled in behind me — a familiar silver Mercedes.

Jaclyn parked, climbed out, and hurried towards me.

“Lochlan.” Her hand closed around my arm. “Lochlan, please. I know I messed up today. I’m sorry. Please don’t shut me out.”

I removed her hand from my arm and walked towards the house without looking back.

The front door was unlocked, because my father believed that locks were “an admission of defeat in the face of hypothetical criminals.”

I stepped into the entrance hall and heard the television from the drawing room. My father’s voice, booming over whatever programme he was pretending to watch, rose to greet me.

“Loch, my boy! What brings you home on a weekday? Don’t tell me you’ve finally decided to delegate and discovered the joys of skiving off!”

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## Chapter 531

Chapter 531:

Holden Hastings unfolded himself from the sofa. His face split into a wide grin as he crossed the room and wrapped me in a bone-crushing hug.

He released me just as Jaclyn appeared in the doorway behind me. His face lit up even further, if that was possible.

“Jacky! Well, well, well. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” He swept past me and took both her hands in his, beaming. “How are things working out at your father’s company, eh? I bet they’re giving you the royal treatment now. After all, you’re the one bringing them the big cats. What is it now — two or three billion in investments? Your old man must be chuffed.”

I turned to face her fully. “Investments?”

My father clapped me on the shoulder. “Didn’t you know? Our Jacky here has worked her cute little butt off. Calling in favours, twisting arms, the whole nine yards. She’s put together a consortium of investors to save her old man’s flailing company. Now don’t get me wrong, the Humphrey Group’s a grand old name, but you’ve got to admit, Loch my boy, they’ve fallen behind the times a bit. Lot of catching up to do.” He winked at Jaclyn. “Good on you, girl. Loyalty to family — can’t beat it.”

I looked at Jaclyn. She wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“The investors,” I said slowly. “The ones you brought to Velos. The ones who demanded a board seat for you as a condition of their investment.”

She bit her lip. “Lochlan, I can explain—”

“They were meant for your father’s company. You had a group of investors ready to pour billions into the Humphrey Group. You had the opportunity to save your family’s business. And instead, you brought them to me.”

“I thought—”

“You thought that if you brought them to my doorstep, I’d be indebted to you. That I’d be grateful.”

“I just wanted to help!”

I stared at her — this woman I’d known since childhood — and felt something I hadn’t expected. Not anger. Not even disappointment, exactly. It was something colder: a kind of profound, weary recognition that she hadn’t changed at all.

She was still the same person who had run the Singapore office into the ground while blaming everyone else. Still the same person who believed that wanting something badly enough made it right. Still the same person who couldn’t see past her own desires to the damage she was causing.

The Humphrey Group was struggling. Everyone in London knew it. My father had asked me to consider the joint venture precisely because Jaclyn’s father was an old friend who needed help. And Jaclyn, presented with the means to actually help him, had instead chosen to use those resources as a bargaining chip in her personal campaign to win me back.

She thought it was romantic.

I thought it was monumentally stupid.

I turned away from her and faced my father. “I need you to make some calls.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Martin Nichols. Ezra Gilchrist. Miriam Feldstein. They’re your people on the Velos board.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 532

Chapter 532:

“Now hold on.” He held up both hands. “I don’t have ‘people.’ I have acquaintances who sometimes share my perspective on certain matters. There’s a difference.”

“Call them whatever you like. But I need you to speak with them tonight. Ask them to vote to remove Jaclyn from the board.”

Her voice rose behind me. “Lochlan! You can’t be serious!”

My father’s eyebrows climbed higher. “You want me to use my influence — such as it is — to oust Jacky from a position she just obtained?”

“What about the investors?”

“I’ll give the money back.”

“Bold move. Why don’t you talk to them yourself? You’re the chairman.”

“I will. I’ll be calling the rest of the directors tonight as well. But you can reach your people faster, and I want this done by start of business tomorrow.”

Jaclyn appeared at my elbow, her face pale. “Do you hate me that much? After everything I’ve done?”

“I don’t hate you,” I said. “I just don’t want you around.”

The tears spilled over, tracking dark lines through her careful makeup. “But — what did I do wrong? You didn’t like it when I was self-involved in Singapore, so I started over. I got myself a job. I tried to help your company. I brought you investors. I—”

“I didn’t ask you to do any of those things.”

“But I want to! For you!” She reached for my arm. I stepped back. “Can’t we go back to the way things were? We used to have so much fun. What changed?”

“He changed. So did you. Change is the only constant, Jaclyn — Heraclitus had a point.”

My mother descended the stairs.

Jaclyn flung herself at her. “Oh, Aunt Jennifer,” she sobbed. “I’ve ruined everything. He hates me!”

My mother patted her back. “Jaclyn, dear. It’s time to stop. You said you wanted another chance, and I helped you get one. But continuing like this isn’t working. Staying at Velos is only going to hurt you further.”

“But I love him.”

“I know you do.” My mother glanced at me. “Though it has always puzzled me why. I know my boy. Sometimes I think his suits have more personality than he does.”

My father chuckled and tried to cover it with a cough.

Jaclyn cried for a while longer. My mother held her until the sobs subsided into shaky breaths, then took her hand and led her towards the stairs.

“Come along. Let’s get you washed up. We’ll have some tea and talk.”

My father appeared at my shoulder, holding two glasses of whiskey. He handed me one.

“I expect a message from each of the three directors by midnight tonight — or I’ll start motions to have them removed from the board.”

He blinked. “Whoa there, son. No need for extreme measures. I’ll handle it.” He took a sip of his whiskey, studying me over the rim. “They won’t like this heavy-handed approach, you know. You can expect more pushback from them in future.”

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Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

## Chapter 533

Chapter 533:

“I’ll take that under advisement.” I set my untouched whiskey on a side table. “And please tell Mother that I’d appreciate it if she stopped running sociological experiments on me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. She’s not running any experiments.”

“She knows I don’t have feelings for Jaclyn. The only reason to thrust her back into my life is to test out another of her theories. I’d rather not be a data point — again.”

“I’ll talk to her.” He paused. “She means well, you know. In her own way.”

I was at the door when my father’s voice stopped me.

“So. When are you bringing Hyacinth home to meet us?”

I didn’t answer. Because the truth was, I’d been asking myself the same question for weeks.

I drove back, hoping she was still awake by the time I arrived.

My phone rang.

“Lochlan Hastings.”

“Sir, you told us to call if there’s any change in the case. Well, there has been — and it’s a big one.”

I pressed down on the accelerator.

Portia’s place was a mess.

The coffee table lay buried under takeaway containers. Clothes were strewn haphazardly across the sofa and chairs. The rose bushes were dying of thirst.

I rolled up my sleeves and got to work.

By the time Portia walked through the door, I had made dinner, resurrected the roses, and restored the living room to something approaching human habitation. She took one look at the scene and clutched her chest.

“I could totally marry you. Forget men — this is true love.”

I pointed her towards the bathroom. “Wash up. Dinner’s ready.”

She emerged five minutes later and fell upon the pasta.

“All right,” she said finally, pointing her fork in my direction. “Spill. What’s going on? Did you and Lochlan have a fight?”

“No. Must I have a fight before I can come here?”

“No. But your face says something’s up.”

“We don’t fight.” I pushed a piece of chicken around my plate. “He’s not really the fighting type.”

“So what’s the problem, then?”

“The problem is that there isn’t one.” I set my fork down. “He’s perfect, Portia. Annoyingly, irritatingly, impeccably perfect. He says the right things, does the right things, looks at me like I’m the only woman on earth. I can’t find a single flaw.”

Portia squinted at me. “And this is a bad thing because...?”

“Because I don’t know what to do with it.” I sighed. “With Cary, everything was clear. He was controlling, manipulative, a bastard. The lines were drawn. I knew what I was fighting against. But Lochlan?” I shook my head. “He just waits. Patiently. For me to figure out what I want.”

“And what do you want?”

“That’s the worst part — I don’t know. I just want things to stay exactly as they are, comfortable and undefined. But he wants to move forward. Towards something real. Something permanent.”

“Ah. And that’s got you scared.” Portia nodded sagely. “So you’re not running yet, but you’ve got your trainers on, just in case.”

“Basically.”

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## Chapter 534

Chapter 534:

She twirled pasta around her fork. “You know, Josh has been dropping hints too. Wants us to get a bigger place. Put both our names on the lease. Properly live together, he says — not just him crashing at mine.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Things are going well with Josh, then? I’m surprised you haven’t dumped him yet. You’ve broken the three-month record.”

“I tried.” Portia looked genuinely pained. “Every time I work up the nerve to have the conversation, he looks at me with these big, sad, puppy-dog eyes — like a dog about to be kicked — and I just...” She shrugged. “I lose my nerve.”

“Where is he now?”

“Who knows? Probably picking flowers in a field somewhere.”

“Is he?”

“He’s an old-fashioned romantic like that. I swear he’s got the soul of a man who should have lived a century ago.” Portia looked horrified at the thought. “He’d probably propose with a horse and carriage if he thought I wouldn’t laugh in his face.”

I smiled. “I want a front-row seat to that.”

Portia opened her mouth to say something else, but the doorbell rang. I was closer.

“I’ll get it.”

I opened the door.

Lochlan stood in the hallway, and one look at his face made my stomach drop.

“Soraya Warren has escaped from prison,” he said.

I stared at him. “What?”

“That’s impossible,” Portia said from behind me. “Absolutely impossible. She was in jail awaiting trial. There’s no way—”

“One of my security team called thirty minutes ago. Warren was being transferred to another facility. En route, the transport was ambushed. One officer dead, another critically injured. She’s gone.”

“Who?” I asked. “Who helped her? She couldn’t have done this alone.”

Lochlan met my eyes. “I have a guess.”

“Which is?”

“Gloria Lockwood.”

“What? But that’s—” I stopped. “I saw her today. In London. She was just there, with her daughter, at the shopping centre. She can’t be—”

“She doesn’t have to be personally involved. She has resources. People she can use. This is exactly the kind of operation she’d orchestrate from a distance.”

Portia asked the crucial question. “Do you have evidence?”

“Not yet.”

The room fell silent.

I tried to process it, but my mind kept snagging on the same question. “Why? Why would Gloria do this? Did they know each other? Was there some connection?”

“Intel suggests they’d never met.”

“Then why—”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.” He pulled out his phone, glanced at it, then put it away. “I have people working on it. But answers take time.”

“Wait.” I held up a hand. “If they’re not connected, why do you think it was Gloria?”

“Remember the day we left the Manor Hotel in Appleby?”

“Yes.”

“I saw her there. Gloria. Driving up to the hotel just as we were leaving.”

I frowned. “She could have been there for any number of reasons. It was the holiday season — people holiday in Appleby.”

“A woman like Gloria Lockwood doesn’t holiday in a place like Appleby.” His voice was certain. “And she was alone. She rarely goes anywhere without her daughter, unless—”

“Unless it’s something she doesn’t want Janine to know about,” I finished.

He nodded.

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## Chapter 535

Chapter 535:

Portia spoke up. “So what now? What do we do?”

“The police are organising a manhunt. There’s nothing for us to do except stay alert and be careful.” Lochlan’s eyes found mine again. “I’ll be assigning guards to you both.” He continued before I could protest. “I don’t want either of you taking unnecessary risks. No late nights alone. No isolated places.”

I looked at Portia. She looked back and nodded.

When I left, I pulled Portia into a brief, tight hug. “Lock your doors. Double-check them before bed. And don’t go anywhere alone without Josh. I mean it.”

“Yes, Mum.”

I walked out to Lochlan’s car and slid into the passenger seat.

He reached over and took my hand. “It’ll be all right,” he said quietly. “We’ll find her.”

I nodded, but my mind was still churning.

I barely registered it when Lochlan spoke again. “Jaclyn Lemon is leaving Velos Capital.”

I blinked, dragged back to the present. “What?”

“Leaving. Resigning. However you want to phrase it.” A pause. “My mother convinced her it was time to move on.”

I didn’t know what to say.

Jaclyn had been a pleasant-looking, pleasant-smelling thorn in my side for weeks — nettling gently, persistently. Because of the joint venture, I had resigned myself to seeing her perfect face around Velos Capital for a long time to come, and here Lochlan was, telling me she was gone. Just like that.

I should have felt triumphant. Vindicated.

Instead, I felt nothing at all.

I leaned into Lochlan, pressing my face against his chest. His arms came around me, holding me close. Then one hand cupped my chin, tilting my face up, and his lips found mine.

I let myself sink into the kiss — into him, into the simple, animal comfort of being held.

We stayed like that for a long moment, wrapped together in the dark car.

Later, much later, I lay in bed and watched the shadows shift across the ceiling.

Lochlan was in the study making calls, no doubt directing his legion of contacts to track down Soraya Warren.

Jaclyn was Lochlan's ex. So was Soraya. One was clingy. The other was vengeful — possibly murderous. His taste in women was certainly eclectic.

I found myself wondering whether there were any more exes lurking somewhere. On my side, I only had Cary, the possessively unstable ex-husband, which somehow made me feel as though I was losing the contest.

I woke exhausted, unable to quite remember the bizarre dream I'd had — only that Cary was there, and so were Jaclyn and Soraya, and the three of them had ended up playing poker somehow. At some point during a round, Cary flipped the table and Soraya drew a stiletto.

The heavenly scent of coffee pulled me back to the present.

Lochlan came in carrying a tray laden with breakfast. He set it on the bedside table and pressed the coffee mug into my hands. "Good morning."

"Morning."

I took a grateful sip. A man who was a maestro in the bedroom as well as the kitchen — I could seriously get used to this.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" His side of the bed looked undisturbed.

He leaned down to kiss my forehead. "I slept in the guest room. It was late when I finished, and I didn't want to disturb you."

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Chapter 536:

“Oh, bummer. Then I bought that lace negligee for nothing.”

Lochlan stared at my pyjama top as if he could see straight through it. “I can check it out now.”

I smiled behind my mug. “Who were you calling last night?”

“Some contacts in the police force, and people who knew Soraya — but none had heard from her. She’s gone to ground.”

“Gloria Lockwood must have stashed her somewhere.”

Lochlan nodded. “So what’s next?” I asked.

“I’ll talk to Aaron Lockwood.”

“Do you think he’s in on it too?”

“Unlikely. He seldom involves himself in his wife’s affairs, but he might know her recent whereabouts. I could try to track down a plausible location for where she’s keeping Soraya.”

“I still don’t understand what Gloria would want with Soraya.”

“A woman like Soraya, with her experience and skill set, could be a useful tool for Gloria.”

“To do what?”

“I’m still working on that.”

“I don’t really care what they do, as long as they keep me out of it.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let her anywhere near you.”

“I’m actually more worried about you. After all, Soraya returned to London with the express purpose of ruining you.”

“Let her try.”

“I admire the confidence — but please tell me you’ve got a bigger bodyguard team now.”

“I have.”

I nodded, feeling slightly better.

I felt even better when I reached the office and heard the talk making the rounds.

“I heard Jaclyn resigned.”

“No way — she folded in just a few days?”

“I can’t believe it. I was betting on her winning.”

“Hyacinth is terrifying. Last time in Appleby she knocked out Galina Croft; this time she knocked out the CEO’s old flame in two days. Not even billions of pounds in investment could save her.”

“Terrifying. Absolutely terrifying.”

News of Jaclyn’s departure had exploded across the company chat groups, and it was only then that I truly believed what Lochlan had told me the night before — he really had pushed her out. In her official resignation email, Jaclyn said she was going to pursue further studies overseas, but we all knew why she was leaving.

I was in a good mood.

Around four o’clock, I went to ask Lochlan for leave. “Portia told me yesterday — I forgot to mention — she’s invited me to a ball tonight. I need to go home and change. Can I leave an hour early?”

Lochlan looked up from the documents in front of him. “A ball? Who’s hosting?”

I blanked. “Ah — the invitation’s at Portia’s. I think it’s a Mrs Reynolds.”

He looked at me expectantly. I looked back apologetically.

“Sorry — Portia said it’s female guests only.”

Lochlan nodded. “I’ll have Declan drive you there.”

I went home, chose a dress suitable for the early spring chill in London, touched up my makeup, pinned my long hair up, and selected a necklace that would neither attract too much attention nor look shabby. By the time I came downstairs, Declan was waiting by the car.

“Ms Galloway.” He nodded in greeting.

I got in, and he drove to collect Portia.

“There was an intruder at my flat last night,” she said the moment she climbed in.

Chapter 537:

I started. “What?! Are you okay? Did you call the police?”

“I’m fine. Didn’t call the police.”

“Why not?”

“Well, turns out it wasn’t really an intruder.”

“What?”

“It was the delivery guy.”

I eyed Portia.

She shrugged sheepishly. “I was jumpy, okay? I had Josh install a security camera over the front door last night before I dared sleep. Soraya Warren really gives me the creeps. I remember how she looked standing in that orchard, looking into that pit. We should’ve had Nicky Forrester stab her then!”

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “If she came back to kill, you wouldn’t be her first target.”

Portia frowned. “Just because it won’t be me but my friend and her boyfriend, does that mean I shouldn’t worry? I’m more worried now, thanks very much!”

Declan, who was driving, spoke from the front. “You needn’t be. Mr Hastings has roughly locked down Soraya’s likely direction of flight. It’s only a matter of time before the police pick her up.”

“I sure hope so,” Portia muttered.

The car drove for nearly an hour and a half before we reached the venue, on the outskirts of London — a very lavish private house, with no other buildings in sight as far as I could see.

“What is this place?” I asked.

Portia told me this wasn’t Mrs Reynolds’s main house; it was another property she used exclusively for entertaining guests.

After we showed our invitations, someone led us inside and into a room piled with masks. “Please pick one,” the woman said.

Portia and I chose our masks, both of them the sort that framed the eyes but left the lower half of our faces uncovered. I picked a delicate silver filigree mask that sat neatly across my face and softened the angles of my jaw. We fastened them on and stepped out.

In the corridor, Portia nearly ran into a woman who was just about to come in.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going!”

An usher steadied the woman. I looked up at the familiar voice. She didn’t appear to recognise me — I was wearing a mask, after all.

“Go,” I said, tugging at Portia’s arm.

We slipped into the ballroom without speaking. Only then did Portia whisper, “That was your former mother-in-law. I’m glad you’ve got a mask, otherwise that vicious old bag would have found a way to make trouble for you.”

I shrugged. “She’s not that bad, I think, now that I’m no longer her daughter-in-law. Besides, Tanya Grant is Dr Liz Forbes’s problem now.”

Speaking of which, I wondered about the wedding — had it happened yet? Or was Tanya still trying to throw a wrench in the works and force Cary to marry someone else?

Portia and I went to the table and helped ourselves to wine. I took a small sip and found, as Portia had promised, the room was filled entirely with women.

“Portia, who is this Mrs Reynolds anyway?”

Chapter 538:

“Not sure, actually,” Portia admitted. “I’ve heard of her. Big philanthropist, loves throwing parties.”

I frowned, having assumed Portia knew the hostess. “If you don’t know her, how did you get the invitation?”

“Friend of a friend at work.”

“Galloway.” A voice called my name, not in a friendly way.

I turned and saw a posse of four young women approaching. The girl at the front wore a white satin gown and a white feather mask, the type of look that suggested an old-school, well-bred debutante. It took me several seconds to recognise Galina Croft.

But it wasn’t Galina who spoke. A young woman to Galina’s left, wearing a fox mask, was burning daggers at me.

“Ms Croft, hello,” I said with a polite smile, ignoring Fox Mask.

Galina returned the smile, and even with half of her features hidden beneath the mask, I could tell it was apologetic.

Fox Mask didn’t bother with pleasantries. “I didn’t expect a tramp like you to be invited to a gathering like this.”

I didn’t get angry. I matched her tone. “Nor did I expect someone who presents as so well-bred to have such a foul mouth. You must’ve skipped the breath freshener this morning — want a spritz? I’ve got some.”

Heat rose under the fox mask. “You—!”

Another girl, wearing a Cleopatra-style mask, backed up her friend. “You stole someone’s boyfriend and you’ve still got the nerve to show up here!”

Galina, looking increasingly embarrassed, tugged at Fox Mask’s wrist and hissed, “Stop it.”

“Don’t be such a pushover, Galina,” Fox Mask spat. “This bitch stole your man. I’ve been meaning to teach her a lesson—”

She was about to continue when Portia, with impeccable timing, “accidentally” tipped a glass of wine over her.

Fox Mask screeched, “What the hell?”

Portia covered her mouth daintily. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m such a clumsy oaf, always dropping things. Here, let me help you clean that up.” She grabbed something from a nearby table, which I was pretty sure was a rag, and started running it over Fox Mask’s expensive-looking dress.

Cleopatra lunged as if to grab Portia. “You two are the same kind of scum. I’ll— aaah!”

Her arm never reached Portia. I kept a firm hold on her wrist and said in a low voice, “Stay out of it. Keep meddling, and I’ll rip off your nipple covers and shove them in your mouth.”

The girl opened her mouth, then closed it — she looked frightened I actually might do it.

Fox Mask, soaked in wine, stormed off to the loo, face dark. Galina Croft forcibly dragged the rest of her posse away before darting one last apologetic look at me.

Portia high-fived me. “That was fun.”

“I’ll say.”

She slung an arm over my shoulder. “Now you’ve got to hang on to Lochlan. Don’t let him go, if only to stick it to these girls’ upper-class arses.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’m just popping to the loo.”

“Do you want company?”

“I’m fine. I’ll be quick.”

Chapter 539:

I stepped out of the ballroom for some air and found a quiet, shadowed corner near the balcony. But peace and quiet wasn’t to be had. I heard low voices before I had a chance to suck in a lungful of fresh air.

A deep man’s voice said, “She’ll be arriving soon. She’s Mrs Reynolds’s most important guest tonight. The biggest mark in London — whether we can land her depends on tonight. Make sure she chooses the gold mask.”

Another man replied, “Understood.”

She? The biggest mark in London? The gold mask?

A few minutes later I heard the click of high heels approaching. I peered out, saw nobody, then stepped towards the corridor where the heels were coming from — it was the passage you had to take to enter the mask room.

A woman approached, elegant, regal, beautiful in a well-preserved kind of way, probably in her late forties or early fifties, skin and figure kept like a woman who had been a stunner in her youth.

I wondered, could she be the mark? I slowed down, debating whether to interfere.

Just then, a portly woman in a formal gown — she must be Mrs Reynolds — emerged from a side room, all smiles and obsequious warmth. She hurried over to the elegant lady, effusive and flattering, and they walked together towards the mask room.

I stepped forward. “Good evening.”

“Oh, hello,” Mrs Reynolds said, surprised. Her smile was a touch too tight, a little unnatural.

The other woman nodded at me, polite. “Hello. Your mask is lovely.” She looked me over in a way that made me straighten, lift my chin — inspected, but not hostile, more like a principal glancing at a pupil.

“Can I help you pick a mask?” I offered, just for something to say.

“That would be wonderful. You appear to have excellent taste.”

Mrs Reynolds began to protest, but I was already moving towards the room.

The woman looked at the dizzying array. “They all look lovely.”

“Actually, I have a bespoke, expertly crafted mask made just for you,” Mrs Reynolds seized the moment to say.

The woman nodded. Mrs Reynolds had someone bring out a gold mask and place it on the table. It was undeniably ornate.

“That’s lovely,” the woman said, turning to me. “What do you think?”

I was still trying to decide if I’d met this woman before — she had such a familiar air. I looked at the mask. “It’s pretty, but somehow... a bit tawdry. It doesn’t really suit your refined manner, madam. I prefer the pale lilac one.”

She considered this. “In that case, let’s go with the lilac.”

Mrs Reynolds interjected, “Come on! The gold mask with your black gown would be a perfect match.”

I said, calmly, “Black with gold — well, it’s not young people’s taste, is it? A bit naff, frankly.”

The woman pointed emphatically at the lilac mask. “This one, please.”

Mrs Reynolds scowled at me behind the woman’s back, then, grudgingly, picked up the lilac mask and helped the woman put it on. She handed over a mirror.

I smiled. “See? You look ten years younger.”

The woman returned the smile. “You flatter me.”

Chapter 540:

I looked at Mrs Reynolds. She looked pissed, but didn’t appear to be hiding a dagger behind her back. I decided the danger was over. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll get back to my friend in the ballroom.”

“Do you mind showing me the way?” the woman asked.

“Uh, okay, sure.”

Mrs Reynolds made no attempt to stop us. We stepped out together. I could still feel her gaze on my face, appraising. Finally I couldn’t take it and looked straight at her.

She smiled in a way that struck me as wistful. “May I ask your name? You look familiar — maybe I know your parents.”

I froze for a second. I’d been thinking the same thing; she looked familiar too, but I was sure we’d never met before. And, for some reason I couldn’t quite understand myself, I didn’t want to tell her my name.

So I evaded. “There’s something you should know.”

She raised a questioning eyebrow.

“I heard something out in the corridor.” I told her what I’d overheard.

She took the news surprisingly calmly, no dramatic gasps, no clutching at her chest. She asked simply, “Why? I haven’t offended anyone. I don’t even know her that well.”

“How did you and Mrs Reynolds meet?” I asked.

“At a charity event.”

“Only that once?”

“Yes.”

“And you accepted this invitation?”

“Mrs Reynolds has been persistent. Besides, my husband has been nudging me to go out more often — he said it would give me more samples to observe.”

“Samples?”

“I’m a sociologist.”

Ah, a student of people. Got it.

“You don’t look scared,” I observed.

“Should I be?”

“Normal people would be.”

She smiled. “Normal is a sociological construct — it depends on which society you live in.”

Okay, she was definitely giving off professorial vibes. “This isn’t the time for a sociological debate. I think you should leave. Whatever she’s planning won’t work if you’re not here.”

“Fair point,” she conceded.

But she didn’t move.

“Well?” I pressed.

“On the other hand, I’m curious to see what develops.”

“What? You can’t—” I exhaled, then pulled out my phone to call Declan.

An automated voice told me the number was temporarily unavailable. I tried again. Same result.

Portia came over. “What’s going on?”

I put my phone down. “We’re screwed.”

“What?”

I told her, then called Lochlan, but the same mechanical voice answered. I tried Declan again in case it was a local fault — same result.

“The ballroom’s signal must’ve been jammed.” Mrs Reynolds was keeping an extra trick up her sleeve.

“Damn, that’s some high-tech spy stuff,” Portia said, eyeing the woman. “Do you work for MI5?”

She shook her head and smiled in amusement.

Suddenly the lights went out.

All the lights cut out entirely.

I tensed, reaching for Portia’s hand in the darkness. A second later, a single spotlight cut across the front of the sweeping spiral staircase.

A woman in a full-face ornate black mask and black gown descended slowly.

Mrs Reynolds stepped forward, beaming. “Ladies, I’m delighted to present our honoured guest this evening. Madam Tarot needs no introduction. She’s been invited to royal events and has once had an audience with—”

Chapter 541:

I scanned the room. There had to be multiple exits to a space this large, but they were all hidden behind thick curtains. Several men were stationed near the far wall, not even trying to blend in.

The professor stood next to me, watching Madam Tarot with interest.

“We should move towards the door,” I said quietly.

“In a moment.” She tilted her head. “Does Madam Tarot look familiar to you?”

“What?”

“There’s something about her. A familiar air. I may have met her before.”

I turned towards the woman in black. Her face was completely hidden behind the mask and she was facing away from me, yet she whipped her head around the moment my gaze landed on her, almost as if she’d sensed it.

We locked eyes. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. The professor was right. There was something about Madam Tarot.

Mrs Reynolds was still waxing lyrical about her special guest. She explained the premise: Madam Tarot saw through masks, through pretence, through the careful surfaces people constructed. She saw the truth of a person. Would anyone care to volunteer?

Nobody did.

Madam Tarot descended the remaining stairs. She moved carefully, gracefully, and I was fairly certain that underneath that elegant gown was a body athletically honed.

She stopped in front of a woman I didn’t know — young, composed, wearing a blue mask — and leaned close. She said something I didn’t catch.

The woman’s composure dissolved so quickly and completely it was almost violent. She covered her mouth with her hand. Someone nearby asked if she was all right.

The crowd surged forward, suddenly interested.

“The door,” I said to Portia. “Now.”

We began working towards the nearest exit, the professor between us. The crowd pressing forward created cover for us to move back.

We almost made it.

Then the spotlight found Tanya Grant.

I stopped despite myself.

Tanya, to her credit, didn't flinch when the light hit her. She lifted her chin.

Madam Tarot crossed to her unhurriedly and bent to speak directly into her ear.

I watched Tanya's face. It took perhaps four seconds. Then the colour simply left it — not a blush, not a flush, but a draining, as if something had been pulled from underneath her skin. Her hand gripped the back of a nearby chair. The knuckles went white.

Whatever had been said, it hit hard.

The crowd around me buzzed, delighted and unsettled, wanting more.

Madam Tarot straightened and turned. Her gaze moved through the room with the unhurried certainty of someone who had already decided where it would land.

It landed on the professor.

Mrs Reynolds stepped forward with a hostess's smile. "Madam Tarot, perhaps our distinguished guest—"

"Not her."

Madam Tarot's gaze hadn't moved from our direction, but it slid, almost imperceptibly, and settled not on the professor.

On me.

Damn. I should have left when I had the chance.

"This one," Madam Tarot said.

The crowd parted.

"I don't believe in tarot," I said pleasantly.

"That's quite all right," she replied. "It believes in you."

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## Chapter 542

Chapter 542:

“Shouldn’t you be asking me to pick a card?” I looked pointedly at her empty hands. “You are Madam Tarot, after all.”

Portia snorted.

“I don’t need cards to read someone.” Madam Tarot circled me once, slowly, as if conducting an inspection.

I kept my eyes forward and my expression neutral, and thought about all the exits in the room and how none of them were close enough.

She stopped in front of me and tilted her head.

“A cuckoo,” she said conversationally, “always knows, somewhere inside itself, that the nest isn’t right.”

“What?”

“The dimensions are wrong. The other birds are wrong. There’s a persistent, low-level sense of not-quite-belonging that no amount of effort resolves.”

I stared at her. What was she talking about? I’d always assumed tarot was about telling people when they were going to find their true love, or some equally woo-woo stuff like that.

“You know the feeling I mean,” she continued. “Like maybe you’re with the wrong people. Like maybe you don’t really belong.”

“Fascinating,” I said. “And with a better broadband connection, you might even find out my shoe size.”

A ripple of uncertain laughter moved through the crowd.

Madam Tarot looked straight at me, and I was growing more certain by the second that we’d met before. But where?

“And now she has found a new nest,” she said. “A grander one. The cuckoo is nothing if not ambitious.”

I looked at her for a long moment. Was she talking about Lochlan?

“Riveting.” I turned to Mrs Reynolds, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in my voice. “Excuse me, but I find I need to make a call. Would you mind pointing me towards the exit?”

I took out my phone as I said it, and stopped. No signal.

Around me, other women were checking their own phones, the same small frown of confusion appearing on face after face.

“Funny,” I said, still looking at Mrs Reynolds. “I can’t seem to get a signal.”

“The house is remote.” She darted a quick glance at Madam Tarot.

“Everyone, check your phones,” I said clearly, to the room.

The murmuring started immediately. A woman near the back said hers was out too. Then another. Then several at once.

Madam Tarot leaned close and whispered something in Mrs Reynolds’s ear.

Mrs Reynolds looked uncertain, but nodded and raised her voice. “Everyone, please calm down. There’s nothing wrong with the signal – we simply have thick walls here. You’ll find it’s fully restored once you step outside.”

“Could you show us the way out, then?” I pressed.

Mrs Reynolds tossed an annoyed glance in my direction but nodded.

Multiple doors around the ballroom opened simultaneously.

Staff materialised, ushering the now thoroughly confused and slightly panicky guests through the many exits.

Mrs Reynolds was whispering urgently in Madam Tarot’s ear, no longer bothering to pretend she was running the show. Madam Tarot stood on the spiral staircase, eyes locked in our direction.

Okay, she was definitely giving me the creeps.

The staff moved through the crowd, shepherding the guests and directing them like traffic cops.

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Chapter 543:

“This way, miss,” one of them said, appearing at my elbow and pointing towards the nearest exit.

“No.” I shook my head, grabbed Portia’s hand, and headed in the opposite direction.

The professor was close on our heels. “Why go the far way around?”

“Just a hunch.” I didn’t know how to explain it to her — that I didn’t like the way the staff had looked at me, as if he recognised me despite the mask, as if he wanted very much for me to go through the designated exit.

My vision swam a little. I swayed.

“Whoa.” Portia squeezed an arm around my shoulder, holding me up. “You okay?”

“I think so.” I blinked away the sudden blurriness. “Maybe it’s the air. Too stuffy.”

“Miss?” The same usher was suddenly in front of us again. “That way’s closer. Please follow me.”

I stepped around him.

“Miss?” He re-materialised, like a hard-to-shake ghost.

“Get out of my way,” I growled, the dizziness in my head getting worse. My legs were turning into spaghetti.

Portia gave the guy a hard shove. For a second he looked like he might retaliate, but one glance towards the spiral staircase and he melted back into the crowd.

“Hurry,” I said, and my voice sounded oddly distant to my own ears, like it was coming from someone else.

“What about her?” Portia tilted her chin towards somewhere off to our right.

I followed her line of sight and saw Tanya Grant clutching the edge of a high-top table, the pallor from her earlier encounter with Madam Tarot still evident. She was mumbling to herself and looked lost, as if she couldn’t decide whether to go with the flow or hide under the table.

I muttered a curse under my breath, strode up to her, and yanked on her wrist. “Start walking.”

She might have protested, but it was hard to hear her over the din. Everybody was talking at once. The guests were socialites — taking away their phone signal was worse than taking away their makeup bags. Some were literally on the verge of tears, as if in the few minutes they’d been out of contact with the outside world an apocalypse might have struck.

Which made me wonder: why had Mrs Reynolds — or more accurately Madam Tarot, who was obviously the one calling the shots — blocked the signal in the first place?

I kept pushing my way through the crowd, pivoting whenever I spotted a member of staff approaching.

We soon came upon the second-to-last door on the right. I shoved it open and risked a peek outside. It led to an empty corridor — expensive carpet on the floor, oil paintings on the walls, perfectly normal-looking.

No staff.

“Come on.”

The professor stepped through calmly. And I finally got close enough to make out what Tanya had been mumbling: “That’s not true. I didn’t. You can’t tell.”

“Uh oh,” Portia murmured, tugging at my elbow.

“Uh oh what?” I turned back towards the ballroom. “Uh oh.”

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## Chapter 544

Chapter 544:

Several men were slowly converging from multiple angles, making for our door. They were the same waistcoated staff from before, but their faces had taken on a decidedly henchman look.

I glanced at the professor, who was still observing the entire chaos with the faintly detached amusement of a bystander. Didn’t she know these men were likely here for her?

I spun around, then had to stop immediately to fight off another wave of dizziness. What was happening to me? But this wasn't the time. "Come on."

Half-dragging and half-supporting a still-mumbling Tanya between us, Portia and I hurried down the corridor, turning at random. If we didn't know where we were going, neither could the men following us.

But the footsteps didn't recede. If anything, they sounded closer.

"Damn it." Spotting a door standing slightly ajar, I shoved it wide open. "Get in here." Then I shut it quietly once everyone was inside.

I pressed my ear to the panel, straining for sounds. Footsteps, muffled by the carpet but coming fast. The crackle of walkie-talkies. Someone shouting, "They can't have gotten far — spread out!"

Eventually, the noise died down.

I breathed out slowly and turned around, feeling suddenly weak-kneed, and sank to the floor as the adrenaline ebbed.

Portia shoved a heavy armchair up against the door.

"Sooner or later, they'll find this room," the professor pointed out, calm as anything.

"I know." I hauled myself back to my feet, my head stuffed with what felt like cotton wool.

The room was a guest suite — generous bed, en suite, the usual.

I staggered to the bathroom. The window was too high and too narrow. I made it back out, found a wall hung with thick curtains, and pulled them aside.

Hello. Behind the curtains: a floor-to-ceiling French window, a sliding door that opened easily.

"Hello? Anyone in there?" Fists pounded on the door behind us.

The doorknob rattled.

Tanya squealed.

"Shush!" Portia hissed.

"Please come out!" The pounding grew louder. "Open up!"

I looked at the professor. “You should go first.”

She eyed the French window. “I wonder where it leads.”

“Probably the garden. Doesn’t matter — just go out, run fast, call the police as soon as you get a signal.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Look,” Portia cut in bluntly, “we’ll probably be fine once you’re gone. These men are only after you. The whole evening seemed to be arranged for your benefit.”

The professor looked thoughtful.

“She’s the devil!” Tanya burst out.

We all looked at her.

“What?”

“Madam Tarot — she knows things. Things I haven’t told anybody.” Tanya’s hands were trembling. “I can’t let her tell anyone. I have to get out of here.”

She glanced around wild-eyed, spotted the open French window, pounced at it, and was gone in a second.

I turned to the professor. “Now your turn.”

The banging at the door had grown more intense. The pounding in my head seemed to grow in tandem.

The professor held out a hand. “Looks like you need some help.”

I looked at her outstretched hand.

“I’m fine,” I said.

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## Chapter 545

Chapter 545:

“You’re listing to the left. And you’ve gone the colour of old parchment.”

“Thanks.”

But I took her hand.

She was stronger than she looked, which shouldn’t have surprised me as much as it did. She steered me towards the French window with brisk efficiency, like someone accustomed to being obeyed without having to ask twice. “Watch the step.”

Portia was right behind me.

Outside, the air was cold and very dark. The garden stretched away from the house in indistinct shapes — hedges, paths, the outline of something that might be a fountain.

Behind us, the banging on the guest suite door had escalated to the kind of rhythmic pounding that suggested whoever was on the other side had run out of patience.

“Move,” Portia said, and we moved.

We crossed what turned out to be a terrace and plunged into the garden proper, the professor’s grip on my arm steady as my feet made uncertain decisions about whether to cooperate.

The grass was wet. I kept slipping, almost tripping over myself.

What the hell was wrong with me? It was as if I was drunk, or—

“The wine.”

“Sorry?” the professor said.

“Someone spiked my wine.”

It felt strange to say it out loud, but the pieces had been assembling themselves in the back of my head for the last twenty minutes. Portia was fine. The professor was fine. The glass pressed into my hand early in the evening by a passing waiter I hadn’t looked at properly — that glass had been meant for me specifically.

Wait. The professor was fine?

But Mrs Reynolds's men had said she was the mark.

"Are you okay?" I asked her. "Feeling dizzy at all?"

"No, perfectly fine."

So the professor wasn't the target.

I was.

But why?

"Shit," Portia said. "You're sure your wine's spiked?"

"I don't know how else to explain this." I gestured at my head, which had staged a full revolt. Tiny stars burst into my field of vision every time I moved too fast. "Portia, I'm seeing stars."

"Damn. I'm so sorry — I swear I didn't know. I'd never have brought you here if I'd—"

"I know." I squeezed her hand. "It's not your fault."

"But why would anyone drug you? You didn't even know Mrs Reynolds. Neither did I."

Madam Tarot's masked face flashed to mind. "I'm guessing it wasn't Mrs Reynolds's idea."

"We can work out the why later," the professor said. "Right now we have more pressing priorities."

We found a gap in a tall hedge and pressed through into a darker, narrower part of the garden. Behind us came voices, more than two, spreading out, the occasional sweep of a torch beam cutting through the dark.

Some of the guards had made it outside.

We crouched behind a dense run of box hedge, the three of us pressed together. I focused on breathing quietly and persuading my head to cooperate.

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## Chapter 546

Chapter 546:

“The signal jammer,” I whispered. “It’s got to have a range. And Declan’s outside — he’ll have noticed something’s wrong the moment the guests started streaming out like panicked trout. He’ll be calling for backup.”

“Who’s Declan?” the professor asked.

“My bodyguard. And Madam Tarot — I think I know who she is.” I looked at the professor. “Gloria Lockwood.”

“What?” Portia and the professor said simultaneously.

“You know her?” I asked the professor.

“Knew would be more accurate.” Her nose wrinkled, like someone who’d caught a bad smell. “I knew her husband once. Aaron. Years ago. We lost touch after his first wife died. That hasn’t stopped his second wife from trying to recruit me into some organisation or other for the better part of two years. I’ve declined, repeatedly, which I imagine she finds irritating.”

“That might explain why you were invited here tonight,” I said.

She waited for approaching footsteps to pass before speaking again. “What about you? Why would Gloria Lockwood want to drug you?”

I told her briefly — Soraya Warren, the prison breakout, Gloria’s suspected involvement. “I think that’s why she jammed the signal. She couldn’t risk anyone recognising her and calling the police.”

“Even so,” the professor said, “appearing publicly is a considerable risk when you’re the subject of a police manhunt. This party had to matter to her enough to justify it. And if her real target was you all along—” She paused.

Something about the way she looked at me made me want to ask what she was thinking.

A torch beam swept close. We went still. The footsteps passed.

The professor kept her eyes on me, and even in the dark I had the distinct, uncomfortable sense of being assessed with great care.

“You should know,” she said quietly, “that you remind me very much of someone I used to know. It’s been bothering me since we met in the mask room. I’d very much like to talk to you properly, once we’re out of this hedge.”

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

“About my parents?” I said, without entirely knowing why I said it.

She looked at me for a moment. “Yes. About your parents.”

There was no time to ask what she meant, because at that moment the voices returned, closer this time, two men systematically working through the garden section by section.

Headed straight for us.

The professor sat up slightly. “I’ll draw them off.”

“Absolutely not,” I said.

“I’m not drugged, I’m not wearing heels, and frankly I’m rather curious to see if I can manage it.” She sounded, if anything, mildly energised by the prospect. “Give me four minutes, then head for the garden wall on the south side. There should be a gate, if memory serves.”

“You’ll get yourself—”

“Four minutes,” she said, and was gone before I could finish the sentence.

Portia and I looked at each other in the dark.

“I like her,” Portia said.

We watched the professor’s silhouette move deliberately towards the torch beams, drawing them away to our left. Then Portia hauled me to my feet and we started for the south wall, moving as quietly as we could.

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## Chapter 547

Chapter 547:

I kept glancing back towards the dark where the professor had disappeared. Would she make it? Would the men hurt her?

Then, from somewhere behind us, came a sound that stopped me cold.

A single heavy splash.

Then silence.

My phone buzzed against my palm.

Declan.

“Miss Galloway.” His voice was tight. “Thank God, signal’s back. Where are you?”

“Garden. South side, I think. There’s a long run of box hedge — I’m behind it. Somewhere near what might be a stone birdbath, though it’s too dark to be certain.”

“Stay there. Don’t move towards any voices you don’t recognise.” A burst of noise in the background — shouting, the crunch of gravel. “It’s chaos out here. A bunch of men are searching the grounds, looks like they’re looking for someone.”

“Might be me they’re looking for.”

“What? But why — never mind that now. I’m going to keep them away from your position. I think some of them are armed. Do NOT move. I’ll— wait, wait, boss’s car just came through the front gate. Let me check... yeah, definitely his car. I’ll send him your way.”

“Right. Thanks, Declan.”

He’d already hung up.

I let out a breath and relayed the highlights to Portia, who was crouched beside me holding a fallen branch as a makeshift weapon.

“Thank God,” she said. “Lochlan’s here. Right, we can stand down, he’ll sort it.”

We pressed further into the hedge, branches snagging at my dress, and settled in to wait.

“Do you think it was a kidnapping?” Portia whispered. “Like, an actual kidnapping?”

“I don’t know.” The dizziness had levelled off, no better but no worse, which I was choosing to interpret as a good sign. “Gloria wanted the professor here, possibly for the recruitment thing. But the wine was meant for me. So either I’m the main event and the professor was almost incidental, or there are two separate agendas running simultaneously and they happened to collide tonight.”

“Why would Gloria Lockwood have an agenda involving you? You’ve never even met her.”

“I have, but I don’t really know her. It’s strange.”

“Unless it’s connected to Lochlan somehow.”

“I know.” And that was a thought I’d rather not delve into right now.

I looked at my phone. Nothing incoming.

I typed out a text to Lochlan: South garden. Stone birdbath nearby, or possibly a statue — too dark to tell. Are you close?

A single grey tick sat there.

“Josh is calling,” Portia murmured, phone pressed to her ear. “Give me a second.” She shifted slightly away. “Yes, I’m fine. No, I’m not — Josh. Josh, I’m literally in a bush, I can’t — yes, both legs still attached, thank you for checking.” A pause. “Because I’m whispering, that’s why. No, I’m not — Joshua, I am not being held at gunpoint, would you please—”

Somewhere beyond the garden wall, an ambulance wail cut through the night and faded past.

I thought of the splash.

Was someone hurt?

I checked my phone again. Still one tick. Sent, not read.

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## Chapter 548

Chapter 548:

Portia finished her call. “Josh insists on driving out here, like that’s going to help. I had to put my foot down and order him to stay put.”

“That’s actually quite sweet.”

“It’s suffocating is what it is.” But she was smiling.

The garden had grown quieter. The voices had receded, the torch beams disappeared. I couldn’t tell if that meant the guards had given up or simply relocated.

I called Lochlan.

It rang. Five times, six, seven.

Voicemail.

I hung up and called Declan instead. He answered on the third ring. “Miss Galloway.”

“Where are you? Sounds like you’re in a car.”

“I am. I’m following a vehicle that left through the rear service entrance while everyone else was going out the front. No plates. I think it’s someone doing a runner. Worth checking out.”

“Oh. I thought— never mind.”

“What is it?”

“I was hoping you could come pick us up.”

“Oh, sorry, I can’t—”

“It’s fine. Don’t lose them.”

“But I told boss where you are, hasn’t he—?”

“He hasn’t found us yet.”

A beat of silence. “I’m certain he’s on his way, if you could just—”

“Never mind.” I stood up, because at that moment, over the hedge and through the trees, came the unmistakable pulse of blue lights. “I can hear sirens.”

We waited until we saw the torches of uniformed officers moving in organised lines across the lawn before we stepped out from behind the hedge.

I'd never been particularly pleased to see the police before. Tonight was an exception.

They took our names and asked us to wait.

What followed was an hour of standing on a cold terrace drinking bad coffee from a flask produced by a very young PC, while around us the house and gardens were systematically combed.

From what I could overhear, someone had reported a possible sighting of Gloria Lockwood. She was a person of interest in Soraya Warren's prison breakout, but the police wouldn't have turned out in such numbers for that alone — not without the simultaneous flurry of phone calls from socialites in hysterics, claiming they were being kidnapped.

I murmured to Portia, "So it really was her."

The police searched the premises. Mrs Reynolds was nowhere to be found. Neither was Madam Tarot.

I hoped Declan was having better luck.

A police car dropped Portia home first. Josh was on the pavement before the car had stopped moving, and he pulled her into a hug so tight I heard her gasp.

Then it was just me.

Back in my silent flat, I showered, changed into pyjamas, made tea, sat down.

Picked up my phone.

The text to Lochlan sat exactly as I'd left it. One grey tick.

I called him one more time.

It rang once, then cut to voicemail immediately.

I didn't so much sleep as lie in the dark rehearsing explanations.

He'd lost his phone. He'd been caught up with something. The signal had been patchy all evening and maybe my messages hadn't gone through properly after all.

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Chapter 549:

There were any number of sensible, non-catastrophic reasons why Lochlan Hastings, a man who ran a billion-pound firm with the organisational precision of a Swiss watch, might fail to respond to multiple calls and texts from someone he was sleeping with.

None of the explanations felt convincing at six in the morning.

I gave up on sleep, made coffee, and looked at my phone.

One grey tick. Still.

I tried calling again. Voicemail, first ring.

The low-grade panic that had been circling since last night landed properly.

This wasn't radio silence. This was something else. Lochlan didn't do radio silence. The only reason he wouldn't respond was if he couldn't.

Car accident. An ambush. Soraya Warren had been on the loose for days, and last night had hardly been short of armed men with unclear motives.

I called Kai.

He answered on the fourth ring, voice thick with sleep. "Hyacinth?"

"Do you know where Lochlan is?"

A long pause. "It's... um, it's twenty to seven. In the morning."

"I know what time it is, Kai."

"I'd assume he's with... I mean, I'd assume he's at home? In bed? Just like me? I thought you two were—" A pause. "Is everything all right?"

"Never mind."

I called Declan.

It rang long enough that I'd started pacing barefoot across the kitchen tiles, my coffee going cold on the counter, before he picked up.

“Miss Galloway.”

“Where’s Lochlan?”

A beat. “Hospital. Blythe Park Hospital, over in—”

My stomach dropped. “Is he hurt?”

“He sounded fine when I spoke to him. I was reporting in on the chase last night, he seemed a bit distracted, maybe, but fine. His voice was normal.” A barely stifled yawn. “Actually, while I’ve got you, I need to tell you what I found.”

In the background I could hear police radios crackling, multiple voices, the particular ambient noise of a scene that hadn’t been cleared yet.

“Go on,” I said.

“I followed the car from Mrs Reynolds’s service entrance. Nearly lost it twice on those dark country lanes. Found it parked up by the roadside about four miles out.” A pause. “Found her in the ditch. Mrs Reynolds. Body was still warm.”

I stopped pacing. “She’s dead?”

“Neck broken. Could be a fall, except the ground’s flat for twenty metres in every direction. Police aren’t buying it. Coroner won’t either, I’d imagine.” He lowered his voice. “Car was clean. Whoever was with her left nothing behind. I searched it before the police arrived.”

An image rose up: the woman in black, Madam Tarot, stepping into a car with Mrs Reynolds as the party collapsed behind them. And then—

“She tied up the loose end.”

“That’d be my read,” Declan said. “Can’t have Reynolds talking to the police about what happened last night. Anyway, boss knows. I updated him just now.”

“Wait, you got through to him?”

“His second phone. The work one’s off, but I’ve got all his numbers.”

“His second—” I stopped. “He has multiple phones?”

“Three, I think. Maybe four. Don’t you have his numbers?”

“I don’t.”

“Oh. Do you want me to—”

“What hospital did you say it was?”

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## Chapter 550

Chapter 550:

Blythe Park Hospital was forty-five minutes across morning London, which was forty-five minutes longer than I wanted to spend in a car with my own thoughts.

The woman at the front desk had the pleasant, professionally impenetrable expression of someone who had spent years not giving out information to people who wanted it.

“I’m looking for a patient. Lochlan Hastings.”

“Are you family?”

I hesitated. The honest answer was no. The honest answer also meant being directed back to the car park. “Yes.”

“Hyacinth?”

I turned.

Jaclyn Lemon stepped out of the lift.

She looked like she hadn’t had much sleep either. She was carrying a familiar-looking jacket over one arm and studying me with an expression I couldn’t immediately categorise. Not hostile, exactly, but not friendly either.

“Is he here?” I said.

Her gaze moved over me briefly. “You look well rested. Change of clothes, shower. Took your time.”

“Is Lochlan here or not?”

“Of course he’s here. His mother’s hurt. Where else would he be?” She tilted her head slightly. “He’s fine, before you ask. Just some minor scratches. But his clothes are soaked through.” She lifted the arm over which the jacket was slung. “Which is why I have to play gofer. He won’t leave Jennifer’s side long enough to go home and change, so I’ll have to

rush back and fetch things for him. Wouldn't even leave to eat. I'll have to bring breakfast in."

"Jennifer." My brain scrambled to keep up. "His mother. She's hurt?"

"Someone pushed her into the pond. She can't swim. If Loch hadn't got there in time, God knows what might have happened to her." She paused. "Wait, why am I telling you this? You should know. You were there."

"There? Where?"

"The party. The masked ball. Loch told me you went."

"I didn't know his mother was at the party."

He told Jaclyn I was there. He had time to speak to Jaclyn but not to call me.

"Really." Jaclyn looked at me for a moment. "Well. I have to move. Loch's asked me to talk Lowell and Lyra down from booking flights home, and Uncle Holden's apparently in a state, so someone needs to intercept him before his blood pressure does something dramatic, and I still need to call Kai about rescheduling today's—"

"Lowell? Lyra?"

"Lowell, Lyra, and Lorna. Loch's siblings." She caught the blank look on my face. "Didn't he mention them? I assumed he would have, given you two—" A small pause. "Anyway. I really do have to go."

The door swung shut behind her.

I stood in the hospital lobby and looked at the lift.

Its doors slid open.

A nurse in scrubs stepped in, caught my eye, and held the door with one hand.

"You coming?"

The corporate jet was the same one we'd used before, yet somehow this time it felt different. Bigger, emptier.

Kai stowed my overnight bag in the overhead compartment. I thanked him, took the window seat, and opened my laptop.

I was going to focus on work. I was absolutely going to focus on work.

