

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 21:

She picked up the papers. The cover page bore the Farrell Group PR Department logo stamped in the corner. A folder Jared must have left behind.

Her eyes locked onto the bold red text: CONFIDENTIAL — GILLIAM GROUP CRISIS BRIEFING.

Ayla's breath hitched.

This wasn't a generic fleet vehicle. It was Jared's personal transport. And the man had left Axel's entire attack strategy against his rival sitting in the glove box.

Read **the latest trends** on galnovels.com

She flipped the page. Her pupils dilated.

The document detailed a massive, coordinated media strike scheduled to drop in exactly two hours. Several tabloid outlets were set to publish fabricated offshore bank records accusing Cassius Gilliam of laundering money for a South American cartel.

It was a classic Axel Farrell smear campaign. Dirty, loud, and engineered to crash Gilliam's stock price right before his acquisition meeting.

Ayla's heart began pounding with a fierce, predatory rhythm.

She forgot about the cold. She forgot about her wet clothes.

She pulled her tablet from her bag, booted it up, and opened her proprietary crisis modeling software.

Cassius thought he had locked a helpless woman in his garage. He didn't know he had just sealed the greatest spin doctor in the country inside a room with his enemy's playbook.

Her fingers flew across the screen. She began constructing a counter-narrative, identifying the legal loopholes in the offshore trust laws, and drafting a precision press release designed to redirect the scandal back onto the tabloids themselves.

She had two hours to build a weapon. When Cassius stepped back off that elevator, she was going to show him exactly why he couldn't afford to treat her like a prisoner.

Two hours later, the heavy steel doors of the VIP elevator slid open with a sharp ding.

Cassius strode out into the underground garage, the air around him thick with hostility. He had removed his tie, and the top button of his shirt was undone. His secretary, Vance, trailed closely behind, clutching a stack of folders and looking severely stressed. The acquisition meeting had clearly been a bloodbath.

Cassius walked straight toward the Ford Explorer.

Before he reached the hood, the screech of tires tore through the concrete cavern. Three unmarked black passenger vans smashed through the wooden security barrier at the entrance and skidded to a halt, completely blocking the exit ramp. The side doors slid open with a violent crack.

A swarm of paparazzi poured out, armed with massive DSLR cameras and blinding flashguns. The flashes erupted instantly, turning the dim garage into a strobe-lit nightmare.

“Mr. Gilliam! Is it true the SEC is investigating your offshore accounts?!” a reporter screamed, shoving a microphone forward.

“Did you launder cartel money through the new acquisition?!” another yelled.

Cassius stopped dead. The muscles in his jaw locked. A dark, violent rage ignited in his eyes.

Marcus and the other bodyguards immediately formed a human wall, shoving the paparazzi back with brutal force — but there were too many. The reporters were rabid, pushing closer, desperate for a money shot of the billionaire losing his composure. Vance panicked, shouting into his radio for the club's backup security.

.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 22:

Inside the Ford Explorer, Ayla watched the chaos unfold. The smear campaign had dropped early.

She didn't hesitate.

She slammed her hand down on the center of the steering wheel. The Ford's horn blared — a deafening, continuous blast that bounced painfully off the concrete walls. The paparazzi flinched. The screaming stopped for a split second. Every head turned toward the cheap SUV.

Ayla kicked her door open and stepped out. She had removed her sunglasses. Her face was pale, her expression absolute ice.

The best reviews on ga/novels.com

She walked directly into the blinding flashes, her cheap trench coat snapping around her legs like armor. She stopped in front of the lead reporter and shoved her phone directly into his face.

"You are standing on private property," she said, her voice sharp and authoritative, cutting clean through the noise. "This constitutes criminal trespassing and targeted harassment under New York State Penal Law."

She pointed a finger at the logo on the reporter's jacket.

“The Daily Chronicle,” Ayla said. “Your publisher is currently facing a class-action lawsuit for defamation. If you don’t lower that camera in three seconds, Gilliam Legal will add a twenty-million-dollar injunction to that suit by morning. You will be personally named.”

The reporter’s face went pale. He lowered his camera instinctively.

Ayla didn’t stop. She turned and grabbed Cassius by the wrist. Her grip was shockingly strong.

Cassius looked down at her hand wrapped around his wrist, too stunned by her audacity to pull away.

“If you don’t want your stock to crash before the bell rings, move,” she hissed, her eyes blazing with adrenaline.

She pulled him hard.

Cassius let her lead him. Ayla dragged him away from the mob, weaving expertly behind a massive concrete support pillar. She knew the architectural layout of these high-end clubs. She pushed open a heavy, unmarked fire exit door the paparazzi hadn’t noticed.

They burst into a narrow, dimly lit concrete stairwell. The heavy door slammed shut behind them, instantly cutting off the screams and the flashes.

Ayla let go of his wrist. She pressed her back against the cold concrete wall, chest heaving as she caught her breath. Her legs were trembling from the adrenaline.

Cassius stood a foot away, his breathing perfectly steady. He stared at her in the dim light. The rage in his eyes had dissolved, replaced by a burning, focused curiosity.

“That was a very professional threat, Miss Joyce,” he murmured, his voice echoing softly in the stairwell. “You handle the press like a shark.”

Ayla swallowed hard and forced her breathing to slow. She reached into her bag, pulled out her tablet, and pressed it firmly against Cassius’s chest.

“The paparazzi are just the distraction,” she said, her voice recovering its cold edge. “The real hit piece drops on the Wall Street Journal in thirty minutes. Axel Farrell planted the offshore banking rumor.”

Cassius took the tablet and looked down at the screen.

.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 23:

His eyes moved across the counter-strategy Ayla had built — the legal loopholes she had identified, the pre-written press releases, the precise timeline designed to destroy the tabloid's credibility before the story gained traction.

It was brilliant. It was ruthless. It was a masterpiece of corporate warfare.

Cassius slowly looked up from the screen.

He no longer saw a runaway mistress. He saw a weapon of mass destruction — and she was standing right in front of him.

Cassius said nothing. He turned and pushed open a secondary door inside the stairwell, leading them into a private, wood-paneled service elevator. He swiped a black keycard. The elevator shot upward, bypassing the main floors, and opened directly into a sprawling, ultra-secure penthouse safe room at the top of the club.

The doors closed, sealing them inside a world of absolute silence and bulletproof glass.

Cassius walked to a crystal decanter on a mahogany wet bar and poured two fingers of neat whiskey into a heavy glass. He carried it back and held it out to Ayla — a silent acknowledgment, treating her as an equal.

Ayla didn't take it. She crossed her arms and held her ground.

"Did you read the strategy?" she asked, her voice tight.

Cassius took a slow sip of the whiskey, his dark eyes never leaving her face.

Popular stories on galnovels.com

"It's flawless," he admitted, his voice a low rumble. "It uses the time-zone delay of the Cayman Island banks against the publishers. It will make the Journal look like amateurs."

He set the glass down on a side table and took a step closer, his towering height casting a shadow over her.

“You built a ten-million-dollar defense strategy in the back of a freezing car in two hours,” he said quietly. “Who exactly are you, Ayla Joyce?”

Ayla kept her chin high. “I’m the person who just saved your acquisition deal. Now I want my payment.”

“Name it,” Cassius said.

“The repair bill for the Maybach is canceled,” she said. “And you give me back my driver’s license right now. I walk out of here, and we never see each other again.”

Cassius let out a low, dark chuckle. He reached into his jacket pocket and produced her plastic ID card, holding it up between his fingers just out of her reach.

“The debt is canceled,” he agreed smoothly. “But I’m keeping the card.”

Ayla’s eyes flared. She reached for it, but he pulled his hand back effortlessly.

He leaned down, his face inches from hers. She could feel the heat radiating from his body.

“You are too valuable to lose in the wind,” he whispered, his voice carrying a dangerous edge of possession. “Consider this ID a retainer fee. We are going to do a lot of business together.”

Before Ayla could respond, the heavy doors of the safe room burst open.

Vance rushed in clutching an iPad, looking on the verge of a heart attack.

“Sir, the paparazzi video just hit Twitter,” he gasped. “It’s going viral.”

Cassius straightened instantly, his demeanor turning to ice. He took the iPad from Vance and hit play.

Ayla stepped closer and looked at the screen over Cassius’s arm.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 24:

The footage was shaky and loud — Ayla stepping out of the car and confronting the reporter. Because of the blinding flashes and the camera angle, her face was completely blown out by the light. She was nothing but a blurry silhouette in a trench coat.

Ayla let out a quiet breath of relief. Axel wouldn't be able to identify her face.

Then the video played its final three seconds.

As Ayla grabbed Cassius's wrist and pulled him away, the cameraman stumbled. The lens swung wildly and snapped into perfect focus on the back of the Ford Explorer. The flash illuminated the license plate. The custom Farrell Group fleet serial number was crystal clear in 4K resolution.

Ayla's heart stopped. The blood froze in her veins.

A wave of nausea hit her so hard she stumbled backward. Axel monitored every mention of his company online. His security team would see that plate within minutes. They would

check the garage logs. They would know she had taken the car. They would know she had been standing beside his worst enemy.

Cassius caught her sudden panic. He looked from the screen to her face.

Join *thousands of fans* on **galnovels.com**

“What is it?” he asked, his eyes narrowing sharply.

“I have to go,” Ayla choked out, her lungs feeling like they were collapsing.

She turned and sprinted toward the elevator, slamming her hand against the call button.

“Ayla!” Cassius barked, stepping toward her.

The doors slid open. She jumped inside and hit the lobby button.

“Call the number on the sticky note!” she shouted as the doors closed, cutting off his intense stare.

Miles away, in the penthouse office of Farrell Tech, Axel stood before a massive wall monitor, the Twitter video paused on its final frame. His eyes were locked on the license plate. His face was bloodless. The veins in his neck stood out in sharp relief.

He stared at the blurry silhouette of the woman holding Cassius Gilliam's wrist.

A violent, sickening jealousy erupted in his chest. He seized a heavy bronze paperweight from his desk and hurled it at the monitor. The screen shattered into a spiderweb of dead pixels.

"Find her!" Axel roared at Jared, his voice tearing raw. "Lock down the city. Find that car!"

Ayla burst out of the service exit of the private club and ran into the freezing Manhattan night.

She didn't stop until she was three blocks away, her lungs burning and her wet boots slapping against the pavement. She ducked into a dimly lit, empty coffee shop and collapsed into a booth in the far corner.

Her hands were shaking as she pulled out her burner phone and dialed the private number Cassius had given her.

The line rang once and was picked up.

“Gilliam.” The voice was cold and mechanical. It wasn’t Cassius. It was Vance.

“Vance, listen to me,” Ayla said, breathless and urgent. “I need your tech team to scrub that Twitter video immediately. Corrupt the metadata, issue a copyright strike — do whatever it takes to pull it offline.”

Vance let out a dry, humorless scoff.

.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 25:

“Miss Joyce,” he said, his tone heavy with suspicion. “You show up driving a Farrell Group car. You conveniently have a multi-million-dollar PR strategy ready in your pocket. And now you want us to use our resources to cover your tracks?”

“I am trying to help him,” Ayla hissed, gripping the edge of the table.

“You are a liability,” Vance replied coldly. “My job is to protect Mr. Gilliam from corporate espionage. For all I know, you and Axel Farrell planned this entire stunt to infiltrate our servers. You will not speak to Mr. Gilliam again.”

The line went dead.

Ayla stared at the phone. A cold knot of despair tightened in her stomach. Vance had completely walled her off.

She opened her tablet and connected to the coffee shop’s unsecured Wi-Fi, booting up a Tor browser. The moment she typed in the URL, her screen froze.

A massive red warning box filled the display: REVERSE TRACE DETECTED. IP COMPROMISED.

Ayla gasped. She slammed the tablet shut and physically ripped the battery pack from the back.

Farrell Tech's cybersecurity team was already hunting. Axel had unleashed his entire digital army, scanning the city's grid for any device searching for that video. She was completely isolated — an island surrounded by sharks.

Ayla pulled her hood up and walked quickly out of the coffee shop. She descended into the humid depths of a subway station, swiped a prepaid MetroCard, and pushed through the turnstile, blending into the late-night crowd of tired commuters.

She stood on the platform and watched the rats scurry along the tracks.

Axel thought she was having an affair with Cassius. The twisted irony of it made her want to scream. He had cheated on her in their own home, yet the mere illusion of her touching another man had driven him to absolute madness.

If he caught her now, he wouldn't just pursue the conservatorship. He would make her disappear entirely.

The roar of an approaching train shook the concrete platform.

Ayla looked at her reflection in the dirty glass of the arriving subway car. She looked terrified. She looked like a victim.

She closed her eyes and took a long, slow breath. When she opened them, the fear was gone.

If Axel wanted to use his power to hunt her, she would turn his own paranoia into the weapon that destroyed him.

She stepped onto the train, heading toward Brooklyn. She was going to set a trap so carefully constructed that Axel would walk straight into his own grave.

The air inside the Farrell Group PR war room was suffocating.

Axel paced back and forth in front of the glass whiteboards, his eyes bloodshot, his tie long discarded.

“Push the narrative harder!” he barked at the row of terrified analysts typing frantically at their keyboards. “I want fifty thousand bot accounts retweeting that video by midnight!”

He jabbed a finger at the screen displaying the blurry image of Ayla and Cassius.

“Tie the money laundering scandal to her,” Axel ordered, his voice trembling with sick, twisted rage. “Make the internet believe Cassius Gilliam is using cartel money to fund his high-end prostitute. Destroy her reputation. Make her completely toxic.”

.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 26:

He wanted Ayla to feel the crushing weight of public humiliation. He wanted her to break, to come crawling back to him, begging for the protection of the monster he had become.

Across the East River, in a dingy, smoke-filled underground cybercafe in Brooklyn, Ayla sat in the darkest corner. She wore a cheap baseball cap pulled low over her eyes and typed on a cash-rented, untraceable computer, watching the Twitter trends update in real time.

GilliamCartelWhore was trending at number three.

Ayla read the vile comments flooding the screen. Axel was deploying the exact same psychological warfare tactics she had taught him.

She didn't try to defend herself. Defending was for the weak.

Her fingers flew across the worn keyboard as she opened a secure browser and began composing an email designed to look like a high-priority security alert from Farrell Tech's IT department. The subject line read: URGENT: Potential Compromise of Executive Accounts. The body was dense with technical jargon calibrated to exploit Jared's deepest fear — being seen as incompetent by Axel. She knew he would click the embedded link without hesitation. The link led to a fake login page she had just built.

Three minutes after sending it to his personal address, a quiet notification appeared on her screen: Payload Delivered. She had a backdoor into his phone — specifically, remote access to its microphone.

She used her access to download Axel's master itinerary for the next forty-eight hours.

share your favorites from galnovels.com

Her eyes locked onto a single entry for that evening: 8:00 PM — Closed-Door Investor Dinner — Waldorf Astoria.

His lifeline. A desperate attempt to calm his major shareholders and hold the IPO together amid the chaos.

Ayla picked up her burner phone and opened an encrypted messaging app. She bypassed Vance entirely, pushing the message directly to the backdoor IP address of Cassius's personal tablet.

Do not issue the PR denial yet. Tonight, 8:00 PM. Waldorf Astoria Grand Ballroom. I am giving you the kill shot. — A.

In the Gilliam Group boardroom, Cassius stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows when his tablet chimed with a harsh, metallic beep.

Vance rushed over. "Sir, the firewall was breached. Someone forced a message through."

Cassius looked at the screen and read the message.

A slow, terrifying smile spread across his face. The predator had caught the scent of blood.

“Cancel the press release,” he said, his voice dropping an octave. “Get my car ready. We are going to a dinner party.”

At seven o’clock, Ayla slipped through the employee service entrance at the back of the Waldorf Astoria and kept to the shadows of a service corridor. A lone housekeeper — older, tired — pushed a heavy laundry cart out of a linen closet. Ayla stepped out in front of her.

“I need your uniform and your cart,” she said, her voice low and firm.

The woman scoffed. Ayla didn’t argue. She pulled a crisp hundred-dollar bill from her pocket and held it out.

“Your uniform, your cart, and you forget you ever saw me. For the next hour, you are on a paid break.”

.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 27:

The housekeeper's eyes widened. She glanced down the empty hallway and quickly nodded, helping Ayla into the baggy dark blue uniform right there in the corridor.

A surgical mask covered the lower half of Ayla's face. She pushed the heavy laundry cart filled with dirty tablecloths down the long carpeted hallway, head down, blending seamlessly into the invisible army of hotel staff.

She steered the cart past a VIP holding room near the main ballroom. The door was cracked open.

Kristal's shrill voice carried through the gap.

Weekly releases on galnovels.com

"You're making her famous, Axel!" Kristal whined, pacing in a tight evening gown. "The whole internet is talking about this mystery woman. You're supposed to be focusing on me!"

“Shut your mouth, Kristal,” Axel snapped, his voice ragged and unhinged. “If you ruin this dinner tonight, the board will fire us both. Just smile and look pretty.”

Ayla stopped the cart in the shadows just outside the door. She reached into her pocket and withdrew a small black USB drive.

She crouched beside the wall and popped open the plastic cover of the hotel’s central media routing port — the one connected directly to the ballroom’s AV system. She plugged the drive in. A tiny green light blinked to life.

Ayla straightened up, gripped the handle of the laundry cart, and walked away into the darkness.

The trap was set. Now she just had to wait for the explosion.

The Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria was a sea of crystal chandeliers, clinking champagne glasses, and the low murmur of Silicon Valley’s most ruthless venture capitalists.

At 8:15 PM, Axel Farrell stepped up to the mahogany podium at the front of the room. He wore a bespoke tuxedo and flashed his signature warm, trustworthy smile — the perfect mask of the visionary CEO.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Axel began, his voice projecting smoothly through the state-of-the-art sound system. “Despite the noise in the media, Farrell Tech remains the gold standard of integrity and innovation...”

Before he could finish, the massive oak double doors at the back of the ballroom were violently shoved open. The crash echoed like a gunshot. The entire room went dead silent, and hundreds of heads turned.

Cassius Gilliam stood in the doorway.

He wore a pitch-black double-breasted suit that made him look like a warlord stepping onto a battlefield. The air around him practically vibrated with lethal intent. Marcus and four other guards flanked him.

Axel’s smile froze. The color drained from his face.

“Cassius,” he forced out, his voice trembling slightly. “This is a private event. Security!”

Cassius ignored him. He walked slowly down the center aisle, his heavy footsteps echoing on the marble floor. The billionaire investors parted before him, too unsettled by his presence to stand in his way. He stopped in the middle of the room and looked up at Axel with eyes full of absolute contempt.

High above the ballroom, standing in the pitch-black shadows of the AV control booth, Ayla watched Cassius take his position.

She pulled a small black remote from her pocket and pressed the red button.

.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 28:

On the main stage, the massive LED screen behind Axel flickered violently. The Farrell Tech logo vanished. A piercing burst of static blasted through the speakers, making several investors cover their ears.

Then a crystal-clear audio recording began to play.

“Push the narrative harder!” Axel’s voice boomed through the ballroom. “Tie the money laundering scandal to her! Make the internet believe Cassius Gilliam is using cartel money to fund his high-end prostitute!”

A collective gasp rippled through the room.

Axel lunged at the podium microphone, trying to cut the feed — but the system was locked.

The recording continued.

“But sir,” Jared’s voice followed, tight with panic. “The offshore accounts the tabloids are using — those are our accounts. If the SEC looks too closely at that fabricated cartel money, they’ll find the three hundred million we embezzled from the R&D fund to cover the fake revenue numbers!”

“Then bury it!” Axel’s voice roared. “Falsify the Q3 audits!”

Addictive novels on galnovels.com

The recording stopped.

The silence in the ballroom was absolute.

It wasn't a PR scandal anymore. It was federal financial fraud.

Axel gripped the edges of the podium, his knuckles white, his chest heaving. Around him, venture capitalists were already pulling out their phones, frantically calling their brokers to dump Farrell stock. The journalists in the room typed like maniacs.

Cassius stood in the center of the chaos, his hands resting casually in his pockets.

"Checkmate, Axel," he said softly, but his voice carried perfectly across the silent room. "Enjoy federal prison."

Axel let out a guttural scream of rage, turned, and bolted off the stage toward the kitchen exits, his bodyguards scrambling after him.

Cassius didn't chase him. He turned his head, his sharp eyes scanning the upper balconies. A brief flash of movement near the AV booth — a shadow slipping out the door.

He broke into a sprint immediately, shoving past a waiter and taking the carpeted stairs two at a time. He kicked the AV booth door open.

The small room was empty. The monitors glowed in the dark.

Cassius looked down at the control board.

Resting precisely on top of the master volume slider was a plain, heavy-stock note card — the exact kind she had pressed against Jared’s chest in the rain. He picked it up and rubbed the thick paper between his thumb and forefinger.

It was blank. An empty stage after the performance.

A low, dark chuckle rose from his chest. She had used him as the sword, and she had been the invisible hand swinging it.

Vance ran into the booth, breathless. “Sir, the police are arriving for Farrell. Should we lock down the building to find the hacker?”

Cassius stared at the blank card. His eyes darkened with an intense, consuming possessiveness.

“No,” he murmured, slipping the card into his breast pocket alongside her driver’s license. “Let her run. She’ll come to me when she’s ready to collect.”

Down at street level, Ayla walked out of the service alley into the cold night air. She pulled off the surgical mask and dropped it into a trash can, then hailed a yellow cab and climbed inside.

.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 29:

She pulled out her phone and watched the news alerts flood the screen. Farrell Tech stock was in freefall. The SEC had just announced an emergency investigation.

Axel was destroyed.

Ayla leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. A small, genuine smile touched her lips for the first time.

She had burned her past to the ground. Tomorrow, she would walk into the Gilliam Group and claim her throne.

The pale morning light pierced through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the Farrell Manor on the Upper East Side.

The first phase of her vengeance was complete, the digital destruction of Farrell Tech already echoing through the financial markets. But Ayla knew that to truly sever her ties and vanish, she had to return to the gilded cage one last time. She needed to retrieve the few items that belonged to Ayla Joyce — before the catastrophic fallout reached Axel, leaving him nothing of her to hold onto.

She pushed open the heavy oak front doors. The chilled air of the foyer hit her skin. She moved silently, her flat shoes making no sound against the marble floor. She knew the security team's exact schedule. The night shift was exhausted, and the day shift hadn't clocked in yet. She had a thirty-minute window.

She walked straight down the long carpeted hallway and pushed open the door to the master suite.

The room smelled of expensive lavender spray and suffocating memories. Ayla looked at the massive ornate bed in the center of the room. Her chest felt completely hollow — no sadness, no anger. Only a cold, clinical need to erase herself from this space.

She dropped to her knees at the edge of the bed and pulled a large black suitcase from beneath the frame.

She unzipped it and stood. She walked into the cavernous walk-in closet without glancing once at the racks of haute couture gowns, silk blouses, and cashmere coats Axel had bought to dress up his perfect doll. She reached into the very back and pulled out five pairs of basic slacks, a few plain cotton button-downs, and a pair of sensible black heels. She folded them quickly and shoved them into the suitcase, then crossed to the mahogany bookshelf and grabbed three heavy textbooks on crisis public relations, dropping them on top of the clothes.

Chinese novels translated on galnovels.com

She zipped the suitcase shut. The sound of the metal teeth locking together was loud in the quiet room.

She stood and looked down at her left hand.

The five-carat pink diamond engagement ring felt impossibly heavy on her finger. A flawless stone. Also a shackle.

Ayla pinched the cold band between her thumb and index finger and pulled it over her knuckle. The skin beneath was pale and untouched by the sun.

She walked to the vanity and placed the ring precisely in the center of the mirrored tray. It sat there, glittering and completely lifeless.

The bedroom door creaked open behind her.

.

.

.

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 30:

Martha, the head housekeeper, stood in the doorway holding a heavy silver tray with a steaming pot of coffee. When she saw the black suitcase on the floor, her hands jerked. The tray rattled violently, and dark coffee sloshed over the rim of the porcelain pot, staining the white linen napkin beneath it.

“Ma’am?” Martha whispered.

Her eyes were red and swollen. She set the tray down quickly and rushed across the room, reaching out to take Ayla’s hands in both of hers. Martha’s hands were rough and warm.

“Are you really doing this?” Her voice broke. A tear spilled down her wrinkled cheek. “Are you really leaving it all behind?”

The *most popular* novels on galnove/s.com

Ayla looked at the older woman. Martha was the only person in this massive, cold house who had ever looked at her with genuine kindness.

She squeezed Martha’s rough hands.

“I have been suffocating in this gold cage for three years, Martha,” Ayla said. Her voice was calm, but the absolute certainty in it made the air in the room feel heavy. “I can’t breathe here anymore.”

Martha looked into Ayla’s eyes, saw the flat, dead emptiness there, and understood there was no point in arguing.

She reached up and wiped the tear from her cheek with the back of her hand, then nodded slowly.

“Then you need to eat,” Martha said firmly, turning her back and refusing to cry anymore. “I am making you a proper American breakfast. You are not leaving this house on an empty stomach.”

Ten minutes later, Ayla sat at the very end of the massive twenty-foot dining table. The room was completely empty. Martha walked in and set a warm plate of crispy bacon and thick pancakes in front of her. The smell of maple syrup filled the air.

Ayla stared at the food. Her stomach twisted. Flashes of the past three years hit her like physical blows — the dinners where Axel ignored her, the mornings where his mother insulted her bloodline, the crushing humiliation of being treated as a prop.

She picked up her silver knife and fork and pressed the blade into the soft pancake.

The screech of tires tore through the quiet morning.

Outside the dining room window, Axel’s custom Maybach slammed to a halt beside the stone fountain. The front doors of the manor were thrown open so hard they crashed against the interior walls.

Axel stormed into the foyer. His tuxedo from the Waldorf Astoria was ruined — bowtie gone, collar ripped open, hair wild and damp with sweat. He reeked of stale whiskey and the sour desperation of a man who had just watched his entire life burn to the ground.

He came through the dining room doorway, his bloodshot eyes locking onto Ayla at the end of the table. He stared at her calm posture, searching desperately for the submissive, quiet wife he had spent three years training. He needed a punching bag. He needed his fixer.

He marched the length of the table and stopped behind her chair, slamming both hands down onto her shoulders. His fingers dug into her collarbone.

.

.

.