

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 41:

He crossed the room in three strides, dropped to one knee directly in front of Ayla, and grabbed both of her arms. His grip was firm and anchoring.

“Ayla. Look at me,” he commanded. His voice was no longer mocking — it was a deep, authoritative rumble designed to cut through the noise in her mind.

Ayla’s head thrashed from side to side. Tears of uncontrollable panic spilled over her lashes. Her lips were turning pale.

Cassius moved closer and slid one hand up to the back of her neck, his large, warm fingers gripping her firmly.

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“Look at my eyes,” he ordered, his tone leaving no room for anything but obedience.

Ayla’s blurry gaze finally locked onto his.

“Breathe in for four seconds. Hold for four. Out for four,” he instructed, exaggerating his own breathing so she could mirror it. “Do it. Now.”

Ayla’s hands reached up instinctively and grabbed the front of his dress shirt, twisting the fabric and holding on like a drowning woman clinging to a life raft.

For ten long minutes, the only sound in the dark office was their heavy, synchronized breathing.

Slowly, the grey fog receded from her vision. The violent trembling in her muscles subsided. She became aware that she was practically sitting in Cassius’s lap, her face buried against his chest, her hands gripping his shirt so tightly her knuckles ached.

Ayla gasped and immediately released him. She scrambled backward, pushing herself away as though she had been burned, and pressed her back against the cold glass wall. Her heart still hammered a frantic rhythm against her ribs. She wiped her wet face with the sleeve of the chef’s jacket, cheeks burning with humiliation.

She had just exposed her deepest, most broken vulnerability to the most dangerous man in the city.

Cassius didn’t move. He remained on one knee, watching her with piercing, analytical intensity.

“A simple PR director doesn’t have a clinical panic attack over a lost piece of plastic,” he said, his voice low and dangerous. “You aren’t just looking for a job, Ayla. You are running for your life. Who are you hiding from?”

Ayla bit the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood. She couldn’t tell him about Axel. If Cassius knew she was the wife of his greatest rival, he would use her as leverage without hesitation.

“I owe money to loan sharks in Brooklyn,” she said, her voice raspy and exhausted but layered with forced ice. “Without my ID, I can’t access my safe deposit box. If I don’t pay them by Monday, they will kill me.”

Cassius stared at her. He knew she was lying. The sheer audacity of it — lying to his face, even in the aftermath of a panic attack — fascinated him.

He stood slowly, brushed the wrinkles from his ruined shirt, and walked to his desk. He pressed a button on the intercom.

“Vance. Dispatch the private jet to D.C. immediately. Have the security team retrieve the black suit from the Dupont cleaner. I want it in my hands by tomorrow night.”

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He released the button and looked down at Ayla, still sitting on the floor.

“Your ID will be here tomorrow,” he said, his voice returning to its cold, arrogant baseline. “But you are going to pay for the jet fuel.”

Ayla looked up at him warily. “How?”

Cassius pointed a long finger at the titanium food box sitting on his desk.

“You are going to sit in that chair,” he said, “and you are going to eat that meal with me. Every single bite.”

Ayla stared at him. The most feared billionaire on Wall Street was using a dinner as extortion.

She pushed herself off the floor, crossed the room, and lowered herself into the heavy leather chair opposite his desk. She reached out and unlatched the titanium box.

In the dim blue light of the financial monitors, the two most damaged people in New York sat in complete silence, sharing a meal built on a foundation of lies and dangerous obsession.

It was past midnight. The underground executive parking garage of the Farrell Group headquarters was completely silent, save for the low hum of massive ventilation fans.

The air was suffocatingly heavy. A dozen armed security guards stood in a rigid line against the concrete wall, too terrified to breathe too loudly.

Axel Farrell stood in the center of the garage. He hadn't gone home. He hadn't slept. His tuxedo was ruined, his eyes bloodshot — a man standing on the absolute edge of a psychotic break. The congressional hearing had imploded, his Washington schedule had been canceled, and he had flown back to New York in the middle of the night to contain the chaos. But the real chaos was happening inside his own skull.

Sitting in the brightly lit inspection bay was the black Ford Explorer. The right front bumper was heavily crushed and scraped, the metal twisted from an impact the security reports couldn't fully explain. The towing company had just dropped it off.

Jared approached, sweating profusely, holding out a thick leather-bound financial dossier with visibly shaking hands.

"Sir," he stammered. "We traced the vehicle's GPS. We also pulled the financial records you requested regarding your wife's assets."

Axel snatched the folder and ripped it open. "Read it to me."

Jared swallowed hard. "Two days ago, Ayla went to a vintage luxury dealer in SoHo. She liquidated fifteen of the limited-edition Hermès bags you bought her and sold them for three million dollars. The funds were issued via a Swiss bearer check. Completely untraceable and unfreezable."

Axel's body went rigid. The folder slipped from his hands and hit the concrete floor with a loud slap.

Three million dollars.

He had spent three days believing Ayla was starving — that he had cut off her oxygen, that she was suffering and begging for his credit cards. Instead, she had walked out of his house, sold his gifts, and made herself a multi-millionaire in a single afternoon.

A wave of pure, emasculating humiliation crashed over him.

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Chapter 43:

Axel let out a guttural roar. He lunged forward and drove his foot into the front tire of the Ford Explorer.

“Open the car!” he screamed at the security team. “Tear it apart! I want every inch of this vehicle searched!”

The guards scrambled, ripping out floor mats, pulling apart the interior, emptying the glove box. Axel shoved one of them aside and threw himself into the back seat, crawling over the upholstery, his hands feeling blindly beneath the cushions, his chest heaving with manic energy.

Then he stopped.

He inhaled sharply. The smell was faint, but in the enclosed space of the car it was unmistakable — cold cedar, whiskey, and a very specific bespoke tobacco cologne.

Axel knew that scent. He had encountered it across ballrooms and boardrooms for years. It was Cassius Gilliam's signature fragrance, custom-made and impossible to mistake.

His hands began to tremble.

He pressed his face against the seats like a bloodhound. The scent was strongest in the back, deep in the fabric, as though someone had sat there for an extended period of time. He pulled out a small flashlight and shone it into the seam where the seat met the backrest.

There.

Several short strands of hair. Deep brown. Not Ayla's long black hair. Not his own.

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Axel's fingers reached out, shaking violently, and pinched the hairs between his thumb and forefinger. He held them up to the light.

He had studied Cassius Gilliam's face in board meetings, financial reports, and his own nightmares for years. The color, the thickness, the length — it matched perfectly.

The pieces slammed together in his mind like a collision.

Ayla had taken his corporate car. She had met with Cassius. Cassius had sat in the back seat of Axel's own vehicle, lingering, leaving behind his scent and his hair.

The paranoia detonated in Axel's chest. He pictured them together in the back of the SUV — close, intimate, laughing at him.

"No!" Axel screamed, the sound tearing his vocal cords raw.

He lunged at the seat, clawing at the upholstery with his bare hands. The thick fabric tore beneath his fingernails. He slammed his fist into the window. The glass spiderwebbed with cracks. Blood sprayed from his knuckles.

Jared and the guards stumbled backward. No one dared approach.

Axel stood in the center of the garage, chest heaving, blood dripping from his hand onto the concrete. His eyes were completely vacant.

“Jared,” Axel said. His voice was no longer screaming. It had dropped to a hollow, terrifying whisper.

Jared stepped forward. “Yes, sir?”

“Call the legal team,” Axel ordered, his gaze fixed on the bloody hairs still clutched in his fist. “Draft a warrant for her immediate arrest. The charge is corporate espionage. She sold company secrets to a competitor.”

He turned his head slowly toward the trembling assistant.

“And call the federal banking regulators,” he continued, his voice dripping with quiet venom. “Tell them an anonymous whistleblower has evidence that Ayla Joyce is using offshore accounts to launder money. Freeze every asset attached to her name. Even the blind trusts. I want her penniless.”

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Chapter 44:

Axel looked down at the torn seat, the cracked window, the blood spreading across his knuckles.

“If she wants to sleep with the devil,” he whispered, a sick smile twisting his lips, “I am going to make sure she burns in hell.”

The cold, grey morning light filtered through the floor-to-ceiling windows of Ayla’s Chelsea apartment.

Ayla stood in the sleek, marble-countered kitchen, tying the belt of her trench coat. She grabbed the heavy brown paper bag containing the hundred thousand dollars in cash. She needed to stock up on food for the week and lie low until Monday.

She took the private elevator down to the lobby and approached the main glass security doors. She stepped up to the biometric retina scanner and looked into the lens.

Instead of the usual soft green chime, the machine let out a harsh, piercing alarm. The heavy magnetic locks on the glass doors engaged with a loud clunk, sealing the exit.

Ayla stepped back.

The management office door swung open. The building manager — a tall man with a severe expression — marched out, flanked by two massive armed security guards. Gone was the groveling politeness he had shown the day before.

“Miss Joyce. Step away from the doors.”

“Is the scanner broken?” Ayla asked, keeping her voice calm.

“Your lease has been unilaterally terminated by the board of directors,” the manager said coldly. “We received an emergency notice from the federal authorities this morning. The offshore letter of credit you provided has been flagged for international money laundering

and fraud. The pending wire transfer has been blocked, and your cash deposit has been seized as evidence.”

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Ayla’s stomach dropped. The air in the lobby turned freezing cold.

“That is impossible,” she said, her heart accelerating. “That check was drawn from a legitimate offshore account. I have the receipt.”

“I don’t care what you have,” the manager snapped. He gestured to the guards. “You have exactly two minutes to vacate the premises before I call the NYPD for criminal trespassing.”

One of the guards grabbed Ayla’s arm and shoved her toward the service exit. She stumbled, her shoulder striking the metal doorframe, but she caught herself. Her eyes flashed with anger. She didn’t fight back — she couldn’t afford to have the police run her name.

She pushed through the service door and stepped out into the freezing, rain-swept alleyway. The heavy door slammed shut behind her, locking automatically.

Ayla stood in the cold rain in nothing but a thin trench coat. No luggage. No ID.

She pulled out her burner phone and opened her encrypted banking app, moving quickly to transfer her remaining offshore funds into an untraceable cold wallet.

The app loaded.

A massive red banner covered the screen: ACCOUNT FROZEN. PENDING SEC INVESTIGATION FOR CORPORATE ESPIONAGE.

Ayla stopped breathing. Her fingers went numb.

Axel.

He had found out about the bags. He had used his Wall Street connections to fabricate a federal investigation, weaponizing the government itself to sever her financial lifeline. He was systematically destroying every safety net she had built.

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Chapter 45:

She shoved the phone into her pocket and gripped the brown paper bag tightly against her chest. She still had the hundred thousand dollars in cash. She could survive.

The rain intensified, soaking through her coat. Ayla ran out of the alley and ducked into a small, brightly lit twenty-four-hour convenience store on the corner.

She grabbed a cheap black umbrella and a hot cup of black coffee, pulled a crisp hundred-dollar bill from the top of the stack, and handed it to the cashier.

The teenager behind the counter swiped it through the counterfeit detector machine with bored indifference.

The machine let out a series of sharp, aggressive beeps. A red light flashed.

He ran it through again. Beep. Beep. Beep.

“This is fake, lady,” he said, holding it up to the fluorescent light. “There’s no watermark. The security thread is printed on. This is a high-grade counterfeit.” He reached under the counter. “I’m calling the cops.”

Ayla’s brain short-circuited. She grabbed the brown paper bag, tore it open, and ripped through the stacks of bills.

Beneath the top layer of real hundreds, the rest of the stack was blank white paper, cut to the exact size of currency.

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She stared at it. A wave of pure horror washed over her.

Axel had anticipated her move. After initiating his financial blockade, he had installed military-grade spyware on Chloe’s communication devices, monitoring every desperate outreach. He owned the underground shadow brokers in Chinatown. He had intercepted the transaction, swapped the cash, and left her with counterfeit bills — knowing she would try to spend them and get herself arrested. He was hunting her for sport.

“Hey! You can’t leave!” the cashier shouted, picking up the phone.

Ayla didn't take the umbrella. She didn't take the coffee. She turned and sprinted back out into the torrential rain.

She ran down the avenue, her wet shoes slipping on the pavement, the cold rain soaking her to the bone. She ducked into a dark, narrow alleyway between two brick buildings and pressed her back against the wet wall, her chest heaving, her whole body shaking from the cold and the adrenaline.

Her burner phone vibrated in her soaked pocket.

Unknown Caller.

She pressed answer and raised it slowly to her ear.

"It's raining quite hard out there, Ayla," Axel's voice slithered through the speaker — low, smooth, dripping with sadistic pleasure.

Ayla closed her eyes. Her stomach churned.

"You have no money. You have no apartment. You have no ID," he continued. "Cassius Gilliam isn't going to save you. He doesn't pick up trash from the gutter."

He let the silence hang.

“I have a car waiting two blocks away,” Axel whispered. “Crawl to it. Get on your knees and beg for my forgiveness, and I will make the SEC investigation disappear. You can come home.”

Ayla opened her eyes. The fear was gone, burned away entirely. In its place was a white-hot hatred that warmed her freezing blood.

“I would rather die freezing on this street,” she said, her voice a low, venomous hiss, “than ever let you touch me again.”

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Chapter 46:

She pulled the phone from her ear, raised her arm, and smashed it against the brick wall. The device shattered into pieces, cutting off his voice and destroying the GPS tracker in a single motion.

Ayla stumbled out of the alley and walked aimlessly down Fifth Avenue. The rain was relentless. Her vision began to blur. The extreme stress, the lack of food, and the freezing cold were methodically shutting her body down.

She reached the glowing window display of a high-end luxury boutique. Her legs gave out beneath her.

She collapsed onto the wet pavement, her back sliding down the cold glass. The world spun into darkness.

Just as her eyes fluttered shut, a massive black Maybach Pullman glided silently to a halt in front of her, its tires cutting through the standing rainwater.

The heavy armored door swung open.

A large black umbrella snapped open against the downpour. A pair of custom handmade Italian leather shoes stepped onto the wet pavement.

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Cassius Gilliam stood over her, looking down at her unconscious, shivering body. The cold arrogance that normally occupied his dark eyes was gone, replaced by something terrifying and absolute.

He didn't say a word. He leaned down, gathered Ayla's limp body into his arms, and carried her into the warm, dark interior of the Maybach.

Ayla gasped, her eyes flying open.

She was lying on a massive king-sized bed, the sheets a dark charcoal silk. The room was minimalist and cold, decorated in stark shades of black and grey. The air smelled strongly of cold mint and the faint metallic trace of gunpowder.

She sat up quickly. Her head swam with a brief wave of vertigo.

She looked down at herself. Her wet, ruined trench coat and suit were gone. She was wearing a massive black silk men's button-down shirt, unbuttoned at the collar and falling just past mid-thigh.

Ayla's breath hitched. She scrambled to the edge of the bed, her bare feet landing on a thick, heated cashmere rug.

She pushed open the heavy walnut bedroom door and stepped into a sprawling, multi-level penthouse living room. Entire walls of floor-to-ceiling glass offered a dizzying panoramic view of the Hudson River and the Tribeca skyline.

Cassius sat on a low black leather Italian sofa, wearing dark slacks and a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, exposing the thick, scarred muscles of his forearms. He held a silver Zippo lighter, flipping the lid open and closed with a rhythmic metallic click.

At the sound of her footsteps, he stopped. He turned his head slowly.

His dark, predatory eyes dragged deliberately up her bare legs, lingering on the hem of his own shirt draped over her body. A slow, deeply satisfied smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth.

Ayla's face flushed, but she crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin in defiance.

"Who changed my clothes?" she demanded, her voice sharp. "And how did you find me?"

Cassius pocketed the lighter and leaned back against the sofa, exuding absolute physical ease.

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Chapter 47:

“My security team tracked the burner phone you used to call Vance,” he said, his voice a low, gravelly drawl. “As for your clothes, my private physician changed you. You were in the early stages of hypothermia. Though I did pick out the shirt.”

Ayla gritted her teeth. She walked over and stood opposite him.

“Did you get my driver’s license back from D.C.?” she asked, cutting straight to the point.

Cassius didn’t answer immediately. He reached onto the glass coffee table, picked up a freshly printed copy of the Wall Street Journal, and tossed it in front of her.

“I think you have bigger problems than a piece of plastic,” he murmured.

Ayla looked down at the front page.

The headline screamed in bold black ink: FARRELL TECH CEO ACCUSES RIVAL GILLIAM OF CORPORATE ESPIONAGE; CLAIMS WIFE FLEEING WITH STOLEN SECRETS.

Below it was a high-resolution photo of Ayla’s face, taken from an old society gala, placed alongside a photo of Cassius. The article cited anonymous sources claiming Ayla was a high-end escort planted by Gilliam to steal Farrell’s AI algorithms.

Ayla’s stomach cramped violently. Axel had gone nuclear. He had incinerated her professional reputation. No PR firm in the world would touch her now. She was radioactive.

“He burned you to the ground,” Cassius said softly, watching her reaction with intense scrutiny. “The whole city thinks you are my personal whore, kept in a cage to steal corporate secrets.”

Ayla didn’t cry. She didn’t panic. The sheer audacity of Axel’s lie triggered something cold and calculating deep in her mind.

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She looked up from the newspaper and locked eyes with Cassius.

“If the world thinks I’m stealing his secrets,” she said, her voice dropping to a lethal whisper, “then let’s actually steal them.”

Cassius’s amusement vanished. Sharp attention replaced it.

“I know the backdoor architecture of Farrell Tech’s core AI algorithm,” Ayla said, leaning forward slightly. “I know the exact fatal flaw in their code. If you give me access to your trading floor, I can trigger a cascade failure in their system right as the Nasdaq opens tomorrow. We can short his stock into oblivion.”

Cassius stared at her — at the absolute, ruthless fire in her eyes. She wasn’t a victim. She was a weapon.

“And what do you want in return?” he asked, his voice vibrating with danger.

“A new identity,” Ayla said. “A flawless, government-grade passport with a new name. I want to disappear from Axel’s radar completely.”

Cassius rose slowly from the sofa. His towering frame cast a heavy shadow over her. He closed the distance between them, stopping so close that the tips of his shoes touched her bare feet.

He reached out. His large, warm hand wrapped around her jaw, his thumb pressing firmly against her cheekbone, tilting her head up until she looked directly into his dark, consuming eyes.

“I can get you a passport in two hours,” he whispered, his breath brushing her lips. “But I don’t want your algorithm, Ayla. I want you.”

Ayla’s breath hitched. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

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Chapter 48:

“I am offering you a contract,” Cassius continued, his thumb moving slowly against her skin. “You want to destroy Axel? Fine. I will be your sword. But in exchange, you belong to me. You stay in this penthouse. You act as my personal assistant and play the role of my mistress. You don’t leave my sight until Axel Farrell is completely annihilated.”

Ayla reached up and grabbed his wrist, trying to pull his hand away. His grip was immovable.

“You are just as bad as he is,” she hissed, her chest heaving. “You are just trading one cage for another.”

Cassius let out a dark, unapologetic laugh. “I am much worse than he is, Ayla. Axel wants to break your wings. I want to watch you fly — as long as you fly for me. Sign the deal, or walk out that door right now and let the FBI arrest you for corporate espionage.”

Ayla stared into his eyes. She saw the absolute certainty in his words and the cold truth beneath them. She had no money, no ID, and the entire federal government was hunting for her. Cassius was her only shield.

She released his wrist. Her eyes hardened with absolute resolve.

“Deal,” she whispered. “But if you ever lie to me, Cassius, I will burn your empire down too.”

His eyes flared with a sudden, violent heat.

Before Ayla could react, his other hand wrapped around the back of her neck. He pulled her flush against his chest and brought his mouth down hard onto hers.

It wasn't a gentle kiss. It was a brutal, aggressive claim — overwhelming and suffocating in its dominance. Ayla gasped against his lips, her hands rising instinctively to push against his chest, but he held her completely immobile.

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She tasted the sharp bite of whiskey and the faint, metallic edge where her teeth caught his lip.

Cassius pulled back slowly. He looked down at her swollen lips and her wide, shocked eyes.

“Welcome to hell, Ayla,” he murmured, his voice a dark, possessive rumble. “Let’s go kill your husband.”

The midday sun beat down on the manicured lawns of the Farrell Manor. The heavy iron gates stood locked and guarded, two armed men positioned at the entrance with their hands resting on holstered weapons. The atmosphere was thick with paranoia.

Then the silence shattered.

The deafening roar of a V12 engine tore through the quiet neighborhood. A sleek, pitch-black Aston Martin DBS Superleggera drifted around the corner and slammed to a halt inches from the iron gates, the engine revving aggressively — a predator growling at the door.

The driver's window rolled down.

Cassius Gilliam sat behind the wheel in a perfectly tailored charcoal suit and dark aviator sunglasses. He didn't acknowledge the guards. He simply reached out and flicked a solid gold Gilliam Group business card onto the pavement.

"Open the gate," he said, his voice cutting through the engine noise. "Tell Axel I'm here to return something that belongs to him."

The head guard's eyes widened. He grabbed his radio and spoke urgently into it. A moment later, the heavy gates swung open.

Cassius drove slowly up the winding driveway and parked directly in front of the stone fountain, blocking the entrance. He stepped out and adjusted his cuffs with deliberate arrogance.

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Chapter 49:

Axel Farrell stood at the top of the marble stairs. He wore a wrinkled dress shirt, untucked and hanging loosely, his face pale and his eyes sunken and bloodshot — a man running entirely on paranoia and rage.

“You have exactly ten seconds to get off my property,” Axel snarled, his voice trembling with barely contained violence, “before I have my security team shoot you for trespassing.”

Cassius didn't flinch. He walked up the marble stairs, his leather shoes clicking sharply against the stone, and stopped one step below Axel. The height difference meant nothing. His presence alone dominated the space.

"I didn't come here to fight," Cassius said, his tone dripping with condescension. "I came to thank you."

Axel's jaw tightened. "Thank me for what?"

"For cultivating such an exquisite woman." Cassius reached into his breast pocket and produced a document — crisp, official, its holographic seals catching the sunlight. He pressed it flat against Axel's chest.

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Axel caught it reflexively. His eyes moved across the page. His face went grey.

It was a copy of a European Union passport. The photograph was unmistakably Ayla. But the name printed in bold letters read: AYLA GILLIAM. Beneath it, her occupation: Special Consultant to the Gilliam Group, European Division. And at the bottom, in fine print: Holder possesses diplomatic immunity.

"She's under my protection now," Cassius said quietly. "Legally. Internationally. Untouchable."

Axel's hands shook. The paper crumpled in his grip. "This is forgery. You can't—"

"Can't what?" Cassius stepped closer, invading his space. "Can't give her a name worth having? Can't offer her what you threw away?" His voice dropped to a whisper only Axel could hear. "She wore my shirt last night. Can you guess which one?"

The words detonated in Axel's mind.

A roar tore from his throat. He lunged forward, grabbing Cassius by the lapels, fist raised to strike. Cassius didn't move. Didn't flinch. He simply smiled.

"Go ahead," Cassius murmured. "Hit me. And watch your stock drop another twenty points before your fist connects."

Axel froze, fist trembling in the air.

Cassius reached up and peeled Axel's fingers from his jacket one by one, with visible disgust. He smoothed his lapel and stepped back.

“Check your phone, Axel. The Nasdaq opened an hour ago. Your AI algorithm has a rather fatal flaw. Someone shorted your stock heavily right at the opening bell. You’ve lost roughly a billion dollars this morning.”

Axel stumbled backward, fumbling for his phone, his fingers slick with sweat. When the numbers loaded, the color drained entirely from his face.

“The algorithm was our secret,” he whispered. “Only Ayla knew—”

“Yes.” Cassius adjusted his sunglasses. “Only Ayla. And now she’s mine. Every secret you trusted her with, every weakness in your empire — she brought it all to me.” He turned and began walking down the stairs. “Consider it severance pay for years of abuse.”

Axel stood frozen, the crumpled passport copy still clutched in his hand, his phone displaying the ruin of his company.

At the bottom of the stairs, Cassius paused and looked back.

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Chapter 50:

“If you ever contact her again — if you even think about her — I will personally ensure the Farrell Group is delisted by end of week. She is untouchable now. Accept it.”

He reached for the car door.

A crash shattered the silence.

From the second-floor balcony, a heavy terracotta flowerpot had tumbled over the railing and exploded against the stone patio, sending shards scattering in every direction.

Kristal stood frozen on the balcony in a silk robe, her hand still outstretched where she had knocked the pot. She had been hiding up there, listening.

Cassius looked up at her, then back at Axel.

He let out a low, disgusted laugh. “Your taste in women is truly pathetic.”

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The words broke Axel completely. He spun around, his eyes wild, and charged into the mansion. Seconds later, Kristal’s piercing scream echoed through the open doors.

Cassius didn’t look back. He slid into the Aston Martin and started the engine. As he roared through the gates, he pressed a button on the steering wheel, connecting to an encrypted line.

“The gift has been delivered,” he said, his voice carrying a note of dark satisfaction. “Your ex-husband is currently losing his mind. Get dressed, Ayla. It’s time to finish this.”

The marble steps of the Manhattan Supreme Court were swarming with chaos.

Over fifty journalists, paparazzi, and news crews were packed tightly behind the police barricades. Camera flashes strobed like lightning in the overcast afternoon light. News of Farrell Tech’s catastrophic stock crash and rumors of a high-profile divorce had drawn the entire city’s media to the courthouse steps.

A massive armored black Bentley Mulsanne pulled up to the curb. Four Gilliam Group private security contractors in tactical suits and earpieces stepped out first, forming a physical wedge and pushing the screaming reporters back.

The rear door opened.

Ayla stepped out in a breathtaking, stark white haute couture suit. The tailoring was razor-sharp, radiating absolute power and untouchable composure. She wore oversized black sunglasses that hid her eyes, but her posture was rigid and commanding. She looked nothing like a victim. She looked like an executioner.

She clutched a thick leather folder to her chest. Inside were the official divorce filings.

She began climbing the wide marble steps, flanked by her security detail. Reporters screamed her name, begging for a comment on the corporate espionage charges. Ayla ignored them completely.

She was three steps from the heavy brass courthouse doors when the deafening screech of tires tore through the air.

Three black Farrell Group SUVs jumped the curb and smashed into the police barricades. The crowd of reporters screamed and scattered.

The door of the lead SUV flew open.

Axel Farrell threw himself out. He looked completely unraveled — clothes torn, face drenched in sweat, eyes wide with manic obsession. He charged up the courthouse steps, ignoring the shouting police officers entirely.

The Gilliam security team moved to intercept. Axel reached to his waist and pulled out a high-voltage tactical stun device. He activated it. The bright blue electrical arc crackled with a sharp, aggressive snap that echoed off the marble columns. The crowd shrieked and stumbled backward in panic.

Ayla's heart stopped.

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