

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 1:

Ayla sat on the edge of the custom Italian leather sofa in the master bedroom of the Farrell estate. The glow of her laptop screen illuminated her face in the dim room as she scrolled through the PR itinerary for the Farrell Group's upcoming week, double-checking every interview slot and press release.

Outside the heavy mahogany doors, the distinct, low growl of an Aston Martin engine cut through the quiet Atherton night.

The engine shut off.

Ayla immediately closed her laptop and set it on the glass coffee table. She stood and walked to the floor-to-ceiling mirror, smoothing her hands down the sides of her silk nightgown and adjusting the hem until it fell perfectly.

The heavy double doors to the bedroom swung open.

Axel walked in, bringing a rush of cold California night air with him. Ayla let a soft, practiced smile touch her lips and moved toward him, automatically reaching out to take his haute couture suit jacket as he slipped it from his shoulders.

As the heavy fabric settled into her hands, a scent hit her.

It was faint, but unmistakable — a heavy blend of sandalwood and crushed roses.

Ayla's fingers stiffened against the wool lapels. Her movements stopped completely. She only ever used unscented, medical-grade skincare. She never wore perfume.

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Axel didn't notice her hesitation. He leaned in and pressed a dry, dismissive kiss to her forehead, then pulled back and lifted a hand to rub the bridge of his nose.

"The closed-door meeting with Sequoia Capital was a nightmare," he muttered, his voice thick with exhaustion. "They never know when to stop talking."

Ayla swallowed the hard lump forming in her throat and forced her lungs to draw in a breath. She turned away from him and walked into the climate-controlled walk-in closet, carefully hanging the jacket on a cedar hanger.

When she returned to the bedroom, Axel was standing at the edge of the bed. He yanked his silk tie loose with a frustrated sigh and tossed it carelessly onto the Persian rug, then

turned his back to her and began unbuttoning his crisp white dress shirt, preparing to head into the master bathroom.

The shirt slid off his broad shoulders and dropped to the floor, exposing the tight muscles of his back.

Ayla's eyes fell naturally on his left shoulder blade.

Her pupils contracted so fast it physically hurt.

The air in the room seemed to vanish. Her lungs stopped working.

There, stamped vividly across his left shoulder blade, were three dark red, raised scratches. The skin around them was inflamed, the edges slightly broken and bleeding. The spacing between the marks was exactly the width of a woman's fingernails, and the downward angle and sheer force of the cuts made it impossible to mistake them for an accidental scrape against gym equipment.

Axel turned his head slightly. He caught her staring directly at his back.

For a fraction of a second, raw panic flashed in his deep brown eyes.

He moved instantly, grabbing a thick white towel from the bench and wrapping it tightly around his upper body to hide the marks.

“I scraped myself on a loose nail in the sauna at the club,” Axel said. His voice was perfectly steady, completely natural.

Ayla looked at his face — the face that had graced the cover of Time magazine, praised for having the most devoted, honest eyes in Silicon Valley.

Her stomach violently turned over. Acid rushed up her throat.

She didn’t scream. She didn’t throw anything.

Instead, she forced the muscles in her face to stretch into a stiff, unnatural smile.

“You should be more careful,” she said, her voice sounding as though it belonged to someone else. “Go take your shower.”

Axel nodded and walked into the bathroom. The heavy door clicked shut, and the sound of the rain showerhead turning on echoed through the wall.

The moment the water hit the tiles, Ayla's knees buckled.

She collapsed onto the edge of the mattress, gripping the sheets so hard her knuckles turned white. Her eyes darted to the nightstand, where Axel's private phone lay face down on the marble surface.

Her hand was shaking violently as she reached out and picked it up. The metal felt like ice against her palm. She swiped up on the screen and typed in the four-digit passcode — their wedding anniversary.

The screen shook side to side. Passcode Incorrect.

Ayla's heart plummeted. A wave of physical nausea crashed over her.

He had changed the passcode. A passcode that had remained the same for three years — changed just one week ago.

The rushing water from the bathroom masked the sound of her heavy, ragged breathing.

The perfect illusion of her marriage shattered into a million jagged pieces in her mind. She thought about the countless nights she had stayed awake until three in the morning, drafting flawless press releases to build his image as the ultimate family man.

A hot, blinding anger erupted in her chest, instantly burning away the grief.

She was being played for a fool.

Ayla set the phone back down on the marble nightstand, making sure it rested in the exact same position as before. She stood, her legs no longer shaking, and crossed the room to her mahogany writing desk. She pulled open the bottom drawer and removed a blank white sticky note and a pen.

With steady fingers, she wrote down the phone number of a top-tier divorce attorney she had memorized years ago.

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Chapter 2:

The morning California sun poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the Farrell estate's dining room.

Ayla sat at the long mahogany table, her face completely blank, quietly cutting into her fried eggs. Footsteps echoed on the grand staircase as Axel walked down, dressed in a perfectly tailored Tom Ford suit, tapping his Bluetooth earpiece and barking a termination order to someone in HR.

He pulled out the chair opposite Ayla and sat down. He didn't look at her. Out of pure habit, he simply waited for her to stand and pour his black coffee.

Ayla didn't move a muscle. She took a slow, deliberate bite of her food.

"The coffee pot is on your right," she said, her voice flat and devoid of warmth.

Axel's hand paused on the table. He looked up at her, his brow furrowing as he registered the sudden drop in temperature. He tapped his earpiece, cutting the call.

His expression softened into a mask of gentle concern, his eyes scanning her face carefully. Last night's panic was gone, replaced by a calculated performance.

“Are you upset because I got home so late last night, sweetheart?”

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Ayla slowly raised her eyes and met his gaze with a dead, hollow stare.

“Was the meeting really that important?” she asked.

Axel didn’t blink. “Everything I do is for the Farrell Group’s Nasdaq bell-ringing plan. You know that.”

Before Ayla could respond, the heavy dining room doors swung open. Martha, the head housekeeper, walked in, followed closely by Axel’s executive assistant, Jared.

Jared walked directly to Ayla and placed a large, iconic orange box on the table in front of her plate.

Axel leaned back in his chair, a smug, triumphant smile spreading across his face — though it never quite reached his eyes, which remained fixed on her, searching.

“Open it. A peace offering.”

Ayla stared at the box. She reached out and pulled the brown ribbon loose, then lifted the lid. Resting inside a velvet dust bag was a Himalayan crocodile Birkin bag — one of the rarest bags on the planet.

“I had my New York office pull it from a private auction before it even went public,” Axel said, his tone dripping with self-satisfaction.

Ayla looked down at the bag. It cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Her chest tightened with a sickening sense of humiliation. He was treating her like a pet, throwing an expensive toy at her to keep her quiet and obedient.

She pushed the orange box away. It slid across the polished wood.

“I don’t need this,” she said coldly.

Axel’s smile vanished. His jaw clenched.

“Don’t be unreasonable, Ayla,” he snapped, his patience evaporating. “I don’t have time for tantrums.”

The sharp click of high heels against marble cut through the tension. The main doors opened wider, and Axel's mother, Heda, marched into the dining room flanked by two of her own assistants.

Heda didn't glance at Ayla. She walked straight to Axel and placed a hand on his shoulder. "How did the networking go last night?"

Then she turned her head. Her sharp, critical eyes dragged slowly down Ayla's body, stopping to linger on her flat stomach.

"Cancel your charity luncheons this week," Heda ordered, her tone arrogant and unyielding. "You are going to the private clinic for a fertility screening."

She crossed her arms. "The Farrell family trust requires an heir with blue-blood genetics to stabilize the board of directors before the IPO."

Ayla's fingers tightened around the handle of her butter knife. The metal dug into her palm.

"I have no intention of having a child right now," she said, her voice dropping to a freezing register.

Heda's face turned red. She slammed her hand down on the dining table, sending the silverware rattling.

"You ungrateful little brat!" Heda shrieked, leaning forward, her eyes filled with pure venom. "You are a fake heiress. You were thrown out of the Joyce family like trash. You have no background, no bloodline, and no value. You are a defective product we took pity on!"

Ayla whipped her head toward Axel.

For three years, he had always stepped in. He had always played the protector when his mother crossed the line.

Axel looked down at his coffee cup and said nothing.

Then he looked up at Ayla and sighed. "Ayla, you're being overly sensitive again. Stop making my mother uncomfortable. Just apologize."

The gaslighting hit her like a physical blow to the chest.

She looked at the two of them — the mother who saw her as a breeding mare, and the cheating husband who used her as a human shield. The last microscopic thread of attachment in her heart snapped clean.

Ayla stood so fast her heavy wooden chair scraped loudly against the floor. Her movements were sharp, decisive, and completely devoid of hesitation.

“Save the Farrell family throne for someone else to inherit,” she said, her voice echoing through the room.

She turned her back on them and walked toward the door.

“Ayla! Get back here!” Axel roared, his voice bouncing off the walls.

She didn’t stop. She walked straight out the front doors, down the steps, and into the garage. She climbed into her Porsche 911, slammed the door, and sped out through the estate gates without once glancing in the rearview mirror.

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Chapter 3:

Ayla sat in the driver's seat of her parked Porsche, fingers hovering over the steering wheel. She had just dialed her best friend Chloe's number when a text message appeared on her screen.

It was from Axel.

If you don't show up to the Silicon Valley Innovation Summit tonight, I will freeze every credit card and trust account tied to your name within sixty seconds.

Ayla stared at the glowing words. Her breathing hitched.

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She closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. She needed cash to hire a ruthless divorce lawyer. If he cut her off now, she would be completely paralyzed.

She shifted the car into drive and forced herself to turn toward San Francisco.

By evening, Ayla stepped out of a black town car in front of the Moscone Center. She wore a minimalist, custom-tailored black evening gown that clung to her curves, looking every bit the untouchable billionaire's wife.

Axel was already waiting at the entrance of the VIP red carpet lane. The moment he saw her, his face transformed. The angry tyrant from that morning vanished, replaced by a mask of overwhelming, practiced devotion.

He stepped forward and wrapped his arm around her waist. His fingers dug into her ribs so hard a sharp pain shot up her spine.

"Smile," Axel whispered directly into her ear, his breath hot against her skin. "Don't you dare ruin the company's stock rating for next week."

The heavy double doors swung open. A wall of blinding camera flashes exploded in their faces as reporters screamed their names.

Ayla's expression shifted instantly. She flashed the flawless, untouchable smile she had spent years perfecting as a top-tier PR strategist.

Axel stopped in the middle of the red carpet and reached into his tuxedo pocket, producing a custom velvet Cartier jewelry box. A collective gasp rippled through the press line. He opened the box, lifted out a blinding, multi-million-dollar diamond necklace, and stepped behind Ayla to fasten it around her neck.

The cameras fired like machine guns. Reporters shouted praises about the Farrell CEO's legendary devotion to his wife.

Axel leaned in and kissed her cheek. Ayla smiled for the lenses while her stomach cramped with nausea.

They moved off the carpet and into the massive, glittering ballroom. Within seconds, Axel was swarmed by a group of Wall Street investors.

Ayla immediately stepped back, retreating into the shadows along the edge of the room. She lifted a flute of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and watched Axel work the crowd.

Then she noticed it.

A faint vibration buzzed in the breast pocket of Axel's tuxedo. He pulled out his private phone, glanced at the screen, and his entire demeanor shifted. His eyes darkened with a specific kind of hunger.

He offered the investors a quick, charming apology, then turned and walked briskly toward the staff corridors at the back of the venue.

Ayla set her champagne glass down on a high-top table.

She knew the layout of the Moscone Center perfectly. She had designed the PR security routes for this exact event.

She slipped through the crowd, staying completely out of sight, and followed him through the noisy, chaotic kitchen hallways until she reached the dimly lit VIP lounge sector.

At the end of the corridor, one of the heavy lounge doors stood slightly ajar. Low, breathy laughter drifted through the gap.

Ayla slowed her steps. She pressed her back against the cold wall and slid closer, peering through the narrow opening.

Inside the lounge, Axel had a woman pinned against the back of a leather sofa, kissing her aggressively. The woman was wearing a plunging red evening gown.

It was Kristal — the brilliant, beautiful Director of Overseas Operations for the Farrell Group.

Kristal giggled and pushed Axel back slightly, running her manicured fingers down his jawline.

“You were a little too convincing on the red carpet out there,” she said, pouting her lips.

Axel let out a dark, mocking laugh. “It’s just PR for the old fossils on the board. Ayla is nothing but a prop.”

On the other side of the door, Ayla felt as though a sledgehammer had caved in her ribs.

It wasn’t just the physical betrayal. It was the complete, utter destruction of her human dignity.

Her hands were shaking so violently she could barely grip her phone. She pulled it out, switched it to video mode, and held the lens up to the gap in the door.

She recorded ten seconds of them tangled together on the sofa. Clear, undeniable proof.

Ayla hit stop and slipped the phone back into her clutch.

She didn’t kick the door open. She didn’t scream.

She turned around and walked back down the hallway, her footsteps completely silent.

When she stepped back into the blinding lights of the ballroom, the pain in her chest was gone. Her eyes were utterly still — empty of everything except cold, calculating resolve.

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Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 4:

Ayla walked straight to the main marble bar, tapped her fingernails against the cold stone, and ordered a bone-dry martini.

Ten minutes later, Axel strolled back into the ballroom through the staff entrance, adjusting his cuffs. He looked perfectly composed as he rejoined the circle of investors. A minute after that, Kristal came through a different set of doors, her lipstick freshly applied, hips swaying as her eyes swept the room.

They landed on Ayla standing alone at the bar.

A smug, victorious smirk spread across Kristal's face. She grabbed a glass of wine and walked directly toward her.

She stopped right beside Ayla and dramatically flipped her hair over one shoulder. A heavy wave of sandalwood and crushed roses hit Ayla's face.

Ayla's eyes turned to ice, but her posture remained perfectly relaxed.

"These Silicon Valley dinners must be so incredibly boring for you," Kristal said, her voice pitched just loud enough to carry.

She took a leisurely sip of wine. "I mean, a woman who only knows how to shop couldn't possibly understand the AI infrastructure architecture Axel was just discussing."

Several wealthy wives and tech executives nearby stopped talking. They turned their heads, eyes gleaming with morbid curiosity.

Ayla took a slow sip of her martini. The gin burned her throat.

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“As the Director of Overseas Operations,” she said, her voice flat and bored, “did you skip the training on basic social etiquette?”

Kristal’s smile twitched. A flush of irritation crept up her face. She stepped closer, invading Ayla’s personal space, and dropped her voice to a venomous whisper.

“Axel loves a woman who can fight alongside him in the boardroom. Not a fake heiress who got thrown out by her own family like garbage.”

Determined to draw a reaction, Kristal shifted her weight deliberately and drove the heel of her stiletto down hard onto the delicate train of Ayla’s custom black gown. The sickening sound of expensive fabric tearing echoed near their feet. Kristal threw her hands up with a loud, theatrical gasp and lurched toward Ayla as though she had lost her balance.

Ayla didn’t flinch. She didn’t step back to catch her.

Instead, her eyes narrowed into slits and her wrist snapped forward with lethal precision. She threw the entire glass of ice-cold martini directly into Kristal’s perfectly contoured face.

The alcohol hit Kristal's eyes.

Kristal let out an ear-piercing scream.

The ballroom went dead silent. The music seemed to stop. Hundreds of heads snapped toward the bar. Kristal stumbled backward, clutching her face, the sticky alcohol dripping down her chin and staining the front of her red dress.

"You crazy bitch!" Kristal shrieked, pointing a trembling finger at Ayla.

The crowd parted as Axel shoved his way to the front, his face purple with rage. He took in Kristal — crying, shivering — and a flash of genuine panic crossed his eyes.

He lunged forward and shoved Ayla hard in the chest.

She stumbled back, her lower back slamming into the sharp edge of the marble bar. Pain exploded up her spine, but she didn't make a sound.

Axel tore off his tuxedo jacket and wrapped it tenderly around Kristal's shoulders. Then he spun to face Ayla.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?!” he roared, his voice booming across the silent ballroom. “Assaulting a company executive in public?!”

He pointed at the floor. “Apologize to her right now, or get the hell out of this venue.”

Whispers broke across the room. The elite crowd was openly mocking the disgraced, hysterical wife.

Ayla looked at him. She looked at the man willing to destroy his wife’s dignity in front of the entire world just to protect his mistress. The last invisible chain holding her to him shattered.

She lifted her empty martini glass and slammed it down onto the marble counter. It shattered into a dozen pieces, the sharp crack making several people flinch.

Ayla stood up straight. She ignored the throbbing pain in her back and looked around the room of staring faces before locking eyes with Axel.

“You two make me sick,” she said. Her voice wasn’t loud, but it cut through the silence like a scalpel.

She didn't wait for his reaction. She gathered the ripped fabric of her gown in one hand, turned around, and walked out of the ballroom with her head held high.

The cold San Francisco wind hit her face as she pushed through the exit doors. Ayla pulled out her phone, blocked Axel's number, hailed a yellow cab, and disappeared into the night.

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Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 5:

Ayla dragged her exhausted body out of a yellow cab in Manhattan. She had taken a red-eye flight straight from San Francisco. She walked up to the door of a luxury apartment building and knocked.

Chloe swung the door open in silk pajamas, her eyes widening in horror at the sight of Ayla's ripped dress and smeared makeup. She immediately pulled her inside and locked the door behind them.

Ayla sank onto Chloe's plush living room sofa and wrapped both hands around a mug of hot tea, letting the warmth seep into her freezing fingers. In a flat, clipped voice, she gave Chloe a brutal, condensed account of the summit.

"That absolute sociopath!" Chloe screamed, hurling a velvet throw pillow across the room. She grabbed a first-aid kit and gently pressed an ice pack against the massive purple bruise spreading across Ayla's lower back.

Ayla didn't wince. She opened her laptop on the coffee table.

"I need to move my money," she said, her voice completely detached.

She logged into the portal for her offshore Swiss bank account — a small personal fund she had quietly set aside before the marriage. The page loaded.

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A massive red warning banner flashed across the screen: ACCOUNT FROZEN BY PRIMARY TRUSTEE.

Ayla's fingers dug into the edge of the laptop.

She had underestimated his cruelty. Axel had mobilized his legal team in the middle of the night to cut off her financial oxygen.

Chloe's phone rang. It was her father, a senior partner at one of Manhattan's top law firms. Chloe answered, and as she listened, the color drained from her face. She hung up slowly.

"Ayla," Chloe whispered, her voice shaking. "Axel just sent a blanket warning to the top ten firms in the city. Anyone who takes your divorce case is declaring war on the Farrell Group."

She swallowed hard. "He also flagged my bank accounts. The fifty grand I tried to wire you this morning was blocked."

Ayla closed her eyes. Her chest felt like it was being crushed in a vice. The sheer, suffocating weight of Axel's reach was closing in on her from all sides.

"I'll sell my cars," Chloe said desperately. "I can get cash by tomorrow—"

"No," Ayla said, opening her eyes. "If you do that, he'll destroy your father's firm. I won't drag you down with me."

She stood up. The exhaustion in her eyes was gone, replaced by a terrifying, cold clarity.

She walked into Chloe's guest closet and pulled out a sharp, tailored black business suit. She drew her hair back into a tight, severe ponytail, then returned to the laptop and opened a hidden, encrypted partition on her hard drive.

Row after row of data filled the screen — raw strategy files, crisis management blueprints, and media manipulation codes she had built for the Farrell Group over the past three years. She compressed the files and uploaded them to a secure, untraceable cloud server.

"Axel thinks starving me out will make me crawl back to him," she said, her voice dropping to a deadly whisper. "He forgot that the most valuable asset in his company is in my head."

She needed a new host. A corporate leviathan large enough to swat the Farrell Group like a fly.

As the sun rose over the Manhattan skyline, Ayla walked out of Chloe's apartment carrying a small velvet pouch.

She made her way to a high-end pawnshop in Lower Manhattan and pulled the Cartier diamond necklace Axel had clasped around her neck the night before, setting it down on the glass counter.

The pawnshop owner, a shrewd man with a jeweler's loupe, recognized her face from the tabloids. He smirked and offered her a fraction of what it was worth.

Ayla leaned over the counter. Her eyes were dead.

She rattled off the exact cut, clarity, and the hidden serial number engraved on the clasp, making clear she knew precisely what those stones would fetch on the black market.

Ten minutes later, she walked out with two hundred thousand dollars in untraceable cashier's checks.

Her phone buzzed. A voicemail from Axel.

She pressed play.

"If you come back to the estate right now and apologize to Kristal on your knees, I'll pretend this little tantrum never happened." His voice oozed with arrogant condescension.

Ayla didn't blink. She tossed the phone directly into a sidewalk trash can.

She stepped into a corner bodega, bought a cheap burner phone and a prepaid SIM card, then dialed an encrypted number for an elite Wall Street headhunter.

“This is Spin Doctor A,” she said into the receiver. “I’m back on the market.”

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Chapter 6:

The rain came down in violent, sideways sheets over Manhattan, turning the evening commute into a gridlocked nightmare.

Ayla stood under the narrow awning of a deli, shivering in her black business suit. The fabric was soaked through and clinging to her freezing skin. She had spent the entire day visiting the top three divorce litigation firms in the city, and every single managing partner had taken one look at the name “Axel Farrell” on her intake form and politely shown her the door.

Her burner phone vibrated in her pocket.

It was an anonymous email from Jared, Axel's assistant. Ayla opened it. A high-resolution photo filled the screen.

It showed the three managing partners she had just visited standing on a private golf course in the Hamptons, laughing and drinking scotch with Axel.

It was a psychological kill shot. He was showing her that she was trapped in a cage he owned.

Ayla let out a harsh, bitter laugh, deleted the email, and looked across the flooded street. Through the rain, a neon sign flickered: The Obsidian Lounge.

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It was a notorious, ultra-exclusive underground speakeasy — the kind of place where Wall Street predators made blood pacts.

She crossed the street, ignoring the water flooding into her heels, and descended the concrete stairs to a heavy iron door. A facial recognition scanner swept her face and

registered her instantly. Her access wasn't tied to the Farrell Group but to an old, ironclad PR contract she had personally negotiated for the lounge's reclusive owner — a man who despised Axel. Her clearance was untouchable. The door clicked open.

The inside of the lounge was dark and heavy with aged cigar smoke and expensive bourbon. Low jazz drifted over the speakers.

Ayla walked to the furthest, darkest corner of the marble bar and sat down.

“Cheapest bourbon you have,” she told the bartender. When the glass arrived, she wrapped her numb fingers around it and stole what little warmth it offered.

She pulled her tablet from her waterproof bag and opened the dossiers the headhunter had sent. She needed a target.

Then she felt it — a heavy, suffocating pressure against the side of her face. A stare so intense it was almost physical.

Ayla turned her head slightly.

In the VIP booth to her right, cloaked in deep shadow, sat a man. He wore a pitch-black dress shirt with the top two buttons undone, and his long, scarred fingers turned a crystal glass of amber liquid in a slow, rhythmic rotation. The dim light caught the watch on his wrist — a Richard Mille military-grade limited edition.

Ayla looked away immediately. She had no time for arrogant billionaires looking for a hookup. She fixed her eyes back on her tablet.

The bartender walked over and set a leather checkbook on the bar in front of her.

“Miss, this section has a two-thousand-dollar minimum spend,” he said, his tone dripping with elitist disdain.

Ayla’s stomach tightened. She had the cashier’s checks, but only about four hundred dollars in physical cash left after buying the burner phone.

“I’ll move,” she said, reaching for her bag.

Before her fingers touched the strap, a solid black Centurion card slid across the marble bar and pinned the checkbook down.

Ayla’s breath hitched.

The man from the shadows was suddenly standing directly beside her. He had moved with the terrifying, silent grace of an apex predator.

“Put it on my tab,” a voice rumbled — deep, gravelly, and laced with absolute authority.

Ayla spun around, muscles tensing defensively. “I don’t need your charity. What do you want?”

The man leaned down slightly, and the dim light finally caught his face. He looked like a fallen angel carved from marble — pale skin, a sharp jawline, and a faint, jagged scar cutting through his left eyebrow.

Cassius didn’t look at her face. His dark, dangerous eyes dropped to the glowing screen of her tablet.

He was looking at the financial acquisition blueprints for the Gilliam Group.

A slow, wicked smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth.

“You have good taste,” Cassius murmured, his voice sending a shiver down Ayla’s spine. “But Gilliam’s firewalls aren’t that easy to hack.”

Ayla’s heart slammed against her ribs. She snapped the tablet shut.

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Chapter 7:

Ayla forced her breathing to steady and looked up into the man’s terrifyingly calm eyes.

“I’m reading public SEC filings,” she said, her voice dripping with ice. “I’m not a hacker.”

Cassius let out a low, rough chuckle. He opened his mouth to respond, but a loud crash at the entrance cut him off.

Two massive bouncers were shoved violently aside.

Axel stormed into the speakeasy radiating pure, unhinged rage, with Kristal trailing closely behind him, a smug smile plastered across her face. His eyes swept the dark room and instantly locked onto Ayla at the bar. He had been forced to fly to New York for an emergency board meeting about the impending PR disaster, and his security team — leveraging Farrell tech against the city’s surveillance network — had flagged her face entering the building.

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He marched across the room, his heavy footsteps cutting through the jazz.

He lunged forward and grabbed Ayla’s wrist, his fingers digging into her bones with brutal, bruising force.

“Is this how low you’ve sunk?” Axel spat, his face inches from hers. “Begging for drinks from random men in a basement?”

Ayla gritted her teeth against the pain shooting up her arm and tried to yank her hand free. His grip was iron.

“Let go of me,” she hissed. “Tracking my location is a felony.”

Kristal stepped up beside Axel and crossed her arms. “We had to cancel three investor calls to hunt you down, Ayla,” she sneered. “Cut off from the Farrell money for one day and you’re already selling yourself for a glass of cheap liquor.”

The surrounding patrons turned their heads to watch. Recognizing Axel Farrell, not one of them dared to intervene.

Axel reached into his jacket, pulled out a blank check, and slammed it onto the bar counter.

“Cash out whatever this guy paid for her,” he barked at the bartender. “I don’t want his dirty money touching my wife.”

Just inches away in the shadows, Cassius’s eyes went completely dead. The temperature around him seemed to drop ten degrees.

Axel didn’t notice him. He yanked Ayla’s arm violently, dragging her off the barstool.

“You’re coming with me to a psychiatric ward,” he snarled. “You’ve completely lost your mind.”

Ayla’s wrist burned with pain. Her eyes fell on the glass of untouched bourbon sitting on the bar.

Without a moment's hesitation, she grabbed it with her free hand, twisted her body, and threw the entire contents directly into Axel's face.

The alcohol splashed into his open eyes.

Axel let out a howl of agony, his hands flying to his face and releasing her wrist instantly. Kristal shrieked and frantically dug through her purse for a tissue.

When Axel's eyes cleared, his face was twisted with blind fury. He raised his right hand high and swung it down with full force, aiming a brutal slap at Ayla's face.

Ayla didn't blink. She held her ground, prepared to absorb the blow and secure the assault charge.

The slap never landed.

Axel's wrist stopped dead in mid-air.

A massive hand clamped around his forearm like a steel vice. Cassius stepped out of the shadows, his towering frame completely shielding Ayla from Axel. He tightened his grip. The sickening sound of bone grinding against bone echoed through the quiet bar.

Axel gasped, his knees buckling as cold sweat broke across his forehead.

Cassius looked down at him with the absolute boredom of a god regarding an insect.

“In this lounge,” Cassius said, his voice a lethal, quiet rasp, “no one touches a lady on my tab.”

“Who the fuck are you?!” Axel screamed, his face pale with pain. “Do you know who I am? I’ll destroy you!”

Behind Cassius, two men in tailored black suits stepped forward. As they moved, their jackets shifted to reveal the distinct, bulky outlines of military-grade tactical holsters strapped to their ribs.

Axel’s bodyguards, who had just rushed in, froze instantly. They recognized the hardware. This was no corporate security detail. This was a death squad.

Cassius released Axel’s arm with a flick of his wrist, as though discarding a piece of trash. He reached into his pocket, produced a pristine white silk handkerchief, and slowly wiped his fingers clean before dropping it at Axel’s feet.

“Scram,” Cassius said. One word. Absolute dominance.

Axel clutched his bruised wrist. He looked at the armed men, then at Cassius. The humiliation burned his face red, but the primal fear coiling in his gut forced him to step back. He grabbed Kristal’s arm and practically ran for the exit.

Ayla stood frozen, staring at the broad, muscular back of the man who had just humiliated the most powerful tech CEO in California. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

Cassius turned around and looked down at the angry red mark blooming across her wrist. His dark eyes lifted to meet hers.

“Your taste in men,” he murmured, a mocking smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth, “is truly tragic.”

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Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 8:

Ayla sat on the edge of a lumpy mattress in a cheap, rundown motel on the outskirts of Brooklyn. She had paid for the room in cash. No ID required.

She crossed to the heavy wooden door and slid the rusted deadbolt into place, then pressed her forehead against the peeling paint and let out a long, trembling breath. The room smelled faintly of bleach and stale cigarette smoke.

She walked into the cramped bathroom and turned on the faucet, splashing freezing water onto her face to wash away the adrenaline and the lingering scent of the speakeasy. She grabbed a scratchy towel, looked up at the cracked mirror, and her eyes immediately dropped to her wrist.

The bruise Axel had left was deepening into an ugly shade of purple.

Staring at it, a violent flashback hit her like a physical blow.

Five years ago. A torrential rainstorm. The grand foyer of the Joyce family's Upper East Side mansion. Her wrist had looked exactly like this.

Richard Joyce, the family patriarch, had thrown a thick DNA report directly into Ayla's face. The sharp edge of the paper cut her cheek. She remembered the official seal on the folder — and the fleeting, triumphant smirk Izetta had shot her from behind their father's back just before he turned.

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"You are not my daughter," Richard spat, looking at her as though she were a diseased rat. "You are the spawn of a drug addict. A filthy mistake."

At the top of the sweeping marble staircase stood Izetta — the real heiress — in a custom gown, looking down at Ayla with a smile of pure, venomous triumph.

Ayla's adoptive mother, Eleanor, turned her back. "Throw her out. Burn her clothes."

The security guards dragged Ayla by her wrists and hurled her onto the wet pavement outside the iron gates. When she tried to crawl back, they drove her down with stun batons.

She lay in the mud, bleeding and shivering, waiting to die.

Then the black Maybach pulled up.

Axel Farrell stepped out into the rain, holding a black umbrella. He knelt in the mud, took off his coat, and wrapped it around her.

“Even if the whole world abandons you,” he had whispered, his eyes full of warmth, “I will give you a home.”

Ayla snapped back to the present. She gripped the edges of the motel sink until her knuckles ached.

A bitter, hollow laugh escaped her throat.

It hadn’t been a rescue. It had been a grooming process.

Axel had deliberately targeted a brilliant, broken girl who had just lost her entire support system. He needed a genius to build his empire — but he needed her completely dependent on him so she would never claim the credit. He hadn’t saved her. He had enslaved her with gratitude.

Ayla walked out of the bathroom and opened her laptop. She booted it up and pulled up the encrypted files she had downloaded from the Farrell servers, staring at the spreadsheets in silence.

Three years. She had generated billions of dollars in market cap for Axel through her crisis management and PR campaigns.

She owed him nothing. He owed her her life.

She opened a secure Tor browser and navigated to the dark web, logging into an elite mercenary investigator forum. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she typed out a precise bounty request.

Target: Joyce family hospital records from twenty-four years ago. Objective: Find the true origin of the baby swap.

She hit send. Fifty thousand dollars in crypto vanished from her hidden wallet.

The swap had been too clean. Too perfect. Izetta's sudden appearance too convenient. With the instincts of a PR shark, Ayla knew there was a massive political conspiracy buried beneath that scandal.

She closed the laptop and lay down on the hard mattress, fully clothed, eyes fixed on the water-stained ceiling.

She wasn't the crying, abandoned fake heiress anymore. She was a predator who had just remembered how to hunt. Tomorrow, she would use Cassius's warning about the Gilliam firewalls to kick down the doors of Wall Street.

Outside, police sirens wailed through the Brooklyn night.

For the first time in three years, Ayla closed her eyes and slept peacefully.

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Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 9:

The following morning, Ayla walked into the underground parking garage of Chloe's law firm wearing a cheap but pristine trench coat she had picked up from a thrift store. Chloe smuggled her up the freight elevator and into a windowless, soundproof conference room.

Chloe handed her a steaming cup of black coffee.

Ayla slid a single sheet of paper across the table. “These are my terms for the divorce. I want twenty percent of Axel’s unvested equity in Farrell Tech.”

Chloe choked on her coffee and stared at the paper in horror. “Ayla, his legal team will slaughter us in court if we ask for this. You signed an ironclad prenup.”

“I don’t expect to get it,” Ayla said, her voice dead calm. “It’s a decoy. I need to trigger his ego to buy me forty-eight hours.”

A knock at the door interrupted them. The firm’s receptionist peeked in, looking nervous.

“Chloe? A priority courier just dropped this off. It requires Ayla Farrell’s signature.”

Chloe accepted the thick manila envelope. The gold-foil logo of the Farrell Group Legal Department was stamped across the front.

Ayla tore it open. A thick stack of papers slid out.

The letterhead on the first page belonged to the most expensive private psychiatric facility in Manhattan. Ayla’s eyes moved across the text. Her blood turned to ice.

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It was a fifty-page medical dossier — detailed, methodical, and entirely fabricated. Forged doctor signatures and invented therapy notes painted a clinical portrait of Ayla as a woman suffering from severe Bipolar Disorder and violent self-destructive tendencies for the past three years.

Attached to the back of the medical file was a legal petition.

Application for Conservatorship.

Axel had petitioned the state of California to strip Ayla of all her civil rights, casting himself as the tragic, devoted husband struggling to save his mentally incompetent wife. If a judge signed it, Ayla wouldn't just lose the divorce. She would be legally kidnapped, locked inside a padded room, and drugged into submission until the day she died.

Chloe read over her shoulder, her hands beginning to shake. "He's a monster. He's trying to legally erase you."

Ayla's fingers tightened on the edges of the paper until the sheets crumpled.

This was why he had called her a “crazy bitch” in the speakeasy. He had been laying the groundwork for the witnesses.

The burner phone in Ayla’s pocket buzzed. An unknown California number.

She set the phone on the table, hit speaker, and pressed record.

“Hello,” Ayla said, her voice completely steady.

“Ayla, darling.” Axel’s voice drifted through the speaker — soft, gentle, and absolutely terrifying. “Are you done throwing your little tantrum? Your illness is acting up again. It’s time to come home and take your medication.”

A cold sweat broke out across the back of Ayla’s neck. “You think a judge is going to believe a stack of forged medical records bought with Farrell money?”

Axel let out a soft, patronizing sigh. “In California, my money is the law. Who do you think the judge will believe? A disgraced, hysterical fake heiress with no family, or the visionary CEO of Silicon Valley?”

His voice dropped to a lethal whisper. “You have until midnight tonight to walk through the front doors of the estate. If you don’t, the court order goes live, and men in white coats will drag you out of whatever rat hole you’re hiding in.”

Ayla stared at the phone. The terror in her chest crystallized in an instant into pure, diamond-hard rage.

“You’re not doing this because you’re angry,” she said, her voice cutting through the air like a razor. “You’re doing this because you’re terrified. Because if I leave, your perfect ‘family man’ PR shield dies, and your stock tanks.”

The line went dead silent. She had hit the nerve.

Ayla didn’t wait for him to recover. She ended the call.

She looked up at Chloe. “We can’t fight this in court. He owns the board.”

“Then what do we do?” Chloe asked, her voice tight with panic.

“We destroy his credibility,” Ayla said, opening her laptop. “If the public thinks he’s a monster, the judge won’t touch his petition with a ten-foot pole.”

She logged into a ghost IP address and opened a blank Twitter account.

It was time to burn his empire to the ground.

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Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 10:

Ayla's fingers flew across the keyboard.

She uploaded the fifteen-second video she had recorded outside the VIP lounge at the Moscone Center — the footage of Axel aggressively kissing Kristal. She didn't write a lengthy caption. Just a single hashtag: FarrellTechScandal.

She routed the post through a bot network she had built years ago, blasting it directly into the mentions of the top fifty tech journalists and gossip bloggers in the country.

Within forty-five minutes, the internet exploded.

The video was slightly grainy, but Axel's face and Kristal's red dress were unmistakable. The hashtag rocketed to the number one trending spot on Twitter. Wall Street forums erupted with mockery. The "ultimate devoted husband" had been exposed as a hypocrite.

Ten minutes before the Nasdaq opening bell, Farrell Group's pre-market stock price plummeted by 2.5%.

Three thousand miles away, in the penthouse office of Farrell headquarters, a ceramic coffee mug shattered against the bulletproof glass window.

Axel stood with his chest heaving, his face purple with rage.

Jared, his assistant, sprinted into the office holding an iPad like a live grenade. "Sir, the PR department is in total freefall. The phones won't stop ringing."

"Issue a denial!" Axel roared, grabbing Jared by the collar. "Tell them it's a deepfake! Tell them it's AI-generated extortion!"

“They tried, sir!” Jared stammered. “But without Ayla’s script templates, the statement was full of holes. Three major tech outlets already ran forensic analysis on the video and confirmed it’s one hundred percent authentic. The denial only made us look guilty.”

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Axel’s private phone began to ring. It was the chairman of the board.

He ignored it. For the first time, cold panic pierced through his arrogance.

He grabbed his phone and dialed Ayla’s number.

Ayla sat in a cheap Manhattan diner, sipping black coffee. She ignored the morning talk show murmuring from the corner TV and watched the stock market’s opening bell on her tablet. A bright red line for FATECH nosedived the moment trading began.

Her phone buzzed. She answered it.

“Ayla,” Axel gasped, his voice trembling. “Post a picture of us on your Instagram right now. Say we have an open marriage. Say anything — if you fix this, I’ll rip up the conservatorship papers. I swear to God.”

Ayla let out a soft, chilling laugh.

“Your PR department’s statement was pathetic, Axel,” she said, her voice dripping with professional disdain. “They used the word ‘fabricated’ in the first paragraph but ‘misunderstood’ in the third. You contradicted your own timeline. It’s amateur hour. Looks like you’re finally seeing what happens when the adults leave the room.”

Axel’s stomach dropped. With horrifying clarity, he understood for the first time that the genius behind his invincible public armor had always been her.

“Ayla, please,” he begged, his pride shattered. “We’re husband and wife. I was just confused.”

“I have three years of your buried scandals ready to go,” she said, her voice ice-cold. “If that conservatorship petition ever reaches a judge’s desk, you should pray I remain silent. Otherwise, Farrell Group’s stock drop will be far worse than 2.5%.”

Axel stopped breathing.

“Axel,” Ayla whispered, delivering the final blow. “You just became your own worst PR crisis.”

She hung up. She pulled the SIM card from the burner phone, snapped it in half, and dropped it into her cold coffee.

In California, Axel collapsed into his leather chair, staring blankly at the collapsing stock numbers.

Ayla stood up and left a five-dollar bill on the table. She walked out of the diner, the wind whipping her trench coat around her legs, and hailed a yellow cab.

“Where to, miss?” the driver asked.

Ayla looked out the window at the towering skyscrapers of the financial district, her eyes burning with ambition and a dangerous thrill.

“The Gilliam Group headquarters,” she said. “I have a delivery to make.”

She had won the first battle. Now she was taking her résumé to the man in the shadows. Spin Doctor A was about to offer Cassius Gilliam a weapon he couldn’t refuse.

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