

Cheated on me? I married a tycoon

Chapter 51:

Axel leveled the crackling device at the chest of the lead bodyguard.

“Get out of my way,” he roared, his voice cracking with hysteria.

Bound by strict engagement rules in a public space and unwilling to close range on a live electrical arc, the bodyguards slowly stepped back just enough to create a gap, hands raised.

Axel lunged through. He grabbed Ayla’s left wrist, his fingers digging into her skin with bone-crushing force, and yanked her violently toward him.

“You think you can just walk away from me?!” he screamed into her face, his breath reeking of alcohol and copper. “You think you can take his name and destroy my company?!”

Ayla didn’t scream. She didn’t pull away.

She reached up with her free hand and slowly removed her sunglasses.

Her eyes were completely dead — no fear, no love, no hesitation. She looked at him the way one looks at something beneath contempt.

“You destroyed yourself, Axel,” she said. Her voice was utterly calm, and it carried perfectly over the terrified, silent crowd. “Your paranoia and your sick need to control me burned your empire to the ground.”

Axel’s face contorted in agony. “You are my wife! You belong to me!”

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Ayla let out a cold, sharp laugh.

She raised the leather folder and slammed it into his chest with one swift motion. The folder burst open. Hundreds of pages of medical documents, pharmacy receipts, and forged psychiatric evaluations scattered into the wind, fluttering down the marble steps.

“Those are the records of the heavy psychiatric drugs you bribed doctors to prescribe me!” Ayla shouted, making certain every camera microphone caught every word. “You tried to drug me into a coma so you could place me in a conservatorship and steal my trust fund. You are a monster.”

The reporters gasped. Camera flashes erupted, capturing the damning documents blowing across the steps.

Axel looked down at the scattered papers. His darkest secret was now public record. His face turned a sickly grey.

“Ayla, please,” he stammered, the manic rage dissolving into pathetic desperation. “I did it to protect you. You were sick.”

“Sign the divorce papers,” Ayla said, her voice cutting through the air like a blade. “Or I will make sure the FBI sees every single one of those forged prescriptions.”

Axel stared at her. He saw the absolute finality in her eyes. She was truly gone.

A slow, twisted smile spread across his face. The desperation vanished, replaced by a terrifying, suicidal possessiveness.

He released her wrist, reached down, and picked up the official divorce petition from the scattered pages. He gripped it in both hands and ripped it in half — then again, and again, until it was nothing but confetti. He threw the shredded paper into the air.

“I will never sign it,” he whispered, his voice dropping to a chilling hiss. “I don’t care if I go to prison. I don’t care if I lose every dime. You will die with my last name, Ayla. You are mine forever.”

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Chapter 52:

A swarm of NYPD riot police tackled him from behind, slamming him face-first into the marble steps, ripping the weapon from his hand, and locking heavy steel handcuffs around his wrists.

Axel didn’t resist. As they dragged him down the steps toward the squad car, he kept his head turned, his manic eyes fixed on Ayla. He was still smiling.

Ayla stood at the top of the stairs. A cold, deep chill settled into her bones. She had won the public battle — but Axel had just locked her in a legal nightmare. He was going to drag the divorce out for years, chaining her to him from inside a prison cell.

She slowly turned her head.

At the bottom of the steps, the tinted window of the Bentley rolled down. Cassius sat in the shadows of the backseat, watching her. A slow, dark, deeply dangerous smile curved his lips.

“Get in the car, Ayla,” his deep voice said through the earpiece of her lead bodyguard.

Ayla grabbed the heavy door handle of the armored Bentley Mulsanne and pulled herself into the backseat. The door slammed shut behind her. Instantly, the deafening roar of reporters, the blinding flash of cameras, and the wail of police sirens outside the Manhattan Supreme Court were completely severed. The interior of the car became a silent, soundproof vacuum.

Her spine met the soft leather seat. The adrenaline that had kept her standing on those marble steps suddenly evaporated, and her entire body went limp. Her chest heaved as she dragged in ragged breaths, her hands shaking so violently she had to press them flat against her thighs to stop the tremors.

Cassius sat beside her in the shadows. He said nothing.

He reached over to the built-in crystal bar, poured a measure of dark bourbon over a large square ice cube, and held the glass out to her. The ice clinked sharply against the crystal.

“Drink it,” Cassius ordered, his deep voice low in the quiet car. His dark eyes tracked the violent shaking of her fingers. “Where did all that terrifying energy go, Ayla? You just publicly executed your husband. You should be celebrating.”

Ayla didn’t take the glass. She turned her head, her eyes locking onto his with a cold, defensive glare.

“I don’t want your liquor,” she said, her voice tight. “I want you to honor our contract. Take me to a safe house — somewhere Axel cannot find me.”

Cassius scoffed. He pulled the glass back and took a slow sip of the bourbon himself.

“Drive,” he commanded the driver. The Bentley pulled smoothly away from the curb. “Take her to the Long Island property.”

He looked back at Ayla, his expression completely devoid of sympathy. “You bought yourself twenty-four hours, Ayla. The NYPD can only hold him for a day on a public disturbance charge. Tomorrow, he will be out, and he will be hunting you.”

At that exact moment, in the holding area of the downtown Manhattan precinct, the heavy metal doors swung open.

A team of five Farrell Group corporate lawyers in expensive suits rushed in, carrying thick leather briefcases. They bypassed the standard processing desk entirely.

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Chapter 53:

Outside the precinct's rear exit, a low-profile Rolls-Royce Phantom idled in the alleyway. The rear door opened, and Heda Farrell stepped out. She leaned heavily on her silver-handled cane, her face a mask of absolute, terrifying aristocratic fury, and walked straight into the private bail corridor.

Axel was sitting on a metal bench inside the holding cell. His tuxedo was torn, his knuckles bruised, but his eyes still burned with the same manic, obsessive fire.

The cell door unlocked. Axel stood.

“Mother, I need the legal team to file an emergency injunction against Ayla. She stole—”

Heda didn’t let him finish. She stepped forward and swung her hand. The sharp crack of her palm striking Axel’s face echoed off the concrete walls.

His head snapped to the side. A red mark bloomed instantly across his pale cheek.

“You absolute fool,” Heda hissed, her voice a venomous whisper. “You let a woman drag the Farrell name through the mud on the steps of the Supreme Court. You let her humiliate us in front of the entire world.”

Axel slowly turned his head back. The dark, homicidal shadow in his eyes didn’t waver. He ground his teeth.

“I am not letting her go,” he growled, his chest heaving. “And I am not giving her half of the AI patent in a divorce settlement. I will lock her in a cage before I let her walk away with my company.”

Heda let out a cold, dismissive laugh.

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“You don’t use a gun to squash a bug, Axel,” she said, adjusting her silk scarf with steady, elegant fingers. “She is a nobody. An orphan with no backing. You don’t need to fight her in court. I will use the old money methods. By tomorrow night, she will cease to exist in society.”

Four hours later, the Bentley pulled up to a massive, secluded estate hidden behind thick pine trees on the coast of Long Island.

Ayla walked into the safe house — a fortress of concrete and glass. She went immediately to the heavy oak desk in the study, connected her encrypted phone to the secure Wi-Fi network, and waited.

Her screen lit up at once.

A high-priority email from Chase Bank Private Wealth Management sat at the top of her inbox. Ayla tapped it. Her eyes moved across the text.

The blood drained instantly from her face. Her stomach dropped so violently she felt physically ill.

The blind trust account — the only asset left to her by the Joyce family grandmother, her absolute last financial lifeline — had been indefinitely frozen. The email cited a federal court order filed by the Farrell family under the guise of “marital asset preservation.”

Ayla’s fingers turned to ice. She immediately dialed the direct number of her trust fund manager.

The line rang twice before he picked up.

“David, what is going on?” she demanded, her voice rising in panic. “You can’t freeze a blind trust. It’s legally protected.”

“Miss Joyce.” David’s voice was trembling, stripped of its usual professional warmth. “I am currently sitting across from three SEC investigators. The Farrell legal team has filed a massive fraud claim against your name. I cannot speak to you. Do not call this number again.”

The line went dead.

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Chapter 54:

Ayla stared at the phone in her hand. Her lungs seized. Heda hadn't merely cut off her current cash flow. She had reached into the federal banking system and choked out her entire future.

The vintage landline phone on the oak desk began to ring.

The shrill, sudden sound made Ayla jump. This was a Gilliam Group safe house. Nobody was supposed to have this number.

She stared at the phone. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Slowly, she reached out and lifted the receiver.

“Hello?” Ayla whispered.

“Did you really think a cheap hotel room on Long Island could hide you from me, Ayla?”

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It was Heda. Her arrogant, suffocating voice poured through the speaker, dripping with absolute power.

Ayla’s knuckles turned bone-white around the receiver. “How did you get this number?”

“The majority shareholder of this state’s largest telecom provider plays bridge at my country club every Sunday, you stupid girl,” Heda said, her tone laced with aristocratic disdain. “Every single line you attempt to use is monitored by my people. The frozen trust fund is just a small taste of what happens when you embarrass my family. You have until sunset tomorrow to withdraw the divorce petition and issue a public apology.”

“I have the medical records,” Ayla fought back, her voice shaking with desperate rage. “I will expose the doctors Axel bribed. I will burn your charity foundations to the ground.”

Heda laughed — a light, effortless sound that made Ayla’s blood run cold.

“Expose them to whom?” Heda asked. “Half the judges in New York and the entire medical review board sit on my charity committees. They eat at my dining table. They will bury your evidence before it ever reaches a courtroom.”

She paused, letting the silence crush Ayla’s hope.

“If you do not comply by sunset,” Heda continued, delivering her final, lethal blow, “I will release the sealed dossier on your biological parents. The real one — the one that proves your mother was a violent felon and your father was a cartel enforcer. I will make sure every news outlet in America knows you carry the blood of murderers. You will be a pariah.”

The line clicked. The dial tone buzzed loudly in Ayla’s ear.

The receiver slipped from her numb fingers and clattered onto the desk.

Her knees gave out. Ayla slid down the side of the desk and collapsed onto the thick Persian rug, pulling her knees to her chest, struggling to breathe. The sheer, terrifying scale of the Farrell family’s power was suffocating her. They controlled the banks. They controlled the courts. They controlled the truth.

“Are you done crying on my floor?”

Ayla’s head snapped up.

Cassius was leaning against the doorframe of the study. He had removed his suit jacket. His dark eyes watched her with a mixture of clinical observation and cruel amusement.

Ayla scrambled to her feet. Her eyes were red, but a sudden, violent spark of anger ignited in her chest.

“Did you know?” she demanded, pointing a shaking finger at him. “Did you know Heda would freeze the trust? Did you know she could bypass your security?”

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Chapter 55:

Cassius walked slowly into the room and stopped directly in front of her. He crouched slightly, his large hand reaching out to grip her chin. His fingers were warm, but his hold was iron.

“Welcome to the real world, Ayla,” he said, his voice a dark, ruthless rumble. “Capital games don’t care about the law. The law is just a suggestion for people with enough money.”

He tilted her face up, forcing her to meet his eyes.

“That fake passport I gave you only buys you time,” he warned. “If you sit on this floor and cry, you are useless to me. And the Gilliam Group does not protect useless assets. I will throw you to the wolves myself.”

Ayla violently slapped his hand away.

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She stepped back. The despair in her chest burned away, replaced by a cold, manic, absolute resolve. She had nothing left to lose. They had taken her money, her name, and her freedom.

She turned and walked to the floor-to-ceiling window. She looked out at the pitch-black ocean.

“They want to destroy my identity?” Ayla whispered, her voice dropping to a lethal, icy calm. “Then I will destroy the only thing they care about. I will kill the Farrell Tech IPO.”

She spun around to face Cassius.

“I need a military-grade laptop,” she said, her eyes burning with absolute fire. “I need three encrypted offshore servers. And I need them right now.”

Cassius stared at her. The cruel amusement in his eyes vanished, replaced by a dark, deeply dangerous flash of approval.

He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

The study door opened. Vance walked in, carrying a heavy black titanium laptop. He set it down on the oak desk, pushed his gold-rimmed glasses up his nose, and regarded Ayla with his usual cold disdain.

“The equipment is ready,” Vance reported. “But you have a new problem, Miss Joyce. Axel Farrell just issued an industry-wide NDA warning. He has effectively blacklisted you from every PR firm, corporation, and landlord in the country.”

Ayla didn't blink. She walked to the desk, flipped open the laptop, and placed her fingers on the keyboard.

"I don't need a PR firm," she said, her fingers beginning to fly across the keys in a blur of motion. "I am going to burn his house down from the inside."

Miles away, in a luxury Manhattan penthouse, Axel sat alone in the dark.

He held a glass of whiskey in one hand and a glowing tablet in the other. Displayed on the screen was a highly detailed satellite map of the Long Island coastline. A red blinking dot pulsed steadily over the Gilliam safe house.

He hadn't tracked her phone — she was far too intelligent to leave a digital footprint like that. Instead, he had exploited Farrell Tech's illegal backdoor access into the state's Department of Transportation traffic camera network. By running a predictive vehicle recognition algorithm on the armored Bentley that had collected her from the courthouse, he had traced her exact route to the coast.

Axel took a slow sip of whiskey. In the darkness, a sick, twisted smile stretched across his face.

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Chapter 56:

The pale morning light filtered through the bulletproof glass of the Long Island safe house. Ayla sat frozen in the leather desk chair. She hadn't slept. Her eyes burned from ten straight hours of staring at the glowing screen of the military-grade laptop.

She moved the cursor and clicked "Submit" on the Manhattan luxury apartment rental portal. She had used the European Union passport Cassius had provided, hoping to secure a small, anonymous studio in the city.

The screen loaded for three seconds. Then a massive red banner flashed across the display.

APPLICATION DENIED. SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER FLAGGED FOR HIGH-RISK CREDIT DEFAULT.

Ayla's breath hitched. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

She quickly opened a new tab and logged into her credit monitoring portal. Her stomach twisted into a violent knot. Her credit score — flawless for years — was completely decimated. It sat in the gutter.

Axel hadn't merely frozen her bank accounts. He had used Farrell Tech's deep data access to hack into the credit bureaus, fabricating massive unpaid loans and defaulted mortgages under her name. He had digitally erased her ability to participate in normal society.

Ayla grabbed her burner phone and dialed the number of a high-end property manager she had worked with during her time as Axel's wife.

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"Hello, this is Marcus," the voice answered.

"Marcus, it's Ayla," she said quickly, fighting to keep the desperation out of her voice. "I need a short-term lease. I can pay cash upfront."

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line.

“Miss Joyce,” Marcus said, his tone dropping instantly to a cold, terrified whisper. “Do not call this number again. I cannot help you.”

The line went dead.

Ayla slammed the phone down on the desk. The crack of plastic against wood echoed through the quiet study.

She refused to give up. She opened LinkedIn, created an anonymous profile, and sent her heavily redacted résumé — highlighting the three major crisis PR campaigns she had secretly orchestrated for Farrell Tech — to the top public relations firms in New York.

Within thirty minutes, her burner phone rang.

“This is Sarah from Apex Headhunting,” a crisp, professional voice said. “Your portfolio is incredible. We have a Senior Director position open. Can you disclose the name of your previous employer?”

Ayla swallowed. “I was the internal crisis strategist for Farrell Tech. But I am currently navigating a non-compete clause.”

The temperature of the call dropped to absolute zero.

“You are Ayla Joyce,” Sarah stated. The excitement in her voice was replaced by sheer panic.

“Yes, but I can—”

“Listen to me carefully,” Sarah interrupted, lowering her voice as if afraid someone was listening. “Axel Farrell sent a legal warning to every major firm in the city this morning. It included a blanket NDA threat with a massive penalty clause. He explicitly stated that any company who hires you will face immediate, hostile patent litigation from Farrell Tech.”

Ayla’s chest tightened. She couldn’t pull enough air into her lungs.

“He is starving you out, Ayla,” Sarah whispered, her voice carrying a trace of sympathy. “No one is going to risk a corporate war with a billionaire for one PR director. I’m sorry.”

The call disconnected.

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Chapter 57:

Ayla stared at the dark screen of her phone. A profound, suffocating sense of isolation washed over her. Axel had built an invisible, impenetrable wall around her entire existence.

Meanwhile, in the sprawling CEO office at Farrell Tech headquarters, Axel sat in his massive leather chair, swirling the amber liquid in his crystal glass. His eyes were bloodshot, but a manic, satisfied energy radiated from his posture.

Jared, his executive assistant, stood nervously before the desk, clutching a tablet.

“Sir,” Jared reported, his voice trembling slightly. “The blacklist is fully operational. Every commercial landlord, HR department, and recruitment agency in Manhattan has confirmed receipt of the warning. She cannot rent a room. She cannot get a job. She can’t be hired anywhere without triggering our legal alerts.”

Axel smiled. It was a dark, terrifying expression.

“Good,” he murmured, taking a slow sip of his drink. “She thinks she can survive without me. Let her feel the cold. Let her realize that without my name, she is absolutely nothing. She will be crawling back to this office begging by tomorrow.”

Back in Long Island, Ayla pushed herself away from the desk.

She couldn’t stay in the safe house any longer. The physical isolation was driving her insane. She needed to break through this blockade in person.

She pulled on a black baseball cap, drew a surgical mask over her face, and grabbed her canvas tote bag.

Ayla walked to the local Long Island Rail Road station and reached for her MetroCard to swipe through the turnstile.

The machine beeped angrily. CARD INVALID.

He had canceled her transit cards.

Her jaw locked. She dug into her coat pocket and pulled out a fold of crumpled cash — the emergency stash she had hidden away. The certified bank draft she had secured from selling her Hermès bag was completely useless to her now; without a clean, unflagged identity to open a new account, that piece of paper was nothing but a mocking reminder of wealth she couldn't touch. She handed the cash to the clerk and bought a paper ticket.

An hour later, Ayla walked out of Penn Station into the chaotic noise of Manhattan.

She pushed through the freezing wind to a small, independent PR studio in the Garment District. The owner, Mark, was an old college classmate — someone unconnected to the massive corporate networks.

Ayla pushed open the glass door. The bell chimed.

Mark looked up from his desk. When he recognized her pulling down her mask, his face went completely pale.

Ayla walked toward him. “Mark, I just need a consulting gig. Under the table. You know my work.”

Mark stood up quickly. He rushed to the front windows and violently yanked the blinds shut, then turned to face her, his eyes wide with fear. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a personal checkbook, and hastily scribbled a number. He tore the check free and shoved it into Ayla's hand.

“Take this,” Mark pleaded, his voice shaking. “It’s enough to get by. Just take it and leave.”

Ayla looked down at the check. “I don’t want your charity, Mark. I want to work.”

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Chapter 58:

“You don’t understand!” Mark hissed, glancing nervously at the door. “Two men in black suits came here yesterday — Farrell’s private security. They told me if I even let you in the building, they would make sure my studio loses its lease and my clients drop me overnight. I have a family, Ayla. I can’t fight him.”

Ayla stared at the terrified man. The reality of her situation crashed down on her like a physical weight. She wasn't just ruined — she was a plague. Anyone who touched her would be destroyed.

She slowly placed the check back on his desk.

"I'm sorry I came here," she said quietly.

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She turned and walked out of the studio, her spine perfectly straight. She refused to let him see her break.

Ayla walked down Fifth Avenue. The sidewalks were packed with people carrying shopping bags and laughing. The city was alive, but Ayla moved through it like a ghost — completely transparent, rejected by the very ecosystem she had once known how to manipulate.

A cold drizzle began to fall.

She ducked into a crowded chain coffee shop to escape the rain. She stood near the door, shivering slightly, trying to gather her thoughts. Her tote bag held a certified bank draft worth a small fortune, and yet here she was, unable to access a single dollar of it. The absurd, brutal humiliation was colder than the rain outside.

She made her way to a dark corner booth at the back and sat down, pulling her coat tight around her body.

High above the city, in the Gilliam Group penthouse, Cassius stood before a massive wall of monitors.

He was watching the live feed from the coffee shop's security cameras. His hackers had tapped into the feed the moment Ayla walked in. He watched her retreat to the corner booth, looking small and defeated.

Ronan stood behind him, holding a tablet. "Sir, she is completely out of resources. Should I dispatch a car to pick her up?"

Cassius didn't take his eyes off the screen. His jaw flexed.

"No," he said, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. "An eagle only shows its true talons when it is pushed to the absolute edge of the cliff. Let her fall a little further."

In the coffee shop, Ayla pulled the heavy military laptop from her tote bag.

Her sadness evaporated, replaced by a freezing, calculated anger. If the legitimate world was closed to her, she would go underground. She opened the laptop and began writing a ghost protocol — a program to bypass Axel's credit blockade and access the dark web to take on anonymous corporate sabotage bounties.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, the code reflecting in her dark eyes.

Just as she hit the final key to compile the program, her burner phone lit up on the table. It was a text from an unknown number.

Ayla opened it.

How does it feel to be a stray dog, Ayla? Come to the Manor gates tonight at 8:00 PM to collect your mother's ashes. If you are late, I will throw them in the East River.

Ayla stared at the screen. The air left her lungs entirely.

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Chapter 59:

Her mother's ashes. The wooden urn she had kept hidden in the back of her closet. The only piece of her true family she had left in the world.

Axel had found her absolute center. He had located her fatal weakness.

Ayla's fingers gripped the edge of the table so hard her nails dug into the cheap wood. Her eyes turned completely black.

Freezing rain lashed against the heavy wrought-iron gates of Farrell Manor on the Upper East Side.

It was exactly eight o'clock.

Ayla stood on the wet pavement outside the gates, holding a cheap transparent plastic umbrella she had bought from a bodega with her last few dollars. The wind whipped her wet hair across her face, but she didn't shiver. She stared through the iron bars at the massive, glowing mansion.

This was the gilded cage she had lived in for three years. Tonight, it looked like a tomb.

She didn't press the intercom button. She simply stood there, a silent ghost in the storm.

A minute later, the small side door beside the main gate clicked open.

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It wasn't Martha, the housekeeper.

Kristal stepped out into the rain, holding a large black plastic garbage bag. Ayla's eyes immediately dropped to what she was wearing — a burgundy silk robe, the exact limited-edition haute couture piece Ayla had left hanging in the master bedroom closet. It was too long for Kristal, dragging slightly on the wet ground, but she wore it like a trophy.

Kristal walked up to the iron gate but didn't open it. She stood on the inside, sheltered by the overhang, looking down at Ayla with a sickeningly sweet smile.

"You look terrible, Ayla," Kristal cooed, her voice dripping with venomous pity. "The streets really don't suit you."

Ayla didn't blink. Her gaze dropped to the black garbage bag in Kristal's hand.

"Give me the urn," Ayla said, her voice completely flat, devoid of any emotion.

Kristal laughed — a sharp, grating sound. She lifted the garbage bag and shook it slightly. The contents rattled inside.

"Axel told me to clean out the closet," Kristal said, tracing a manicured finger along an iron bar. "He said having your trash in the house was ruining the aesthetic of our bedroom. I moved in last night, by the way. Axel didn't want to sleep alone."

Kristal waited for a reaction. She wanted to see Ayla cry. She wanted jealousy, heartbreak, anything.

Ayla's knuckles turned white around the umbrella handle. Her stomach churned with physical disgust, but her face remained a mask of ice.

"If you are done giving me the details of your pathetic whoring," Ayla said, her voice dropping to a lethal whisper, "hand over the bag."

Kristal's smug smile vanished. Her eyes flashed with sudden, vicious anger. Ayla's absolute indifference felt like a slap across the face.

"You think you are still better than me?" Kristal hissed, her true nature bleeding through the elegant facade. "You are a homeless beggar!"

Kristal grabbed the bottom of the garbage bag and violently ripped it open. She shoved the contents through the gaps in the iron gate.

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Chapter 60:

A yellowed diary, a stack of old faded photographs, and a small purple sandalwood box tumbled out and hit the wet pavement with a sickening thud. The sandalwood box bounced on the concrete. The impact cracked the corner of the wood.

Kristal let out a cruel, triumphant laugh. “Don’t ever come back to the Upper East Side, you piece of trash.”

She turned and walked back toward the mansion, the burgundy silk trailing through the mud behind her.

Ayla’s mind went completely blank.

The umbrella slipped from her hand and blew away in the wind.

She dropped to her knees in the freezing mud. She didn’t care about the rain soaking through her clothes. She frantically gathered the wet photographs and the diary, her trembling hands finally closing around the cracked sandalwood box. She pulled it to her chest and curled her body over it, shielding it from the rain.

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Kneeling in the mud outside the gate, the rain mixing with the hot tears streaming down her face, she felt the crack in the wood as though it were a fracture in her own chest.

She slowly stood. She held the box tightly against her, and without a single glance back at the mansion, she turned and walked into the dark, rainy night. The last thread connecting her to her past had been severed. Her eyes were hollow, radiating a terrifying, dead silence.

An hour later, Ayla pushed open the heavy wooden door of a dive bar on the far edge of Brooklyn.

The air inside was thick with stale beer, cheap cigarettes, and sweat. A scratchy heavy metal song blasted from a neon jukebox in the corner. Five massive men in leather cuts covered in biker patches crowded around a pool table, shouting and slamming their cues.

Ayla walked straight to the darkest corner of the bar and sat on a ripped vinyl stool. She placed the sandalwood box carefully on the inside of the counter, shielding it with her body.

The bartender, a heavily tattooed man, walked over and took one look at her ruined clothes and her pale face.

“What do you want?” he grunted.

“A bottle of your cheapest tequila,” Ayla said, her voice raspy. She placed her last crumpled twenty-dollar bill on the sticky counter.

He grabbed the bill and slammed a half-full bottle of generic tequila on the bar. No glass.

Ayla didn't ask for one. She grabbed the neck of the bottle, brought it to her lips, and took a massive, burning swallow. The cheap alcohol scorched her throat and hit her empty stomach like battery acid. She coughed, her eyes watering, and immediately took another drink.

She needed the fire. She needed the alcohol to burn away the crushing weight of the last three years — the humiliation of the blacklist, the freezing rain, the sight of her mother's urn hitting the mud.

She took a third drink. The alcohol hit her bloodstream fast.

Her psychological defenses — the iron walls she had built to survive Axel's abuse — finally shattered.

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