

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 11:

The yellow cab crawled through the heavy, rain-slicked traffic of the Manhattan financial district.

Ayla leaned her head against the cold glass of the window, watching the towering skyscrapers blur past. Her heart beat with a steady, dangerous rhythm. She had just crippled Axel's stock price. Now she was on her way to the Gilliam Group to finish the job.

She was only a few blocks from the Gilliam tower — a spire of black glass that seemed to cut the sky in two — when a flicker of movement in the side-view mirror caught her eye. A familiar, brutish black Cadillac Escalade, two cars back.

Her blood ran cold.

She leaned forward quickly. "Driver, take a left at the next light. Now."

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It was too late. The Escalade surged forward with a low, predatory growl.

The cab driver slammed the brakes. Tires screeched against the wet asphalt. Ayla's body jerked violently forward, the rough nylon seatbelt biting hard into her collarbone and knocking the breath from her lungs.

The Escalade had swerved aggressively across two lanes, cutting the cab off and forcing it to a dead stop in the middle of the street.

Ayla's stomach dropped. She unzipped her leather handbag and wrapped her fingers around the hard plastic cylinder of her pepper spray.

The heavy door of the Escalade swung open. Jared, Axel's executive assistant, stepped out into the freezing rain without bothering with an umbrella. He jogged straight toward the cab, his expensive suit soaking through in seconds.

He stopped at Ayla's window and rapped his knuckles sharply against the wet glass.

Ayla kept her hand on the pepper spray and pressed the button to lower the window exactly three inches. Cold air and the smell of car exhaust rushed in.

"Are you trying to cause a pile-up in the middle of Wall Street, Jared?" she asked, her voice flat and devoid of emotion.

Jared wiped a mixture of rain and sweat from his forehead. He looked exhausted, but his eyes held the familiar, arrogant obedience of a man executing orders without question. He reached into his wet jacket and pulled out a black velvet box, shoving it through the narrow gap in the window.

“Mr. Farrell sent this as a compensation package,” he said, raising his voice over the rain.

Ayla didn’t reach for it. She looked down at the open box. Resting on the black velvet was an American Express Centurion Black Card — no credit limit.

“Mr. Farrell’s conditions are simple,” Jared said quickly. “You log back into the PR servers right now, issue a statement saying your Twitter account was hacked, fix the stock price, and this card is yours. No limits. No questions asked.”

Ayla stared at the heavy piece of black titanium.

For three years, that card had been the leash Axel used to control her. He had let her spend half a million dollars in haute couture just to remind her that she owned nothing without his signature.

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Chapter 12:

A slow, freezing smile pulled at the corners of her mouth.

She reached into her handbag, pulled out a blank note card and a black marker, and pressed it against her knee. She wrote down a single number.

Then she reached through the window gap and slapped the paper flat against Jared's wet chest.

"The fee for a Code Black crisis protocol is ten million dollars," Ayla said, her voice dropping to a lethal whisper. "It's a term he'll understand. And I don't do credit."

Jared looked down at the card. His eyes went wide. He stared at the string of zeros.

“Are you out of your mind?” he stammered, his professional mask slipping. “You’re extorting your own husband!”

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“Farrell Tech’s pre-market valuation just bled three hundred million dollars,” Ayla replied smoothly, leaning back in her seat. “Ten million to stop the bleeding is a family discount.”

Before Jared could argue, his phone began vibrating violently in his pocket. He pulled it out, fumbled with the screen, and accidentally hit the speakerphone button.

Axel’s voice exploded into the cab.

“Has she fixed the damn Twitter post yet?!” The sheer volume made the cab driver flinch.

Ayla leaned closer to the window and looked directly at the phone in Jared’s hand.

“Ten million dollars, Axel,” she said, her voice cutting through the rain. “Wire it to my offshore account, or watch your board of directors vote you out by Friday.”

Dead silence on the other end of the line. A beat of controlled, seething fury.

“Ayla, be reasonable.” Axel’s voice dropped, a strained attempt at negotiation laced with menace. “You’ve made your point. Take the card. Take a vacation. We’ll sort this out when you’ve calmed down.”

Ayla said nothing. Her silence was a void he couldn’t control, and it drove him past the edge.

The sound of something heavy smashing against a wall cracked through the speaker.

“You greedy, delusional bitch!” Axel screamed. “You think you’re a player in this game? You’re nothing! You are a fake heiress — thrown out of the Joyce family because you have the dirty, worthless blood of a drug addict running through your veins!”

A sharp, physical pain shot through Ayla’s chest, like a hot needle piercing her heart.

“Without my money, you don’t belong in this zip code,” Axel snarled, his breathing ragged. “You’ll be sleeping in a homeless shelter in the Bronx by the end of the week, waiting in line for food stamps.”

Ayla didn’t cry. She didn’t scream.

The pain in her chest froze over instantly, solidifying into a block of ice.

“Thank you for the reminder, Axel,” she said. Her voice was so calm it was terrifying.

She reached her hand through the window and snatched the velvet box from Jared’s grip. For a split second, relief washed over his face — he thought she had finally yielded.

Ayla rolled the window all the way down. She looked Jared dead in the eyes, turned her wrist, and tipped the Black Card out of the box.

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Chapter 13:

The titanium card fell through the rain, hit the pavement with a sharp clink, and slid directly into the muddy, trash-filled grate of the street sewer.

Jared stumbled back a step in sheer horror.

“From this second on, I am done with the Farrell family,” Ayla said clearly, loud enough for the phone. “I’ll see you in divorce court.”

She hit the window button, rolling it up fast.

“Drive,” she told the cab driver. “Go around them. Now.”

The driver floored the gas. The yellow cab swerved hard, its tires throwing a massive wave of dirty street water across Jared’s suit as it accelerated away.

Ayla fell back against the vinyl seat and let out a long, shaky breath. Her hands were trembling — not from fear, but from pure adrenaline.

She pulled out her burner phone and opened her banking app.

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The screen loaded. Available balance: three hundred and forty-two dollars.

The ten-million-dollar invoice had felt extraordinary to say, but the physical reality was crushing. She couldn't walk into the Gilliam Group headquarters looking like a desperate, broke woman. Cassius Gilliam would eat her alive.

She needed real capital.

She dialed Chloe's number.

"Ayla? Are you safe?" Chloe answered immediately, her voice tight with anxiety.

"I'm fine," Ayla said, keeping her tone steady. "Chloe, can I use the underground storage unit at your family's building? I need a place to drop some boxes."

"Of course," Chloe said. "But what are you doing?"

"I'm going to get my severance package," Ayla said, and hung up.

She leaned forward and tapped the plastic partition.

“Change of plans,” she told the driver. “Take me to the Upper East Side. Fifth Avenue.”

She was going back to the Farrell family’s empty penthouse. She was going to take every single thing she owned.

Ayla stood in front of the heavy oak door of the Farrell family’s Fifth Avenue penthouse and punched the six-digit code into the electronic keypad. The lock clicked open with a heavy thud. Axel hadn’t thought to change this passcode yet — he was too busy dealing with the PR fire she had started.

She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The massive apartment was dead silent. White dust sheets draped every piece of furniture, and the air smelled stale. They only used this place twice a year for charity galas.

Ayla walked straight past the grand living room and down the hallway to the master suite. She pushed open the doors to the climate-controlled walk-in closet. The sensor lights flickered on, illuminating an entire wall of custom display shelves.

Sitting perfectly spaced on the velvet were over a dozen Hermès bags — Himalayan crocodiles, limited edition Kellys, rare Constance bags. Millions of dollars in leather and hardware, bought to make her look like the perfect trophy wife.

Ayla walked to the utility room, grabbed three massive heavy-duty black trash bags, and returned to the closet. She didn't bother with the orange boxes or the dust covers.

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Chapter 14:

She seized a two-hundred-thousand-dollar Himalayan Birkin by the handles and shoved it into the first bag. Then another. Then another. She swept them off the shelves like cheap groceries.

Just as she stuffed a custom Chanel haute couture gown into the second bag, her burner phone rang.

It was Chloe.

Ayla answered it, pinning the phone between her ear and her shoulder as she tied the bag shut.

“Chloe, I’m almost done—”

“Ayla.” Chloe’s voice was completely broken. She was sobbing.

Ayla stopped moving. Her hands froze on the plastic knot. “What’s wrong?”

“Axel is a psychopath,” Chloe cried, her breath hitching. “He just terminated every single corporate retainer contract the Farrell Group has with my father’s law firm.”

Ayla’s stomach cramped violently. The air in the closet suddenly felt too thin to breathe.

“It gets worse,” Chloe choked out. “He called his friends on Wall Street. They’re initiating a hostile short-sell on my father’s firm. My dad is panicking. He just froze all my personal checking accounts. He told me if I ever speak to you again, he’ll disown me.”

Ayla closed her eyes. The guilt hit her like a punch to the throat.

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Axel was employing a scorched-earth policy — destroying anyone who dared to stand near her.

“Chloe, listen to me,” Ayla said, forcing her voice to stay absolutely firm while hiding the tremor in her chest. “Do exactly what your father says. Cut me off. Block this number.”

“But Ayla, you have no money!” Chloe sobbed. “Where will you go?”

“I have a backup plan,” Ayla said smoothly. “I’m safe. Protect yourself. I am so sorry.”

She pulled the phone from her ear and ended the call.

She stared at the black screen. She was completely, utterly alone. There was no safety net left.

She grabbed the heavy plastic bags and dragged them across the hardwood floor to the private elevator. The concrete walls of the underground parking garage echoed with the sound of plastic scraping against stone.

She walked toward her designated parking spot, expecting to load the bags into the Mercedes G-Wagon she kept in the city.

She stopped dead.

A heavy, bright yellow steel boot was clamped firmly around the front left tire of the G-Wagon.

The building manager, a tall man in a grey suit, emerged from the security booth, his face devoid of sympathy.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Farrell,” he said coldly. “Mr. Farrell called an hour ago. He instructed us to immobilize all vehicles registered under your name. You are not permitted to drive them off the property.”

Ayla’s jaw clenched so hard her teeth ached.

She didn’t waste her breath on the manager. Her eyes swept the dimly lit garage.

In the far corner, covered in a thin layer of dust, sat a black Ford Explorer with a Farrell Group fleet license plate on the back — a utility vehicle personally assigned to Jared for executive errands. It was not registered under her name.

The manager turned his back to answer a call on his radio.

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Chapter 15:

Ayla dropped her bags. She moved quickly and silently to the security booth, whose glass door was propped open. She reached inside, her fingers brushing the metal hooks of the spare key box, and closed around a Ford key fob. She slipped it into her pocket.

She walked back, grabbed her bags, hauled them to the Ford Explorer, threw them into the trunk, and slammed it shut.

She climbed into the driver's seat and hit the push-to-start button. The engine roared to life.

She slammed the car into gear and sped up the exit ramp, leaving the manager shouting in her rearview mirror.

The sky over Manhattan had turned a bruised, dark grey.

Ayla drove deep into SoHo, avoiding the main avenues with their heavy camera surveillance, and pulled up to an unmarked high-end vintage luxury boutique. She dragged the black trash bags inside.

The owner — a sharp-eyed French woman with a tape measure around her neck — looked annoyed at the sight of the garbage bags. Then Ayla unknotted the plastic and dumped fifteen extremely rare Hermès bags onto the glass display counter.

The French woman's jaw dropped. She stopped breathing for a full second before her eyes narrowed with greed. She could see Ayla was desperate.

"No boxes. No receipts," the owner said, tapping her manicured nails on the glass. "I can give you forty percent of market value. Cash."

Ayla let out a cold, sharp laugh. She leaned over the counter and held the owner's gaze.

"That Himalayan Birkin is one of five in the world," Ayla said, switching to flawless, rapid-fire French. "The hardware is eighteen-karat white gold. If I walk this over to Christie's auction house, it will sell for three hundred percent over retail. You know it, and I know it."

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The owner blinked, caught off guard by the perfect French and the absolute authority in Ayla's voice.

"Eighty percent of market value for the entire lot," Ayla said, her tone leaving zero room for negotiation. "Or I pack them up and walk down the street."

For twenty minutes, they waged a brutal, rapid-fire psychological war over the leather goods.

Finally, the French woman let out a heavy sigh of defeat. She walked to her safe and pulled out a heavy checkbook, writing out a bearer check drawn from a Swiss bank — untraceable, unfreezable. She slid the paper across the glass.

Three million dollars.

Ayla's cold fingers closed around it. The tension in her shoulders cracked and released in a wave of pure, physical relief. She had her war chest.

She folded the check, tucked it into a waterproof pouch in her handbag's hidden compartment, and walked out of the boutique.

The cold wind hit her face. The check was security — but it was also a target. Cashing a Swiss bearer check of that magnitude required careful handling through a private banker, a process that would take at least twenty-four hours to execute without triggering international money-laundering alarms. For now, it was just paper. She was still exposed.

But she felt lighter. She felt dangerous.

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Chapter 16:

Ayla climbed back into the Ford Explorer, pulled out her tablet, and began searching for a luxury short-term rental in Midtown. She needed a fortress. She put the car in drive and pulled away from the curb, her eyes fixed on the screen.

She didn't look in her rearview mirror.

She didn't see the massive black Maybach Pullman easing slowly out of an alleyway across the street, its tinted windows hiding the predator inside.

Ayla drove the Ford Explorer through the chaotic, horn-blaring traffic of Midtown Manhattan.

The dark grey clouds finally broke, unleashing a freezing, relentless winter rain. Water pounded against the windshield, blurring the neon lights of Fifth Avenue into smeared streaks of color.

Ayla kept one eye on the road and one on the GPS on her phone, heading toward a high-security apartment building that didn't require credit checks.

The traffic light at the upcoming intersection flashed yellow.

The yellow cab directly ahead decided not to risk it. The driver slammed his brakes, coming to a violent dead stop just before the crosswalk.

Ayla gasped. Her foot drove down hard on the brake pedal.

The heavy Ford lurched forward. The anti-lock brakes engaged, sending violent shudders up through her leg. The tires lost traction on the slick, oil-stained asphalt with a high-pitched screech.

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The Ford stopped inches from the yellow cab's bumper.

Ayla let out a sharp breath, her hands gripping the wheel so tightly her knuckles ached.

But before she could even relax her shoulders, a massive shadow filled her right-side mirror. The extended braking had swung the Ford's rear end slightly into the right lane — directly into the path of a black Maybach Pullman attempting to change lanes to avoid the stopped traffic.

There was no time to swerve.

The sickening sound of metal grinding against metal echoed through the intersection. The Ford's right front bumper scraped violently along the entire left side of the Maybach's rear passenger door. Both cars jolted to a halt, completely blocking the intersection. The cars behind them immediately leaned on their horns.

Ayla's heart stopped. The blood drained from her face.

She stared at the long, sleek body of the Maybach. It was a custom Pullman edition. A scratch on that paint cost more than most people made in a year.

But the money wasn't the problem.

She was driving a Farrell Group corporate vehicle. If the police came and ran the plates, the accident report would be flagged in the Farrell security system within ten minutes. Axel would know exactly what street she was on.

The Maybach's driver door swung open. A massive man in a tailored black suit stepped out into the pouring rain without flinching at the cold. He raised a large black umbrella and walked toward Ayla's window with heavy, purposeful strides.

It was Marcus. The bodyguard from the Obsidian Lounge.

Ayla's stomach flipped. She grabbed her oversized black sunglasses from the center console and shoved them onto her face.

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Chapter 17:

Marcus stopped at her window and rapped his knuckles against the glass. His face was a mask of pure, lethal indifference. He recognized her instantly — the same woman from the bar, now looking like a drowned rat in a cheap coat — but his training was absolute: observe, report, await orders. He showed nothing.

Ayla took a deep breath, pushed the door open, and stepped out into the freezing rain. The water soaked through her trench coat in seconds.

Marcus said nothing. He raised his phone and aimed the camera at the Ford's license plate.

"Wait," Ayla said quickly, stepping forward and placing her hand over the lens. "Don't call the police. I'll pay for the damage. All of it. Just keep this off the record."

Marcus looked down at her hand, his eyes narrowing.

"My boss's time is worth more than your life," he said, his voice a low rumble. "Move your hand. We are filing a police report."

Before Ayla could argue, a sound cut through the rain and the blaring horns.

The heavily tinted rear window of the Maybach rolled down halfway.

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"Marcus. Stop."

The voice was low, gravelly, and laced with dangerous boredom.

Ayla turned her head. The interior of the Maybach was dark, but she could make out the faint orange glow of an unlit cigar pinched between two long, scarred fingers resting on the window ledge.

Cassius Gilliam leaned forward slightly, his face remaining mostly in shadow. His dark, predatory eyes locked onto Ayla. Even behind her sunglasses, she felt completely exposed under his gaze.

He let out a low, mocking chuckle.

“A woman driving a Farrell Group fleet car, begging to avoid the police,” Cassius murmured, his voice sending a shiver down her spine that had nothing to do with the rain. “You seem to be having a very bad day.”

Ayla’s breath hitched. He had recognized the license plate. He knew exactly whose car she was driving.

Cassius glanced at the diamond-encrusted watch on his wrist.

“I have a billion-dollar acquisition meeting in the Financial District in exactly twenty minutes,” he said, his tone shifting from amused to absolute authority. “My door is crushed. This car cannot safely exceed forty miles an hour.”

He looked back at Ayla. “You are going to be my driver.”

“What? No. I can’t—”

Marcus’s hand dropped instantly to his waist, his fingers brushing the grip of the concealed tactical pistol beneath his jacket.

Ayla swallowed the rest of her sentence. The threat was silent but deafening.

If she refused, they would call the police. Axel would find her.

She gritted her teeth, walked to the rear passenger door of the Ford Explorer, and pulled it open. The interior was cheap cloth — a massive downgrade from the Maybach.

She gestured toward the open door. “Get in.”

Marcus held the umbrella over Cassius as the billionaire stepped out of the Maybach. As they moved, Marcus spoke quietly into the microphone on his cufflink. “Alpha team, secure the asset on Fifth and 57th. Await transport. We are mobile in the secondary vehicle.”

Cassius folded his towering frame into the back seat of the Ford. The moment he entered, the entire atmosphere inside the car shifted. The air felt heavier, suffocating, carrying the scent of cold mint and faint gunpowder.

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Chapter 18:

Marcus slid into the front passenger seat, bringing the smell of wet wool with him.

Ayla climbed back behind the wheel. Her hands trembled slightly as she gripped the steering wheel.

“Drive,” Marcus ordered, rattling off the address of an ultra-exclusive private club in the Financial District.

Ayla shifted into drive and glanced in the rearview mirror.

Cassius was leaning back against the cheap cloth seat, his eyes closed, looking completely at ease. But Ayla knew better. She had just locked herself inside a moving cage with the most dangerous man in New York.

The Ford Explorer moved steadily through the rain-soaked streets of Manhattan, heading south toward the Financial District.

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The silence inside the car was absolute. The only sound was the rhythmic squeak of the windshield wipers pushing the heavy rain aside.

Ayla kept her eyes on the road, but her peripheral vision was hyper-aware of the man sitting behind her. She glanced at the rearview mirror. Cassius had his eyes open now, staring down at a sleek black tablet, his thumb swiping through complex financial charts. His jawline was rigid, his expression unreadable.

In the passenger seat, Marcus sat perfectly still, scanning the side mirrors with the focused patience of a hawk searching for a threat.

Ayla's chest felt tight. She needed to extract herself from this situation before he started asking real questions.

She cleared her throat. The sound was startling in the quiet car.

"About the Maybach," she said, keeping her voice steady and professional. "Whatever the cost, I will cover it. I just need to keep insurance and police out of this."

Cassius's thumb stopped moving on the tablet.

He slowly lifted his head. His dark eyes met hers in the rearview mirror, and a slow, cruel smirk touched his lips.

"That door is fitted with ballistic armor paneling that costs half a million to replace," he said, his voice a low, mocking rumble. "You hit a tank, sweetheart, not a sedan."

Ayla's stomach twisted into a knot. She had the three-million-dollar check, but it was untouchable for at least a day. Admitting she had that kind of inaccessible capital would only invite more questions.

“Give me three days,” she said smoothly, her heart hammering against her ribs. “I can liquidate some assets and get you the full amount.”

Cassius closed his tablet. The soft click sounded like a gun cocking.

He leaned forward, his broad chest pressing against the back of her seat. The scent of mint and danger washed over her.

“A woman who can casually liquidate half a million dollars,” he murmured, his voice close to her ear, “is driving a stolen corporate fleet car registered to my biggest rival, and is terrified of a simple police report.”

He tilted his head. “Why are you running from Axel Farrell?”

Ayla’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.

He was too sharp. He was dismantling her lies in real time. She needed to give him something — a piece of meat to distract him from the bone.

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Chapter 19:

“I was a senior executive at Farrell Tech,” she said, letting a note of bitter resentment color her voice. “I was also his mistress. I found out he was cooking the books on the overseas accounts. When I tried to leave, he sent his security team after me. I took the car to escape.”

Cassius heard the word “mistress.”

His eyes narrowed. The lie was audacious, almost insulting. He didn’t believe the mistress part — not for a second. But the claim about Farrell cooking the books? That landed differently.

“A runaway mistress with corporate secrets,” he mused, his tone dripping with amused sarcasm. “How dramatic.”

Ayla saw the red light ahead and eased onto the brake. She turned her head and looked directly over her shoulder at Cassius.

“I know how Axel’s PR machine works,” she said, her voice sharpening with confidence. “I know his vulnerabilities. Keep the police away from me, and I will give you the strategy to crush him.”

Cassius studied her — the cheap sunglasses hiding her eyes, the wet thrift-store coat, the absolute, desperate fire radiating from every line of her posture.

He found her fascinating. Like a cornered animal that had chosen to bare its teeth instead of playing dead.

“I don’t make deals based on promises,” he said coldly. “I need collateral.”

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Ayla reached into her handbag, pulled out a pen and a blank sticky note, and scribbled down the number of her burner phone. She passed the yellow paper over her shoulder.

Cassius took it. He looked at the ten digits.

Then he opened his fingers and let the paper fall to the floor mat.

“A burner phone number,” he said, his voice laced with contempt. “You think I’m an idiot?”

Ayla’s heart lurched.

“I want real collateral,” Cassius said, his eyes hardening. “Something that guarantees you won’t disappear the second I step out of this car.”

Ayla bit the inside of her cheek so hard she tasted copper. She had nothing else to give.

The Ford Explorer descended a steep concrete ramp into the underground VIP parking garage of the private club. Ayla pulled into a reserved spot near the private elevator and shifted into park.

Marcus stepped out immediately and opened the rear door. Cassius climbed out into the dim fluorescent light of the garage, buttoned his suit jacket, and looked down at Ayla through the open door.

“Give me something with your real name on it,” he said, his voice echoing off the concrete walls. “Or Marcus calls the NYPD right now.”

Ayla was trapped. The walls of the garage felt like they were closing in.

The cold, damp air of the underground garage drifted into the car, making Ayla shiver.

She sat frozen in the driver's seat, staring at Cassius. He stood outside the open door — a towering wall of bespoke wool and lethal patience. He wasn't going to blink.

Her mind raced. If she didn't give him an ID, he would call the police, and Axel would have her in a psychiatric hold by midnight.

She unzipped the hidden compartment of her handbag. Her fingers trembled slightly as she pulled out her New York State driver's license. She took a deep breath, stepped out of the car, and held the small plastic card toward him.

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Chapter 20:

“Here. This is all I have.”

Cassius didn't reach for it immediately. His dark eyes swept over her face, lingering on the large sunglasses hiding her expression. Then he slowly raised his hand, his black leather glove creaking softly, and pinched the edge of the license between two fingers.

He looked down at the card.

The name printed in bold black letters read: AYL A JOYCE.

Her maiden name. She had never legally changed it to Farrell — a small act of rebellion Axel had always despised.

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Cassius studied the photo: a younger Ayla, without the sunglasses, looking cold and defiant. A faint, dangerous smile touched the corners of his mouth. The queen was playing dress-up.

He slipped the license into the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket.

“I’ll hold onto this until the Maybach is fully repaired,” he said, his voice smooth and devoid of warmth.

Ayla exhaled a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. She had bought herself time.

“Fine,” she said, turning back toward the driver’s seat. “I’ll contact you tomorrow to arrange the payment.”

“You misunderstand.” Cassius’s voice cracked behind her like a whip.

She turned back around.

“You are my driver,” he said, his tone carrying the absolute finality of someone who had never been argued with successfully. “You stay with the car until my meeting is finished.”

Ayla stared at him. “You can’t be serious. I have places to be.”

Cassius didn't bother arguing. He simply tilted his head toward Marcus.

Marcus moved with terrifying efficiency, reaching through the open window of the Ford Explorer and pulling the keys from the ignition in one fluid motion. He stepped back and held them at his side.

"This is kidnapping!" Ayla snapped, fury flooding her chest. "You can't just lock me in a basement!"

Cassius let out a dry, humorless laugh and gestured toward the four heavily armed private security guards stationed near the VIP elevator.

"Scream as loud as you want, Miss Joyce," he said softly. "See who comes to help you."

He turned his back on her and walked toward the elevator, his long coat sweeping behind him. Marcus followed. The doors closed, swallowing them whole.

Ayla stood alone in the freezing garage. She slammed her palm against the hood of the Ford in frustration. The metal stung her hand.

She climbed back into the driver's seat and pulled the door shut. The car was dead — no heat, no radio, just the cold seeping steadily through the windows. She crossed her arms and shivered in her wet clothes, glaring at the steering wheel.

She had escaped one tyrant only to be imprisoned by another.

She needed leverage. She needed to make Cassius need her.

Ayla leaned over and popped open the glove compartment, searching for a tissue to dry her face.

Instead, a thick stack of papers bound by a black binder clip slid out and landed on the floor mat. Beside it was a dry-cleaning receipt with Jared's name on it.

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