

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

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Chapter 551

Chapter 551:

I checked the schedule for the Frankfurt meetings, read the same paragraph three times, and closed the briefing document.

“Kai.” I checked my watch. “When’s Alderton joining us?”

Kai had a slightly guilty look on his face. “He’s not.”

“What? Then who’s—”

Kai nodded towards the small oval window.

A black Cadillac rolled to a stop on the tarmac below.

Roy’s liveried figure emerged first. He waved up at us, then held open the rear door.

Lochlan stepped out.

His suit was impeccable. His gait was as it always was, unhurried and deliberate.

It was only when he reached the steps and looked up briefly that I saw the stubble, dark against his jaw.

He boarded, exchanged a word with the pilot, and sat down in the seat across from me even though there were rows of empty seats elsewhere.

“Morning, boss,” I said. “I thought you were taking the week.”

“This trip matters.” He glanced at my screen. “Penis enlargement?”

I closed the laptop. “Junk mail.”

He said nothing. The engines began their low build.

I looked out of the window and watched the terminal slide away.

The cabin was never truly silent — there was the steady, pressurised hiss of the air system, the low drone of the engines settling into their cruising note — yet somehow all those sounds only made the silence between us more pronounced.

“Can we talk?” Lochlan finally broke it.

“I need to go over the schedule with Kai.” I looked up.

Kai had vanished.

I stared at the empty galley doorway for a moment. Traitor.

“This isn’t company time,” Lochlan said.

“We’re on a company jet.”

“We’re on my jet. And work doesn’t start till after we land.”

I put the laptop away and folded my hands in my lap.

Lochlan looked at me for a moment, and something moved behind his eyes that I couldn’t read.

He had a tell, a very small one. When he was composing himself, the muscles along his jaw tightened fractionally, almost imperceptibly. I’d learned to notice it.

He was composing himself now.

“I’m sorry about the other night,” he said.

“You’ve already apologised. I’ve told you it’s fine.” His phone had died when he jumped into the pond after his mother. Of course my calls hadn’t gone through. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Sure, he could’ve called me from a different phone. Borrowed one from the medics, used the hospital’s front desk phone, or just whipped out one of his apparently myriad backup phones I knew nothing about.

But fine, technically, not his fault his phone died.

“I should have made sure you had my other numbers.”

Inside, something said: yes, you should have.

Out loud, I said: “I never asked.”

“I thought Declan was with you. I thought you were—”

“I was safe.” I thought, briefly, of crouching behind a box hedge in the dark with Portia, listening to boot-steps on gravel, not knowing who was coming. “Nothing happened.”

“I was coming to get you,” he said. “I was on my way and then my mother was—”

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“I know.” I didn’t want him to finish that sentence, didn’t want him to confirm out loud that yes, his mother’s safety had taken priority over mine.

Rationally, it made sense — Christ, if it had been my mum who fell into that pond, I’d probably have jumped in faster than Lochlan and forgotten he even existed — still, knowing something is rational doesn’t stop it from stinging.

Better not to dwell on it. “Have you found out who pushed her?”

A beat. “Not yet. I have people working on the guest list.”

“Did she see who it was?”

He was looking at me steadily. His lips weren’t moving, but I could tell there were words building in his throat, words he wanted to get out, words that might offer a more satisfactory explanation of why he’d gone dark on me for the past forty-eight hours.

His mother was part of the story. Not the whole story.

He didn’t say it.

“I hope she recovers quickly,” I said. “In fact, shouldn’t you still be with her?”

“She’ll be fine. Minor concussion. Dad’s with her.”

I nodded and looked out the porthole. Below us, London had already shrunk to a grey patchwork, the Thames a pale thread through it.

The thing about Lochlan was that he was not, in ordinary circumstances, an evasive man. He was private — there was a difference.

But he was being evasive as hell now. What had he been doing for the past two days, for instance. And what had Jaclyn been doing by his side.

But if he didn't want to talk about it, there was nothing I could do.

"Have the police made any progress?" I retreated to safer ground. "About Mrs Reynolds's death, I mean? More than one person recognised Gloria Lockwood at the party. Surely the police have enough to bring her in, at least question her."

Lochlan shook his head. "Gloria has an alibi. For the night of the party, she was hundreds of miles from London. Seen by plenty of people."

"How is that possible?"

"It isn't. She had to have pre-arranged the alibi. The police are working to dismantle it, but it will take time."

"She's good. Scarily good." Which didn't bode well for those in her crosshairs. Like me. For reasons I still didn't quite understand.

"Which is why I wanted you on this trip. Her influence has limits. Frankfurt is one of them."

I nodded.

He reached across the table and took my hand. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"I know."

"Hyacinth."

"Yeah?" I looked up.

"After we deal with the Frankfurt meetings, after things settle down, there's something I want to tell you."

"Sure." My heart picked up pace, very slightly.

"I don't want to lie to you. And you deserve to have all the information before you decide if you..." He struggled to get the rest of the words out. "Still want to be with me."

"What is it?" I held my breath.

His phone rang.

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He took it from his coat pocket, looked at the screen, and went very still in the particular way he went still when something required all of his attention at once.

“Sorry, I have to take this.”

“Sure.”

He was the boss. He got calls. Even if this one had interrupted what felt like a significant conversation, I could understand that.

What I couldn’t understand was why he had to get up and take it in the cockpit, with the door closed.

Frankfurt’s financial district looks like London’s cousin, same glass and steel ambition, but more organised.

I’ve always found it easier to think here. Less noise.

Today was not easier.

The morning meetings ran as they were supposed to. I said what needed to be said, asked what needed to be asked, shook the hands that needed shaking. Thirty years of watching my father work a room had left me with a functional autopilot for these occasions.

I could run a creditors’ meeting on four hours of sleep and a bad conscience, which was fortunate, because that was precisely what I was doing.

Hyacinth sat two seats down during the first session and took notes with the focused efficiency of someone who had decided to be excellent at her job today specifically.

I noticed because I notice everything she does, which is a condition I’ve largely given up trying to manage.

During the coffee break, one of the Frankfurt associates — mid-thirties, nice enough suit, the easy confidence of a man who has never been told no particularly often — drifted towards her with a cup and a smile.

I watched him say something. Watched her laugh, brief and polite. Watched him take out his phone in the unmistakable gesture of someone asking for a number.

The violence of what I wanted to do to him was, frankly, disproportionate. I gave it exactly two seconds of internal acknowledgement, then turned to Kai.

“Tell Hyacinth it’s time for lunch.”

Kai, who had been watching me watch her, said nothing and went immediately.

He is an excellent assistant.

Lunch was the four of us — Hyacinth, Kai, myself, and the Frankfurt director — at a restaurant that served food I didn’t taste.

Hyacinth was composed and engaged and asked the Frankfurt director questions that impressed him visibly, and I thought, not for the first time, that she had wasted years being someone’s secret wife when she could have been doing this.

When the director excused himself to take a call, we were briefly alone. Kai had developed a sudden intense interest in the wine list at the far end of the table.

Hyacinth looked at her water glass.

I looked at her.

She knew I was looking. She continued to look at the water glass.

This was the third time today she had done this — found somewhere else to direct her attention at the precise moment when there was only the two of us and the space between us where a conversation should have been.

She was waiting.

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I knew what she was waiting for. I had told her on the plane that there was something I needed to say, and then I had taken a phone call in a cockpit with a closed door like a man with something to hide, because that was exactly what I was.

I picked up my water glass and drank.

Hyacinth looked up, caught me looking, and looked away again.

The afternoon was long.

By five o'clock I had the beginnings of a headache that had nothing to do with the meetings, and Hyacinth had perfected the art of being professionally present and personally unreachable — a skill I recognised because I invented it.

Outside the office building, the evening light was doing something pleasant to the street that I didn't particularly care about.

"Kai." I kept my voice level. "Could you take Hyacinth back to the hotel? I have a personal appointment."

I watched Hyacinth's face in my peripheral vision. The slight shift. The question she assembled and then, visibly, put away.

He nodded. "Of course. Evening, boss."

I watched the car pull away.

Then I stood on the pavement in the Frankfurt evening and did what I'd been doing for four days — think about a woman I had never met until recently and wonder how thoroughly she was about to dismantle everything I had built.

The private investigator's office was above a pharmacy on a quiet street near the river, the kind of office that doesn't advertise itself.

Stefan Brandt had a firm handshake and the careful eyes of a man who had learned to be unsurprised by the things people needed to know about each other.

I had found him online. I had not used my own name. I had paid in cash via a third party.

Brandt set a manila folder on the desk between us without preamble.

"The woman you asked about. I've compiled what's available. It isn't everything, given the tight time frame, but it's enough to establish the broad picture."

I opened the folder.

The photograph was paper-clipped to the inside cover. A woman who looked to be in her early sixties but I knew was in fact a decade younger. The thick makeup did a passable job of hiding the damage — the deep-set lines, the hollowed cheeks, the particular greyish cast of skin that has been treated badly for a long time.

I had seen another photograph of her before. In that one she'd been wearing waitstaff uniform and a name tag that said HELEN.

After my team had combed through the guest list but failed to find a suspect, they pulled the staff records from Mrs Reynolds's household.

Helen was a fake name. The references were fabricated. She had worked two previous events for Reynolds and disappeared after the night of the masked ball.

There was no apparent connection between this woman and my mother. No shared history, no mutual acquaintances, no obvious motive for wanting her dead.

Before I'd had the chance to dig further, I'd received a call.

I still don't know how she obtained my number.

The first thing she said to me would be burned in my memory till the day I die.

"Lochlan. I'm your mother."

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I'd been watching the strip of light under my hotel room door like a complete lunatic for the past twenty minutes.

I heard the lift. I heard the very faint impression of footsteps on thick carpet, so faint I'd have missed it if I hadn't been actively listening for it. I saw the light change, that brief darkening of the gap as someone paused outside my door.

He stood there for a moment. Then the light shifted back and the footsteps continued.

He didn't knock.

A minute later, I was standing outside his door with my hand raised.

But I didn't knock either.

Maybe he didn't want to be bothered. Maybe he didn't want to talk. Maybe I should just—

The door opened.

Lochlan stood there in trousers and a half-unbuttoned shirt, holding his tie. He looked at me with that expression I'd been trying to read for the past week, the one that gave me nothing.

I cleared my throat. "Just wondering if you'd had dinner."

Where have you been was the real question I wanted to ask.

"Not yet. I was going to order after I showered."

"I can order for you. If you want."

Something moved across his face. He stepped back and let me in.

His suite was identical to mine — same grey and cream, same view of the same slice of Frankfurt skyline.

What wasn't identical was the state of it. His coat was thrown over an armchair. There were files on the desk, files on the coffee table, a folder splayed face-down on the sofa like he'd put it down in the middle of a thought and forgotten it.

I started stacking them automatically. It was just wrong, the mess. Lochlan was always organised.

I heard the shower start.

I sat on the edge of his bed with the room service menu and thought about the last time we'd been in a shower together, how long we'd spent in the tub, how entirely different that version of him had been from this one.

It didn't feel like a week and a half ago. It felt like a different chapter of something.

I picked up the phone and ordered for him. Grilled salmon, no butter sauce, steamed vegetables, brown rice, sparkling water.

Then I added a portion of fries.

I'd been sneaking junk food onto Lochlan's plate for weeks now, quietly waiting to see when he'd finally succumb to temptation like the rest of us mortals.

So far I was getting nowhere.

He came out of the bathroom in a towel.

I stayed where I was and watched him. Water dripped from his hair onto his collarbone. He picked up the smaller towel from his shoulder and rubbed his hair dry, and I watched that too, remembering the way it felt to run my fingers through it.

He went to the closet. His back was to me when he let the towel drop.

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I absolutely did not look away. I watched him step into his underwear, pull on a shirt, reach for his trousers, and I felt an irresistible urge to cross the room and put both hands on him, and I thought: honestly, Galloway. Get a grip.

He turned around.

“I ordered dinner,” I said. “Should be here in about ten minutes.”

“Thanks.”

He said thanks all the time, which was exactly why I’d learned to tell the difference between a thanks said to a secretary and a thanks said to a girlfriend.

He’d just used the first one.

He picked up his laptop from the bedside table and went and sat in the armchair in the seating area. The armchair that was not near me.

He opened his laptop and said, without looking up, “Kai just updated the schedule. Holberg pushed the call back by an hour tomorrow. Does that affect the factory tour in the afternoon?”

I stared at him.

“Are we still on company time?” I asked.

He looked up. “No.”

“Then I don’t want to talk about work.”

He closed the laptop. Set it aside. Looked at me with that unreadable expression, waiting.

I stood up and walked over to him. He tipped his chin up slightly as I stopped in front of him, looking up at me, and I looked down at him and thought: I had absolutely no idea what was going on behind those pale eyes, and I was fairly certain that a week ago I would have said I did.

“You pick a topic.”

He thought for a moment. “Family. I met yours. Jeremy and Jenna are both lovely.”

“They are. They spoiled me so badly it’s a miracle I’m not completely insufferable.” I paused. “Your turn.”

“What about mine?”

“Your father’s charming. Genuinely hard to dislike.” Even when I thought he was a home intruder.

I pulled the ottoman over and sat down, closer now. “I bet he was devastating when he was young. Ladies couldn’t keep their hands off him. And you’ve got his looks.”

Lochlan’s mouth did something that was almost a smile. “You think I look like him?”

“Yeah. You’ve got the same bone structure.” I studied his face. “Different eye colours obviously, but the rest of it. Why, you don’t think so?”

“I suppose I’ve never looked that closely.”

There was something odd in how he said it.

“You got the looks,” I said. “He got the personality. He’s all fireworks and bear hugs and you’re more...” I gestured at him. “This. The aloof prince thing.”

“The aloof prince thing.”

“It’s a compliment. Sort of.”

The almost-smile faded. He'd gone somewhere again, that slight glazing of his attention, and I'd watched it happen enough times to recognise it as whatever had been sitting behind his sternum for the last week.

I stood up, crossed the remaining distance, and sat down on his lap.

His hands came up to my waist almost automatically.

"You know you can talk to me," I said. "About whatever it is."

"I know."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it keeps being true."

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I leant in to kiss his cheek — a consolation, an "I'm here if you need me" — but when I pulled back he reeled me back in, and the kiss went from consolation to something else in about three seconds.

His hands tightened on my waist and I could feel it, the thing underneath — not quite desire, or not just desire, but something more urgent than that.

Like he needed the physical connection, the physical act of using his hands and his mouth and the rest of him, to hold off something he didn't want to think about.

I thought: okay, fine. I can be that. I can give him this.

He got my bra off through my shirt somehow, and I was just thinking that Frankfurt was maybe salvageable after all when the doorbell went.

We broke apart. I yanked my shirt straight.

Lochlan stood up and smoothed his shirt and went to open the door with the composure of someone who'd just been reading.

The porter wheeled in the cart. Lochlan signed for it, tipped him, and closed the door, and when he lifted the silver cloche and saw the fries sitting next to the salmon, he looked at me.

"Those are mine," I said.

He picked one up and offered it to me.

I took it. The smell hit me before the taste did, hot oil and salt, and something in my stomach lurched sideways. I gagged.

"You alright?" Lochlan came closer.

"Fine. I think." I set down the fry. "Probably just my stomach still adjusting."

He fetched me a glass of water, watched me for a second to make sure I wasn't going to throw up, then sat down to eat.

I picked at my fries and watched him and thought about the black car. The dark saloon I'd clocked outside my parents' house three weeks ago, and then again outside the Velos building, and then again, undeniably, pulling away from the kerb as I'd walked to meet Portia for dinner last week.

Common model, common colour, I'd told myself. London was full of them.

But maybe it wasn't so common, not since I'd learned about Soraya's prison break. Maybe Lochlan needed to know.

He ate in silence. Whatever was weighing on him was still there, had possibly settled deeper for not being talked about.

I decided not to mention the car.

He had enough on his mind. And I was probably wrong.

For the rest of the Frankfurt trip, I barely saw him.

This was not, technically, abnormal for a business trip. There were meetings, dinners, site visits, the usual choreography of corporate travel.

What was abnormal was that Lochlan kept vanishing from his own schedule. Meetings he was supposed to lead, I led instead. Dinners he was supposed to attend, I attended with

Kai, making his apologies to rooms full of people who had specifically come to meet Lochlan Hastings and were visibly trying to hide their disappointment at getting me.

I'm a perfectly adequate substitute in most situations. I was aware this was not one of them.

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Chapter 558:

Every evening, it was Kai and me returning to the hotel by ourselves. Every evening, there was no sign of Lochlan until late, sometimes very late, the light under my door going dark long after I'd given up watching for it.

On the fourth evening I asked Kai where Lochlan was.

Kai gave me the look of a man who had just been handed a live grenade. "He, uh, had some personal matters to attend to."

"What personal matters."

"I'm afraid I don't have that information."

"Kai."

"Hyacinth." He shrugged apologetically. "I genuinely don't know. I thought perhaps you might."

We looked at each other for a moment, each hoping the other had the answer.

Neither of us did.

I went to bed and stared at the ceiling and told myself there was a perfectly reasonable explanation, probably several, and I would hear it when Lochlan was ready to explain himself, and I was a grown adult woman with a functional life and a reasonably healthy sense of self-worth and I was absolutely not going to spend another night watching a strip of light under a door.

I watched it for forty minutes before I fell asleep.

On the last morning, we went to the airport together. The car was so quiet you could barely tell it contained four people.

Lochlan sat beside me in the back seat and looked out the window, and I looked at my phone and pretended to read something important.

When we reached the private terminal, the plane was already waiting on the tarmac, steps down.

Kai walked ahead of us with the luggage. I walked up the steps with Lochlan.

I was almost at the top when he stopped.

I turned around. He was still on the steps below me, and something in his expression made me go very still.

“I’m not coming back with you,” he said.

I stared at him. “Sorry?”

“I still have some things to take care of here. Personal things. Roy will meet you at Heathrow. Declan will be your security detail until... until things settle down with Soraya.”

I opened my mouth. I closed it again.

There were about fifteen things I wanted to say.

I wanted to say: you’ve been disappearing for days and I’ve covered for you in rooms full of people who didn’t want me there, and you don’t owe me an explanation for your personal life, but the complete absence of one is starting to feel like its own kind of message.

I wanted to say: what personal things, Lochlan, what are you doing in Frankfurt, who are you meeting, why won’t you just tell me what’s going on.

I wanted to say: this isn’t about Soraya and you know it isn’t.

What I said was: “Right.”

He came up the remaining steps and hugged me, briefly, his hand at the back of my head for just a moment.

Then he pulled back and looked at me with that expression I still couldn’t read, and walked back down the steps, and across the tarmac, and I stood at the top of the stairs and watched him go.

The ground crew were watching me.

I went inside and sat down and buckled my seatbelt.

Chapter 559:

Kai appeared from wherever he'd been hiding and settled into the seat across the aisle with the tactful silence of someone who had witnessed the entire exchange from a respectful distance and was now pretending very hard that he hadn't.

The engines started. Frankfurt began to slide away beneath us.

"Hyacinth," Kai said, after a decent interval. "Can I get you anything? The bar is fully stocked. Boss keeps a rather extensive selection."

I looked out the window at the clouds closing in below us and thought about everything I was carrying home that I hadn't brought with me.

"You know what," I said, "why not. Let's see what he's got. Let's sample everything."

Kai blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"The big boss is away." I turned from the window. "Seems like a reasonable time to take advantage."

Kai stared at me for a moment. Then he unbuckled his seatbelt and went to investigate the drinks cabinet.

He came back juggling four bottles. "There's a 2009 Krug Clos du Mesnil, a Macallan 1926, a Chateau Pétrus 2000, and something called Blanton's Gold that I suspect boss won at an auction."

I picked up the Krug, found two glasses in the cabinet above, and poured.

The champagne was pale gold and smelled expensive. I handed Kai a glass, picked up mine, and touched it to his.

"Cheers," I said.

"Cheers."

I drank.

The champagne was extraordinary. Cool and precise, with that particular quality of very good things that makes you feel briefly that the world is more ordered than you thought.

I took a second sip.

Something shifted.

I set the glass down with great care, stood up with equal care, said “excuse me” to Kai in a squeaky voice, and speedwalked to the rear of the plane.

I made it to the toilet with approximately three seconds to spare.

Afterwards, I ran the cold tap and pressed both wrists under it and waited for the world to stop tilting. Then I straightened up and looked in the mirror.

My reflection looked back at me. Pale. Mascara slightly wrong. Hair still okay, though.

I thought about the nausea in Lochlan’s hotel room. The fries I couldn’t finish. The coffee that had smelled wrong for a week.

I did the arithmetic, and thought:

Oh, shit.

“She called in this morning,” Kai said over the phone. “Said she wasn’t feeling well. Timothy’s covering her meetings.”

I looked out the window at London’s grey midmorning sky. “If she’s still not in tomorrow, go to the flat. Make sure she’s alright.”

“Of course.” A pause. “Though I think, if I’m being honest, she’d rather it was you than me.”

“I’ll go and see her,” I said. “After.”

I didn’t say after what. Kai didn’t ask, which was one of the reasons I valued him.

I ended the call and sat with the phone in my hand for a moment, thinking about Hyacinth calling in sick, which she almost never did.

A knock at the door.

I put the phone down and went to answer it.

She looked different from the photographs. Smaller, somehow. Dyed dark hair cut short, wearing a coat that had been expensive once.

Chapter 560:

She walked past me into the room without being invited and looked around like someone pricing things up.

“Why a hotel?” She tsk-tsked. “I’d have preferred a restaurant. I’m starving.”

“I have no interest in sharing a meal with you.”

She turned to look at me with an expression that was almost amused. “Oh, how direct. Just like your father. He asked me out two minutes after we met, you know. We ended up in his bed that very same—”

“I’m not here to reminisce.”

She held up both hands, crossed to the armchair, sat down, and picked up the room service menu from the side table. “Fine. Talk while I eat, then. I haven’t had a proper meal since yesterday.”

I stayed where I was near the door and watched her flip through the menu.

We looked nothing alike. Different build, different eye colour, different bone structure. Try as I might, I couldn’t identify a single feature where I resembled her.

And yet.

“The DNA test confirmed your claim.”

She snorted. “As if there was ever any doubt. I said I was your mother, and that’s the honest God’s truth.” She set the menu down and spread her arms wide. “So. Ready to give your dear mum a hug?”

I remained where I was.

She dropped her arms and shrugged. “I know you rich lot like to keep a poker face. But you’ve just learned the people who raised you aren’t your real parents. I’d expect some kind of reaction.”

“I already knew.”

That made her look up.

“Holden and Jennifer told me when I turned eighteen,” I said. “Everything. They hid nothing.” I kept my voice level and my eyes on her face. “So I already know that you and whoever he was at the time were high school dropouts. That you were both drug and alcohol addicts. That you ran away from home and had a baby you didn’t want and left it in the street.” I paused. “To die.”

Helen — which wasn’t her real name but was what I was going to call her anyway — said nothing for a moment. Something moved across her face that might have been shame and

might have been something older and more complicated than that, but she recovered quickly.

“How much?”

“What?”

“I presume money is the reason you’ve resurfaced after all these years. What’s the number that makes you go away?”

She stared hard at me for a long moment. “What if I don’t want money? What if I want to reconnect with my son, my only blood in the whole wide world? Don’t you want to know? Aren’t you even a little curious — about me, about your dad? Do you even know his name?”

I did. Stefan Brandt’s file had been thorough, and nothing in it suggested my birth father was someone I’d want to meet in any context whatsoever.

“So you don’t want money.”

Chapter 561:

I must have let the contempt creep too far into my voice, because Helen was on her feet in an instant, face flushed. “That’s what you think of me? Your own mother? You think I’m here to squeeze you for cash?”

“You wouldn’t have used the word squeeze if it hadn’t been on your mind. And I’d advise you to think quickly. I’d like to conclude this matter by the end of tonight.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“I have no interest in prolonging our contact, yes.”

“Hmph.” She tilted her chin. “And what if I don’t want to go away?”

Fine. If the carrot wouldn’t work, the stick would. “If you’re still in London by tomorrow morning, you’ll be arrested and charged with attempted murder.”

She gaped. “What?”

“Witnesses are already being rounded up who can swear under oath they saw you push my mother into the pond at the masked ball. She could have drowned. With your record — assault, theft, possession of cocaine and heroin — it won’t be difficult to convince a jury.”

The change in her face was swift and total.

The casual, faintly amused woman who had walked in here minutes ago was gone.

What came back in her place was something harder and older — the street survivor, the woman who'd learned early that when a situation turned, it turned fast, and you either hit first or ran fast. Her eyes went flat. Her jaw set.

"You wouldn't."

"I presume you've done your homework on me. So you know I don't issue empty threats."

Helen's nostrils flared. I caught the way her eyes cut sideways to the lamp on the side table.

Was she going to use it? Did she think that was still how things got resolved? Or was it simply habit, the muscle memory of years spent in rooms where things could turn ugly without warning?

It had been thirteen days since she'd said "I'm your mother," and it still felt completely unreal.

"You want to know why I pushed her into that pond?"

I said nothing.

"Well, I'm going to tell you anyway, so you might as well listen." Helen started pacing. "Jennifer Hastings, this sainted mother of yours — she's not the angel you've got her down as. Deep down, she's just a cold-hearted, self-serving bitch. Same as me."

"Don't talk about my mother that way," I said quietly.

"Or what? You'll throw me in jail?" She laughed. "Go ahead. But you'll hear this first." She crossed her arms. "I went back. After. I left you there and then I... I went back."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know why. Maybe I thought I'd made a mistake, maybe I just needed to see. And I saw her. Jennifer. Standing there in that spot in her fancy coat and her good shoes, looking like she'd taken a wrong turn off the high street. She picked you up. And I heard what she said to the man with her."

The doctor had kind eyes and a very calm voice, and she explained the report to me patiently, thoroughly.

Even though I hadn't needed her to.

Chapter 562:

I thanked her, promised vaguely to think about scheduling regular prenatal check-ups, then walked out into the street.

This was the fourth clinic in three days.

They had all said the same thing.

The home pregnancy test I'd done in my bathroom at two in the morning three days ago had also said the same thing, which meant I had now received the same information five times and still couldn't quite make it feel real.

I was pregnant.

We had always been careful. Always.

Except that one night, in that bathtub.

We'd skipped protection just that one time, and boom, I got pregnant.

Just my luck.

Though was it bad luck really? Was that the right word for it, a potential new life — was that something you called bad luck?

I turned that over as I walked. The pavement was wet from earlier rain, and I stepped around a puddle without registering I'd done it.

Would there even be a new life, in the end?

That was the question underneath all the other questions, the one I hadn't been able to look at directly yet.

Would I keep it?

I had absolutely no idea.

In my trouser pocket, my phone buzzed.

I ignored it.

Probably Kai or Timothy calling about something at work.

Work was somewhere at the back of my mind, very small and very far away.

Kai could wait. The international conferences could wait. The prospectuses could wait. Everything could wait.

My mind kept returning instead to the stack of doctor's reports in my drawer and to Lochlan, in that order, sometimes simultaneously, like two documents open on the same screen and neither of them loading properly.

When Kai had come to the flat two nights ago, I'd had to fake a cough and a sore throat, which I'd felt bad about because Kai had brought soup.

He'd probably seen straight through it but was good enough to pretend not to.

Which was why, when he'd hemmed and hawed in answer to my question about where Lochlan was, I hadn't pushed.

Professional courtesy between two people both pretending not to know things.

But what the hell was Lochlan doing? Where was he? What were these things he was busy with that apparently required him to stay in Frankfurt alone and send the rest of us home and disappear from his own schedule for days at a stretch?

An irrational part of my brain suggested he knew. About the pregnancy. Had somehow known before I did and was putting distance between us accordingly.

Which was insane, obviously. He couldn't have known when I hadn't known myself.

But the irrational part of my brain had been running at elevated volume for three days, and I hadn't found a reliable way to turn it down.

And even if he didn't know yet, I was going to have to tell him. Wasn't I?

At some point I was going to have to sit across from Lochlan Hastings and say the words, and I already knew, with a certainty that was almost physical, exactly what he would do.

Chapter 563:

He would ask me to marry him. Probably within the same breath.

Knowing him, he'd have a venue shortlisted and a guest list drafted before I'd finished the sentence.

And I didn't know if that was what I wanted.

I didn't know what I wanted.

I'd spent the better part of six months not publicly acknowledging we were even together because I'd been burned so comprehensively by my previous marriage to a billionaire that the thought of doing anything that irrevocable again made my chest go tight.

And now here I was, irrevocably pregnant, and Lochlan had been pulling away for ten days for reasons he wouldn't explain, and I was walking the streets of London with yet another copy of the same doctor's report and no idea what to do with any of it.

I touched my stomach through my coat.

Felt nothing. No flutter, no significance, no cinematic wave of maternal instinct.

Just my own hand on my own coat, and the thought that maybe I needed to be more active to shed those few pounds of winter weight.

Oh, wait.

I couldn't.

With the pregnancy I was bound to put on more weight. Weight loss would be impossible for the next — what, six, seven months?

I was going to balloon up, and soon it would be summertime and I wouldn't be able to hide the bump in a coat, and I'd probably have to go on leave for a year after delivery to take care of the baby.

There was shopping to be done. A cot. Formula. Nappies.

I stopped walking.

Why had I been thinking about nappies?

Had I already decided, somewhere underneath all the confusion and the deliberate not-looking-at-it, that I was going to keep the baby? Without consciously deciding anything?

I found a bench, sat down, put my face in my hands, and groaned.

God. What a mess.

It was stupid, probably, but I found myself thinking about my Cary years. The years I'd spent worrying first about whether he'd follow through on the hospital bills for Mum, then whether Mum would recover, then, once she did, about navigating his company and navigating Cary himself, whose particular brand of possessive and aloof and abrasive had revealed itself so gradually I'd almost missed it until I was already in the middle of it.

Not once, in all of that, had I worried about babies.

I groaned into my hands again.

It really said something about my current state of mind that I was almost nostalgic for the Cary years.

“Hey.”

I nearly left my skin.

Someone had sat down next to me.

I whipped around, heart hammering, and didn’t breathe properly again until I recognised her.

Portia waved a hand in front of my face. “Yeah, it’s me. Not a mugger.”

“How did you—”

“I followed you from the hospital.”

I stared at her. “What?”

Chapter 564:

“Kai called me. Said you’d been sick, asked me to check in on you.” She gave me a look. “Which made me think, hold on, why don’t I know my best friend is sick? Why hasn’t she called me? Smelling a rat, I went round to yours this morning. You walked right past me outside your building, by the way. Didn’t even clock me.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Obviously. You’ve been in a complete daze since you left the flat. I watched you nearly step in front of a bus on Marylebone Road.”

“Oh!”

“Are you going to hand me those papers, or do I have to take them from you by force?”

I looked down. I was still holding the doctor’s report. I’d been clutching it since I left the clinic, apparently.

Slowly, I held it out.

Portia read it.

“Fuck,” she said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “That’s about where I am.”

“What are you going to do?”

I turned to look at her. “Does my face look like the face of someone who has any idea?”

“Fair enough.” She folded the report carefully and handed it back. “You need time to process. But not too much time.”

“I know.”

“The baby’s Lochlan’s, I assume.”

“Obviously.”

“And you haven’t told him yet.” She narrowed her eyes. “Say no. If you told him before you told me, I will box you behind the ears.”

“No, I haven’t told him.”

“Good.” She took my hand. “At least your priorities are still intact.”

We sat there for a while. The bench was cold, the street was grey, the city went about its business around us, completely indifferent to the fact that my entire life had apparently reorganised itself without consulting me.

Portia didn’t say anything. She just held my hand, which was exactly what I needed and the reason she’d been my best friend for fifteen years.

The retail therapy was her idea, and I didn’t argue with it because I had no better ones.

We spent the afternoon moving through shops, just two women who weren’t really there to buy anything but needed somewhere to put their feet.

Portia tried on eleven things and bought two of them. I tried on four things and bought none of them, but I held them up and considered them and put them back, which was a reasonable facsimile of normal human behaviour, and that was the best I could manage.

We had a late dinner. I managed soup and most of a bread roll, which felt like progress.

Portia talked steadily and entertainingly about Josh, about a particularly deranged client at the clinic, about a horror film she’d seen that had apparently been so bad it had looped back around to brilliant.

I listened and occasionally contributed and felt, by degrees, some clarity returning to my mind.

Afterwards, she insisted on coming back to mine.

“I’m fine,” I said in the lift. “You don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to. There’s a difference.”

“There are guards outside my building. You saw them. Seriously, I’ll be fine.”

“I know. Your man Lochlan’s put a couple of his people on my block as well. Which means Josh is perfectly safe at home, which means I can sleep over without worrying, which means this is actually very convenient for everyone.”

Chapter 565:

I put up both hands. “You win, as usual.”

The lift doors opened.

Portia stepped out. “Duh. Besides, you need someone to hold your hair when you’re sick. How’s the morning sickness coming along, by the way? I hear that’s usually the first thing that hits during pregnancy.”

“What pregnancy?”

I froze.

Portia stopped mid-breath.

My parents were standing in my living room, both with their eyes wide open.

“Mum. Dad. What— why are you— How did you get in?”

Dad recovered first. “You gave us the access code, remember? Your mum said last night, why not go down for a visit, so we drove down this morning.” He spread his hands. “Early birthday surprise. Tried the code and hey, worked perfectly.”

“My birthday’s not for another month.”

“That’s why it’s a surprise.”

Mum said nothing. She was still looking at me with that expression, like she was still buffering the news, trying to decide if she’d misheard.

I became aware that Portia had taken a very small step backwards towards the lift. I reached behind me and grabbed her wrist.

She stayed.

“But looks like you’ve got a bigger surprise for us,” Mum said quietly.

Dad made tea, and I had never been more grateful for it, because it gave everyone something to do with their hands.

We sat in my living room — me on the sofa, Portia beside me at a slight distance that suggested she was here as a witness rather than a participant, Mum in the armchair, Dad on the pouffe beside her.

“How long?” Mum asked.

“I found out three days ago. Though apparently I’ve been...” I did the arithmetic the doctor had done for me. “About seven weeks.”

Dad made a small sound into his tea.

“And it’s Lochlan’s,” Mum said. Not a question.

“Yes.”

“Have you told him?”

“No.”

She absorbed that. “Are you going to?”

“Yes. Obviously. I just...” I pressed my fingers to my eyes for a moment. “I needed to think first. I needed to know what I actually wanted before I handed it to someone else to react to.”

“And what do you want?” Dad asked carefully.

“I genuinely don’t know.”

“About the baby,” Mum said, “or about Lochlan?”

“Either. Both.” I exhaled. “He’ll want to get married. I know he will. Probably ask me before I’ve finished the sentence. And I don’t know if that’s... I don’t know if that’s what I want. I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“Why not?” Dad asked. “You like him, don’t you? The man clearly thinks the world of you. And he seems like the decent sort.”

Chapter 566:

“He is decent.” This was not the problem. “He’s... look, on paper Lochlan Hastings is practically without flaw. He’s thoughtful, he’s steady, he’s never once said anything deliberately unkind to me, he remembers everything I tell him, he’s never tried to undermine my work or make me feel like I’m less than—” I stopped. I was making my own case for him and that wasn’t the point. “Cary was impressive on paper too.”

Silence.

“Lochlan is not Cary,” Portia said, from her witness position on the sofa.

“I know that. I know he’s not Cary. But I didn’t know Cary was Cary until I was already married to him and it was too late, did I?”

I looked at my parents. Time to lay it all out. Mum already knew most of it anyway.

“I spent three years feeling like I was doing everything wrong. Three years of being managed and manoeuvred and told what to wear to what event and who to talk to and who to avoid, and people looking at me across rooms at parties thinking, where did he find that one, some village in Cornwall is it?” I shook my head. “That world is relentless, Mum. The money, the society of it, the women who want what you have and the ones who think you don’t deserve what you have, and the in-laws who—”

I stopped. The picture was clear enough.

Mum was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, “Is that what you think would happen with Lochlan?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again.

“I don’t know,” I said finally.

Dad leant forward, elbows on his knees. “It sounds to me like you’re more worried about the world Lochlan moves in than about Lochlan himself.”

I sat with that for a moment.

He was right, actually.

Ever since the pregnancy, I’d been agonising, round and round the same circuit, and all of it had been about the world Lochlan came from — the money, the privilege, the social machinery that ground up women like me and spat them out polished and diminished in equal measure. I’d been terrified of being swallowed by all of that again.

But Lochlan himself? Not once. Not for a single moment had I been genuinely frightened of Lochlan or how he’d treat me.

I hadn't realised that until just now.

Mum and Dad exchanged a look over my head, the kind that had its own entire language developed over thirty-odd years of marriage.

"We're driving down to Mousehole tomorrow," Mum said.

I looked up. "Why? Is Gran alright?"

"She's fine. But I need to tell her about the baby."

I hesitated.

"You know how much she cares about you," Mum said. "And she's the one person I turn to when I genuinely don't know what to do." She paused. "The last time I was this uncertain about something, she was the one who showed me the right way through it." Something crossed her face then, briefly, before she smoothed it over. "I need her counsel on this."

Dad squeezed her hand.

Mum looked at me. "Cinny. Do you think things would feel different if you and Lochlan were on equal footing? If you came from the same world he does — the money, the connections, all of it?"

Chapter 567:

"Probably not. I don't think the fundamental problem changes." I gave a wry smile. "Though it would make it considerably easier to tell the snobs where to go."

They left not long after. At the door, Mum pulled me into a hug. "Don't make any major decisions yet. Wait until I call you. There's something you need to know that may affect how you decide."

"What something?"

"I'll tell you after I've spoken to Gran." She kissed my cheek. "Just wait. Please."

Then she was gone, Dad's hand at her back as they stepped into the lift.

Portia patted my knee when I came back to the sofa.

"For the record," she said, "I support you. Whatever you decide. All the way."

"I know."

“Including if you decide not to continue the pregnancy. Or if you decide to have the baby on your own and not tell him.”

I looked at her. “You’re serious.”

“Completely. Your body, your life, your call. I’ll be here either way.”

I leant back against the cushions and stared at the ceiling and entertained the thought of doing exactly that. Having the baby quietly, telling no one who the father was, raising it alone without the complications of marrying a billionaire.

It was, I had to admit, not entirely without appeal.

And then I thought: but that’s not fair to Lochlan.

Whatever was going on with him right now, he hadn’t done anything to deserve being cut out.

And yet. If he was already pulling back — if that distant, evasive behaviour was the beginning of something rather than a temporary aberration — then maybe I was about to burden him with a baby he didn’t want any more than he wanted this relationship.

Portia handed me my phone.

“I don’t want to tell him about the baby,” I said. “Not yet.”

“I know. But you do need to talk to him. Sound him out.”

I held the phone.

It started ringing.

I stared at the caller ID on the screen.

Portia leant over and whistled softly when she saw the name. “Is he telepathic or something?”

“So?” Mum clasped her hands, her professorial signal for me to start talking.

I looked at her.

She was about the same age as Helen, but if you put them side by side, you’d think they were a well-preserved middle-aged woman and her very elderly aunt.

She didn't have the haggard, sallow skin pockmarked with spots that Helen did—the inevitable toll of decades spent in a chemical haze. The crow's feet around her eyes made her look wise instead of weary.

We had different eye colours and different face shapes. She enjoyed the company of others; I preferred keeping the world at arm's length. Neither she nor Dad had ever exhibited the same compulsive streak that's haunted me since I was old enough to understand the concept of addiction.

Yet I was her son, in every sense that mattered.

"I met a woman called Helen yesterday," I said. "She's the one who shoved you into the pond at the masked ball."

Chapter 568:

"I assume you didn't pull me out of an international conference just to tell me the culprit's being charged?"

"She's my biological mother."

Mum's breathing hitched for a fraction of a second.

I told her about the meeting, the DNA report, and what Helen had told me in the hotel room last night.

"She saw you," I said. "When you picked up the ba—when you picked me up. She heard what you said to Dad."

"Which was?"

"You said I was likely the offspring of drug addicts, as the spot was a notorious dumping ground for users who'd suddenly found themselves saddled with a child they hadn't planned on and didn't want. In fact, that's why you went there in the first place."

Mum nodded. "I remember. I was conducting field research for a study on addiction. Your father insisted on coming along. Claimed it wasn't safe." She smiled a little. "As if his two weeks of taekwondo was going to be of any use in a scrap."

"You said the baby would make for a fascinating case study on nature versus nurture. Give it a proper home, the right influence—would the baby turn out to be a pillar of the community, or would he still gravitate towards self-destructive behaviour like his birth parents? That's why you took me home. To be used as a guinea pig for your sociological experiment."

"Is that what she—is that what Helen told you?" Mum asked.

I nodded. “Do you deny it?”

“Why would I?” Mum tilted her head, studying me. “I did say it. Perhaps I don’t recall the exact words, but, yes, that was the primary incentive for me to bring the baby—to bring you—home.”

“What did Father have to say about it? Where’s he anyway?” He wasn’t in the living room glued to Dep when I came in.

“Fishing with friends, or so he claims. But the brochure for the Old Amersham pudding fete was peeking out of his coat pocket when he left.” Mum smiled again.

Dad was the only one who could bring an instant smile to her face, even after three decades of marriage.

“What do you imagine he said?” Mum continued. “Holden has always been a bit of a soft touch. He’d never have left a baby to freeze to death on top of a rubbish bin in the dead of winter.”

“So you adopted me, just like that?”

Mum looked straight at me, lips pressed together, as was her habit.

To those who didn’t know her, she could appear aloof, rather formidable—the polar opposite of Dad’s gentler nature.

But she’d taken a drug addicts’ baby home twenty-eight years ago. She’d fed him, clothed him, and provided an upbringing most others could only dream of. And, yes, she’d occasionally used him as a subject in her numerous studies and experiments.

“If you’re asking me whether I adopted you back then because you’d make an excellent test subject, then yes.”

Just like Mother—straight to the point, never one to beat around the bush, no matter how hard the truth was to stomach.

Chapter 569:

“I’d just met you; you were wrapped in an oily copy of the Daily Mirror. You couldn’t talk, you couldn’t even make eye contact, let alone hold a meaningful conversation. It’d be absurd to claim I fell in love with you at first sight.”

I’d have winced if I hadn’t had almost three decades of exposure to such bluntness.

“But, if you’re asking me whether I’ve kept you all these years and still see you as nothing more than a test subject”—Mum paused—“I think you’re wise enough to judge that for

yourself, aren't you? Use the tools I taught you, Lochlan. The DAIR method, remember? Deconstruct, analyse, interpret."

"And reflect," I finished for her. "Yes, I remember."

"So?" She spread her hands. "What's your conclusion?"

I rose slowly, circled the desk, and went to where Mum sat in her well-worn armchair. I leaned down and hugged her. "You're my mum, Mum."

Helen gave me her DNA, but Jennifer gave me everything.

Mum patted my back. "Does this mean you're okay with me using your name in my next paper on agnotology?"

"Absolutely not." I pulled back.

"Killjoy." Mum tapped the pen against her chin. "There's something else I need your help with, though, since you probably already have the list of the masked ball guests."

"What is it?"

"I met a girl there. A young woman. She's the one who alerted me to Mrs Reynolds's designs on me. I didn't see her entire face, but it's been niggling at me. Her eyes—they remind me so much of an old friend. I've been wondering ever since if there's a connection. Could you find her for me?"

"Of course. Can you describe her?"

Mum described the woman's height, eye colour, hair colour, and dress, in detail sufficient for a police sketch artist who'd never met her.

And it was certainly more than enough for someone who had done more than just "meet" her.

"Mum, I think I know who you're talking about." My heart beat a little faster. This could be the perfect chance to introduce Hyacinth to my mother.

"You do? That's good. Do you think you could arrange a meeting? I'd like to take a proper look at her, and there are some questions I have for her."

"Before that, can you tell me who this friend is she reminds you of? I think I know most of your friends."

“Not this one. She died when you were just a toddler. Marin Lockwood. Or, as I like to remember her, Marin Lockhart.” She gave a bitter smile. “She’d probably still be alive if she hadn’t become a Lockwood.”

I sat up straighter. “Lockwood, as in Aaron Lockwood’s wife?”

“Yes. She was his first wife. I cut ties with Aaron after he married Gloria a week after Marin’s funeral.” Mum shook her head. “He was so under that woman’s spell that he lost himself. But let’s not talk about him. This young woman—do you know who she is?”

“I do. But before I set up the meeting, I need to talk to her first.”

“Of course.”

Mum thought I meant I needed time to get in touch with the woman.

Chapter 570:

But the truth was, I needed to have a conversation with Hyacinth first, after which she might no longer wish to know my family.

I dragged my feet on the way to the office.

Having taken more than a week’s leave of absence without a valid excuse, had I been my own boss, I’d have sacked myself.

But Lochlan was my boss, and he wasn’t going to sack me.

I hoped.

When he’d called me last night saying we needed to talk, I’d no idea why I’d suggested we do it at the office. Maybe the familiar environment was supposed to help. Or, maybe—though I didn’t want to admit it to myself—I knew he was less likely to go spare when he was surrounded by employees and files. Not that I expected him to lose his cool—he never did—but one never knew how a man might react to news of an unexpected pregnancy.

When I reached the building, I paused at the scanner, wondering if my employee pass was still valid. Thankfully, the scanner beeped dutifully and the doors slid open.

“Excuse me!”

I turned around at the sound.

The woman was standing right behind me, so close I could see the faint plume of condensation from her breath. I hadn’t heard her approach, which was unsettling.

She was looking at me in a peculiar way that suggested she knew me.

But I didn't know her from Adam.

"Yes? If you'd like to visit someone at Velos Capital, you can give their name at reception." I pointed to a separate lobby for visitors. "This entrance is for—"

"You're Hyacinth, right? Hyacinth Galloway?"

"Yes," I answered, suddenly wary.

The woman was dressed far too casually for a business meeting. She wasn't carrying a briefcase, or even a handbag. The gleam in her eyes gave me the heebie-jeebies.

I eyed the nearest security guard, just in case.

She took a step closer. "You don't know me, but I'm—"

"Hyacinth!"

I looked over her shoulder. Lochlan was breaking into a run in my direction. Behind him, a familiar Rolls-Royce had just rolled to a stop, its rear passenger door still open.

I stared. Lochlan was actually running.

He did that a lot in the gym, but seeing him do it out here, in a suit, suggested he was in a blind panic.

He was by my side in a matter of seconds. The woman said something, but I didn't catch it.

"Morning, boss."

Lochlan beckoned to the two uniformed guards. "This woman is not to get inside. If she tries, subdue her, call the police, and press charges for aggravated trespass."

"What?" The woman's face flushed. "How dare you! I only came to talk to you. You didn't give me—"

"I told you what would happen if you remained in London past midnight." Lochlan turned his back on her and took my hand. "Let's go."

The woman's shouting was cut off by the soundproof glass.

Chapter 571:

I let him lead me into the lobby, into the executive lift, and then into his private office. He shut the door carefully but firmly before leaving a message for Kai that he was not to be disturbed under any circumstances.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“That... was Helen,” he said with some difficulty, as if it were a name he’d have preferred didn’t cross his lips.

“Okay, and Helen is...?”

“She’s part of what I needed to talk to you about.”

I fidgeted. “Oh. I thought we were doing that after work.”

I thought I was prepared. Portia had spent half the night geeing me up, coaching me on what to say, and even role-playing Lochlan so I’d know how to react in the unlikely event he flipped. Then we’d spent the second half of the night searching for childcare services, the best brand of nappies, and baby names.

Lochlan covered the short distance between the door and the chair where I sat with the slowest pace I’d ever seen him walk. His head wasn’t bowed, but the slight droop of his shoulders and the thin line he’d pressed his lips into told me he had some heavy news of his own.

“Why don’t you start,” I said.

He did.

It probably took him less than ten minutes to cover it all: the adoption, the parents addicted to crack, Helen’s extortion, and her threat to go public with his birth if he didn’t cough up.

I sat there like a statue for what felt like an eternity.

I just couldn’t wrap my head around it.

Lochlan, adopted? His birth parents, drug addicts?

It seemed impossible.

I stared at him—at his perfectly shaved jaw, his suit all buttoned up, and his shoes so shiny they’d have made a drill sergeant proud. I looked at his expressionless face and his calm, unblinking eyes. A crack baby? Lochlan? Those two terms simply didn’t belong in the same sentence.

I'd never known anyone who took drugs. All I knew about it came from documentaries. I didn't even know the term crack baby until I saw it last night, when I was browsing online with Portia and—

Oh, damn.

I dug out my phone hastily and started typing.

"Hyacinth?" Lochlan ventured a step closer. "If you're thinking of leaving, you don't have to call a car. I can drive you. Or let Roy—"

"Quiet. I need to find something."

I pulled up the website from my browser history. There it was. A sociology paper concluding that children born to addicts are approximately eight times more likely to develop an addiction themselves later in life, and that increased risk can be passed on to their own children.

If Lochlan was at risk, that meant our baby was at risk as well. A baby with two grandparents who were addicts would have a higher risk for... I scrolled past terms like "congenital defects," "cognitive delays." My hands wouldn't stop shaking.

"Hyacinth?" Lochlan was leaning over me.

I shoved him hard in the chest, and he stumbled a step back.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Chapter 572:

He righted himself. "I'm sorry. I only learned of this very recently. That's why I've been distant. I had to deal with Helen—"

"But the baby! The baby is going to be at risk!"

He went very still. "What baby?"

"The baby I'm carrying!"

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen.

Was I carrying a crack baby? Would I even be able to carry it to full term?

And here I was, still wobbling on the fence about whether to have it or not, when the decision might well have been taken out of my hands entirely.

I should have taken the doctor's advice, should have gone for the full check-up straight away, then I'd have known about it sooner. Maybe then I'd have—

"Hyacinth!" Lochlan plucked the phone from my hand and set it down. With both hands on my shoulders, he pressed me gently back into the armchair. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"The baby. You're... you're pregnant?"

I laid a hand over my face. "Yeah."

I told him about the clinic visits, showed him the report in triplicate.

He read it. Then he read it again.

I didn't wait for him to finish the second read. "How long were they using? Your biological parents. What were they on—was it heroin, cocaine, both? What state were they in when you were born, do you know? Were there any complications at birth, any—"

"Hyacinth—"

"I need to know." I grabbed the phone back. "Because if they were both heavy users and you were exposed in utero, then there are implications for—for—" I was already pulling up another tab. "There's a study here on intergenerational transmission of addiction risk, it says—"

"Hyacinth. Stop."

"—potentially at significantly higher risk for a whole range of outcomes, including facial clefts, heart defects, decreased—"

"Stop." He crouched in front of me so we were at eye level, hands over mine, phone face-down. "Listen to me."

I looked at him.

"My biological father died of an overdose," he said quietly. "Last year. Heroin, long-term. My biological mother—Helen—used both. From her mid-teens. I don't know the precise state they were in when I was born, but I can find out. I can get the full medical history." His hands tightened over mine. "And I will. Whatever information exists, I'll get it, and I'll find the best doctors—not just good ones, the actual best—and we'll know exactly what tests to run and when to run them. All right? We'll know everything there is to know."

I stared at him.

He was steady. Completely, impossibly steady, the way he always was when I was spiralling, as if his function in the universe was to be the fixed point everything else spun around.

“Your father died of an overdose,” I repeated. “Last year?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve known about this for how long?”

“A matter of weeks.”

I sat back. The spiral slowed slightly, not because the fear had gone anywhere, but because I’d run out of immediate velocity.

Chapter 573:

I pressed both hands flat on my thighs and breathed through my nose and thought about the best doctors, and tests, and information, and all the things that could be known and planned for and managed.

It didn’t make the fear disappear. But it gave it somewhere to go.

“Fine,” I said at last. “Get the information. Book the appointments.” I paused. “All the appointments.”

“Every single one,” he nodded.

We sat for a while after that, the office quiet around us, the staff outside going about their business, oblivious.

I’d meant to sound him out. That had been the plan—arrive, talk, take the temperature of things before I committed to telling him anything.

Instead, I’d blurted the pregnancy the moment he’d told me about his birth parents, in approximately the least controlled fashion imaginable, and now we were here.

I looked at him.

He was watching me carefully. “There’s something I’d like to say. About us. Moving forward, I’d like—”

“Don’t. I know what you’re going to say. That marriage is the sensible thing. For the baby. And I just—I can’t think about that right now, I can’t—”

“I’m not going to ask you to marry me.”

I blinked. “Sorry?”

“Proposing to you right now would be an insult.” He said it plainly. “You’d think I was doing it for the baby’s sake. And I’m not—the baby matters to me because it’s yours, it’s ours, but it’s not why I want to marry you. I don’t want you to spend the rest of your life wondering if that’s the only reason I asked.”

He went to the safe behind his desk, unlocked it, and took out a small velvet box. He brought it back, stood in front of me, and opened it.

Two rings. A matching pair. Both extraordinary—the kind of thing clearly designed for two specific people rather than selected from a display cabinet.

I stared at them.

“I bought these,” Lochlan said, “on the day I decided I wanted you. Not just temporarily.”

“Let me finish. I want you. I want you there when I go to sleep, when I wake up. I want to see your greasy chips next to my poached salmon. I want you to keep sneaking junk food onto my plate. I want our treadmills to be side by side. I want Custard to have one home instead of bouncing between your flat and mine.”

Tongue-tied, the only thing I could do was stare.

“I’m not asking you now.” He closed the box. “I just wanted you to know that I do want to ask you. When you’re ready. If you’re ever ready.” He looked at me steadily. “That’s all.”

“What if I’m... what if I’m never ready?”

“Then the box stays in the safe.”

I stood up. My legs felt like string cheese on a hot day.

“I need some time,” I croaked out. “To think. Alone.”

“Of course.”

Lochlan stepped toward the desk, his hand hovering over the intercom. “I’ll have someone escort you home.”

“I don’t want a security detail.”

“Hyacinth—”

Chapter 574:

“I’ll call you. Later.” I picked up my bag, my fingers trembling against the leather. “I mean it, Lochlan. I need to think, and I can’t do it with two of Cameron’s people watching me from the pavement.”

He looked like he wanted to argue. He didn’t. “Call me,” he said. “When you arrive.”

I was halfway down the M4 when my phone rang.

“You need to come to Mousehole,” Mum said, without preamble. “Today. Gran and I have something to tell you.”

“Mum, today’s not—”

“The sooner the better, Cinny. Please.”

I could never say no to her. “Fine. I’m on my way.”

The long drive would clear my head. I wondered for a moment what they wanted to tell me, but my mind kept drifting back to the office.

Lochlan had proposed. Sort of.

I’d been expecting it, but it still came as a shock.

I knew he liked me—he’d made that clear enough by firmly rejecting every other woman since we got together—but I had no idea he was all in.

Did he love me? He hadn’t said the word, but he was acting like it. Lochlan was the type to go a hundred per cent once he committed to something.

But did I love him?

I loved his body, certainly. I loved the way he treated me. At work, he didn’t see me as office furniture or a dogsbody; he saw me as a person. And in the bedroom, it was like he could read my mind.

But marriage? The word made me wince.

I’d been there before. For some, it was Prince Charming and happily ever after. For me, it had been becoming a social accessory. It had been four walls that felt like a prison. Add a baby to that, and the sentence felt permanent.

Could it be different with him?

The road opened up ahead of me, fields on either side going grey-green in the early afternoon light. The motorway thinned as I headed further southwest, the urban sprawl of London replaced by the rolling hills of the countryside.

My mind circled back to the rings, then to the baby, and then to the genetics research I'd been obsessing over. Then, finally, to Mum's voice on the phone.

What did she want to tell me?

I checked my mirror as I turned left onto a narrower A-road, and frowned.

A dark Audi had been behind me for a while. I'd told Lochlan I didn't want security, but apparently he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

I stepped on the accelerator, hoping to put some distance between us.

The Audi didn't budge.

I changed lanes. It changed lanes.

I moved back. It moved back.

I reached down for my phone, planning to call Lochlan and tell him to call off his hounds. Cary used to put people on me whenever I left the house—I'd be damned if I were to go through that again, even if Lochlan thought he was being protective.

As I fumbled for the device, a flash of movement caught the corner of my eye. I looked up.

Chapter 575:

The Audi wasn't just following anymore. It was accelerating, covering the gap between us with terrifying speed. It didn't signal. It didn't look like it was trying to overtake.

It was headed straight for my rear bumper.

"Shit!"

I slammed my foot down and swung the steering wheel, veering into the opposite lane. It was empty, a lucky break on this stretch of road, but the Audi swerved with me. It was closing in, the roar of its engine drowning out my own.

Heart hammering against my ribs, I floored it, my car groaning as the engine strained. We were flying down a country lane now, hedgerows blurring into a solid wall of green. The first impact sent a jolt through my spine. The Audi clipped my boot, sending my car fishtailing.

I fought the wheel, my knuckles white.

In the rearview mirror, I caught a glimpse of the driver. A man. A cap was pulled low over his eyes, and a scarf was wrapped around the lower half of his face.

Soraya's man. Had to be.

But I had no time to think. The Audi sped up again, positioning itself for another hit.

I looked around wildly for an escape, a slip road, anything—but there was nothing but fields and empty tarmac.

The car lunged forward.

I said a quick prayer, thought of my mum, and braced for impact.

The impact didn't come.

Instead there was a sound—an almighty crack from somewhere behind and to the left of me, followed by the shriek of tyres on tarmac and a second impact that I felt rather than heard, the shudder of metal meeting metal at speed, and then my car was spinning, not off the road but on it, the fields wheeling past the windscreen in a smear of grey-green until I got my foot on the brake and brought it to a shuddering stop half on the verge.

I opened my eyes—I hadn't even realised I'd shut them. My hands were still on the wheel.

Outside, something was still moving—engines, voices, the sound of a door.

I couldn't quite make sense of it. My head felt like it was full of cotton wool, and my left arm was burning somewhere between my elbow and my shoulder where it had connected with the door panel. There was something warm on my temple that I was fairly sure was blood.

I tried the door. It opened, which surprised me. I got one leg out and then the world tilted considerably, and I gripped the door frame and stayed where I was.

The Audi—I could see it now, maybe thirty metres back down the road, front quarter crumpled against the verge, steam rising from the bonnet.

There was a third car between us, a large dark Range Rover, barely a scratch on it, positioned at an angle that made it very clear it had driven directly into the path of the Audi at speed.

Lochlan, I thought, with a wave of relief so strong it made me dizzy. He'd sent someone anyway. Thank god he had.

Chapter 576:

Then the driver's door of the Range Rover opened and a man got out, and it wasn't anyone from Cameron's team.

"Blimey," Desmond Lockwood said, looking at my car and then at me. "You alright?"

He had me out of the car and into the passenger seat of the Range Rover inside two minutes, the first aid kit from his boot open on the seat between us, pressing a folded gauze pad to my temple with one hand and examining my arm with the other.

"Nothing broken," he said, of the arm. "Cut on your head's stopped bleeding. You'll have a bruise the size of Cornwall by tomorrow, mind."

"Thank you," I said, still dazed. "That's very comforting."

"You're welcome." He leant back and looked at me. "Do you know who was driving the Audi?"

I looked back down the road. The Audi was still there, engine ticking as it cooled. The driver had gone. "No. Do you?"

"Not his name. But I know who he works for." He waited. "Gloria."

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Why am I not surprised."

"So you were expecting this." He tilted his head. "So why would my lovely Aunt Gloria want you dead?"

"I have absolutely no idea." Except that maybe it had something to do with Soraya.

"Were you following the car? Or me?"

"Car. I've been keeping an eye on Gloria's people." He said it easily, the way you might say you'd been keeping an eye on the weather. "Partly because Lochlan asked me to."

"And the other part?"

"Partly because she spent the better part of eighteen months trying to engineer various unfortunate accidents for me, and when she suddenly stopped, I wanted to know what she'd moved on to instead." He looked at me with interest. "Turns out she'd moved on to you. I had no idea that was where that Audi was headed until I was already halfway down the M4."

I thought about that. Did Desmond know about Soraya? Being Lochlan's best friend, surely he'd been briefed. Could he have an idea where his aunt had been stashing her?

“Where are you headed?” Desmond asked.

“My grandmother’s place. Mousehole.”

“Right.” He started the engine without further discussion. “Address?”

“You really don’t have to—”

“If Loch finds out I left you on a country road bleeding, he’ll kill me. And unlike whoever was driving that Audi, he’d actually manage it.” He glanced at me. “Address.”

I gave him the address.

He drove the way he did everything, apparently—with total ease and absolutely no visible effort. The Range Rover ate up the country lanes without complaint, and Desmond chatted without apparent need for a response.

“So,” he said, somewhere around Bodmin. “When’s the wedding?”

I turned my head sharply, then regretted it when the movement made my temple throb. “What wedding? There’s no wedding.”

He laughed. “Not yet.”

“Not at all. What has Lochlan told you?”

Chapter 577:

“Nothing about a wedding. It was an educated guess.” He glanced at me with those bright, amused eyes. “Anyone with functioning vision can see he’s completely gone on you. I’ve known Loch a long time. I’ve never seen him get serious about anyone the way he’s got serious about you.” A chuckle. “You’re doomed, girl. If you’re not already engaged to him, you will be. That’s my prediction. Provided,” he added, more carefully, “that you feel the same way.”

He looked at me.

I looked out the window.

“That,” I said, “is what I’ve been trying to work out.”

“Mm.” He didn’t push it. “For what it’s worth, I think I know the answer.”

“Is that right.”

“You can tell me I’m wrong.”

I didn't say anything. He seemed to take that as confirmation.

When the village appeared below us, he let out a low whistle.

"Now that is somewhere worth living." He looked at the harbour, the clustered cottages, the afternoon light sitting flat and grey on the water. "When I'm old and finished with all of it, I want somewhere exactly like this. Fish all day, skate on the lake in winter." He paused. "Do they have a lake?"

"There's a pond," I said.

"Near enough."

He helped me out of the car—my legs had made their opinions about the afternoon known by this point—and we were barely through the gate when the cottage door flew open and Gran Alison came out at a pace that was frankly startling for a woman her age. She took one look at my face and hands, still carrying traces of dried blood despite Desmond's best efforts, and said:

"What in God's name happened to you?"

"An accident," I said.

I shot Desmond a pleading look over her shoulder. He gave me the smallest nod.

Gran had her arm around me, and we were inside.

Mum was there, and Dad, and all of them were talking at once when they saw my face.

I let it wash over me while Mum cleaned the cut on my temple, and Dad fetched a towel, and Desmond stood by the window, an amused spectator.

Gran wrapped a bandage around my forearm and asked Desmond if he'd like tea.

"Lovely, thank you," he said. "I'd love—"

I looked up. He was staring at the kitchen doorway.

Someone had just come through it.

Both he and Desmond spoke at the same time: "What are you doing here?"

The man standing in the kitchen doorway was tall, silver-haired, and the last person I'd expected to see.

Apparently, Desmond had the same thought.

He was on his feet in an instant. “Uncle Aaron. What are you doing here?”

Aaron Lockwood looked at him, then at me, then back at Desmond. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“I asked first.”

“Desmond—”

“Gran,” I said.

Everyone looked at me.

I was looking at Gran Alison, who was standing very still by the fireplace with her hands clasped in front of her, wearing the expression I knew meant she had something difficult to say and had decided the time for saying it had arrived.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Gran said, “This is why I asked your mum to call you down here. We need to talk.” She looked at Aaron Lockwood. “All of us.”

Chapter 578:

We sat. Dad on the sofa beside Mum, whose hands he was holding in both of his. Desmond in the armchair he’d been in before, his elbows on his knees now, watching his uncle like a police officer watching a suspect.

Aaron Lockwood kept looking at me.

Not in a creepy, leering way—but still deeply unsettling. Like he’d like nothing more than to envelop me in a bone-crushing hug. There might even have been tears in his eyes.

I didn’t know what to do with that, so I looked at Gran.

“Go on, then,” I said.

Gran Alison sat down in her own chair, folded her hands, and said: “Hyacinth. You are adopted.”

The room was very quiet.

I heard the words. I understood them individually. Together, in that order, they seemed to belong to a sentence that couldn’t possibly be directed at me.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“You are adopted,” Gran said again, without softening it, because she’d never been a woman who believed in softening things that needed to be said plainly. “You are not Jeremy and Jenna’s biological daughter. You are the daughter of Aaron Lockwood and his first wife, Marin.”

I looked at Mum.

Mum was crying, silently, tears running down her face, shoulders shaking. She was looking at me, and her mouth was pressed into a trembling line.

“Mum?” The word came out strange. Half-strangled. “Mum, what is she—is this—”

“It’s true.” Mum said. “It’s true, and I’m sorry, Cinny. I’m so sorry.”

Aaron Lockwood made a small sound—quickly suppressed, quickly swallowed—and I saw his hands tighten on the arms of his chair. He wanted to say something, or do something. He was stopping himself.

I looked away from him.

“Tell me,” I said to Gran. “All of it.”

Gran told it the way she did everything—steadily, without embellishment, without looking away from me once.

Mum had worked for the Lockwood household in Manchester.

Marin Lockwood—Aaron’s first wife—had been pregnant. There had been a car accident. Marin had died, and her five-year-old son Joel with her, and everyone had assumed the baby she was carrying had died too.

Mum had known better.

The baby had been born early at the scene. Marin had barely survived long enough.

And Mum, who had loved Marin, and who did not believe the accident was an accident at all—who believed it had been engineered by Gloria, the woman Aaron was already seeing behind his wife’s back—had taken the baby and said nothing.

She left the Lockwood household and came home.

“Why?” I heard myself ask. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I looked at Aaron, then away again. “You know I’d love you no matter what happens. Why hide it from me? I’d understand why you couldn’t tell me when I was just a kid. But I’m in my twenties now, and I had no idea.”

Mum opened her mouth.

Dad said, "That was my doing."

I turned to look at him.

Chapter 579:

"We'd been trying to have children for a long time," he said. He said it quietly, to his own hands. "Years. And when your mum came home with you, the plan was to find you a good family. A proper home. That was all it was supposed to be."

He looked up at me. "But I'd just found out I was infertile. We were never going to have children of our own. And there you were."

He stopped. Started again. "I talked Jenna out of it. Out of telling the truth. I told myself it was better this way, safer, that Gloria would be watching, that if anyone knew you'd survived, you might be in danger. That was true, and I believed it. But the other truth, the one I didn't say out loud, was that I was terrified."

His voice broke slightly. "I was terrified that if you knew, someday—when you were old enough—you'd look at what the Lockwoods could give you and look at what we could give you, and you'd—"

He couldn't finish it.

"You'd think I'd leave," I said.

Dad looked at me. His eyes were very bright.

"You think that little of me," I said. "That I'd choose money over you."

"No," he said. "I never thought that little of you. I thought that little of myself."

The room was very quiet for a moment.

I pressed my fingers to my eyes. My temple was throbbing again. My arm hurt.

Aaron Lockwood said, "Hyacinth."

I didn't look at him.

"You're my daughter," he said. "I understand if you need time. I understand why you're angry. But you're my daughter, and I've spent twenty-six years not knowing you were alive, and I can't—I need you to know that I... You have Marin's eyes." His voice was

wrecked. “Her eyes, and the way you hold your chin, and the—I should have known right away when I first saw you, I should have—”

“Don’t,” I said.

He stopped.

“Don’t,” I said again, and I didn’t know exactly what I was asking him not to do, only that I needed him to stop.

“We can do a DNA test if you want.”

“No.”

“Of course,” he said. “Of course, there’s no rush, I only want—”

“So,” Desmond said, from his armchair.

We both looked at him.

He looked at me with those bright, absurdly unflappable eyes, and said: “You’re my cousin.”

“Apparently,” I said.

“Huh.” He sat back. “That explains some things, actually.”

“Does it.”

I stood up. My legs held, which was more than I’d been expecting of them.

I looked at Mum, who was still crying her silent, careful tears, and at Dad, who was watching me with the expression of a man waiting for a verdict in court, and at Gran, who was clear-eyed, ready for whatever came next.

And at Aaron Lockwood, who I didn’t know how to look at yet.

“I need a minute,” I said.

I went upstairs, into my old room, shut the door.

Then I sat on the edge of the bed and put my face in my hands.

I stood in the open doorway and surveyed the damage.

Chapter 580:

The bedside lamp lay in pieces across the carpet, and the curtains had been ripped half off their rails. The dresser drawers had been pulled out and emptied, leaving clothes scattered everywhere.

Helen sat on the edge of the mattress, her arms wrapped tightly around her chest, her eyes narrowed to slits. "I should've known you were just as cunning a bastard as your dad."

"I told you to leave London."

"I ain't leaving until I get my money. I want my money!"

"I'm not giving you any money."

Helen spat on the floor and lunged to her feet. "You fucking idiot, you've just thrown away your own future. I'm going to call every tabloid I know. I'm going to call the fucking ITV and BBC, and by tomorrow morning everyone in London will know the almighty Lochlan Hastings is a bastard child, a crack baby with addicts for parents. I'm going to cry so hard in front of the cameras the public will want to believe I've reformed. They'll know you turned your back on your own mother. They'll know you are nothing but a selfish, lying, cheating bastard."

"You really don't know how negotiating works, do you?"

Her eyes darted to the door. Before I could even register the movement, she bent down, snatched a jagged shard of glass from the broken lamp, and lunged at me.

Cameron was faster. He stepped into her path, his hand clamping around her wrist with enough force to make the glass drop to the carpet. With a swift, efficient shove, he sent her reeling back into the armchair.

Helen shrieked, her fingers clawing at the fabric of the chair. "You think your squad of goons can keep me here? They got the drop on me last time, but you better keep one eye open in your sleep, Lochlan boy, because when I get out of here, I'm coming for you."

"You've just made your own case worse. I have no reason to pay you millions of pounds when I could simply store you away out of the public eye indefinitely. Food, lodging, and guards for a lifetime are still cheaper than what you've asked for."

She went still, her fingers loosening on the chair as the implication sank in.

"You wouldn't. You're bluffing. You're not locking up your own mother."

"Take a look around you."

"You fucking bastard! You wouldn't dare!"

I turned to Cameron. “Make sure to post two guards outside the door at all times. And get CCTV cameras in here.”

He nodded.

I glanced at the wrecked room once more. “Have someone clean this up, and this time, leave just the bed and the armchair. If she doesn’t like the rest of the furniture, there’s no point bringing it in again.”

Helen screamed obscenities, but Cameron kept a firm hand on her shoulder, pinning her in place.

“You can’t keep me here! I have someone on the outside. If they don’t hear from me, they’ll start asking questions. Soon the press will know your dirty little secret.”

Chapter 581:

I shook my head. “It’s a little too late to make up an imaginary ally. You have lived alone since your boyfriend died, and you are too greedy to let anybody else in on your blackmail scheme.”

I left the room, the sound of her shrieks still audible as I stepped into the lift.

The moment the doors slid shut, my shoulders slumped. I stared at my reflection in the gilded lift door. I was clean-shaven and my suit was still pressed, but dark circles had begun to form beneath my eyes. The extortion scheme concocted by Helen’s heroin-addled brain was deeply flawed, but she was right about one thing—I couldn’t detain her indefinitely.

I was not a mobster, and I did not run my own private prison. By having my men snatch her off the street before she could contact the press, I had already stepped over a line I swore I would never cross. I refused to go down that slippery slope from kidnapping to something irredeemably worse.

Hyacinth was already teetering on the edge about our relationship, and she would walk away without a second’s hesitation if she knew what I’d done.

I ran a hand over my face, trying to scrub away the image of my birth mother’s rage-distorted face.

I wondered what Hyacinth was doing right now. She’d said she needed time to think, but that had been more than twenty hours ago. Had she reached a decision?

I’d asked Kai to research the best gynaecologists in the country and secure appointments as soon as possible. I didn’t know if she would want to keep the appointments, or if she would even want me there. A part of me was afraid she might decide she didn’t want the

baby after all. I'd told her that I would respect her decision no matter what it was, but that had been a lie. I wanted the baby; I wanted a tangible, irrevocable, permanent, living proof of the bond between us.

Whatever Hyacinth's feelings towards me, she was not the type to walk away from her own child.

Despicable of me to try to trap her in the relationship this way, I know, but as I'd just proven with Helen, I wasn't as noble as Hyacinth liked to believe me to be.

My hand hovered over the keypad of my phone, itching to call her. I needed to hear her voice, but any good business negotiator knows that showing desperation only leads to disastrous outcomes.

I would wait, because she would call eventually.

My phone suddenly rang in my hand, making my pulse quicken.

It was not Hyacinth.

"Guess where I am?" Desmond asked, chuckling on the other end.

"Some beach on the Australian coast, no doubt," I said, stepping out of the lift.

"Nope. I'm in the guestroom of a lovely little cottage in Cornwall owned by a lovely old woman who goes by the name of Alison, who happens to be—"

"You are at Hyacinth's grandmother's house?" I cut him off. "What are you doing there?"

"Ha, of course you know your girlfriend's grandma's name. You probably know the name of the family boat, too, don't you?"

"Get to the point."

Chapter 582:

"You might want to watch your tone with me, buddy." I could hear the smirk in his voice. "Now that I've saved your girlfriend's life."

I stopped in my tracks. "What? What happened to Hyacinth? Is she okay?" I gestured to Roy the moment I reached the lobby. "Prep the plane. Be ready to take off as soon as possible."

“Don’t worry,” Desmond said. “She’s fine, just some scratches. But that’s not even the biggest headline. Are you sitting down? If not, go find a chair, because the news is—”

“Just tell me.”

“It turns out your beloved Miss Galloway is not a Galloway at all. She’s a Lockwood, as in Aaron Lockwood, as in, I’ve just found myself a long-lost cousin.”

Mum came into the room. She put a tray down on my bedside table.

“I brought you dinner,” she said.

I looked at the food, then back at her. “Why are you telling me this now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You spent more than twenty years keeping this a secret. Why did you decide to tell me now?”

Mum fell silent. She looked down at the tray, and her fingers twisted together.

“Is it because of Aaron Lockwood?” I asked. “He’s been behaving strangely since the day I met him, and he kept visiting you to ask questions.”

Mum’s voice was low. “He would’ve found out eventually. I couldn’t let you be the last person to know the truth.”

“It doesn’t change anything, you know,” I told her.

“Hyacinth, please,” she began.

“It doesn’t. You are still my mum, and Dad is still my dad. Aaron Lockwood is my biological father, and that’s all he’s ever going to be.”

“I know you are upset and confused right now. I know we dropped this on you without notice, and it’s unfair to you. You might need some time to think it through.”

“There’s nothing to think about,” I said. “You and Dad are my parents, and that is the end of the story.”

A knock sounded on the open door. “Can I come in?” a voice asked.

I tried to slam the door shut with my telepathic powers, but since I didn’t have any, the door remained open, and Aaron Lockwood remained standing in the doorway.

He stepped into the room and moved towards the bed carefully, like a prey animal approaching a predator.

“Hyacinth, I... I just want to say, there’s a house in Mayfair,” Aaron said. “I just called my lawyer and asked him to draw up papers to transfer it under your name. You don’t have to stay there if you don’t want to, of course. I just thought it’s closer to work, and I—”

“I don’t want your house,” I said.

Aaron clasped his hands together. “I know that, and I understand. I’m not trying to pressure you into anything. I wasn’t there for you when you grew up, and there’s a lot I have to make up for. I just thought—”

“Keep your house, and your apologies. I don’t need them.”

Mum stroked my arm. “Hyacinth, just hear him out.”

Chapter 583:

I thought about the woman named Marin whom I’d never met, the woman who gave birth to me while she herself was dying. I thought about what I’d heard about the car accident from my parents and from Desmond. Then I thought of Gloria Lockwood, and the Audi that had tried to ram me off the road yesterday.

Everything clicked.

I sat bolt upright in bed, and the sudden movement caused a wave of nausea to bubble up in my throat.

“That’s why she tried to kill me!”

“What do you mean?” Mum asked.

“What?” Aaron asked at the same time.

“The same thought just occurred to me,” a man’s voice said.

Desmond stepped into the room and tapped his temple. “Great minds think alike, eh, cuz?”

Mum and Aaron turned to him. “What are you talking about?”

Desmond looked at me. “Do you want to tell them, or should I?”

I waved a hand at him. “Go ahead.” I wasn’t in the mood for talking.

“By the way, Lochlan’s on his way over.”

“You called him?”

“Of course I did.” He then turned to Mum and Aaron and relayed what had happened with the Audi.

Mum grasped my hand. “Why didn’t you tell me? We must call the police at once!”

“I’ve already done that,” Desmond said. “They’re probably processing the Audi for evidence as we speak. Don’t worry, Mrs Galloway. My good buddy Lochlan is coming with a team of bodyguards. No one’s going to hurt Hyacinth, not under our watch.”

Aaron stammered, “But... but it can’t be Gloria. She doesn’t even know—”

“If she didn’t know, why would she try to kill me?” I asked.

Desmond gave me a look that said I shouldn’t bother arguing.

“No, it can’t be,” Aaron muttered. “Gloria would never do something like that. She... I have to call her.”

He staggered from the room.

Desmond shrugged. “Uncle Aaron’s not a bad sort once you get to know him, but his IQ plummets to zero when it comes to his precious Gloria. To him, that woman walks on water. He’s never going to believe she tried to kill you, and me, for money.”

“It doesn’t matter to me what he believes,” I said. “I just hope the police can get her this time.”

Mum shook her head. “Gloria’s not going to give up easily. I know her. She may look like a society wife, but that woman has the stone-cold heart of a murderer.”

“I agree,” Desmond said. “But Uncle Aaron doesn’t see it that way.”

Mum turned to me. “I’m sorry, Cinny. I didn’t know. I don’t know how Gloria could’ve found out. I never told a soul, I swear.”

“It’s fine, Mum. I’m glad you told me. At least now I finally understand why she tried to kill me.”

Desmond added, “She was probably following Uncle Aaron. He keeps hanging around your parents; naturally, it got her suspicious. I’ve seen photos of Aunt Marin, and you do have her eyes, Hyacinth.”

“Could you show me those photos?” I asked.

“Sure, but I’ll have to go dig up the album. It’s back at the estate somewhere. I can get someone to fetch it.”

“We can do that later. Right now there’s something more important.” I looked at Mum and Desmond. “What do we do about Gloria?”

Chapter 584:

“I have a plan.”

Lochlan stood in the doorway.

I had not, until that moment, fully understood how much of the day I’d been holding together with sheer bloody-mindedness.

The car. The road. Desmond’s first aid kit. Gran’s face when she saw the blood. The revelation that had turned the ground under my feet into something I no longer entirely recognised.

All of it, held at arm’s length through the long hours of the evening by the simple necessity of getting through the next five minutes and the five minutes after that.

Lochlan’s face undid about six hours of that effort in approximately three seconds.

He nodded at Desmond, said something quiet to Mum, and crossed the room to me. He leant down and put his arms around me, carefully, mindful of the bandaged arm, and I let my head drop against his shoulder and closed my eyes and thought: there it is. There’s the thing I’ve been waiting for all day without letting myself know I was waiting for it.

He straightened up after a moment and looked at my arm, examining the bandage. His face was perfectly composed, but I knew him too well by now. I could see the muscle working in his jaw. I could see what the composure was sitting on top of.

“Are you alright?” he asked in a strained voice.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

“I’m fine enough. It looks worse than it is.”

He looked at me for a moment like he had more things to say.

“What plan?” I asked.

“I’ve just heard back from my contact.”

The police had processed the Audi—stolen from a scrapyard in Essex, plates fake, lifted from a write-off in a salvage yard in Swindon. They’d pulled fingerprints from the interior but found no match in their database. The driver was almost certainly already out of the country.

“So,” I said. “Dead end.”

“Nothing to link the car to Gloria directly,” Lochlan said. “She’s covered her tracks.”

“Damn,” Desmond said, with what sounded almost like admiration. “She really is good. I’ve said for years—if she’d put that brain to work actually running the Lockwood business instead of devising creative ways to eliminate me, she’d be twice as rich and considerably less likely to end up in prison.”

“So what’s the plan?” I asked again.

Lochlan looked at me. Then at Mum. Then back at me, and there was something hesitant in it, which was unusual enough to be alarming.

“Well?” I said.

“It’s risky.”

“Tell me what it is.”

He held my gaze for a moment. Then he said, “We draw her out.”

Desmond let out a low whistle.

I turned the meaning of it over in my mind.

Mum got there first. “Absolutely not! You are not using my daughter as bait. She’s already been through enough today, she’s been through enough in the past—”

“Mum.”

“No. No, Hyacinth, I’m not—”

“Do you think it’ll work?” I asked Lochlan.

He looked me straight in the eye. “Yes.”

Chapter 585:

“Then let’s do it.”

“Hyacinth!”

I lifted my bandaged arm. “Mum. Look at this. This is what happens when we let Gloria do whatever she wants and wait for the police to find evidence she’s already made sure doesn’t exist.” I put my arm down. “I’m not spending the rest of my life looking over my shoulder.”

Lochlan’s hand found mine on the bedspread. He didn’t say anything, just squeezed my hand, and I thought: yes. I know. I know you’d rather I didn’t. I’m doing it anyway.

He leant slightly closer and said quietly, “Thank you for trusting me.”

I squeezed back. I thought: of course I trust you. That’s not even a question anymore. The only question I still haven’t managed to answer is the rather larger one sitting just behind it.

He let go of my hand and turned to Desmond. “Aaron Lockwood is central to this.”

Desmond pulled a face. “He’s never going to agree to anything that sends his beloved Gloria to prison. You know that.”

“Which is why you’re not going to ask him to agree.”

“Hmm. Interesting. Go on.”

Mum checked the corridor, closed the bedroom door, and came to sit beside me on the bed and take my hand.

Lochlan laid out what he needed.

“Are you sure she’ll fall for it?” I asked when he’d finished.

It was Desmond who answered. “She will. Gloria operates on two assumptions: one, that Aaron worships her—which he does—and two, that he’s still corroded with guilt over his first wife’s—” he glanced at me quickly, then continued—”over Marin’s death. Both

assumptions are correct. And guilt makes people impulsive. That impulsiveness is what we're counting on."

I nodded slowly.

Lochlan looked at me. "There'll be guards on you at all times. But they'll need to stay out of sight. They may not reach you in time if something goes wrong."

"I know."

"Hyacinth—"

"I'm willing to risk another broken arm to end this." I glanced at Mum. "It's going to be fine, Mum. But please don't tell Dad and Gran. I don't want them worrying."

Mum gave me a look that suggested she found this request borderline insulting. "Your grandmother has eyes like a hawk and the nose of a bloodhound. She'll know something's wrong before I've opened my mouth."

I looked at Lochlan. "Then we need to be out of here before she cottons on."

Twenty minutes later, I was in the back of Lochlan's car heading away from Mousehole, the cottage lights disappearing in the rear window.

Desmond was staying behind to begin his part of the plan with Aaron.

"Do you think Aaron will go along with it?" I asked. "Even without knowing he's going along with it?"

"His guilt might override his loyalty to Gloria," Lochlan said. "It should be just enough. Besides, for the plan to work, we don't need him to actually make a decision."

"Just the illusion that he has," I said.

"That's right."

Chapter 586:

I thought about it for a moment. "Do you think Gloria would leave me alone if I told her I have absolutely zero interest in taking the surname Lockwood? What if I tell her I don't care about the apparently vast Lockwood fortune? Actually, just out of curiosity, how much money are we talking about?"

"The Lockwoods are an old family. Their wealth has accumulated over generations."

“So, are we talking about seven or eight figures?”

“It’s substantially more than that.” Lochlan gave me a number.

I let out a low whistle. “And if Desmond dies and I die, all that money goes to Gloria and her daughter?”

“Yes.”

“No wonder she wants me out of the way.”

“Words won’t change her mind,” Lochlan said. “As long as you are alive, you are a threat to her. That is Gloria’s logic.”

I sighed as I recalled Janine Lockwood. She was in her mid-twenties, but she couldn’t even go to the supermarket without supervision. “I have to hand it to Gloria, though. The lengths she’s willing to go for her daughter. Remember when she tried to set up Cary with Janine? She probably thought he’d be capable of taking care of her daughter. The fact that he was already engaged apparently didn’t bother her one bit.”

“Cary was the wrong choice.”

“Yeah, he was. If I’d known her back then, I’d have told her not to bother.”

That plan falling through probably explained why she was so fixated on getting her hands on the Lockwood family fortune now. If she had to kill to get it, so be it.

The things parents do for their children.

I touched a hand to my stomach.

Lochlan caught the movement. He said something to Roy, and the car slowed noticeably. He turned to look at me. “Are you in pain? Nausea? Should we stop the car?”

“No, I’m fine.” I dropped my hand to my lap. “Just tired.”

“Kai has already been in contact with several specialists. There are tests we can arrange to—”

I groaned. “Kai knows?”

Lochlan shifted in his seat. “I’m sorry. He’s with me most of the day, it’s difficult to hide things from him.”

I waved away the apology. “Never mind, he was going to find out eventually. Can you just ask him not to tell anyone? The last thing I need is to be the subject of the Velos Capital grapevine for the next six months.”

“He won’t breathe a word.” Lochlan paused. “There are tests to establish whether the baby is... developing normally.”

I nodded. Swallowed hard. “Okay, let’s do that.”

“I’ll set it up.”

The car went quiet after that.

I stared at the dark road ahead of us. The hedgerows were sliding past in the headlights. Something was turning over in my mind that had been turning over since Lochlan first described the plan in my old bedroom.

“I’ve an idea,” I said.

“What is it?” Lochlan looked up from his phone. “Somehow, the tone you’re using suggests I’m not going to like it.”

“Just hear me out.” I turned to face him fully. “We need Gloria to believe I’m alone and unguarded. We need her to think you’ve stepped back, so we can entice her to try and hit me again, right?”

He nodded.

Chapter 587:

“But think about it. I’ve just survived one attempt on my life, so naturally you would have security on me round the clock. She’s not stupid. If she sees me apparently wandering around all by myself, she’s going to smell a trap. We need to give her a reason to believe you’re genuinely out of the picture.”

“That’s why I’m arranging a very visible trip abroad,” Lochlan said. “Anyone watching Velos Capital would think I’d left the country.”

“Right, but why would you not have taken me with you? Why would you leave me alone in London? She needs to believe there’s a reason you’ve walked away from me, but also that it’s temporary. That will put her under time pressure to act before you come back into my life.”

Lochlan was quiet in a way that meant he had already followed the logic to its conclusion. He clearly didn't like what he found there.

"It was the mention of Kai that gave me the idea, actually."

"The company grapevine."

"Exactly. What if we had a row? An apparently big one, public enough to be noticed. If you broke up with me, or if you even fired me, that would do it."

"Hyacinth," he warned.

"Let me finish. We don't need to take out an ad in the paper. We just need the rumours to start moving. Whispers, speculation, people talking would do the trick. That's actually more convincing than anything official. Nobody believes official statements, but everyone believes gossip." I watched his face closely. "If Gloria thinks you've washed your hands of me, she'll think I'm vulnerable. She'll think the window of opportunity is open."

Lochlan looked at me for a long moment. "What would we have rowed about?"

I held his gaze steadily.

Then I took my hand off my lap and pressed it very gently to my stomach.

Cameron's report on Helen was brief. She'd attempted the bathroom window at half two in the morning and had made it as far as the ledge before the guard posted on the adjacent rooftop had persuaded her otherwise.

The French window onto the balcony had fared worse: she'd put a chair through it, which had produced both an impressive quantity of broken glass and the unwelcome attention of three guards arriving simultaneously.

She was now, Cameron informed me, refusing food and demanding an audience.

"She won't eat unless she sees you."

"Let her," I said.

A woman who'd spent her entire life looking out for herself alone would sooner put a knife in me than voluntarily deny herself a meal. The hunger strike was theatre.

But, just in case.

"If her health deteriorates," I said, "get a doctor in. IV nutrition. I'm not having her collapse on me."

“Understood.” Cameron nodded and left.

Keeping Helen in that room was not a permanent solution. It wasn’t even a good temporary one. But it was the solution I had for now, and everything else could wait.

I then turned to Klaus.

“Tracker in her phone,” he said, “tracker in the car, one in each pair of shoes, one sewn into the lining of the handbag she uses most often.” He set the tablet down on the desk between us. “We have continuous location data from four independent sources. If she moves, we know where she is.”

Chapter 588:

“How did she take it?”

“Ill at ease,” Klaus said. “But no complaints.”

That sounded exactly right.

Hyacinth would hate every inch of it and say nothing, because she was the one who’d come up with the idea, and she wasn’t the sort of person who agreed to things and then made them difficult.

“Team on her at all times,” I said. “Out of sight, but don’t lose her. Not for a second.”

“Yes, sir.”

He left. I sat down at the desk, opened my laptop, and pulled up the tabloid site.

The story had taken hold faster than I’d expected. “Sources close to Mr Lochlan Hastings”—my people, carefully briefed—were confirming to anyone who’d listen that the relationship was over, that there’d been a row, that it had something to do with the baby.

The details were vague enough to be believed.

There were photographs. Hyacinth coming out of a bar in Marylebone, alone, a slight hunch to her shoulders. Hyacinth getting into her building, alone, not looking at the camera, which the caption interpreted as “devastated.”

I looked at her face on the screen. She was a convincing actress.

But would Gloria fall for it?

That was the question I kept returning to, in the gaps between the work and the calls and the stream of updates from Cameron's team.

Gloria Lockwood was not a stupid woman. She'd engineered Marin's death and kept the truth buried for twenty-six years. She'd kept her position in Aaron's household and his affections while simultaneously trying to dismantle his nephew's life from a comfortable distance.

Stupidity was not among her many faults.

But she was also, according to Desmond, a woman who operated on the assumption that she was the cleverest person in the room. And people who believed that tended to make a specific kind of mistake.

Hyacinth, to Gloria's knowledge, was a woman alone, newly without the protection of a billionaire boyfriend, apparently reeling, apparently vulnerable. The window would seem open.

Part of me wanted her to move quickly. To get this over with, to get Hyacinth out of danger, to get to the conversation we both knew had to happen.

The other part of me, the part I was less proud of, wanted Gloria to wait.

Because as long as she waited, the conversation didn't happen. And as long as the conversation didn't happen, I didn't have to sit across from Hyacinth and hear what she might have decided about us.

I knew she wasn't going to end the pregnancy. That was the one thing I felt reasonably certain about.

But I also knew there was a more than negligible probability that she'd decide to keep the baby and handle it herself. On her own terms. Without the complication of me.

That was not acceptable.

I had, not twelve hours ago, told her I would respect whatever she decided. I had meant it when I said it.

Chapter 589:

I meant it somewhat less now, sitting in a hotel room fifteen minutes from her flat, watching paparazzi footage of her, and thinking about the fact that there was a child coming who was mine too and who I intended, quite firmly, to be present for.

I dealt with work, took a call from my father, told him things were fine, everything was under control. I took another call from my mother, who simply asked “is she safe” and, when I said yes, said “good” and hung up.

Men came and went. Updates arrived. I read them, responded, redirected. I called Hyacinth every day, but I couldn’t see her, no matter how much I wanted to.

I wanted to sit in the same room as her, to see that she was actually fine rather than hearing it from my men, to be close enough to do something if something went wrong.

Novels in trend on .com

But I couldn’t.

Those four days pushed my patience further than anything in my entire life.

The call came on the fifth evening.

“Dark blue Volvo estate,” Cameron said, over the secure line. “Registered to a rental company in Hammersmith, but plates don’t match the DVLA record. Been on her tail since she left the bar on Paddington Street. It’s hanging back, for now.”

I was out the door before he’d finished the sentence.

Four days of pub-crawling in the service of a sting operation, and what I had to show for it was a comprehensive knowledge of which establishments on the Marylebone-to-Paddington corridor served the best sparkling water and which barmen were least likely to notice you weren’t actually drinking the wine they’d poured you.

I’d been nursing drinks mostly. Swapping them when no one was looking. Sitting in corners with the carefully arranged posture of a woman who had been badly let down by a man and was doing something about it one glass at a time.

The performance was, I felt, reasonably convincing.

The tabloids seemed to think so, anyway.

The baby thought so too, in the sense that the baby appeared entirely indifferent to the ambient lighting and sad background music of Marylebone’s hospitality sector and continued going about its business regardless.

Lochlan’s team had given me an earpiece on the first day. A tiny thing, nearly invisible, with a range that meant someone from the team could murmur in my ear at all times and direct my movements like a producer talking to a presenter through an on-air monitor.

The first day I'd worn it without complaint. The second day it had started to feel like having a very officious stranger living inside my skull.

By the evening of the second day, I'd taken it out and put it in my coat pocket. I didn't want to wander around the city with my every move narrated at me. I was bait, not a marionette.

Though I'd have been perfectly content with the earpiece, I thought now, if it had been Lochlan's voice in it.

The alley had been the team's idea.

Quiet, poorly lit, the kind of narrow service passage that ran between two residential streets and smelled of wet stone and uncollected recycling. No traffic cameras. An ideal location, apparently, for something to happen.

Chapter 590:

I walked it slowly, heels quiet on the wet paving, and thought about the hotel. Several blocks over. Fifteen minutes on foot, less if you knew the cut-through past the car park on Gloucester Place. I knew because I'd looked it up, twice.

He was probably watching through his people right now. Watching the dot on the tracker move through the alley in real time.

I glanced back at the alley entrance.

I ached to see him. Not just for reassurance, though there was that.

I wanted to see him because I had something to tell him. A decision I'd arrived at, slowly, over four evenings of pretending to be alone and discovering, with a clarity that was almost inconvenient, exactly how much I didn't want to be.

Something moved.

I froze.

A dark shape, rising from a crouch behind the large bin to my left—someone I hadn't seen, someone who'd been there all along—and my hand was already moving toward my coat pocket, toward the small hard shape of the taser, before my brain had fully caught up with what my body was doing.

The shape didn't move toward me.

It moved toward the bin.

A man—elderly, by the looks of him, bundled into a coat several sizes too large for him—was methodically working his way through the bin’s contents.

He found something wrapped in a paper bag, examined it, apparently approved, and tucked it away.

He didn’t look at me.

I let my hand drop from my pocket.

I kept to the far side of the alley as I passed him, and he didn’t look up, and I came out the other end into the lamplight and stood there for a moment with my heart conducting a spirited argument with my ribcage.

I pressed a hand to my chest. I’d never wanted to talk to Lochlan more than I did at that moment.

But I couldn’t.

Breathing out slowly, I started walking.

Just put one foot in front of the other. Five minutes, then home, then this day would be over.

It was quiet. Slick from an earlier shower, the pavement reflecting the amber of the streetlamps in long wobbling lines. My footsteps were the only sound.

Then I heard the engine.

Not in front of me. Behind.

I turned around.

Headlights.

Full beam, coming fast, and for a split second I just stood there in the white light with the completely useless thought that that was a car coming directly toward me on a pavement, which wasn’t where cars were supposed to be.

My body woke up before my brain did. I threw myself sideways, already calculating the gap between the lamppost and the wall, already knowing it wasn’t enough, the headlights were too close, too fast, the gap was wrong—

The car lurched.

Sideways, violently, as though something had struck it broadside with enormous force—which was exactly what had happened, I understood a half-second later, as a dark MPV came out of the junction at speed and drove directly into the car's flank.