

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 31:

“Get up,” Axel ordered, his voice a harsh, alcohol-soaked rasp. “Get to the PR department right now. You are going to draft a statement saying the audio recording was an AI deepfake. You are going to fix this mess.”

Ayla didn’t flinch. She didn’t cower.

She slowly chewed the piece of pancake in her mouth, swallowed it, picked up her white linen napkin, and elegantly dabbed the corners of her lips.

She tilted her head slightly, breaking contact with his hands.

“I am just a housewife, Axel,” she said, her voice ice-cold and perfectly flat. “I don’t know anything about crisis PR.”

Axel’s face turned a violent shade of purple. The veins in his neck strained against the skin.

He let out a roar of pure rage, seized the heavy silver coffee pot from the center of the table, and hurled it across the room. It smashed against the wall. Boiling coffee and shattered silver rained down onto the Persian rug.

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“You ungrateful bitch!” Axel screamed, spit flying from his lips. “You eat my food! You live in my house! And when I need you, you play dumb?!”

Ayla placed her napkin on the table and slowly stood. She turned and looked Axel dead in the eyes, her spine perfectly straight. There was no fear left in her body — only a terrifying, suffocating stillness.

She let out a short, sharp laugh.

“Why don’t you ask Kristal to fix it?” she said, her voice dropping to a lethal whisper. “She seemed very capable of handling your needs at the gala last night.”

The name hit Axel like a blow to the gut. His pupils dilated. His mouth opened — a lie, a defense, an excuse forming and dying before it reached his lips.

Ayla turned her back on him and walked toward the grand staircase.

Axel stared at her straight, unyielding posture and felt a violent wave of panic crash into his chest, as though the floor were dropping away beneath him. Something was deeply, irreversibly wrong. The woman walking away from him no longer belonged to him.

“Ayla!” he roared.

He sprinted to the stairs and grabbed her left wrist, yanking her backward. His thumb pressed against her skin and stopped.

He felt bare skin. Smooth. No metal band.

His eyes snapped to the master bedroom doorway. Through the open door, he could see the vanity tray — and the five-carat pink diamond sitting alone on the glass.

A sharp, physical pain stabbed into his chest. His breathing stopped.

“What are you doing?” he hissed, teeth grinding. “Are you playing games? Do you think taking off the ring will get you a bigger cut of the trust fund?”

Ayla ripped her wrist from his grip.

“I don’t want a single penny from you,” she said. Her voice was absolute. “I just want you to sign the divorce papers.”

Axel stared at her. Then he threw his head back and let out a loud, manic laugh.

“You?” he mocked, his voice echoing through the foyer. “You are going to leave me? You don’t have a dime to your name. You can’t even afford a rat-infested basement in Manhattan without my credit cards.”

Ayla didn’t waste her breath.

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Chapter 32:

She walked to the front door, grabbed the handle of her black suitcase, and pulled it upright, the wheels clicking sharply against the marble. She walked past Axel without giving him a second glance.

He spun around, his face contorted with rage.

“If you walk out that door, you are dead to me!” he screamed at her back. “You will never step foot in this house again! I will make sure you starve in the streets!”

Ayla stopped in the open doorway. The cold morning wind lifted her hair.

She didn’t turn around.

“I hope your stock stays above ten dollars tomorrow, Axel,” she said quietly.

She stepped out into the driveway and pulled the door shut behind her.

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The heavy oak slammed with a deafening boom.

Axel stood completely alone in the massive, silent foyer.

He looked at the empty space where she had just been standing. A sudden, terrifying emptiness clawed at his throat and swallowed him whole.

Ayla stepped out of the yellow cab and looked up at the towering glass facade of the Gilliam Group headquarters in Midtown Manhattan.

She wore a sharply tailored dark grey wool suit, the cut ruthless and professional. She adjusted the collar of her blazer, her fingers brushing the cold fabric. Her heart beat with a steady, aggressive rhythm.

She walked through the revolving glass doors and into the massive, high-tech lobby, heading straight to the front desk. The receptionist — a woman with a severe bun and a headset — immediately held up a hand.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Do you have an appointment?”

Ayla didn’t speak. She reached into her leather handbag, produced the solid gold business card Cassius had given her, and slid it across the polished marble counter.

“I am here to see the Executive Vice President of Public Relations,” she said, her voice completely flat. “Tell him the owner of this card is waiting.”

The receptionist looked down at the gold card. The color instantly drained from her face. Her fingers trembled as she picked up the desk phone.

Ten minutes later, Ayla was escorted into a massive glass-walled conference room on the forty-fifth floor.

Three senior Gilliam Group executives sat across a long mahogany table, their eyes sharp, calculating, and full of skepticism. The lead interviewer — a man with silver hair and a hard jawline — looked down at Ayla’s printed résumé.

“Miss Joyce,” he said, his tone laced with condescension. “Your résumé shows a complete three-year gap in employment and zero recent corporate history. How exactly do you plan to prove you can handle the position of Senior Director of Crisis Management for a global conglomerate?”

Ayla didn’t flinch. She offered a cold, razor-sharp smile.

She reached into her bag, pulled out her tablet, and connected it to the room’s wireless projection system. The massive screen behind the executives flickered to life, displaying a complex, real-time data model — a complete autopsy of the Farrell Tech stock crash from the night before. Red lines plummeted like waterfalls.

“This is how I prove it,” Ayla said, her voice carrying absolute authority.

She stood and walked toward the screen, pointing to three specific data spikes on the graph.

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Chapter 33:

“Last night, Farrell Tech was destroyed,” she said, her words clipping through the air like bullets. “I engineered that destruction. I bypassed their internal firewalls. I hijacked their AV system at the Waldorf Astoria. I timed the release of the audio leak to coincide precisely with the Asian market opening, maximizing the panic sell-off.”

The three executives sat frozen in their leather chairs, mouths slightly open, staring at what they were slowly realizing was the exact blueprint of a corporate assassination.

The silver-haired man leaned forward. “Are you telling us you orchestrated the Farrell hack?”

Ayla looked at him without blinking. She neither confirmed nor denied it.

“I am telling you that this data model is my offering to the Gilliam Group,” she said smoothly. “I know how to destroy a billionaire. Imagine what I can do to protect one.”

Out in the hallway, Vance was moving quickly past the glass wall of the conference room, a stack of legal files under his arm. He glanced inside and stopped dead.

He saw Ayla standing in front of the screen — the cold, predatory look on her face unmistakable. His stomach dropped. The woman from the underground garage had breached their walls.

Vance spun on his heel and sprinted toward the private elevator. He had to warn Cassius.

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Inside the conference room, the energy had shifted entirely. The skepticism was gone, replaced by a hungry, unsettling respect.

Thirty minutes later, Ayla walked out with a high-level executive position and a base salary of five hundred thousand dollars a year.

The cold New York wind hit her face as she stepped onto the sidewalk. Her burner phone vibrated in her pocket — the real estate broker.

She hailed a cab and headed straight to Chelsea.

The apartment building was a fortress of black steel and tinted glass. The broker walked her through the lobby, pointing out the biometric retina scanners at the entrance and the private key-card-only elevator. They rode up to the twentieth floor and stepped into a sprawling, ultra-modern apartment. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a sweeping view of the Hudson River. It was exactly what she needed.

“The rent is fifteen thousand dollars a month, Miss Joyce,” the broker said, eyeing her plain suit nervously. “And the board requires six months upfront.”

Ayla didn’t blink. She reached into her bag and produced a thick, banded stack of hundred-dollar bills — enough for the first month and the security deposit — alongside a cryptographically secured letter of credit from her offshore private banker.

“I’ll take it for a full year,” she said, placing everything on the counter. “The letter guarantees the full wire transfer will clear within twenty-four hours. Process it tomorrow morning. Keep the extra cash as your expedition fee.”

The broker stared at the stack of bills and the official bank seal, then hurried off to process the paperwork.

Miles away, the atmosphere inside Farrell Manor had turned toxic.

Axel was tearing the master bedroom apart — ripping drawers from dressers and hurling them to the floor, his breathing ragged and loud. He was searching for Ayla’s passport. He needed physical leverage to force her back.

His phone buzzed. It was Jared.

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Chapter 34:

“Sir,” Jared’s voice trembled over the speaker. “We tracked the last ping of her cell before she destroyed the SIM card. It triangulated to the Chelsea district. We cross-referenced her need for maximum security and found a newly signed lease.”

A digital file arrived on Axel’s phone. He opened it — a promotional brochure for a high-security luxury apartment building in Chelsea. Printed in bold gold letters across the screen: Exclusive Living. Starting at \$15,000 a month.

Axel’s hands began to shake. The phone nearly cracked under his grip.

Ayla had no money. He had frozen her credit cards. She couldn’t afford a cup of coffee, let alone a fifteen-thousand-dollar-a-month fortress.

Unless someone else was paying for it.

His mind flashed back to the Waldorf Astoria — Cassius Gilliam standing in the ballroom, looking at him with absolute contempt. Then the image shifted to the blurry Twitter video: Ayla grabbing Cassius’s wrist in the parking garage.

A wave of acidic bile rose in Axel's throat.

The logic locked into place in his deteriorating mind. Ayla hadn't just left him. She had sold him out to his worst enemy, and in exchange, Cassius was setting her up in a luxury penthouse.

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He called Jared back, pressing the screen so hard the glass nearly cracked.

"I want every single lease agreement signed in the Chelsea district in the last twenty-four hours pulled immediately," Axel roared, his voice shaking with barely contained rage.

Jared hesitated. "Sir, the board is demanding an emergency meeting. The SEC investigators are in the lobby. We need you at headquarters—"

Axel swept his arm across the vanity. Dozens of crystal perfume bottles shattered against the hardwood floor, flooding the room with the suffocating scent of floral perfume.

"If you don't find my wife," Axel screamed, his voice cracking, "I will fire every single person in this company!"

Across the city, Ayla sat on the edge of the plush sofa in her new Chelsea apartment, a glass of cold champagne in her hand, looking out at the glittering skyline. For the first time, she felt genuinely safe.

Her new phone buzzed on the glass coffee table. A text from an unknown number.

Welcome to Gilliam. I expect a flawless performance on Monday.

A slow, dangerous smile curved her lips. She typed back a single “OK” and hit send.

High above the city in the Gilliam penthouse office, Cassius sat in his massive leather chair and looked at the reply on his screen. His dark eyes gleamed with the thrill of the hunt.

Vance stood by the door, visibly uneasy. “Sir, she is a liability. She is a walking target. We shouldn’t let her anywhere near the executive floor.”

Cassius let out a low, dark laugh and tossed the phone onto his desk.

“She isn’t a liability, Vance,” he murmured, his voice dripping with lethal anticipation. “She is a bomb. And I am going to drop her right on Axel Farrell’s head.”

Night fell over New York City.

Axel sat on the floor of his ruined bedroom, surrounded by broken glass and the wreckage of overturned drawers. He held the crumpled apartment brochure in his bleeding hand.

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Chapter 35:

“I will find you,” he whispered to the empty room, his eyes wide and unblinking. “I will break your legs and drag you back here if I have to.”

The morning sun struck the floor-to-ceiling windows of the Chelsea apartment, casting long, sharp shadows across the hardwood floor.

Ayla woke early. She walked into the walk-in closet and pulled out the dark grey power suit she had bought the day before. The fabric was stiff and expensive. It felt like armor.

She moved to the kitchen, opened her laptop, and found the official employment contract from the Gilliam Group HR department sitting in her inbox. Her start date was set for the following Monday.

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She didn't smile. She knew the war was just beginning. She had a five-day gap before she officially fell under the protection of the Gilliam corporate umbrella — five days during which she was completely exposed.

She opened a secure encrypted browser and logged into a dark web marketplace, purchasing a military-grade anti-surveillance kit: a signal jammer, an encrypted router, and a set of audio sweepers. She paid using a fraction of her offshore funds. Axel's hackers were ruthless. She couldn't afford a single digital footprint.

At that exact moment, twenty miles away, a Gulfstream G650 touched down on the private tarmac at John F. Kennedy International Airport. The Farrell Group logo was painted on the tail.

Axel sat in the plush leather cabin, his face a mask of exhaustion and barely suppressed rage. He had just flown back from an emergency congressional hearing in Washington D.C., where he had been publicly grilled about the financial fraud allegations.

The cabin door opened. Cold, jet-fuel-scented air rushed in.

Waiting at the bottom of the metal stairs was Kristal, the Director of Overseas Operations, wearing a skin-tight blood-red designer dress and six-inch heels. She shivered in the wind, her face holding a desperate, calculating smile.

Axel walked down the stairs. Kristal immediately stepped forward and looped her arm through his.

“Axel, I canceled all my morning meetings to come get you,” she cooed, her voice sickeningly sweet. “I know how stressed you are. Let me take you back to my place and help you relax.”

Axel looked down at her arm, then at the bright red fabric of her dress.

A violent image flashed in his mind — the blurry Twitter video, Ayla in a red trench coat, grabbing Cassius Gilliam’s wrist in the parking garage.

A wave of physiological disgust hit his stomach.

He ripped his arm from Kristal's grasp and shoved her away with enough force that she stumbled backward, her heels twisting on the wet tarmac. She barely kept her balance.

"Don't touch me," Axel snarled.

Kristal gasped, her face going pale. "Axel, what are you doing? I'm trying to help you!"

He stepped closer, his frame casting a dark shadow over her. "Save your tricks for someone else, Kristal. You are a distraction. Get back to the office and fix the European accounts before the SEC freezes them."

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Chapter 36:

Kristal stood frozen on the tarmac. Her face flushed a deep, humiliating shade of purple as the ground crew watched. A flash of pure, venomous hatred crossed her eyes, but she bit her lip and stepped back.

Axel turned his back on her and climbed into his waiting armored Cadillac Escalade.

Jared occupied the front passenger seat, visibly terrified. He immediately handed a thick manila folder over the center console.

“Sir, we finished the sweep of the Chelsea district,” Jared stammered. “We checked over seventy high-end buildings.”

Axel snatched the folder. “And?”

“There is one building with maximum biometric security,” Jared said, swallowing hard. “A top-floor unit was rented yesterday, paid in full for a year. The funds came from a blind offshore shell company.”

Axel’s jaw locked. A blind shell company — the exact tactic a billionaire like Cassius Gilliam would use to hide someone.

“Put a surveillance team on every exit of that building,” Axel said, his voice dropping to a dead, terrifying calm. “I want eyes on that door twenty-four seven.”

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Back in Manhattan, Ayla pulled a black baseball cap low over her eyes and strapped a face mask across her mouth. She grabbed a canvas tote containing her newly purchased equipment and walked out of the apartment — not through the main elevator, but down the service stairs to the basement and out through the loading dock alleyway.

As she stepped onto the sidewalk, the hairs on the back of her neck rose.

She glanced left. Parked illegally beside a fire hydrant was a black Chevrolet sedan with windows tinted so dark they resembled solid black mirrors. The engine was running.

Axel had found the building.

She didn't panic. She didn't run. She casually raised her phone as though reading a text and turned right, walking at a steady, unhurried pace. The moment she rounded the corner, she sprinted into a narrow, graffiti-covered alleyway in the meatpacking district.

The Chevrolet's doors flew open. Two men in plain clothes jumped out and ran after her.

Ayla's lungs burned as she navigated the maze of dumpsters and fire escapes. She knew this neighborhood perfectly — she had mapped it for a PR event two years ago.

She reached the end of the alley, ducked through the open back door of a busy underground speakeasy kitchen, wove through screaming chefs, pushed through the swinging doors, and walked straight out the front entrance onto a completely different avenue.

She hailed a passing cab and jumped in.

In the Escalade, Jared's phone buzzed. He listened for three seconds, his face going white.

"Sir," he whispered. "The private investigators lost her in the meatpacking district."

Axel let out a roar of fury. He grabbed the crystal decanter from the built-in bar and smashed it against the bulletproof divider. Glass and expensive scotch exploded across the cabin.

"Hack the city's traffic cameras!" he screamed, his chest heaving. "Tear the grid apart. Find her!"

Ayla sat in the back of the cab as her breathing slowly steadied. She got off near Central Park and walked into a small, dimly lit tea room tucked behind a bookstore.

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Chapter 37:

Chloe was already there, sitting in a private booth at the back, nervously shredding a paper napkin. When Ayla slid into the seat across from her, Chloe let out a massive sigh of relief and threw her arms around her neck.

“Thank God you’re okay,” she whispered.

As she pulled back, her eyes darted nervously toward the window, her body rigid with unnatural tension. She reached under the table and pushed a heavy, unmarked brown paper bag across to Ayla.

“One hundred thousand dollars,” Chloe said, her voice trembling slightly. “I had to use a shadow broker in Chinatown. My accounts are heavily monitored, but I managed to secure this through a back channel. The bills are unmarked and non-sequential. Axel’s financial team can’t trace it.”

Ayla noticed the slight tremor in Chloe’s hands and the evasive shift in her gaze, but in her exhausted state she attributed it to the paralyzing terror of defying Axel’s financial blockade.

“Ayla, Axel is acting like a rabid dog,” Chloe said. “He has private security tearing the city apart. He’s using his connections with the local syndicates.”

Ayla let out a cold, sharp laugh. “The harder he looks, the more mistakes he’ll make. He’s bleeding money, and his ego is driving him insane.”

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “I got the job at Gilliam Group. I start Monday.”

Chloe gasped. “Ayla, are you crazy? Cassius Gilliam is a monster. He’s worse than Axel. He destroys people for fun.”

Ayla looked out the window at the grey sky over Central Park, her eyes hard and unyielding.

“In Wall Street, you don’t survive by playing nice,” she said, her voice completely devoid of fear. “You survive by finding the biggest, most vicious predator in the jungle and feeding your enemies to him.”

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She grabbed the bag of cash and stood.

“I have one last thing to do before Monday,” she said. “I have to get my driver’s license back from Cassius. And I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Ayla sat at a small wrought-iron table outside a café directly across the street from the Gilliam Group headquarters. The cold wind whipped her hair across her face, but she didn’t move. She kept her eyes locked on the massive revolving glass doors of the building.

The heavy brown paper bag containing one hundred thousand dollars in cash rested securely between her feet.

She couldn’t simply walk through the front doors. Vance had her face memorized and would have security remove her before she reached the elevator banks.

Ayla pulled out her burner phone and dialed the internal HR extension she had saved from her interview.

“Gilliam Group Human Resources,” a polite voice answered.

“This is Ayla Joyce, the new Senior Director of PR,” she said, her voice sharp and authoritative. “Transfer me to the executive penthouse. Vance’s desk.”

A brief pause, a click, and then the line began to ring.

“Executive office,” Vance’s cold, mechanical voice came through the speaker.

“Vance, it’s Ayla. I need to speak with Cassius.”

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Chapter 38:

Vance let out a harsh, dismissive breath. “Miss Joyce. I told you not to call this line. Having an employment offer does not grant you access to Mr. Gilliam. He is currently unavailable to everyone.”

“I am not calling about the job,” Ayla pressed, tightening her grip on the phone. “I am calling to settle the insurance claim for the Maybach. I have the cash. I want my driver’s license back.”

“The legal department handles property damage,” Vance replied, his tone dripping with ice. “As for your identification card, Mr. Gilliam has not issued any directives regarding its return. Goodbye.”

The line went dead.

Ayla lowered the phone. Vance’s wording was precise: Mr. Gilliam has not issued any directives. That meant Vance didn’t have the ID. Cassius was keeping it on his person.

Her eyes swept the street, her mind calculating a new angle of attack.

Her gaze stopped on a sleek refrigerated delivery van pulling up to the side service entrance of the Gilliam building. The elegant, minimalist logo of Le Bernardin — one of New York’s most exclusive three-star Michelin restaurants — was printed on its side.

Ayla’s memory surfaced a detail from her research on Cassius. He suffered from severe PTSD from his military service, which had manifested as a crippling eating disorder. He rarely ate solid food and survived almost entirely on specialized, nutrient-dense liquid meals prepared exclusively by a private Michelin chef.

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She grabbed her bag of cash, stood, and crossed the busy street, dodging yellow cabs. The driver — a young man in a crisp white uniform — stood at the back of the van checking a clipboard.

Ayla walked straight up to him, reached into her coat pocket, and pressed five folded hundred-dollar bills directly into the front pocket of his apron.

The driver jumped, eyes widening. “Hey, what are you—”

“I am Mr. Gilliam’s new private clinical nutritionist,” Ayla interrupted, switching to rapid, flawless French to assert immediate authority. “He is experiencing a severe caloric deficit today. I need to personally deliver his thermal meal box to ensure he consumes it. Hand it to me.”

The driver hesitated, visibly unsettled by her perfect French and commanding posture.

“Today’s meal must strictly adhere to his specialized medical directives,” Ayla continued smoothly, “particularly regarding the allergen protocols and lipid content. Give me the box, or I will personally inform the executive chef that you delayed his critical medical intake.”

The driver swallowed hard. He reached into the van and produced a sleek, black, temperature-controlled titanium lockbox.

“Take my jacket,” he said nervously, already shrugging it off. “Security won’t let you through the service entrance without the restaurant insignia.”

Ayla pulled the oversized white coat on over her clothes, raised her black face mask over her nose, and picked up the heavy thermal box.

She walked through the side service doors. The security guard glanced at the Michelin logo on her jacket, recognized the familiar black box, and waved her through without a second look.

Ayla stepped into the stainless-steel service elevator and swiped her hand over the sensor. The elevator shot upward, bypassing the lobby entirely and rising straight to the penthouse level.

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Chapter 39:

The doors slid open with a soft ping.

She stepped into a dimly lit carpeted hallway and heard Vance's voice echoing from the far end of the corridor — he was aggressively berating two junior executives. Ayla held her breath and moved silently, slipping behind a massive imported indoor palm tree. She waited until Vance turned his back, then crossed the hallway in a few quick strides and slipped through the slightly ajar frosted-glass double doors of Cassius's private office.

The room was massive and almost entirely dark, lit only by the eerie blue glow of six Bloomberg terminal screens displaying real-time global financial data.

Cassius stood with his back to her, looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the Manhattan skyline, a heavy crystal glass of whiskey in his hand. The sheer physical

presence of the man made the air in the room feel thin. He radiated a dark, suffocating isolation.

At the soft click of the door, he didn't turn around.

"Put the box on the desk and get out," he said. His voice was a low, gravelly rumble that resonated in Ayla's chest.

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She didn't leave. She pulled the face mask down to her chin, walked to the center of the room, lifted the heavy titanium box, and slammed it down onto the custom-carved rosewood executive desk.

The thud echoed like a gunshot in the silent room.

Cassius's broad shoulders tensed instantly. He spun around, his eyes flashing with the lethal instinct of a predator whose territory had been breached.

When he saw Ayla, the violence in his expression dissolved, replaced by dark, predatory amusement.

He took a slow sip of whiskey and walked toward her, his footsteps soundless on the thick carpet. His eyes dragged slowly over the oversized, ridiculous white chef's jacket she was wearing.

"You broke into a highly secure corporate fortress," he murmured, a cruel smirk playing at his lips, "dressed as a delivery boy. You must really want to see me, Miss Joyce."

Ayla didn't back down. She met his gaze with absolute defiance.

She unzipped the brown paper bag and pulled out the thick stacks of unmarked hundred-dollar bills, dropping them onto the rosewood desk. The cash fanned across the polished surface.

"One hundred thousand dollars," she said, her voice freezing cold. "That covers the Maybach door. The debt is paid. Give me my driver's license right now."

Cassius looked down at the pile of cash.

Then he threw his head back and let out a low, dark laugh — genuinely amused, the sound echoing through the cavernous office.

He closed the distance between them and stopped mere inches away. Ayla could feel the heat radiating from his chest. The scent of cold mint, expensive whiskey, and faint gunpowder washed over her, her heart accelerating against her will.

Cassius leaned down, his lips dangerously close to her ear.

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Chapter 40:

“You think you can buy your way out of my game with pocket change?” he whispered, his voice sending a shiver straight down her spine. “The game just started, Ayla. And your ID isn’t here.”

Ayla’s heart slammed against her ribs. The air in her lungs suddenly felt like thick, freezing water.

She took a step back, forcing herself to maintain eye contact with Cassius.

“What do you mean it isn’t here?” she demanded, her voice tight. “You put it in your jacket pocket yesterday. I saw you do it.”

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Cassius walked casually to the wet bar, picked up the crystal decanter, and poured another splash of amber liquid into his glass. He watched her through the mirror’s reflection.

“I did,” he said smoothly. “But after I left you in the garage, I flew down to Washington D.C. for a congressional hearing. I changed suits on the plane.”

He turned around and leaned his hip against the edge of the bar, taking a slow sip of whiskey, his dark eyes gleaming with sadistic amusement.

“My security team left that particular suit at a dry cleaner near Dupont Circle,” he said, his tone completely indifferent. “Your license is currently sitting in a plastic bag, three hundred miles away.”

A sudden, violent wave of dizziness hit Ayla. The floor seemed to tilt beneath her feet.

“Call them,” she ordered, her breathing quickening. “Call the dry cleaner. Tell them to overnight it. I need that ID by tomorrow.”

Cassius raised a single dark eyebrow and swirled the whiskey in his glass.

“A billionaire doesn’t call a dry cleaner, Ayla,” he said softly, his voice laced with mockery. “And I certainly don’t run errands for a woman who breaks into my office and throws dirty cash on my desk. I left it there on purpose. I wanted to see how long it would take for you to panic.”

Ayla’s hands curled into tight fists at her sides, her fingernails digging into her palms until the skin nearly broke.

She was trapped. Without that ID, she couldn’t finalize the biometric registration for the Chelsea apartment. Without it, the Gilliam Group HR department couldn’t run her mandatory background check on Monday. And if Axel’s hackers flagged her name at the DMV when she applied for a replacement, they would ping her exact location within minutes.

The realization crashed down on her all at once. The walls of the massive office seemed to shrink, pressing inward, crushing her ribs.

Ayla’s chest heaved. She tried to draw a breath, but her throat locked. Her vision blurred at the edges, bleeding into grey.

She stumbled backward. Her shoulder struck the cold glass wall and she slid down it, both hands rising to grip her own chest.

She was having a full-blown panic attack.

Cassius's mocking smile vanished instantly.

He recognized the signs immediately — the rapid, shallow breathing, the dilated pupils, the complete loss of motor control. He had seen it a thousand times in his own mirror. He knew exactly what it looked like.

He slammed his whiskey glass down on the bar. The crystal shattered. He didn't care.

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