

Billionaire Boss Nah, Just a possessive husband!

Chapter 91:

Lochlan gave her a quick once-over, then nodded a polite greeting to the rest of the senior management team waiting respectfully to welcome him.

We spent the entire day at the company: meetings, performance reports, financial reviews, project updates. At six, Jaclyn arranged dinner at a local restaurant known for its specialties.

The deputy manager and head of finance joined as well. Kai and I participated, but slipped out discreetly when the conversation shifted to personal topics at the bar.

I had been running at full throttle all day and was completely wiped.

Mayfair Global didn't have an energy arm, so I was new to the renewable energy sector and struggled to keep up with the acronyms and industry shorthand.

Not to mention the bombardment of Singlish didn't make my job any easier.

Like when someone said the project needed to be done “chop chop,” it didn’t mean it was going to be axed—only that it needed to be done quickly.

Kai laughed. “I know. They also talk super fast. But you get used to it after a while. If you think Singlish is hard, try listening to the Glaswegian accent from Scotland.”

I smiled.

Kai glanced toward the bar, then bent his head closer. “Jaclyn today feels like a completely different person from last Friday.”

“Yeah, I noticed. She can separate the personal from business. Good for her.”

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Jaclyn had been present in every meeting and maintained a professional veneer throughout, although, by a woman’s intuition, I could tell her focus was on Lochlan more than on the presentations.

Kai nodded. “I just hope we don’t run into any more of the boss’s ex-flames at the next stop.”

I glanced at him, tempted to ask if what he'd said about Lochlan and Jaclyn's relationship was true, but held off, because that would mean telling him what Lochlan had told me.

Kai pushed one of the two glasses the server set down at our table. "This is for you."

"Thanks. What is it?"

"The Bedtime Orchid. A mocktail with chamomile and lavender. Helps you sleep." He pointed at my eyes. "You've still got dark circles. Still burning the midnight oil?"

"Yeah. I've got a lot to catch up on." Jumping from Mayfair Global to Velos Capital was a major career shift, and I had a great deal to learn.

Speaking of which.

I took out my work tablet. "I've got something to ask."

"Shoot."

“It’s about the ESS factory. The one that manufactures VRFBs.” Vanadium Redox Flow Batteries were the next big thing in utility-level energy storage.

“What about it?”

“I skimmed through the factory’s attendance and payroll files.” I showed him the data.

“Problem?”

“Not sure, but something feels off. The payroll matches the attendance records, yes, but when I checked the actual on-site headcount, it’s always two people short. Every single day.”

“You serious?” Kai examined the files. It took him only a moment to spot it.

He frowned. “Yeah. Two people short.”

He exchanged a look with me, and we both understood the unspoken implication.

It wasn’t difficult to work out.

If 148 people were on the payroll but only 146 actually showed up, yet 148 got paid, there was only one explanation.

“Someone’s gaming the system,” Kai said.

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“But who, and how, I can’t be certain just from this.” I nodded at the spreadsheet.

Kai scrolled down. “It’s been going on at least ten years. Salaries, CPF, bonuses, overtime. Two people, ten years—nearly two million dollars.”

“About one point two million pounds,” I said. “Lovely. Someone’s been milking the company like a prize dairy cow.”

“Whoever’s behind this has help from higher up,” Kai said. “No way this slipped through unnoticed for a decade.”

“We’ll have to report it. But not before I know exactly whose neck I’m handing to the guillotine.”

Kai nodded. “Boss has that government summit tomorrow. You can talk to him after.”

“Fine. I’ll check the factory first. See if I can shake something loose.”

He frowned. “You sure about going yourself?”

“I’m sure.” If I could survive a three-year contract marriage with Cary, I could handle a factory audit.

Kai raised his glass. “Here’s to shaking the tree, then. Cheers.”

I clinked his glass. “And may the rotten fruit fall fast.”

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I was about to drink when I froze.

“What’s wrong?” Kai asked.

“Nothing,” I said, scanning the lounge.

The waiters were gliding about like they were paid by the inch, and no one seemed remotely interested in me.

Still, the hairs on my neck were standing up.

I shook my head.

Maybe I was imagining things. Or maybe old habits die hard.

Cary used to hire private investigators to keep an eye on me.

He wouldn’t be doing that now. Would he?

Surely even his control-freak tendencies didn’t extend ten thousand kilometres.

When Lochlan finally emerged, he looked criminally composed—shirt crisp, hair immaculate, not a wobble in sight.

Then he handed me his driving licence and said, perfectly seriously, “Pay the bill.”

Ah. There it was.

“Of course, sir,” I said, taking the card.

Translation: utterly sloshed.

Kai started to move, but Jaclyn beat him to it, materialising from the dining room in a flash. “Loch, come to my place. It’s close, and I’ve a bottle of that First Growth you like.”

Of course she did. She probably had it chilling in the fridge next to the champagne she’d labelled Just in Case He Finally Notices Me.

“That’s kind, but I should get back to the hotel,” Lochlan said, still excruciatingly polite even in full blackout mode.

He stepped forward, tripped slightly on the carpet, and Jaclyn threw out her arms in slow-motion anticipation of her damsel-catches-drunk-CEO moment.

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Except Lochlan apparently had lightning-fast reflexes, even drunk. His hand shot out, grabbed my arm—and the next thing I knew, I was airborne, launched directly into Jaclyn’s cleavage.

We hit each other hard. I’m fairly sure I left a bruise on her dignity.

For one horrifying second, our faces were merely an inch apart. I pulled back before our lips could make contact.

Meanwhile, my supposedly drunk boss was suddenly perfectly steady and already halfway to the exit.

Brilliant. Used as a human projectile by the man who signs my paycheques. Since when did “chief of staff” come with the job description “sacrificial body double”?

Still, at least now I finally believed his claim that he wasn’t romantically interested in Jaclyn.

Or in any woman, for that matter.

Jaclyn and I disentangled ourselves with mutual disdain.

She looked livid. I looked mortified.

She shot Lochlan a furious look, spun around, and stormed off.

“Sorry about that,” Lochlan said mildly, as if he’d merely stepped on my foot instead of throwing me at a woman like a bowling ball.

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“No problem,” I said sweetly, arranging my features into what I hoped passed for a forgiving smile.

Of course I understood. He was the boss, after all. By corporate law, that meant everything he did was automatically correct.

Accidentally hurl your employee into another woman? Probably team-building.

The ride back to the hotel was quiet. I’d claimed shotgun before Kai could, having learned my lesson the hard way.

Halfway through the drive, a dull throb in my knee reminded me that I was still made of bones and not industrial steel. I glanced down. A bruise was forming—lovely, a souvenir from the night’s festivities.

In the back seat, Lochlan was out cold.

When we arrived, he didn’t stir. It took Kai, Roy, me, and two hotel staff to lug him into the lift. By the time we deposited him on the bed, we were all sweating.

“Your knee looks bad,” Kai said. “Put some ice on it.”

“I’ll live. I’ve survived worse than a bruise.” I’d survived Cary’s mother, for one.

“All right. Night, then.”

I glanced at Lochlan, asleep and looking irritatingly angelic. No chance to talk to him now.
“You’ll stay with him?”

“Yeah. Go get some rest.”

“Fine. Oh—and tell him tomorrow I won’t be at the summit. The factory’s off the main island and a bit of a trek. I need to leave early if I want to make it back before dinner.”

“Got it. Call me if anything comes up.”

Back in my room, I showered, grabbed an ice pack from the minibar, and pressed it to my knee.

The cold bit into my skin and I hissed, then laughed.

Figures. I'd planned to spend the week trekking through Iceland's wilderness to "find myself." Instead, I was limping through Singapore, juggling fraud investigations and drunk CEOs.

There had been no time to wallow, or to think about Cary. I hobbled to the balcony and looked out at the skyline glittering like it was showing off.

I snapped a photo and typed: [Wish you were here.]

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"What is it?" I demanded.

Portia put her phone face down on the table. “Nothing.”

“It’s Hyacinth, isn’t it?”

“It’s not.”

“You only giggle like that when it’s a text from her.” She shrugged. “So what if it is?”

“What did she say?”

“Why should I tell you?”

She stood and walked to the thermostat like she owned the place. Outside, the sky hung low and swollen, the kind of filthy grey that made London look like it wanted to drown itself. It had been raining for days. Miserable city, miserable weather.

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I'd checked the forecast for Singapore. Thirty-one degrees. Sunshine. No wonder she hadn't come back. Two weeks there and no sign of movement.

"When is she coming back?" I asked.

"No idea."

Typical. Ever since Portia appointed herself Hyacinth's legal mouthpiece, she'd turned every conversation into a brick wall of "no idea"s and "don't know"s.

She slid a document across the table. "Sign this."

The Joint Declaration of Intent to Finalise. I didn't even look at it. "I want to talk to her."

"And I want to win the lottery and wake up next to Idris Elba. We all want things we can't have. Grow up and sign the bloody thing."

"Is she working for Lochlan Hastings now? Has she taken a job in Singapore? Is she ever coming back to London?"

"No idea. Wouldn't tell you if I did. Ask me again and I'll scream."

My hand clenched into a fist. Dr Forbes's voice crept in, that calm, irritating drawl: "When you feel the surge, breathe, count, control the reaction."

I could feel it—the spike in adrenaline, the pulse hammering behind my eyes. I breathed in through my nose. One, two, three, four.

The technique didn't always work, but I hadn't broken anything in three days, which was a personal record.

I stared past Portia's shoulder instead of at her rage-inducing face.

"Mrs Grant isn't taking my calls," she said, tapping her nails against the table in a deliberate, grating rhythm. "Hyacinth's agreed to waive the settlement, but as her lawyer, I'm fighting for what's rightfully hers. Your mother created the mess. She'll pay for it."

"Then deal with her directly," I said. "If you can find her sober long enough to sign a cheque. Try setting her on fire. That usually gets her attention."

My mother had stopped speaking to me after I refused to bail her out.

Good. She'd destroyed enough lives.

“Fine. I’ll handle her,” Portia said. “But sign this and stop wasting my time.”

The word “Finalise” sat in the header like a gravestone.

No way in hell was I going to sign it.

As long as the Joint Declaration remained unsigned, the court couldn’t validate the divorce.

Portia folded her arms. “What’s the point of dragging this out? She’s not coming back to you. Ever.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. She hates cheaters. She never forgives cheaters.”

“I didn’t cheat.”

Portia laughed. Sharp, cruel, dismissive. “The blonde with the big tits, that spoiled princess Vanessa Abrams, and probably half the women in Mayfair. Want me to keep listing names?”

“I never fucked any of them. Is that clear enough for you?”

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Chapter 95:

“Oh, give it a rest. You think if you say it enough times, I’ll start believing it? Or maybe the gin’s eaten your last working brain cell and you can’t tell lies from reality anymore.”

“It’s not a lie.”

“Whatever. Just sign.”

“No. Not until I talk to her. And if you make this harder than it needs to be, Portia, I’ll shut down your clinic before tomorrow. Don’t test me. I’ve got the resources to bury you so deep you’ll be polishing nails in bloody Grimsby.”

Portia’s grin faltered for a second before she found her nerve again. “Don’t threaten me. She doesn’t want you. She’s gone halfway round the world to evade you. She’s changed her number. If you think pestering her will fix anything, then you clearly don’t know her at all.”

“I know her better than you think.”

“Oh yeah? What’s her favourite colour?”

“Blue.”

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“Favourite ice cream flavour?”

“Elderflower and lime.”

“Favourite season?”

“Summer. Because London never has a real one.”

I also knew she hated the sound of a fork scraping ceramic, slept better with distant traffic noise than in complete silence, and came harder if I used both my cock and my hands.

I looked straight at Portia. “I know her better than you ever will. And I know she still feels something for me.”

“Maybe in the past. But she’s moved on.”

“Bullshit!” I slammed my fist on the table. The sound cracked through the room.

Portia flinched.

“See?” she said after a beat. “That’s why she left. You can’t control yourself. You scare her. You hurt her. And now you think you can win her back with an apology? Too late.”

I curled my hand into a fist again, nails biting my palm. “I’ll change. I’ll control my temper. I’ll never hurt her again.”

She sighed. “Look, I—”

A knock on the door cut her off. Greg Hunt stepped in, apologetic. “Sorry to interrupt, boss. Miss Abrams is downstairs. She insists on seeing you. She won’t leave.”

“Tell her I’m busy.”

“No, you’re not.” Portia stood. “We’re done. You can meet your mistress now. Actually, she’s not a mistress anymore, is she? You’re single. Girlfriend, then.”

A vein twitched in my temple. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Oh really? Because she’s been posting photos of the two of you all over social media. Changed her status to ‘in love.’”

“The photos are fake.”

“Maybe. But her forgiveness isn’t. You had her arrested. You nearly destroyed her family’s business. And she still forgives you and can’t go a day without seeing you. That’s loyalty. Or stupidity. Take your pick.”

Portia reached the door. “Vanessa Abrams is spoiled, manipulative, and possibly deranged, but she’s in love with you. Maybe it’s time you stopped chasing Hyacinth and started appreciating the woman who actually wants you.”

The door slammed behind her.

Appreciate Vanessa? A woman who forgave me because she’s just as fucked up as I am? That’s not love. That’s rot dressed as affection.

Hyacinth was the only thing I ever had that wasn’t tainted.

I pushed my chair back and stood. “Get me Sarah in Travel Logistics. Tell her to prep the jet for immediate departure.”

Greg nodded. “Destination, sir?”

“Singapore.”

“Understood.” He paused. “And Miss Abrams?”

“Tell her to go to hell.”

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After breakfast, I changed into a business-casual suit and flat shoes.

I briefly considered heels, then remembered I was heading to an industrial island, not a boardroom fashion parade. Besides, nothing screams “clueless foreign auditor” quite like someone trying to balance on four-inch stilettos near heavy machinery.

On the taxi ride to Jurong Island, I got a text from Kai: [Boss is up. No hangover. Coconut water you suggested worked like a charm. Omw to the summit now. Gl with the investigation!] I replied with a thumbs up.

Good thing I’d left early. The security process made airport immigration look like a drive-through. The taxi stopped at a checkpoint, and I was held hostage by a very polite guard with the persistence of a customs officer and the charm of a wet sock. Eventually, I had to call the plant director to vouch for me before they decided I wasn’t a security threat disguised as a woman in flats.

“Miss Galloway, welcome!” Shawn Tan beamed at me with both hands outstretched.

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He was in his forties, local, about my height, with the sort of tan that suggested he’d been born under the equator and the sort of belly that suggested his favourite food was beer. His smile was too wide, too ready—the kind of smile that said, Please don’t make my life difficult.

We exchanged pleasantries. When I mentioned that Lochlan wouldn’t be joining us today, he looked momentarily conflicted—relief fighting disappointment, with relief winning by a hair.

“Let’s start here, shall we?” he said cheerfully, gesturing to a section filled with massive drums of purple-black liquid. “This is where the magic begins.”

Vanadium electrolyte. Nothing magical about it, unless you were the sort who got turned on by battery fluids.

Shawn Tan’s file said he’d worked here fifteen years, starting as a line worker. He clearly knew his stuff. He talked me through filtration, temperature control, purity levels—all the things I pretended to find riveting while wondering if he’d practised this presentation in front of a mirror.

We moved onto the main floor, where the sound hit like a wall—steady mechanical rhythm, the hum of human labour drowned beneath automation. Workers in white overalls lined a conveyor, carefully sandwiching membranes between electrode sheets.

Shawn raised his voice slightly. “We’ve invested heavily in automation, but final sealing and inspection are still human-controlled.”

He stopped beside one of the workers and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “This is Ah Hock. Been with us since day one. Our line workers are our bedrock, Miss Galloway.”

I looked at Ah Hock. If he’d been here that long, he probably knew what was going on.

But Shawn didn't give me time to speak to the man. He was already moving on, narrating the next process like a tour guide. By lunchtime, I knew three things: Shawn could talk for England, the cafeteria food wasn't half bad, and I hadn't been left alone with a single employee.

Shawn hovered so close that if he'd been a man on the Tube, I'd have reported him.

But he couldn't follow me into the toilet.

I lingered by the sink, pretending to fuss with my hair until a trio of women came in. They paused when they saw me, obviously clocking the outsider.

"Hello," I said, offering what I hoped was a friendly, nonthreatening nod.

"You're the lady from headquarters," one of them said.

News travelled fast here, apparently.

"Yeah. The big boss is too busy, so I'm here to take a look for him." I fanned myself with one hand. "Had to get up at four-thirty this morning. Still, the heat's insane. I think I melted three layers of skin walking from the gate."

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“Four-thirty, lah? That’s rough.” The woman shook her head. “You’re wearing too many clothes for this weather. You’ll be sweating through that blazer by afternoon.”

“Already am.” I gave her a wry smile. “The thing is basically glued to my back. I thought I needed to look official, but now I think I just look ridiculous. You’ve got it right in those light overalls.”

“Yeah. Light and cheap.” The woman on the left let out a dry chuckle. “Mr Tan likes everything cheap.”

Oh. So they had opinions about their boss. Good.

The trio were surprised to find me still there when they came out of the toilet.

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"I kind of forgot the way back," I said, with the right amount of self-deprecating helplessness.

"We'll show you," the eldest offered, and I joined them, chatting as we walked.

"The cafeteria food's surprisingly decent," I said.

"When the cook remembers the salt," one of them replied. We laughed, easy camaraderie forming.

We kept talking and, eventually, as naturally as I could, I steered the conversation. "HQ's planning a little recognition piece. Highlighting the long-time workers—the people who built this place. Some of them have been here over ten years, right?"

"My auntie has," said the youngest, Jasmine. "Since the second wing opened."

“Perfect. That’s exactly the sort of loyalty we want to feature. I was hoping to talk to a few of the veterans.” I pretended to scroll my tablet. “Let’s see. Lim Soon Huat and Rani Devi. Fourteen years each, if I’m reading this right. You must know them.”

The three women traded glances.

Mrs Chew frowned. “Lim Soon Huat? Fourteen years?”

Jasmine shook her head. “Never heard of them. Maybe they’re on the night shift?”

“No, the day shift has most of the senior staff,” said the third woman. “There are only about a hundred and fifty people here. We all know the long-timers. I’ve never heard of either.”

“Me neither,” Mrs Chew and Jasmine echoed.

I raised an eyebrow, feigning mild surprise. “Oh, that’s strange. Must be outdated HR records, then. I’ll flag it. Thanks, ladies. You’ve been a huge help.”

At two-thirty, I used the coffee break to vanish from Shawn’s ever-watchful orbit again. I tracked down Ah Hock, the worker he’d paraded earlier. Five minutes of casual chat and a discreet question later, I had my confirmation.

I returned to Shawn's office. He was in deep discussion with the finance and HR managers. The moment I entered, all three straightened like schoolchildren caught gossiping.

"Miss Galloway," Shawn said, recovering quickly. "They've got the files you requested. We can move to the conference room. It's got a bigger screen there, better lighting—"

"Maybe later," I said lightly. "For now, I'd like to meet Lim Soon Huat and Rani Devi."

Shawn's smile vanished. "Fuck."

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Shawn gestured at the finance manager. “Wayne, lock the door.”

The heavysset man with wire-rimmed glasses hesitated for half a second, then obeyed. The lock turned with a click that suggested this was not going to be a fun conversation.

The HR manager, Daryl Koh, pulled down all the blinds in quick succession. The room darkened instantly.

I stepped back, on guard. “What is this?”

Shawn smiled, all teeth and nerves. “Don’t worry, Miss Galloway. It’s just a precaution. The request you made just now... well, it’s not the kind of thing we want spreading around.”

“Why not?” I asked. The office was suddenly far too big, far too quiet, and filled with men who either outweighed me or outmuscled me.

“You see, here’s the thing.” Shawn rubbed his palms together. “Those two you asked about, they used to work here, but that was a long time ago.”

“Oh?” I said, keeping my voice light while my mind calculated exits, angles, and whether the decorative paperweight on his desk would crack a skull if necessary.

“They had a workplace accident. Ended up with disabilities. Had to retire early. Naturally, we didn’t want the news to get out—bad for our image, you see—so I arranged a private settlement.”

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“That doesn’t sound like something that has to be discussed behind closed doors,” I said. “The company has a workplace injury policy, not to mention compulsory insurance.”

Daryl Koh’s expression twitched, guilt flickering across his face. Wayne looked worse, fidgeting with his shirt cuffs. Shawn was clearly the only one with the acting range to attempt sincerity.

“Well,” he said smoothly, “Lim Soon Huat and Rani Devi didn’t have insurance. And technically, they didn’t have valid work passes.” He tried for an embarrassed shrug.

“I see.”

“So I couldn’t tell HQ,” he continued, nodding gravely. “In the end, they agreed to receive disability pay spread out over fifteen years in exchange for not suing.”

I nodded along as if I bought every word. “That’s why their names are still on the payroll, but they never appear in the factory.”

“Exactly,” he said eagerly. His relief was palpable. “I know it isn’t proper SOP. I didn’t report it because, well, I didn’t want a black mark on my record. I feel terrible about it, of course I do. But what’s done is done, and...” He gave me a hopeful look. “I know Mr Hastings is in town, but he must be very busy. Perhaps we don’t need to trouble him with such a minor matter.” If he’d smiled any harder, his face would’ve cracked.

I looked at the other two. “I suppose Mr Chen and Mr Koh were aware of the arrangement as well?” I stopped short of saying “cover-up,” though the word was tap-dancing through my head. Both men nodded, refusing eye contact.

I paused, pretended to think. The air conditioner hummed, the only sound in the room besides the low-level panic.

“Fine,” I said eventually. “Then I’ll need to talk to Lim and Devi myself to verify your story. If it checks out, I won’t report anything to Mr Hastings.”

Shawn glanced at his men, and something unspoken passed between them.

“Of course,” he said finally. “No problem at all. Let me just call ahead.”

I actually relaxed when I heard the door unlock.

Which, considering what happened next, was impressively stupid of me.

When I came to, everything hurt.

My head pounded, my throat felt like sandpaper, and my mouth... my mouth was taped shut. I could taste the glue.

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Chapter 99:

What the hell?

I tried to move, but a sharp tug pulled my arms back. My wrists were tied. So were my ankles.

My pulse spiked.

I blinked, but the darkness didn't move. It was absolute, the kind that pressed in on you, thick and suffocating.

Somewhere nearby, waves crashed against something solid.

Sea. So, Jurong Island or somewhere close.

The air stank of damp wood and mould. The floor beneath me was hard—probably concrete, possibly hell.

My head throbbed when I tried to move again, and I thought I smelled something metallic. Blood, probably mine.

I cursed myself silently for being stupid. I'd known Shawn was lying, yet I'd still followed him like an amateur intern on her first day out.

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Somewhere, Cary would be laughing smugly. He'd always said my curiosity would get me killed. I'd always replied—silently, of course—that his arrogance would get him there first.

At least one of us was about to be proven right.

Lim and Devi had never existed. They were phantom employees created to siphon money out of payroll. A nice, clean little embezzlement scheme.

When Shawn offered to arrange a meeting with the two “former employees,” I'd played along, expecting him to conjure up two random people to pass off as them. I'd even rehearsed my speech, ready to turn one of them against him.

Instead, I'd gotten a blunt-force trauma to the back of the head.

Not the outcome I'd been hoping for.

I had no idea how long I'd been out, but judging from the ache in my shoulders and the fact that I was still breathing, it couldn't have been more than a few hours.

Once the initial panic faded, I forced myself to think logically.

What was Shawn's plan? He couldn't keep me forever. I'd told Kai where I was going. Once I missed check-in tonight, he'd start calling. If I didn't answer, he'd get worried. And when Kai got worried, Lochlan would get involved.

Still, I couldn't just sit here waiting for rescue like some helpless damsel.

If Shawn came back, I could try reasoning with him. Offer a deal. Promise leniency if he let me go. Embezzlement was survivable. Kidnapping wasn't.

I repeated the words in my head like a script, rehearsing my calm, steady tone for when he inevitably appeared. The trick with men like Shawn was to sound unafraid, even when your heart was doing a drum solo in your chest.

Somewhere, hinges creaked. My breath caught.

Light sliced through the dark, a harsh beam from a torch. I squinted, blinking against it.

A figure stepped in, silhouetted against the doorway.

It wasn't Shawn.

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Chapter 100:

The business summit dragged on longer than expected.

One of the hosts turned out to be an old acquaintance of my father's, which meant there was no polite way to refuse without causing a minor diplomatic incident. By the time I returned to the hotel, it was nearing eight.

I stepped into the lobby and scanned it automatically. The disappointment was immediate, though I had no reason to expect otherwise—she wasn't there.

Hyacinth Galloway.

A woman with a pleasing name, a pleasing face, and a body that, even in the most conservative of suits, made me look longer than was strictly polite.

Two weeks in, I was still trying to make sense of my decision to hire her.

I told myself I wanted her institutional knowledge, her insight into Cary Grant's operations.

That part was true. It was also incomplete.

The truth was that something about her had short-circuited my usual logic. I had felt an inexplicable pull, the kind of irrational compulsion I usually despised in others. It was inconvenient, distracting, and yet I had allowed it.

I had rationalised the decision as strategic, but the sheer fact that I'd allowed a woman to step this close to my inner circle was an unexamined risk I felt increasingly exposed by.

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As we waited for the lift, I glanced at the small box in Kai's hand. Onde-onde cake. I had ordered it myself—absurdly—after hearing Kai mention that she had a weakness for sweets. I gave my staff gifts from time to time, but never personal ones like this.

This was a dangerous precedent.

I should fire her.

Not because she had done anything wrong, but because she had disrupted my equilibrium.

Professionally, she had been an unproductive source of intelligence. Every subtle probe into her previous employment was met with bland diplomacy. She was courteous, measured, and maddeningly loyal to her former firm.

Even her description of her ex-husband, a man known for insufferable arrogance, was temperate. Not a single word of bitterness.

That restraint had irritated me at first, then intrigued me.

She was relentless at her desk, and more composed than anyone had a right to be so soon after a divorce that had played out in the tabloids.

Everyone knew Cary Grant had cheated. She never mentioned it. She just worked.

There was something magnetic in that self-control.

Her focus, her composure, even her scent—light, citrus, faintly floral—had become distractions I resented.

More and more frequently, I had found myself thinking about her in meetings, at night, even in dreams I had no business having.

Last night, I'd dreamt of her again. We were leaving the dock. Roy had swerved hard. She had fallen into my lap in the back of the car, her hand had lingered, and I didn't stop her when she reached for my belt buckle.

The lift dinged. I blinked the dream away.

Kai was fidgeting beside me, his attention on his phone.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He looked up. “Hyacinth isn’t back yet. She said she’d be back before dinner.”

I glanced towards the lobby entrance. Traffic outside was heavy, the usual evening chaos. “It’s peak hour. She may be delayed.”

“I thought that too, but she hasn’t replied to any of my texts. Calls go straight to voicemail.”

I checked my watch. I had a nine o’clock video conference, but that suddenly felt irrelevant. “How long have you been trying to reach her?”

“She texted me around noon. Sent a photo of her lunch.”

That small detail annoyed me for reasons I couldn’t articulate. I hadn’t realised the two of them exchanged casual messages. “Call the factory,” I said.

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