



VEILED IN THE BOARDROOM

A Corporate Thriller of Lies, Leaks, and Loyalty

REZA DESITA

Veiled in the Boardroom

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Chapter 1

The Unwelcoming Seat

That morning, the Nusatech building looked like a giant pane of glass swallowing the Jakarta sky—cold, immaculate, and utterly uninterested in the softness of anyone’s heart.

Aira Nasywa slowed at the revolving door and drew a careful breath, as if oxygen itself needed permission to enter her lungs. In her hand was a brand-new access card, still stiff at the edges, still too clean to feel real. She held it tighter—not from fear, but from the strange disbelief that comes when life finally hands you the thing you worked for... and then dares you to keep it.

Her hijab—mocha, neatly pinned—sat like an anchor, a quiet decision she had made long before Nusatech ever knew her name.

Not to prove myself to people, she reminded herself. *But to carry an amanah.*

She had lingered longer than usual after Fajr prayer, not for drama, not for the romance of ritual, but because her chest had felt bound with invisible rope. She’d recited the du’a for leaving home until her voice trembled, then stared at her reflection in the mirror: twenty-nine years old, a calm face trained into composure, eyes storing an exhaustion she never offered to anyone.

Today she was officially the Director of Global Operations & Strategy.

On LinkedIn, that title would glitter like a red carpet.

In reality, it felt like a long corridor with dim lights and footsteps waiting for her to stumble.

“Good morning, Ma’am.”

The security guard greeted her politely, but his gaze swept over her in a quick, practiced motion—head to toe—like a habit the city had taught him. Aira returned a small smile, measured, not too warm.

“Morning, Pak.”

And then she walked in.

The lobby was wide and expensive-quiet, perfumed with coffee and new carpet. Nusatech’s logo rose like a monument—an N shaped in sharp futuristic angles. Across oversized screens, numbers crawled, graphs rose and dipped, tech headlines scrolled past like a heartbeat no one dared interrupt.

Inside the elevator, Aira’s reflection multiplied across mirrored walls. The repetition made her look like a crowd of one. She straightened her shoulders anyway.

Bismillah.

Her phone vibrated.

Uncle Harun.

She stared at his name for a few seconds before answering. His voice had always felt like home—firm, warm, unshakable. Since her father passed two years ago, that voice had been the rope she grabbed when the world tested her.

“Assalamu’alaikum,” he said.

“Wa’alaikumussalam, Uncle.”

“You there?”

“In the lift,” she said softly. “Going up to thirty-two.”

“Good.” A pause. And then his next words warmed her and strengthened her at the same time. “Remember your intention, Aira. Guard it. Don’t perform your strength. Don’t chase victory. Chase Allah’s pleasure.”

Aira swallowed. “InshaAllah.”

“And if someone tries to bait your emotions,” he continued, his tone calm but serious, “don’t answer with emotion. Answer with quality.”

A small smile tugged at her lips. “You sound like you already know what’s waiting.”

“I don’t know,” he said, and his voice hardened—not angry, just honest. “The world is not kind to women who walk straight.”

The elevator chimed.

Before ending the call, he delivered the sentence that had always been her shield. “Recite the prayer of Prophet Musa.”

Aira nodded even though he couldn’t see her. “*Rabbi ishrah li sadri...*”

“Yes,” he said gently.

The call ended. The doors opened.

Floor thirty-two was quiet as a library. A long corridor in polished white, glossy enough to reflect her footsteps back at her. Glass panels framed the city like a living map—thousands of vehicles moving like ants below. At the end stood a large door, the letters stark and authoritative:

****EXECUTIVE BOARDROOM****

Aira paused.

Her hand was cold.

She lifted her knuckles and knocked.

“Come in.”

The voice was flat. Calm. Like someone who didn’t do doubt.

Aira pushed the door open.

The room was enormous. A long table of dark wood, leather chairs, a wall-sized screen. On the right, several men and two women sat arranged like a perfectly designed diagram, laptops open, faces composed. Some offered polite nods. Others glanced at her and immediately returned to typing. And a few stared too long—measuring, not greeting.

At the far end, a man stood facing the screen with his back to the room. Black suit, white shirt without a wrinkle, hair cut and disciplined, posture held like a statue. He turned as Aira entered.

Adrian Wicaksana.

The new CEO—more often seen in business headlines than in anyone’s casual conversation. People said he was brilliant, cold, and that he left no room for failure.

His gaze paused at Aira’s face, then dipped—fractionally—to her hijab. It wasn’t mocking. It was the look of someone calculating a risk.

“Aira Nasywa,” he said. Not a question.

“Yes. Good morning, Pak Adrian.”

He gave a short nod. “Sit. We’ll begin.”

No welcome. No “we’re glad to have you.” No sweetness.

Aira walked to the seat prepared for her—close to Adrian, a position that looked strategic and felt... exposed. She set down her bag, opened her

notebook, connected her laptop to the system.

As the screen loaded, she scanned the faces around the table.

An older man with sharp eyes—the CFO—whose posture suggested he interrogated numbers for sport. Another man wore a friendly expression, but the smile was too polished, too rehearsed, the kind that could package poison in silk: the Head of Corporate Affairs. The two women on the left—one focused and professional, the other looking tired like she'd already fought three wars before breakfast.

A whisper floated from the far end—too quiet to catch the words, loud enough to catch the meaning.

New girl.

Too young.

Hijab.

Aira held her breath through it.

Adrian clicked a remote. A title flared onto the screen:

****Q1 Crisis Mitigation & Global Launch Readiness****

“All right,” he began, voice clean and sharp. “Straight to the point. We have two major problems and one deadline that will not move.”

He pointed at a graph. “One: user retention down across three core markets. Two: internal leakage—information getting out fast enough that competitors can move first.” He let the numbers sit like a threat in the air. “And the third—” he turned, eyes sweeping the table before landing on Aira, “—we’re launching a new AI product in six weeks. If we miss... it won’t just be reputation. Investors will choke us.”

Silence tightened around the room.

Adrian set the remote down. “I was given a recommendation for a new Global Operations Director.” His gaze didn’t go to Aira when he said it, as if he were discussing weather, not a person sitting within arm’s reach. “That recommendation came from my father.”

A few people exchanged looks. That wasn’t the kind of information you casually offered in a boardroom—which meant it was being offered as a test.

Adrian continued, expression still unreadable. “I don’t choose based on relationships. I choose based on results. But I’ll be honest—” He finally looked at her. “—I’m not convinced yet.”

Aira met his stare without blinking. She’d expected it.

“Bu Aira,” he said, “you’re young. You’re new. You’re stepping into a team that’s been here a long time. And I don’t have time for emotional adaptation.”

The sentence hit like a gavel.

“So I need you to explain one thing, right now,” Adrian said. “Why should I trust you to lead change under conditions like this?”

The room waited the way people wait when they think they’re about to watch someone fall.

Aira folded her fingers on the table, steadyng them. In her mind, Musa’s prayer rotated like a protective wheel—*widen my chest, ease my task, loosen my tongue.*

She looked at Adrian calmly.

“Pak Adrian,” she began, voice soft but clear, “you don’t need to trust me because your father recommended me.”

A flicker of surprise crossed a few faces.

“And you don’t need to trust me because I’m a woman,” she continued, “or because I wear a hijab.”

At the far end, the Head of Corporate Affairs’ mouth twitched like he was holding back a smile.

Aira didn’t take the bait.

“You only need to trust the system,” she said. “If the system is right, results will speak. If the system is wrong, whoever sits in this chair—me included—will become the scapegoat.”

Adrian narrowed his eyes. “Are you teaching me about systems?”

Aira shook her head once. “I’m offering a way of working. I didn’t come here to be liked. I came to meet targets—without sacrificing the company’s integrity.”

The word integrity made the CFO lift his head.

Aira clicked to her first slide.

Three pillars appeared in bold:

****STABILIZE – STRENGTHEN – LAUNCH****

“First two weeks,” she explained, “we stabilize. We audit the data flow, map leakage points, and review user retention by cohort. We need to know where the wound is before we try to stitch it.”

Adrian cut in immediately. “Two weeks is long.”

Aira met his eyes. “Longer if we patch what we don’t understand.”

The silence returned—but different now. Not the silence of waiting for her to fail.

The silence of waiting for Adrian to react.

After a beat, Adrian leaned back slightly. “Continue.”

Aira nodded. “Weeks three to five—strengthen. We break teams into smaller units with clear KPIs. We pull key people across departments not by seniority, but by output.”

She clicked again. “Week six—launch. But I won’t squeeze the team into hiding risk. If something isn’t ready, I’ll say it isn’t ready. Being one day late is better than carrying scandal for life.”

A small laugh slipped out from somewhere near the end of the table—muted, cynical.

The Head of Corporate Affairs spoke with a gentle tone that still somehow cut. “This is a tech company, Bu. Not a religious school. The world is competitive. If we’re too idealistic, we lose.”

Aira turned to him, unruffled. “If we ‘win’ in a way that destroys us, that isn’t winning.”

His smile tightened, then returned to its polished shape.

Aira’s final slide appeared:

****NON-NEGOTIABLES****

1. Risk transparency
2. No manipulation of user data
3. Cross-team communication—no gossip routes
4. Decisions backed by evidence, not opinion

The CFO raised a hand. “Bu Aira. You believe you can stand against board pressure if the numbers don’t match expectations?”

Aira nodded once. “I can’t hold back all pressure. But I can make sure we have the right reasons—and an accountable strategy.”

Adrian tapped the table lightly. One tap. The room obeyed.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll give you a chance.”

Aira didn’t smile. She only nodded, receiving it like weight, not a gift.

“But,” Adrian added, voice lower, “I’ll test you.”

“Please do, Pak,” she said.

He stood, walked toward the window, and turned back to the table. “From today, all major launch decisions go through you. And if anything goes wrong...” His gaze fixed on her. “I will demand answers directly.”

Aira held her breath. *A polite war,* she thought. *And I have to win the right way.*

Then the boardroom door opened.

Every head turned.

A man walked in quickly, a tablet in hand. White shirt. Sleeves rolled halfway up. A metal watch catching light on his wrist. His face was firm—older than Aira remembered—and because of that, it felt like someone had reopened an old wound with surgical precision.

Aira froze.

Something long buried rose in her chest—not longing.

Memory.

Bitter and sharp.

The man paused at the threshold, looked into the room... and his eyes met hers.

For a fraction of a second, time stopped.

He exhaled as if he hadn't expected fate to be sitting in a corporate boardroom.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, voice rough but steady. "There was an issue in the lab."

Adrian glanced at him. "Come in, Raka. Sit. We just started."

The name landed like a heavy object.

Raka Pradipta.

Aira stared straight ahead, forcing her face into calm. Her fingers closed around her pen until it almost hurt.

Raka walked in, passed the other seats—

and chose the one directly across from her.

In the cold, immaculate room, Aira heard her own heartbeat.

And for the first time that morning, she understood:

the board seat wasn't the only thing that was unwelcoming.

Her past had just taken a chair right in front of her.

Chapter 2

The Crack That Echoed Back

Raka sat down.

And in the space of a single heartbeat, the boardroom didn't just feel cold anymore—it felt sharpened.

Aira kept her eyes on the projected slide, but she didn't have to look up to know what happened. The air shifted. People's attention moved like a wave: from Raka's face to hers, then back again, as if they'd just been handed a new, expensive rumor to carry for the rest of the quarter.

Across the table, Raka's posture was controlled—professional, careful. His white shirt sleeves were rolled just enough to look like he'd come from work, not from a mirror. But it wasn't his outfit that unsettled her.

It was his presence.

Older than the last version she'd known. Harder around the edges. Like life had taken whatever softness he once had and traded it for survival.

And his eyes—

His eyes were still the same. Too observant. Too fast. The kind of eyes that didn't just **see** you, but calculated you.

Adrian stood near the window, calm as ever, the city sprawled behind him like a map he could fold with one hand. Yet Aira caught something—thin, almost invisible—flicker across the CEO's expression.

Not shock.

Recognition.

As if Adrian had just realized there was a conflict in the room that he hadn't personally designed.

"Raka," Adrian said, tone flat. "You'll take over Engineering function for the launch. The Head of Engineering role is still in final process."

Raka nodded once. "Understood."

Aira's fingers tightened around her pen.

So he wasn't just... appearing.

He was being placed in the center of her work. Data. Product. Decisions. Every corridor she was expected to walk—he'd be walking in the opposite direction.

Adrian shifted the meeting forward the way some people cut bread: quick, precise, no ceremony.

"We continue," he said. "Bu Aira, walk us through your first two-week priorities again. Then Raka will brief lab status and progress."

Aira inhaled, silently.

Bismillah.

She took the remote without hesitation. This time she went more detailed, not because she needed to prove herself, but because she could already hear the future accusation: *She's theory. She's new. She's untested.*

Fine.

She'd give them no easy target.

"First two weeks are stabilization," Aira said, voice calm. "Four lanes."

The slide changed.

1. **Audit access flow** — who can see what, who can change what.
2. **Map leakage points** — internal, vendor, partner routes.
3. **Cohort retention analysis** — understand why churn is rising and where.
4. **Tighten release approvals** — no shortcuts, no shadow pathways.

She didn't look at Raka while she spoke. She didn't need to. She could feel him listening.

When she finished, Adrian's gaze shifted across the room and landed on Raka.

“Now you.”

Raka tapped his tablet. A dashboard appeared on the screen—progress charts, unresolved critical bugs, feature stability flags. The language of Engineering: cold, blunt, honest when done right.

“Technically,” Raka said, “the product can ship.”

A few shoulders loosened. The kind of relief people inhale too early.

“But,” Raka continued, and the word dropped like a stone, “there are two major risks.”

Aira's spine straightened. She liked that word—*risk*. People who dared to name risk usually still had integrity.

“First,” Raka said, “the AI model needs additional data for accuracy. If we force it without that, the output will degrade in certain markets. And the worst part is—some regions will look fine, so we might not notice until it becomes public.”

Adrian didn't blink. “And second?”

Raka paused, as if weighing whether to speak in a room full of political ears.

“There’s been unusual access to the staging server for three days,” he said.
“Not standard testing. Not normal hours.”

The room tightened again.

The CFO—sharp-eyed, built like someone who interrogated numbers for fun—leaned forward. “Unusual how?”

Raka swiped. The screen changed to logs: timestamps, user IDs, download activity. Configuration changes—small, almost polite. The kind of change someone made when they didn’t want alarms screaming.

Aira kept her expression steady, but inside, something turned cold.

Adrian didn’t look surprised.

He looked... confirmed.

“Which account?” Adrian asked.

Raka read out the internal user code. It didn’t mean much to most people in the room, but Aira recognized the structure immediately.

Infrastructure-level.

The kind of access only a handful should ever touch.

Across the table, a soft laugh slipped out—muted, cynical.

“Perfect,” a man said with a smile that was too neat to be kind. “Two risks on day one. Technical and security. Bu Aira just joined and the company immediately gifts her a crisis.”

His tone was sweet. His intent wasn’t.

Aira turned to him slowly.

Dimas Arlangga—Head of Corporate Affairs. The kind of executive who could shake hands while placing a knife on the table with the other.

“Krisis doesn’t choose timing,” Aira said evenly. “But our response does.”

Dimas gave a small chuckle like she’d just made a charming joke. He didn’t argue—because arguing would be honest.

Adrian tapped the table once. Not loud. Not dramatic.

Instant silence.

“Bu Aira,” Adrian said, “I want a small team. Today. You lead it. Focus: identify the source of access, close the gap, and prepare a report for the board.”

Aira nodded. “Understood.”

“Raka,” Adrian continued, “you’re on that team. You handle technical forensic.”

Raka nodded again. “Understood.”

Aira felt something like a careful impact inside her chest.

Not panic.

Not weakness.

Just the reality of what it meant: she would now have to work shoulder-to-shoulder with the man who had once walked away from her at the worst possible moment.

Adrian’s eyes moved between them—cold, measuring.

“And I don’t want personal drama interfering with this,” he said. “We work.”

Aira answered first. “It won’t.”

Raka’s gaze flicked toward her—brief, controlled. “It won’t.”

Aira didn’t look back.

The meeting ended earlier than usual, but people didn’t leave fast. They walked slower—because everyone was carrying something heavier than agendas.

A story.

Aira stayed seated a moment longer, organizing files with deliberate care. She needed her hands busy so her body didn’t betray what she refused to show.

Adrian approached her chair. He didn’t lower his voice because he feared people overhearing—he lowered it because he didn’t waste volume on things he considered obvious.

“I heard you went to school with Raka,” he said.

Aira lifted her chin slightly. “Yes. A long time ago.”

“A long time ago,” Adrian repeated, as if underlining the phrase with a pen. “And now you’re professional.”

Aira met his gaze directly.

“Now,” she said, “I’m responsible.”

She didn’t use the word **amanah** aloud in that moment, but it lived beneath her sentence like a second spine.

Adrian held her stare for a beat.

Then he nodded once. “Good.”

And left—no extra reassurance, no warmth. Only the confirmation that he’d be watching.

Aira exhaled slowly only after he was gone.

The boardroom emptied out until it was mostly silence—dark screen, polished table, the city behind glass.

And footsteps that didn’t retreat.

“Aira.”

His voice.

Her fingers closed her laptop with quiet control before she turned.

Raka stood several steps away. He didn’t sit. He didn’t move closer. It was as if he knew there was a line and wasn’t sure whether he was allowed to approach it.

“I didn’t know you’d be here,” he said.

Aira’s expression stayed neutral. “I didn’t know either.”

He swallowed, eyes shifting like he was looking for an opening into a locked room.

“Aira… about before—”

She raised her palm gently.

Not rude.

Final.

“Raka,” she said, voice soft but edged with something unmistakable, “if it’s about work, we talk in the team room. If it’s not about work... I don’t want to discuss it at the office.”

His face tightened—pain passing quick, like a shadow that didn’t want to admit it existed.

Aira added, still courteous, “And I don’t see the need to reopen anything that isn’t part of my responsibility today.”

For a moment, he looked like he wanted to argue.

Then he nodded. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

Silence, in that moment, was the strongest fence she could build.

Raka turned to leave. At the door, he paused without looking back.

“You look... different,” he said quietly.

Aira watched his back.

“I’m just trying to be more right,” she replied.

He didn’t answer.

He left.

And only then did Aira realize how cold her hands were.

Her office sat not far from the executive corridor—glass walls facing the city, as if the company believed transparency was a design choice.

On her desk, a new nameplate waited:

****AIRA NASYWA****

****Director, Global Ops & Strategy****

She stared at it longer than she expected.

Once, she had imagined success as a stage.

Now it looked more like an exam.

A knock came.

A young woman entered with a warm smile. “Assalamu’alaikum, Bu. I’m Nisa—your new EA.”

Aira felt an unexpected ease at the sound of a greeting that carried faith in it—quiet, normal, human.

“Wa’alaikumussalam,” she replied. “Come in, Nisa.”

Nisa placed folders on the desk. “Your schedule is packed today. Meeting with Security, Product, and Pak Adrian wants an update at five.”

Aira nodded. “Schedule a small meeting an hour from now. Attendees: me, Raka Pradipta, Security Lead, and Infra Lead.”

Nisa wrote fast, then hesitated like she was about to step on glass.

“Bu... I’m sorry,” she said, lowering her voice. “Some people have been asking about... you and Pak Raka.”

Aira looked at her gently. “If anyone asks, the answer is simple.”

Nisa blinked. “Yes, Bu?”

“We work,” Aira said.

Nisa nodded quickly. “Understood.”

After Nisa left, Aira reached for her phone out of instinct—her thumb hovering over her uncle’s chat.

But she didn’t type.

She already knew what he would say: *Don’t open doors for slander. Hold your boundaries. Hold your intention.*

Instead, she stood and went to the small executive pantry sink, running water over her hands. The cold grounded her. She made wudu—not for performance, but because she needed her faith to touch her reality the way water touched skin.

Then her email notification chimed.

The subject line stopped her breath.

You’re being set up.

Unknown sender. Anonymous.

Aira stared at the screen, heart pounding hard enough to feel loud.

The email contained one sentence:

“That staging-server access will be pinned on you. Watch the man with the polished smile.”

Aira closed the email slowly, as if she were shutting a door that had just opened into a small, private hell.

The man with the polished smile.

Dimas.

This wasn't just about proving herself anymore.

This was starting to smell like war.

An hour later, the small meeting room was full.

Security Lead opened his laptop. Infra Lead pulled up logs on the screen. Raka sat to Aira's right—at a respectful distance. Professional posture. Controlled expression.

Still, his presence was a thorn with a memory attached.

Aira stood at the front. "We start."

She pointed to the projected logs. "Two goals today: identify the account used for access—and identify who benefits."

Security Lead nodded. "We suspect credential theft. But something's off. There's an approval token that looks like it was generated internally."

Raka leaned forward, tapping a single line on the log. "This isn't typical credential theft. Whoever did this knew the path. They weren't guessing."

Infra Lead cleared his throat. "And there's another issue—small permission changes. Made through the admin panel."

Aira turned slowly. "Say it."

Infra Lead swallowed. "Three roles have admin-panel access. Two belong to senior Infra. One belongs to... Corporate Affairs."

Aira went still for half a second.

Raka's eyebrows lifted. "Corporate Affairs can access the admin panel?"

"They shouldn't," Infra Lead said, uncomfortable. "But there was a temporary access request last week. It came through an executive route."

Aira's voice stayed calm, but the room heard the edge under it. "Who approved it?"

Infra Lead hesitated, then spoke like someone dropping a fragile thing.

"The approval is logged... under the CEO's name."

Silence.

Aira felt a cold line trace up the back of her neck.

If that was true, there were only two possibilities—and both were dangerous.

Either Adrian approved it.

Or someone had used Adrian's name without his knowledge.

Aira looked at Raka—not as the man who belonged to her past, but as her teammate.

"Raka," she said softly, "can you verify whether that approval is authentic or forged?"

Raka nodded, immediate and firm. "I can. But if it's forged..."

He paused.

"...whoever did it is bold."

Aira's gaze returned to the log, then to the faces around the table.

“If they’re bold,” she said quietly, “it means they believe they’re protected.”

Raka watched her for a moment, as if realizing something he hadn’t calculated: she wasn’t the Aira he left behind. This Aira stood in the middle of a storm and didn’t flinch.

Aira closed her laptop with controlled finality.

“Okay,” she said. “We move. From this second on, all communication about this goes through official channels and gets recorded. No side chats. No hallway updates.”

Security Lead nodded.

Infra Lead nodded.

Raka nodded.

Aira stood. “I’ll brief Adrian this afternoon. But before that—we collect evidence. Without evidence, we’re just another story.”

She walked out with steadier steps than she felt.

In the corridor, her phone vibrated again.

Not email this time.

A name lit up the screen that made her pause:

Adrian Wicaksana.

She answered. “Yes, Pak?”

His voice was flat, but something in it was harder than this morning. “I just got a call from my father. We need to talk. Now.”

Aira swallowed. “Understood.”

“And one more thing,” Adrian said, quieter. “Starting this afternoon, the board will want someone’s head for this leak.”

Aira stared at the glass floor reflecting a slice of sky.

“And I,” Adrian continued, “don’t intend to choose wrong.”

The call ended.

Aira stood still for two seconds—just long enough to feel the weight of being newly appointed and already marked.

Outside the window, the city kept moving like nothing had changed.

She adjusted the edge of her hijab, drew in a deep breath, and whispered, barely audible:

“Ya Allah... don’t let me become the victim of slander.”

Then she walked toward the CEO’s office—

where the real test was about to begin.

Chapter 3

The CEO's Room, The Real Exam

The corridor to the CEO's office felt less like a hallway and more like a courtroom—quiet, spotless, and polished enough to reflect the truth back at you whether you wanted it or not.

Aira stopped in front of the door, pressed her fingers lightly against the edge of her hijab as if to anchor herself, then knocked twice.

“Come in.”

The voice was even. Calm. The kind of calm that didn't soothe—because it came from control, not comfort.

She stepped inside.

Adrian Wicaksana's office wasn't what Aira expected. No motivational quotes. No framed magazine covers. No family photos. Just a wide desk, two guest chairs, a wall of glass overlooking Jakarta, and monitors alive with numbers that pulsed like the company's heartbeat.

Adrian stood with his back to her, staring out at the skyline like he was evaluating an enemy's position.

“Sit,” he said without turning.

Aira sat. Back straight. Hands folded neatly in her lap. She didn't bring fear into this room—she brought caution.

Adrian finally turned. His eyes were sharp, tired, and not entirely angry. More like a man who'd just been hit by a problem from a direction he hadn't predicted.

“My father called,” he said. “A long one.”

Aira stayed silent, waiting.

He continued, tone flat, almost annoyed at the existence of emotions in a business building. “He said I’d be ‘ruining an amanah’ if I doubted you too harshly on your first day.”

Aira felt her chest tighten—because her uncle’s voice, earlier that morning, had carried a similar warning in a different shape: *Don’t answer bait with bait. Answer it with quality.*

“Sir,” she said carefully, “I don’t need anyone to defend me. I need space to do my job.”

Something in Adrian’s gaze shifted—small, but real. He sat down across from her.

“Good,” he said. “Because I don’t have time for family drama either.”

“I don’t,” Aira replied. “And I won’t.”

Adrian leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice as if the walls themselves were on a payroll. “Now the point. Your team found an approval log—temporary admin-panel access—recorded under my name.”

Aira didn’t flinch. “Yes, sir.”

He studied her. “Meaning you think I approved something I don’t remember?”

“I’m not concluding anything,” Aira said, steady. “I’m stating what the data says: the approval came through the executive route, and the log carries your name.”

Adrian leaned back.

“I didn’t approve it.” The words came out quick—clean—like a verdict he’d already signed in his head.

Aira kept her expression neutral, but inside, something hardened into clarity.

“Then we have a bigger problem,” she said. “Someone is bold enough to use your name.”

Adrian’s fingers tapped the desk once. Not loud. Just enough to make a point land.

“And the board will want someone’s head for this,” he said. “This afternoon.”

“I know.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You know?”

Aira drew a slow breath. “I received an anonymous email. It said the staging-server access would be pinned on me.”

Adrian’s face sharpened. “Anonymous?”

Aira nodded. “And it mentioned ‘the man with the polished smile.’”

Adrian didn’t ask who. That was the part that chilled her.

He already had a name in mind.

Silence stretched between them—ten seconds that felt longer because both of them understood what it meant when someone could forge executive approvals. This wasn’t gossip anymore. This was an internal weapon.

Adrian stood and walked to the window, pulling out his phone.

“I want you to hear this,” he said.

He dialed.

One ring.

Two.

Then an older man's voice came through—deep, composed, heavy with authority.

“Adrian.”

Adrian's jaw tightened. “Dad. We're talking now.”

Aira didn't move, but her heartbeat sped up. This wasn't a private family call anymore. This was a strategy meeting wearing a family mask.

“I heard you started doubting Aira on her first day,” his father said—calm, but with a clear edge beneath it.

Adrian exhaled hard, as if patience itself was a cost center. “You placed someone you met at a religious gathering into an executive seat at a global tech company. It's reasonable that I verify. This isn't a charity.”

His father's answer came fast.

“Don't insult the place you say that like it's only for tears and prayers,” the man replied. “I didn't assess her because she was sitting in a mosque. I assessed her by how she thinks—and how she guards responsibility.”

Adrian's eyes flicked to Aira for half a second, then back to the window. “Responsibility won't fix user retention.”

“It will save the company when everyone gets tempted to fake numbers,” his father cut in. “You think businesses collapse because they're not smart enough? Many collapse because they're too clever and lose their fear of God.”

Aira felt her throat tighten.

She wasn't used to hearing faith spoken in a corporate context without it being used as decoration.

Adrian's voice came lower. "Do you understand reputational risk? A young hijabi woman in the boardroom. They will attack. They'll call it branding."

"Let them talk," his father replied. "Your job isn't to satisfy mouths. Your job is to build a clean system."

Adrian's fingers clenched around the phone. "This still feels personal."

His father's tone softened for a breath, then sharpened again. "Yes. I respect her guardian. I trust him. But I didn't choose Aira because of family ties. I chose her because I've watched her refuse 'fast routes' that would've made her rich. I've watched her manage conflict without humiliating anyone. I've seen her in a place money can't buy."

Adrian went quiet.

His father continued, voice lower but heavier. "You think you're a strong leader because you can fire people. A strong leader is someone who can trust the right person—even when his ego fights it."

Adrian's knuckles whitened around the device.

"Dad," he said, controlled, "today we have a security breach—"

The line went faint for a moment as Adrian moved the phone away, the rest of his sentence swallowed by distance.

But the meaning was clear.

Even a CEO had to answer to someone.

Adrian ended the call a minute later.

He stood still, looking out at the city like he was trying to decide where the next strike would come from.

Then he turned back to Aira.

For the first time since she met him, his voice shifted—just slightly—into something more human.

“I don’t care about your past,” he said quietly. “But I care about your safety.”

Aira’s breath caught—because it wasn’t romantic.

It was something rarer in rooms like this: acknowledgment.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, brief.

Adrian studied her for a beat longer than usual. “You’re strong.”

Aira met his gaze without lowering hers. “I just have something to hold onto.”

He didn’t ask what.

But his eyes said he understood there were anchors that couldn’t be audited.

The knock came next—sharp, urgent.

“Come in,” Adrian said, back in full CEO mode.

The Head of Security entered carrying a laptop inside a transparent evidence bag, sealed with an official strip.

“Ma’am. Sir,” he said, placing it carefully on the desk like it was explosive. “This is a loan device used from Corporate Affairs’ floor. Taken from their storage room. Borrowed under the name Rendi Pramana.”

Aira's stomach tightened.

A laptop didn't prove guilt.

But in a war of narratives, it was a weapon—depending on whose hands held it.

“Who is Rendi?” Aira asked, voice steady.

Her EA, Nisa, stepped in with HR data already open, as if she'd been waiting behind the door for this exact moment. “New staff, Ma'am. Joined two months ago. Position: Executive admin, Corporate Affairs.”

Aira's mind raced through the pattern:

New staff.

Low power.

High access when “requested.”

Easy to pressure. Easy to sacrifice.

A quiet voice appeared behind Security—Raka, arriving without drama, as if he belonged to crises now.

“New staff are the easiest to order around,” he murmured.

Aira didn't look at him. Not yet. She didn't want her face to remember what her heart refused to reopen.

Adrian's gaze moved between the evidence bag and Aira.

“Chain of custody?” he asked.

“Intact,” Security confirmed. “We logged the retrieval. CCTV on the storage corridor is secured.”

“Good,” Adrian said. Then to Aira: “You lead. What's next?”

Aira stared at the sealed laptop for a full second, feeling the weight of what this meant.

If they opened it without procedure, it would become useless.

If they waited too long, it might become missing.

And somewhere in the building, someone with a polished smile was already preparing a story.

Aira lifted her eyes to Adrian.

“Official route,” she said. “Forensics images it. Hash everything. No one touches the original device without witnesses.” She looked to Security. “I want access logs from Corporate Affairs’ storage room—who entered, when, and for how long. And I want the approval chain for any temporary admin access, including the request ticket.”

Security nodded. “On it.”

Adrian watched her, and for a moment, the room felt like it did when she’d walked in—like a test.

Except now, it wasn’t only her being tested.

It was him too.

Because if someone could forge his approval, then the CEO wasn’t just threatened by a leak.

He was threatened by the idea that his authority could be stolen and used as a knife.

Aira rose from the chair.

“One more thing,” she said, voice calm but firm. “Starting now, your approvals need multi-factor verification that can’t be replicated by

‘executive route’ shortcuts.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed—not offended. Thinking.

Then he gave a single nod. “Do it.”

Aira stepped toward the door, and only then did she allow herself to feel the truth she’d been holding back since the boardroom:

This isn’t a crisis you solve.

This is a war you survive—without losing who you are.

And the most dangerous wars weren’t fought in public.

They were fought inside buildings that looked clean.

They were fought by people who smiled neatly.

And they always began the same way:

With someone deciding who would be the scapegoat.

Aira opened the door and walked out.

Behind her, the city kept moving like nothing was happening.

But inside Nusatech—

the real exam had officially started.

Chapter 4

The Pulpit and the Boardroom

Aira walked beside Adrian toward the executive boardroom with a pace that looked effortless—measured, precise, almost serene.

Inside her chest, something sprinted.

The corridor was a runway of glass and polished stone. Every step echoed softly, like the building kept receipts of everyone's confidence. Ahead, the boardroom doors waited—tall, heavy, and indifferent.

Behind them, Dimas Arlangga followed at a respectful distance, phone in hand, thumb scrolling as if a crisis could still be packaged into a “clean statement” if you used the right words.

Nisa appeared briefly from the side corridor, moving fast on silent heels. Her eyes flicked to Aira's face, then to Adrian, then back again.

“Ma'am,” she whispered, keeping her voice low. “The board is complete. CFO is inside.”

Aira nodded without stopping. “Thank you.”

Nisa swallowed. “And... I heard someone say, ‘Today, a name has to be written.’”

Aira didn't answer.

She tightened her grip on the folder in her hand, as if keeping papers aligned could keep her life aligned too. Somewhere in her memory, her uncle's voice returned—quiet, steady, stubbornly warm:

Don't chase winning. Chase Allah's pleasure. Respond with quality.

The boardroom doors opened.

The air inside was different from the morning meeting. Heavier. Colder. Not because of the AC, but because the people in it were no longer discussing a plan.

They were searching for a culprit.

The table stretched long and dark, glossy enough to reflect every face. The Nusatech logo watched from the far wall like an unblinking eye. The board members sat in their places with the posture of people who'd survived many storms by ensuring someone else stood in the rain.

CFO Surya sat near the center, fingers laced, gaze sharp and unsentimental. He looked like a man who believed technology was war—and wars needed sacrifices.

Beside him, Ibu Laksmi, one of the board's fiercest voices, sat upright with a pen balanced between her fingers like a weapon she could choose to use or not. On the other side, Pak Hadinata leaned back with a face that said patience was a luxury he hated paying for.

Aira took the seat prepared for her beside Adrian—close enough that she could feel the pressure of his decisions, close enough that any mistake would splash onto both of them.

Dimas settled across the table, spine straight, expression neat, smile ready. The kind of smile that looked respectful in photos and dangerous in real life.

Adrian didn't waste time with introductions.

“Incident report,” he said, voice flat. “Staging access. I want facts, not storytelling.”

The room went still.

Dimas raised his hand with gentle confidence, like the one student who always wanted to answer first.

“Sir,” he began smoothly, “before we get into technical detail, it might help to align on one voice. We don’t want to confuse anyone with conflicting information. Investors don’t like noise.”

Ibu Laksmi tilted her head slightly. “One voice,” she repeated.

Dimas smiled, calm. “Yes, Ma’am. A single narrative.”

“Or a single lie,” Laksmi replied.

Dimas didn’t flinch. But Aira caught it—just a small flash behind his eyes. A quick irritation. A tiny crack in polished control.

Adrian turned his gaze to Aira. “Bu Aira. Update.”

Aira rose slowly.

She didn’t hurry. Haste looked like panic, and panic was blood in a room full of sharks. She opened her folder, connected her laptop, and faced the wall screen like she belonged there—because whether they welcomed her or not, she did.

Her first slide didn’t say ***Conclusion.***

It said:

****VERIFIED FACTS****

Aira glanced once around the table, then spoke.

“Three days of unusual access to the staging server,” she said. “Not consistent with standard testing hours. The activity includes configuration edits and download behavior that matches deliberate extraction, not normal QA.”

Surya’s eyes narrowed. “Deliberate extraction,” he repeated. “You’re certain?”

Aira kept her voice steady. “Certain enough to label it a risk, not a rumor. Logs support it.”

She clicked.

****Access Path: Admin Panel Route****

“Second,” she continued, “there is evidence of admin-panel access that should not be used for routine work. The access was granted temporarily via an executive approval route.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. He didn’t look at her, but she could feel his attention sharpen like a blade.

Pak Hadinata leaned forward, impatience leaking into his tone. “Enough with the structure. The company was breached. Who is responsible?”

The question didn’t land like curiosity.

It landed like a demand for blood.

Aira didn’t answer immediately. She let the silence sit just long enough to remind them: **If you rush the wrong answer, you can never pull it back.**

“We’re not at attribution yet,” she said carefully. “We’re at containment and evidence preservation.”

Surya scoffed under his breath. “Investors don’t invest in careful language.”

Ibu Laksmi tapped her pen once. “Investors also don’t invest in scandals.”

Surya shot her a tight look. “Scandal is exactly what we’ll get if we can’t show control.”

Adrian’s fingers drummed softly on the table—one controlled beat, then stop. Silence returned immediately.

Aira clicked again.

****Current Actions Underway****

“Containment: tightened permissions and frozen non-essential access changes,” she said. “Investigation: forensic imaging of relevant devices, hash verification, and chain-of-custody logging. No one touches originals without witnesses.”

Dimas’s smile returned, smooth as silk. “Ma’am, with respect—technical language doesn’t reassure stakeholders. A clean message does.”

Aira turned to him, calm. “A clean message without clean evidence is just makeup on a wound.”

A few faces shifted. Not agreement—interest. The kind people show when a new person dares to speak like she won’t be intimidated.

Dimas chuckled lightly. “You’re idealistic.”

Aira didn’t take the bait. “I’m accountable.”

Adrian’s gaze moved to Surya. “CFO. This isn’t a PR meeting. This is internal control.”

Surya’s lips pressed together. “Internal control is fine. But the board needs certainty.”

Adrian’s eyes cooled. “Certainty comes from facts.”

Pak Hadinata leaned back with a faint sneer. “Facts are expensive. Scapegoats are efficient.”

The word hung in the air like smoke.

Aira felt it touch her skin.

Not because she was guilty—because she was new.

Because she was visible.

Because she was easy to point at.

Adrian's voice sharpened. "We are not naming anyone without evidence."

Surya's attention cut toward Aira. "And you, Bu Aira—how confident are you that your team can deliver answers today? You were appointed... yesterday."

The sentence was polite.

The intent was not.

Aira met his eyes. "I was appointed today. And we will deliver what we can verify today."

Laksmi's gaze stayed on Aira, assessing. "And if what you can verify points to someone powerful?"

Aira didn't blink. "Then the evidence will speak louder than titles."

Surya exhaled like he disliked the sound of her confidence. "CEO," he said, turning to Adrian, "the board is also concerned about how this appointment was made."

Aira didn't move, but her heartbeat tightened.

Adrian's head turned slightly. "What exactly are you implying, Pak Surya?"

Surya spread his hands. "I'm stating concerns. We've heard there was... a recommendation. Not based on performance metrics. Not based on internal seniority."

Dimas's smile deepened by a fraction.

Ibu Laksmi looked toward Adrian with a steady, almost challenging stare. “Is that true?”

Adrian’s expression barely changed, but his eyes hardened. “I don’t like recommendations that aren’t backed by numbers.”

Aira felt the room tilt, as if someone had shifted weight at the far end of the table.

This wasn’t about the breach anymore.

This was about her presence in the room.

Aira thought of the phone call earlier. Adrian’s father. Faith. The word **amanah**—trust—spoken like it belonged in a place that usually worshipped profit.

Adrian continued, voice controlled, “But I also don’t like internal politics wearing the face of ‘concern.’ If you have an objection, speak it clearly.”

Silence.

No one wanted to be the first to say, **We think she’s a liability.**

Because saying it would reveal what they really believed:

that a hijab didn’t belong next to a CEO.

Surya cleared his throat. “We want assurance this won’t become an internal war.”

Adrian answered without hesitation. “I guarantee the process. Not the outcome.”

Laksmi’s eyes sharpened. “Meaning?”

Adrian's voice dropped, and the room felt suddenly colder. "Meaning the outcome depends on who is clean."

Dimas lowered his gaze for half a second.

Then he smiled again—thinner now.

Aira returned to her slides, refusing to let the conversation drag her into an identity debate. If she fought on their chosen battlefield, she would lose on principle alone.

She clicked once more.

****Next Step: Verification of Executive-Route Approval****

"We are currently validating whether the executive-route approval log is authentic or forged," Aira said. "If forged, this becomes more than unauthorized access. It becomes an internal sabotage attempt."

Surya's eyes narrowed. "Forged approvals?"

Aira nodded. "Yes."

Hadinata looked unimpressed. "You speak like someone who already expects to be framed."

Aira's breath paused for half a second.

This was the moment where defensiveness would ruin her.

So she told the truth, simply.

"I'm not brave," Aira said, voice soft but clear. "I just don't want to become the victim of slander."

The word landed like a stone in water.

Not everyone understood it, but everyone understood what it meant: *a lie meant to destroy someone's reputation.*

Laksmi leaned forward slightly. "Are you saying someone is deliberately setting you up?"

Aira didn't say yes.

She didn't say no.

She said, "I'm saying we should treat that as a possibility—and protect the investigation from manipulation."

Surya exhaled sharply. "CEO, investors don't like uncertainty."

Laksmi cut in. "Investors like truth even less when it explodes."

Adrian's gaze moved from one face to the next, the way a man scans a battlefield and decides which side is pretending.

"Enough," Adrian said.

The room fell silent again.

Adrian turned to Aira. "Continue. Short version."

Aira nodded. "Short version: we lock access, we preserve evidence, we verify approvals, we identify who benefits."

Dimas lifted a finger gently. "And what we say outside this room—"

Adrian didn't let him finish. "We say nothing until we know what's true."

Dimas's smile didn't vanish, but it tightened.

The meeting was nearing its end when the boardroom door knocked—three quick taps.

A security staff member stepped inside, head bowed slightly as he approached Adrian. He leaned in and whispered something.

Adrian's face changed.

Not shocked—Adrian didn't do shock.

But tense, the way steel tenses before it bends.

Surya noticed immediately. “What?”

Adrian's gaze went straight to Aira.

And for the first time, it wasn't skeptical.

It was sharp with something like warning.

“A package,” Adrian said quietly. “Just arrived at reception. Addressed to... Bu Aira.”

Aira went still.

Her hands turned cold so fast it felt unreal.

Laksmi's voice cut the silence. “What's inside?”

Adrian took a breath and answered like someone choosing honesty over comfort.

“Printed access logs,” he said. “And a document... an approval.”

Surya leaned forward, interest flickering like hunger. “Approval for what?”

Adrian didn't look away from Aira.

“Admin-panel access approval,” Adrian said. “With a digital signature... under your name.”

For a moment, Aira couldn't hear the room properly.

It was like someone had poured water into her ears.

Across the table, Dimas looked at her.

And for the first time since the meeting began, his polished smile carried something else beneath it.

Satisfaction.

Ibu Laksmi tapped her pen once on the table—slow, deliberate.

“All right,” she said, voice flat. “Now we’re no longer dealing in suspicion. This is evidence.”

Surya nodded. “Finally.”

Aira rose.

She didn’t know how her body obeyed her when her mind was still trying to catch up, but she stood anyway—straight-backed, face composed, voice steady enough to make the room listen.

“Ma’am,” she said to Laksmi, “if that document is authentic, I’m prepared to take responsibility.”

Eyes locked onto her.

Aira continued, calm as a knife laid on velvet.

“But if it’s forged,” she said, “then whoever created it has just declared war—openly.”

The room held its breath.

And that’s when her phone vibrated in her pocket.

Aira didn't want to check it.

But instinct forced her hand.

A notification from Raka flashed across the screen:

I found something. This isn't just forgery. It's bigger. Meet me now.

Aira stared at the message for one heartbeat too long.

Then she lifted her eyes to the boardroom—full of faces, full of power, full of people calculating who should fall first.

Her voice didn't shake when she spoke.

“CEO,” she said, looking at Adrian, “I need ten minutes. There’s a development.”

Adrian’s gaze sharpened. “From whom?”

Aira held his eyes. “Engineering.”

Adrian nodded once, tight. “Go.”

Aira turned and walked out, the boardroom doors closing behind her like the end of a safe chapter.

In the corridor, the building still looked clean.

The city outside still moved like nothing had happened.

But Aira finally understood the truth she’d been refusing to name:

This wasn’t a technical breach.

This was a human one.

And someone had already chosen her as the headline.

She adjusted the edge of her hijab, breathed in slowly, and whispered the only thing that kept her from breaking under the weight of it all:

“Ya Allah... guard me from false accusation.”

Then she headed for Raka—

and whatever “bigger” meant.

Chapter 5

The Signature That Betrayed

Aira had always believed betrayal was loud.

A slammed door. A raised voice. A name said with contempt.

She was wrong.

Sometimes betrayal came in clean fonts and neat timestamps—wrapped in a system log that looked, at first glance, harmless. Professional. Ordinary.

Raka didn’t speak right away.

He simply angled his tablet toward her, the glow of the screen painting sharp lines across his face. The room they’d stepped into was one of Nusatech’s “quiet pods”—glass walls, whiteboard markers lined like

soldiers, a single camera in the corner that reminded everyone: this place was designed for truth, not comfort.

Adrian stood a few steps behind them, arms folded, expression unreadable. His presence made the air feel colder—like the company itself had stepped into the room.

Raka tapped the screen once.

“There,” he said, voice tight. “This is the approval record.”

Aira leaned in.

A line item blinked back at her:

Approved by: Aira Nasywa

Action: Temporary Admin Panel Access — Staging Environment

Status: Approved

Her name sat there like a stamp—final and absolute.

Her stomach dropped so fast she felt it in her knees.

“That’s not—” she started, then forced the words through. “That’s not possible.”

Raka didn’t argue. He didn’t soften it for her.

“Exactly,” he said. “Look at the timestamp.”

He highlighted the date. Aira’s eyes scanned the numbers, and for a second she genuinely thought she’d misread them—like her brain refused to accept what was right in front of her.

The approval had been logged **two days before** she’d even been officially active in the system.

Two days before she'd received her access badge.

Two days before she'd entered this building for the first time.

Aira straightened, her hands curling into fists against her thighs.

“No,” she said, more firmly this time. “My account didn’t even exist then.”

“It existed,” Raka corrected, careful. “IT created it in advance. That’s normal for executive onboarding. But—” He paused, then looked directly at her. “You hadn’t logged in yet. Not once.”

Aira’s throat tightened.

“So if there’s activity… under my name…”

“It means someone else used it.” Raka’s voice hardened. “Or worse—someone made the system **think** you used it.”

Adrian’s gaze flicked to Raka. “How?”

The question wasn’t curiosity. It was command.

Raka swiped to a second panel, pulling up a configuration screen Aira didn’t recognize. It looked like the inside of a machine—menus within menus, permissions stacked like invisible walls.

“Nusatech uses a delegated approval feature,” Raka explained. “It’s for executives who travel. You can assign a temporary approver to act on your behalf. It’s supposed to keep things moving when someone’s in a different timezone.”

Aira felt the room tilt slightly.

“So… someone could delegate approvals using my account?”

Raka nodded once, grim. “If they had the right admin access, they could create a delegation in your name. And once that delegation exists, approvals can be triggered without you touching anything. The system logs it as you.”

Aira stared at the screen, the words **delegated approval** echoing like a threat.

A signature you never signed.

A stamp you never lifted.

A crime committed wearing your identity like a suit.

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “Who has access to set delegations?”

Raka didn’t answer immediately. He tapped, pulled another log window, then turned the tablet slightly so all three of them could see.

A block of text appeared:

****Delegation created by: C.AFFAIRS.ADMIN****

****Requestor: D. ARLANGGA****

****Origin IP: 10.21.6.43 (Corporate Affairs Floor)****

The room went silent in a way that didn’t feel like quiet.

It felt like a verdict.

Aira didn’t react at first. Not outwardly.

Her body did the opposite of panic—went still, as if movement might break something inside her. She read the lines again, slower, like repetition could soften them.

C.AFFAIRS.ADMIN.

Corporate Affairs.

And the requestor...

D. Arlangga.

Adrian said the name like he was tasting poison. “Dimas.”

Raka’s eyes didn’t leave the screen. “And it’s not just that.”

He pulled up a timeline view. A series of access requests—one after another—each wrapped in a neat justification. Each designed to look urgent. Necessary. Reasonable.

“Two hours before the delegation was created,” Raka said, pointing, “Corporate Affairs requested temporary admin-panel access. Reason: ‘urgent investor briefing.’”

Aira swallowed. “And who approved it?”

Raka didn’t look at her when he answered. He looked at Adrian.

“It was approved through the executive channel,” he said. “Using the CEO token.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “I never gave anyone my token.”

The words landed heavy, because they didn’t sound like denial—they sounded like certainty.

Raka’s mouth tightened. “Then it was stolen.”

Aira felt cold creep up the back of her neck, slow and deliberate.

If the CEO’s identity could be stolen inside his own building, then the enemy wasn’t outside.

It was sitting in meeting rooms.

Smiling politely.

Shaking hands.

Aira forced herself to breathe in through her nose, out through her mouth—an old habit, the kind her uncle Harun had taught her without ever calling it a technique.

Don't let fear drive the cart, he'd said once. *Put it in the back seat. Let it ride, but don't let it steer.*

She looked at Adrian carefully. "Sir..."

He glanced at her.

"There's someone bold enough," she said softly, "to wear your name and shoot me with mine."

For the first time since they'd met, Adrian's expression changed—not much, but enough.

The cold CEO mask didn't crack; it shifted.

Like a man realizing the game wasn't just competitive—it was dirty.

He exhaled once, slow. Then he said, low and controlled:

"Ms. Aira... you're safe."

Aira didn't know why the words hit her so hard.

Safe.

Not *fine*. Not *handle it*. Not *prove yourself*.

Safe.

She should've felt relief. Instead, a different fear rose—quiet and sharp.

Because being “safe” didn’t mean you weren’t targeted.

It just meant someone had finally acknowledged the bullet.

Raka looked down at the log again, then spoke like he couldn’t help himself.

“They didn’t just set you up,” he said. “They designed it so the system would *testify against you*.”

Aira’s nails pressed into her palm.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

Adrian didn’t hesitate. “We lock this down.”

He turned slightly toward the door, already shifting into CEO mode—decisions moving faster than emotions.

“I want Security and Internal Audit looped in,” he said. “Now. No side channels. No ‘friendly calls.’ Everything documented.”

Raka nodded. “Chain of custody.”

Adrian’s eyes flicked to him, approval and warning mixed. “Exactly.”

Aira watched them—two men who moved through power differently.

Adrian ruled like a blade: clean, decisive, sometimes unforgiving.

Raka worked like a scalpel: precise, careful, built for cutting out the rot without killing the patient.

And she... she was the one being offered up as the patient **and** the scapegoat.

Aira straightened her shoulders, the fabric of her hijab settling against her collarbone like a quiet vow.

“Sir,” she said, voice steady, “if we confront Corporate Affairs without a formal umbrella, they’ll spin this.”

Adrian’s eyes sharpened. “You think they’ll control the narrative?”

“I think,” Aira said, choosing her words, “they already are.”

Raka’s gaze flicked to her, something unreadable in it—recognition, maybe. Respect. The kind that didn’t ask permission.

Adrian was silent for half a beat, then nodded once.

“Then we move before they do.”

He reached for his phone.

Aira expected him to call Security.

Instead, he paused, looking at the screen like he’d seen a message he didn’t like.

His posture changed.

Just slightly.

Enough for Aira to feel it before she understood it.

Raka noticed too. “What is it?”

Adrian’s voice lowered. “Board.”

Aira's stomach sank again. "They're calling you?"

Adrian's thumb hovered over the screen. "Emergency meeting request."

He looked at her—not as a test this time, but as a warning.

"And yes," he added, quiet. "It's about the leak."

Aira held his gaze, waiting for the second blade.

Adrian didn't make her wait.

"And it's about you."

The room felt too bright suddenly. Too exposed.

Like every glass wall in the building had turned into a spotlight.

Aira pressed her lips together, then nodded once—small, controlled.

"Okay," she said.

Raka's brows drew together. "Aira—"

She cut him off gently, without looking at him. "We stay professional."

It wasn't just a boundary.

It was armor.

Aira lifted her chin, clutching nothing but her composure, and in her chest she whispered a prayer so quick it barely formed into words.

Ya Allah. Don't let me win by becoming like them.

Adrian pocketed his phone, already moving toward the door.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Aira stepped forward with them, and as they left the quiet pod, she felt the weight of the building shift.

Like the next room they walked into wouldn’t just test a new director.

It would test whether integrity could survive in a place built for optics.

And somewhere, on another floor, someone was smiling—perfectly, politely—because the trap had finally started to close.

Chapter 6

A Clean Counterstrike

The boardroom door closed with a soft, deliberate hush—yet the sound landed like a judge’s gavel.

Dimas Arlangga had exited first, shoulders squared, his smile still intact in the way only practiced men could manage—polished enough to look harmless, sharp enough to cut. He’d said **temporary** like it was a technical term, not a warning. Like a pause button he still controlled.

Aira stayed where she was for a beat too long, forcing air into her lungs. There was a tremor in her hands she refused to acknowledge. Under her neatly draped hijab, she kept her posture steady—spine straight, chin level—because in this building, your body confessed before your mouth ever did.

“Ms. Aira.”

Adrian’s voice pulled her back. Calm. Flat. Firm.

She lifted her gaze.

“From this moment on,” Adrian said, tone clipped with resolve, “I want every update to come to me directly. No filters. No ‘interpretations.’ I don’t want anyone deciding what the CEO should or shouldn’t hear.”

Aira nodded once. “Understood, Sir.”

At the head of the table, the chairwoman tapped her pen against the wood. Laksmi’s eyes were sharp enough to read motives like financial statements.

“I want an update at six this evening,” Laksmi said. “If anything happens before then, you contact me immediately.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

As people began to gather their files, Surya—ever controlled, ever immaculate—stood without looking at Aira. Then, right before he stepped out, he paused. His voice stayed neutral, but it carried weight.

“Ms. Aira,” he said, “I pushed you in there. Don’t take it personally. If you fall, we all fall.”

Aira met his gaze. “I understand, Sir.”

Surya left without another word.

The room emptied until only Aira, Adrian, and a few staff remained to straighten papers and remove water glasses like none of this was war. But Aira could still feel it—something tightening in the air. The kind of pressure that didn’t belong to deadlines.

Adrian watched her for a second longer than he usually did.

“You did well in there,” he said quietly.

Aira didn’t smile. Praise in Nusatech was rarely pure. “We’re not done.”

“No,” Adrian agreed. “We’re not.”

Back in Adrian’s office, the glass walls made everything feel exposed—like even silence had an audience.

He sat, opened his laptop, and pressed the intercom. “Security Lead. Internal Audit. In here. Now.”

Then he looked at Aira again, not as if he was judging her—more as if he was recalculating the entire board.

“That evidence packet,” he said, voice low, “I want it sealed and kept with you. No one touches it unless it’s the Audit Committee.”

“It’s already sealed,” Aira replied. “Security logged chain-of-custody.”

A flicker of approval crossed Adrian’s face. “Fast.”

“It had to be.”

He held her gaze for two seconds, then—so abruptly it almost felt like a trap—he said a name.

“Raka.”

Aira didn’t react. Not outwardly. She waited.

Adrian’s tone stayed neutral. “He’s... your history?”

The question dropped onto the space between them like a cold coin.

Aira's spine didn't change. Her eyes didn't widen. She answered the only way she could survive in a room like this.

"That's not a workplace matter, Sir."

Adrian didn't look offended. If anything, he looked like he respected the boundary.

"I'm not asking for gossip," he said. "I'm asking because they will. Your enemies will weaponize anything that even looks like conflict of interest—personal proximity, past ties, rumors. We have to sterilize the process."

Aira inhaled slowly. "I've thought about it."

"Good," he said. "Then we do this clean. Everything documented. Every decision traceable. No private channels. No side conversations."

Aira nodded. "Agreed."

A knock came. The Security Lead entered first, followed by Internal Audit—both moving like men who already knew what a company could lose in one careless hour.

Adrian didn't waste a breath.

"We form a task force," he said. "Ms. Aira leads it. Corporate Affairs is frozen immediately. Seize all devices used by Dimas's team and the admin layer that handled delegated approvals."

Security nodded. "Already moving."

Internal Audit glanced at Aira, then Adrian. "There's a complication, Sir. Legal says all communications related to this incident should route through them."

Adrian's stare turned colder. "Legal reports to...?"

Audit hesitated. “For external coordination, they’re still reporting through Corporate Affairs.”

Adrian gave a humorless smile. “So Dimas still has a tail.”

Aira lifted her hand slightly. “Sir—permission.”

Adrian turned to her.

Aira spoke with a calm that wasn’t softness—it was control.

“For investigation purposes, we need a separate channel. Legal can be involved, but they cannot control internal flow. We need speed and evidence integrity. We route investigative comms through Audit and Security, with executive oversight. Legal gets copied. Not gatekeeping.”

Internal Audit looked relieved—as if someone had finally said out loud what everyone was afraid to.

Adrian nodded. “Do it.”

Within an hour, the task force existed.

Aira claimed a small meeting room near the executive wing and turned it into a war-room. On the whiteboard she wrote in bold letters:

****THE 48-HOUR OBJECTIVE****

1. Secure evidence (logs, devices, audit trails)
2. Identify the actor and motive
3. Keep the launch timeline realistic (no denial-fantasy)
4. Seal the rumor pipelines and conflict-of-interest angles

Nisa moved quickly, setting a schedule, listing attendees, making sure no one “accidentally” missed critical sessions. Security arrived with device inventories. Audit brought chain-of-custody templates.

Raka entered quietly with a laptop and two encrypted drives. He paused at the doorway for half a second, like he was checking whether Aira would permit his presence.

Aira didn’t give him a long look. She pointed to a chair at the far side of the room.

“Sit there,” she said, professional. Clean. Controlled.

Raka nodded and obeyed.

The room filled with bodies, but Aira could still read the lines between them: who came to help, who came to observe, who came to position themselves in case power shifted overnight.

She began the briefing without raising her voice.

“We are not reacting,” Aira said. “We are moving first. They’re using two weapons: lies and speed. Our weapons are evidence and consistency.”

Silence held.

Internal Audit nodded once. “Then we go straight to the center: who’s the brain?”

That question had hovered since yesterday like a storm refusing to rain. Dimas was cornered. A few accounts had already been flagged. But the pattern—the precision—felt too organized to be one man’s panic.

Aira looked at the timeline projected on the screen.

“If Dimas and the admin layer are only hands,” she said, “then there’s a head.”

By late afternoon, the war-room had a rhythm: a quiet urgency that didn't spill into chaos. Aira demanded documentation for every step. Security logged every device transfer. Audit checked every access trail. Raka traced pathways through systems like he was following footprints in the dark.

And then the first ripple came.

Nisa raised her hand, hesitant. "Ma'am... an email came in. From media."

The room cooled instantly.

Aira lifted her chin. "Which outlet?"

Nisa read quickly. "They're asking for comment on... rumors. About you and the CEO. They specifically mention 'conflict of interest' and 'improper proximity' between the new Strategy Director and the person leading the investigation."

Aira didn't blink. She didn't let her face change. But her throat tightened just enough for her to feel it.

"So they're not just attacking the incident," Aira said. "They're attacking the integrity of the response."

She turned slightly to Raka, but not the way people turned to ex-lovers. The way leaders turned to specialists.

"From this second," Aira said, "no direct communication between you and me outside documented channels. War-room only, or email with Audit and Security copied."

Raka nodded quickly. "Okay."

She looked at Nisa. "For media: standard response. The company is investigating. Official communications come only from the CEO and the

Board. No comment on personal rumor.”

Nisa nodded. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Aira looked at Security. “Track internal rumor sources. If this leaked outward, someone inside fed it.”

Security gave a firm nod. “We’ll check document access, printing, forwards.”

Aira didn’t miss the flicker in Raka’s eyes—something like guilt, held back by discipline. She refused to give her past oxygen. Not today.

A little after five, Adrian came into the war-room.

His presence tightened the room the way a storm changes air pressure. The talkative people became concise. The nervous people sat straighter.

Adrian scanned the timeline, then looked at Aira. “Progress?”

Aira stood. “We’ve locked delegated approvals. We seized the admin layer access list. We’re tracking device usage and who signed out equipment. And... rumor has started to be seeded externally to poison the investigation.”

Adrian exhaled once. “Dimas.”

Aira didn’t say the name. She didn’t need to.

Adrian looked around the room. “Everyone here understands this is bigger than one person’s reputation. If we lose credibility, we lose the company. Launch goes down, investors panic, the Board fractures. And the people behind this win without ever stepping into sunlight.”

Then he turned to Aira again. “Come with me.”

She followed him out, leaving Audit and Security to steer the room.

In the corridor near a small pantry, Adrian stopped.

“You were strict about the communication boundary with Raka,” Adrian said.

Aira nodded. “They’ll use anything.”

Adrian’s eyes softened by a fraction—not romantic, not indulgent. Human.

“I don’t care about your past,” he said. “I care about your safety.”

Aira held her breath for a beat. There was something in that sentence—something she refused to name.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said, and kept it short because anything longer might tremble.

Adrian studied her. “You’re strong.”

Aira met his gaze. “I just have something to hold onto.”

He didn’t ask what. But he looked like he understood.

His phone rang.

He glanced at the screen, and his face tightened. “Dad.”

Aira kept her eyes forward, giving him privacy without being told.

Adrian answered. “Dad.”

His father’s voice carried through, clear even without being loud.

“Have you heard the rumors they’re spreading?” the older man asked.

Adrian closed his eyes briefly. “Yes.”

“And you still want to stay quiet?” His father’s tone sharpened.

“I don’t want to amplify it,” Adrian said.

“That’s not amplification,” his father cut in. “That’s protection. If you don’t stand, you teach that office that slander is more powerful than work.”

Adrian’s gaze flicked to Aira.

“What do you want me to do?” Adrian asked.

“Stand,” his father said simply. “Stand on the side of facts. And make sure this is driven officially—by the Audit Committee. Not by one ‘new director’ standing alone.”

Adrian nodded slightly. “I can do that.”

Then his father’s voice lowered, quieter—almost gentler.

“Adrian… you’ll be tested. People will force you to choose: comfort or right.”

Adrian looked at Aira again, longer this time.

“I choose right,” he said.

The call ended.

Aira swallowed, unsure what she was feeling—only certain that in Nusatech, saying **I choose right** came with a price tag.

Night began to settle when Security returned to the war-room with a laptop sealed inside a clear evidence bag.

“Ma’am,” the Security Lead said, “this is a loaner device signed out from IT inventory. Borrowed under a staff name: **Rendi Pramana**.”

Aira stared at the name. New. Unknown.

“Who is he?” she asked.

Nisa was already pulling HR records. “New staff, Ma’am. Joined two months ago. Position: Executive Admin, Corporate Affairs.”

Raka muttered, eyes on the bag. “New staff are the easiest to push.”

Aira looked at Internal Audit. “Bring him in. By procedure. Witnesses, recording, HR present.”

Audit nodded. “Understood.”

Fifteen minutes later, Rendi sat in the small meeting room next door—hands trembling, face pale, eyes darting like a trapped animal.

Aira sat opposite him. Not looming. Not cruel. Just unmovable.

“Rendi,” she said gently, “we’re not accusing you. We’re verifying facts. You borrowed this laptop?”

He nodded fast. “Y-yes, Ma’am.”

“For what purpose?”

He swallowed. His eyes flicked toward the door like he hoped someone would rescue him.

“For... investor presentation,” he whispered.

Aira kept her voice steady. “Who asked you to borrow it?”

Rendi hesitated.

Internal Audit leaned forward. “Rendi, you’re protected if you’re honest. But you can become a victim if you cover for someone.”

Rendi’s throat bobbed. Then, finally—like a confession ripping through fear

“Mr. Dimas,” he said.

The name landed in the room like a nail.

Aira didn’t flinch. She asked quietly, “Mr. Dimas asked you to borrow the laptop?”

Rendi nodded, tears gathering. “He said… urgent. He said the CEO needed it. I… I was scared, Ma’am.”

Aira breathed in slowly.

“Did you ever see Mr. Dimas using the laptop?” she asked.

Rendi nodded harder. “Yes. He brought it into his office. And he told me not to tell anyone.”

Aira turned to Security. “Do we have CCTV coverage?”

Security nodded. “Yes. We’ll pull it.”

Raka spoke, voice controlled but charged with purpose. “If CCTV shows Dimas carrying the device, it’s not just suspicion. It’s a chain.”

Aira nodded once. “Correct.”

Rendi’s tears finally spilled. “Ma’am… I didn’t know what it was for. I just

Aira softened her eyes without softening her stance.

“You’re not the enemy,” she told him. “You’re someone who got used.”

Rendi looked at her like someone had finally allowed him to breathe.

Aira signaled HR and Audit. “Document his statement. He stays protected. No intimidation. No retaliation.”

Then she stood, ready to move forward—because evidence was mercy, but it was also a weapon.

Her phone vibrated.

An email notification.

Aira’s blood cooled as soon as she saw the subject line:

“TAKEDOWN PLAN: AIRA — FINAL.”

Sender: Anonymous.

She opened it instantly.

Attached were screenshots—fabricated internal chats—made to look like private messages between her and someone high up. The tone was falsely warm, falsely intimate, constructed like bait.

And underneath the screenshots, one sentence:

“Tomorrow morning the Board will finally have a reason to kick you out. And this time, Adrian won’t be able to save you.”

Aira lowered the screen slowly. The tremor reached the tips of her fingers, and she forced it back down with sheer will.

Raka noticed the shift in her face. “Ma’am… what is it?”

Aira looked at him, then at everyone in the room.

Her voice stayed calm—but it turned colder.

“Phase two,” she said. “Slander.”

Adrian’s gaze sharpened. “They’re manufacturing evidence.”

Aira nodded. “And the target isn’t only me.”

She glanced at Raka—not personally, not emotionally. Strategically.

“The target is the credibility of the investigation.”

Silence dropped like a curtain.

Aira inhaled, long and controlled, and murmured—almost to herself—

“If they’re doing this now... it means they’re panicking.”

As if answering her thought, her phone vibrated again.

A message from an unknown number:

“If you keep moving, we’ll drag your guardian down with you.”

Aira froze.

Uncle Harun.

They dared to touch him.

She lifted her chin and looked around the room at the faces waiting for direction—Audit, Security, Nisa, Raka, Adrian.

“All right,” Aira said softly, but there was steel under the softness. “If they’re bringing family into this... we stop playing gentle.”

She looked straight at Adrian.

“Sir,” she said, “I’m asking permission for one thing. Tomorrow morning, before they frame the narrative any further—I want to meet Dimas. With witnesses. With recording.”

Adrian held her gaze for a long second.

Then he nodded once. “I’ll come.”

And when Aira lowered her eyes—not out of fear, but to hold back the tears threatening to rise—she whispered inside her chest, where only God could hear:

Ya Allah... don’t let slander win just because I chose the right path.

Chapter 7

The Smile That Cracked

Morning in Jakarta didn’t arrive with gentleness.

It came in layers—humidity first, then traffic, then the familiar weight of a city that never asked whether you were ready. Aira had been awake long before the call to prayer faded into the distance. She’d prayed longer than usual, not for drama, not for comfort—just to keep her chest from tightening into something she couldn’t control.

Ya Allah... keep me steady. Keep me clean.

By the time she reached the executive floor, her face was calm. Her hands were not.

Nisa met her at the corridor with a tablet clutched like a shield. “Ma’am,” she whispered, voice too careful, “the Board is already inside. External

counsel is here. Forensics too.”

Aira gave a small nod. “Is everything recorded?”

“Yes. Official notetaker. Security log. Everything.”

Good. If they wanted to kill her with “perception,” she would defend herself with procedure.

And still—she could feel it, like static under her skin.

Somewhere, someone was already writing the headline.

The boardroom looked the same as always: expensive wood, silent glass, a skyline that pretended it wasn’t listening.

But today it felt different. Sharper. Like the room had teeth.

Ibu Laksmi sat at the far end, posture straight, expression blank in the way only people with real power could afford. On her left, a board member Aira barely knew—Pak Rahman—watched everything the way auditors watched numbers: not impressed, just alert. The CFO, Surya, sat with hands clasped like he was about to read a verdict.

And then there was Dimas Arlangga.

He arrived as if he was late to a charity dinner, not a crisis hearing. Same flawless suit. Same polished grin—just wide enough to seem friendly, not wide enough to look desperate.

Aira noted the little things most people missed.

The way he straightened his cufflinks twice.

The way his eyes tracked the cameras before he sat.

The way he looked at Aira—briefly—like she was a new object in his workspace that hadn't been labeled yet.

Adrian entered last.

No greeting. No small talk. He took his seat, face unreadable, and nodded once to the external counsel.

“Start,” Adrian said.

Ibu Laksmi didn't soften her voice. “This is not a meeting about reputation. It's about integrity. We speak with evidence.”

Dimas smiled, as if integrity was a branding concept he could package.

“Of course,” he said smoothly. “I'm the first to support a clean process.”

Aira didn't blink.

Clean was exactly what Dimas feared.

The counsel projected a timeline, and the room shifted into that corporate quiet where people stopped being human and became decisions.

Aira stayed slightly off to the side, as agreed—evidence custodian, not prosecutor. Let the system speak, Paman Harun would've said. Don't let your ego do the job that procedure can do better.

Then the questions began.

Aira opened her file and kept her tone flat.

“Pak Dimas,” she said, “a delegation approval was created from the **C.AFFAIRS.ADMIN** role. The requestor is logged under your department access. Are you confirming or denying involvement?”

Dimas sighed lightly, as if she'd asked him whether he'd ordered oat milk.

"I deny it," he said. "I don't even have that kind of admin access. Corporate Affairs deals with messaging, not permissions."

The Head of Security didn't move his face. "The role exists. And the device is registered."

Dimas shrugged with practiced confidence. "Devices get shared. This is a big company. Don't be naïve."

Aira let the words sit for half a second—then slid the next document forward.

"That's why we checked who signed the device out."

HR spoke next. "The loaner laptop was checked out under your staff member's name: **Rendi Pramana**."

Dimas tilted his head. "Rendi? The new kid?"

He gave a tiny laugh, the kind that sounded like compassion but wasn't.

"If there's a mistake," he continued, "it's probably him. Admin people click things without understanding impact."

Adrian tapped the table once.

Not loud. Just final.

"Dimas," Adrian said. "Stop spinning."

For a fraction of a second, Dimas's smile thinned.

Aira didn't rush. She pushed one more sheet to the center.

“This is Rendi’s signed statement,” she said calmly. “Witnessed by HR and Audit. He states you asked him to borrow the laptop, you brought it into your office, and you told him not to speak.”

A crack—barely visible—ran through Dimas’s expression.

It lasted less than a heartbeat.

Then the smile came back.

“Oh,” he said, as if disappointed in the world. “So now we trust a panicking new staff member over a department head?”

“We don’t trust panic,” Aira replied. “We verify.”

She nodded at Security.

The screen changed.

CCTV footage filled the wall—Corporate Affairs corridor, grainy and silent. A man in a sharp suit walked into frame, lifted a laptop bag from storage, and disappeared into an office.

Dimas.

This time, his eyes didn’t have enough time to rebuild the smile.

Adrian leaned forward slightly. “Still want to call that coincidence?”

Dimas swallowed.

Then he snapped back into what Aira had started calling *communications mode*—the polished voice, the gentle hands, the tone designed to make truth feel negotiable.

“That laptop was for investor presentation materials,” he said quickly. “Yes, I used it. That doesn’t prove I hacked anything.”

Aira nodded once. “Correct. That alone doesn’t prove hijacking.”

And then she clicked the remote.

A new slide appeared: **Origin IP + Attempt Delete Log**

“This does,” Aira said, voice steady.

The audit trail showed access originating from the Corporate Affairs floor, executed under **C.AFFAIRS.ADMIN**, and—most damning—an attempt to delete logs while the board meeting was actively happening.

The Head of Audit added quietly, “The attempt came from the same role.”

For the first time, Dimas didn’t answer immediately.

He adjusted his cufflink again. Once. Twice.

Looking for ground.

Then he lifted his gaze to Aira, and the warmth left his face.

“Ms. Aira,” he said softly, “you’re smart. But you’re new. You don’t know what you’re disturbing.”

Aira held his stare.

“I’m disturbing slander,” she said.

Dimas smiled again—only now it wasn’t friendly. It was bored.

“Slander?” he repeated. “I manage perception. That’s my job. Companies don’t live on truth alone. They live on investor trust.”

Adrian’s voice sharpened. “And you think investor trust is built through sabotage?”

Dimas's shoulders lifted in a thin shrug. "The world is cruel, Sir. Sometimes you choose: be honest and collapse... or stay clean-looking and survive."

Aira didn't flinch.

She'd met men like this before—not in boardrooms, but in life. The kind who spoke of cruelty like it was an excuse, not a confession.

"Pak Dimas," she said evenly, "why did you create delegation under my name?"

Dimas looked at her for a long moment.

Then, very calmly: "I didn't."

Aira nodded. "Okay."

That "okay" wasn't surrender.

It was the sound of a trap closing.

She opened another folder—one she had kept quiet until now.

"Do you know what's most dangerous about tidy people?" Aira asked, still calm.

Dimas narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"They forget the system can record what they didn't expect."

She turned to the Head of Audit.

"Please play the recovered files from the loaner laptop."

Forensics connected the sealed device.

A hidden folder appeared—recovered before the deletion attempt could wipe it clean.

One file opened:

****draft_email_media_FINAL.docx****

A press release template.

Not finalized.

But chillingly specific.

The company will conduct an internal evaluation of the new executive suspected of violating security protocol...

The name wasn't written yet.

But the metadata was.

****Author: Dimas Arlangga.****

For a second, the room turned to stone.

Dimas stared at the screen—too long.

Then he let out a small laugh. “You’re seriously going to trap me with metadata? That can be—”

“Continue,” Adrian cut in, voice low and dangerous.

Audit opened a second file: an internal chat export.

Not the fake romantic screenshots that had landed in Aira’s inbox last night.

This one had admin-level requests—delegation creation, access routing, approvals.

And the account name was sitting there like a signature:

D. Arlangga

Dimas closed his eyes briefly.

When he opened them, the smile returned—only now it looked like a mask being forced onto a face that didn't want it.

“Pak Adrian,” Dimas said quietly, “if you remove me, you’ll create chaos. Media will smell blood. Investors will panic.”

Adrian didn't blink. “Investors will panic when they learn you forged approvals under my director’s name and tried to erase the logs.”

Dimas’s gaze slid to Aira.

And his voice dropped—more private, more personal, more poisonous.

“You think you’re defending what’s right,” he murmured. “But people like you have... weak points.”

Aira felt the old cold spread at the base of her neck.

The anonymous message from last night flashed in her head.

Your guardian will be dragged too.

Paman Harun.

Her jaw tightened—just once—then she loosened it again. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her shake.

Not here.

Not recorded.

Not in front of people who would turn her fear into a headline.

Ibu Laksmi's pen tapped once. "Enough."

Her voice was calm, but the room obeyed it like law.

"Pak Dimas," she said, "your access is frozen. You are placed on immediate suspension pending formal investigation. Security will escort you."

Dimas stood slowly, still wearing that near-smile.

He looked around the room as if memorizing everyone's faces.

Then he looked at Aira one last time.

And Aira realized something terrifying:

A smile could be a weapon.

And his had only just broken.

In the corridor outside, the executive wing hummed with quiet panic. People pretended to work while their eyes hunted for updates. Phones glowed under tables like forbidden candles.

Nisa approached Aira with a tight expression. "Ma'am... there are reporters downstairs."

Aira didn't look surprised.

Of course there were.

Someone had invited them.

Adrian stepped beside her.

For a second, his voice softened—not in a romantic way, not in a careless way. In the way a leader speaks when he finally understands the cost of choosing right.

“You were right,” he said quietly. “This isn’t just one man.”

Aira nodded. “No. It’s a system.”

Adrian looked down the corridor, jaw set. “Then we break it.”

Aira’s phone vibrated in her palm.

Unknown number.

She didn’t open it. Not here.

But she already knew what it would say.

Because Dimas’s smile had cracked in the room...

...and outside the room, someone else was already smiling—ready to sell a cheap story to the world.

And Chapter Eight was coming like an ambulance siren: loud, urgent, and full of people who would pretend they were helping while deciding who to sacrifice.

Chapter 8

The Headline Before the Truth

The lobby smelled like expensive coffee and cheap hunger.

Cameras stood behind the revolving doors like teeth—waiting for a mistake, waiting for a tremble, waiting for a woman in a hijab to become a headline they could sell in five words or less.

Aira stayed on the executive floor for as long as she could. Not because she was hiding, but because she understood something now:

In a crisis, truth moved slowly.

But rumors ran like wildfire.

Nisa hovered near her, tablet pressed to her chest. “Ma’am... they’re asking for you by name.”

Aira didn’t react. “Who?”

“Two outlets,” Nisa whispered. “And... one influencer account that always gets information too fast.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “Someone tipped them.”

Aira’s mind sharpened into a narrow, dangerous clarity. If Dimas had been suspended, then whoever was feeding the media had either moved early—or moved around him.

Head. Not hands.

Aira looked at Security. “Where are they positioned?”

“Front lobby and side entrance,” the Security Lead answered. “They’re trying to catch anyone coming down.”

Adrian exhaled once, slow. “Then we don’t give them a chase.”

He turned to Aira. “You’re not going to the lobby.”

Aira held his gaze. “Sir—if we vanish, they’ll say we’re guilty.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “If you show up, they’ll twist it.”

Aira nodded once. “That’s why we choose the frame.”

She didn’t say it dramatically. She said it like someone arranging evidence on a table: clean, deliberate.

Adrian studied her for a beat.

Then he nodded, tight. “Fine. But you don’t go alone.”

Aira didn’t argue. She knew what “alone” looked like in this building: isolated, stripped, easier to blame.

In the war-room, Internal Audit prepared a short statement—no names, no admissions, just enough to stop the bleeding.

Nusatech is conducting an internal investigation into unauthorized access activity. The company is cooperating with relevant internal control functions. Further updates will be provided through official channels.

It was safe.

Too safe.

The kind of safe that didn’t win wars—only paused them.

Aira watched the words and felt her throat tighten.

“They’ll call this evasive,” she said quietly.

Audit nodded. “Evasive is better than legally exposed.”

Aira’s eyes went to the evidence inventory list on the wall: the laptop, the logs, the delegation feature proof, the recovered drafts, the deletion attempt.

“We have proof of manipulation,” she said. “Not enough to name the head. But enough to say this isn’t ‘a new director’s mistake.’”

Adrian’s voice was flat. “You want to push back publicly.”

“I want to stop them from building the wrong story,” Aira replied. “Before it becomes permanent.”

Silence held.

Then Raka—who’d stayed quiet most of the morning, working like a man trying to erase a fire with a spoon—spoke softly.

“They’re already building it,” he said.

Aira turned her head slightly. “What do you mean?”

Raka slid his phone across the table.

On the screen was an article draft—unpublished but already in circulation through “whisper networks.” The headline was a blade:

****NEW HIJAB-WEARING EXECUTIVE LINKED TO SECURITY BREACH, SOURCES SAY****

Underneath were phrases like **alleged**, **insider claims**, **conflict of interest**, **special access**.

Aira’s stomach turned cold.

She didn't need to read the full thing to know what it was.

Not journalism.

Targeting.

Adrian's eyes darkened. "Where did you get this?"

Raka's voice was tight. "A friend in PR circles. He said the draft landed in multiple group chats. Someone is shopping it."

Aira's fingers pressed into her palm. "So they're moving the narrative even with Dimas suspended."

Adrian's voice dropped. "Meaning Dimas wasn't the only mouth."

Aira nodded once. "Meaning the head is still smiling."

Her phone vibrated again.

Unknown number.

This time, she didn't ignore it.

She opened the message.

"We told you. The Board will choose optics. Not you."

Aira's face stayed composed—but her blood cooled as the next message arrived.

"And your guardian? We have his name on a list too."

Her breath caught.

Uncle Harun wasn't just a person in her life. He was her remaining pillar. The man who had raised her after her father died, who taught her that dignity wasn't something you demanded—it was something you practiced.

Aira stood so suddenly her chair scraped the floor.

Nisa startled. "Ma'am—?"

Aira forced her voice to remain steady. "Security. I need a check."

"On what?" Security asked immediately.

Aira swallowed once. "On someone outside this building."

Adrian's gaze sharpened. "Who?"

Aira didn't want to say it. Saying it made it real.

"My uncle," she answered.

A beat of silence.

Then Adrian nodded, already moving. "Do it. Quietly."

Security didn't ask questions. He stepped aside, calling two staff on his radio with coded language.

Aira's hands went cold.

She looked at Raka without meaning to.

Raka's eyes held hers for a fraction of a second—long enough to show something he hadn't allowed himself to show before:

Regret.

But she couldn't carry his regret today. She had too much already.

“We proceed,” she said, voice firm. “We don’t freeze.”

Adrian watched her like he was measuring whether she would break.

She didn’t.

Not because she was fearless.

Because she refused to become the kind of person Dimas wanted her to be: messy, emotional, easy to discredit.

At noon, Adrian made a decision that changed the air in the building.

He called a short internal broadcast—executive-only.

No drama. No long speech. Just one clean move.

“The investigation is now under Audit Committee oversight,” Adrian said. “No department will manage its own narrative. No one will pressure the team leading containment. Any attempt to interfere will be treated as misconduct.”

His voice didn’t rise.

It didn’t need to.

And for the first time since Aira walked into Nusatech, she saw something shift: not kindness, but clarity. The kind that made cowards nervous.

After the broadcast, a message arrived on Aira’s email—internal, high priority:

MEETING REQUEST: Audit Committee — Immediate

Aira stared at it for a heartbeat.

This wasn't a normal escalation.

This was the Board stepping closer to the fire.

Adrian looked at her. "We go together."

Aira nodded. "Yes."

Raka stood too. "Do you want me—"

Aira cut him off gently. "Not this one."

Raka's jaw tightened, but he nodded. He understood, even if it stung.

This was political territory now.

And politics didn't forgive the appearance of closeness.

The Audit Committee room was smaller than the boardroom, but it felt heavier. Less theater. More consequences.

Ibu Laksmi sat at the head, expression unreadable. Two other members sat beside her, one with legal training, one with an operations background.

"Bu Aira," Laksmi began, voice controlled, "you're under attack."

Aira didn't deny it. "Yes, Ma'am."

Laksmi slid a printed page across the table.

It was a screenshot of the fake chat images Aira had received—the ones designed to look intimate and inappropriate. The ones meant to poison her legitimacy.

“We received this anonymously,” Laksmi said. “Half an hour ago. Sent to multiple board members.”

Aira’s chest tightened.

Adrian’s eyes narrowed to a dangerous calm. “So they’re directly targeting the Board now.”

Laksmi nodded once. “They want us to panic.”

Aira’s voice stayed even. “It’s fabricated.”

“Can you prove it?” the legal-trained member asked.

Aira nodded. “Yes. We have a forensics path. Metadata analysis, origin trace, and—” she paused and chose her next words carefully, “—we also have evidence that someone attempted to create forged approvals using delegated approver features. This is consistent behavior.”

The operations member leaned forward. “Who do you believe is behind it?”

Aira didn’t answer with a name.

She answered with a principle.

“Someone who benefits from chaos,” she said. “Someone who has access to executive routes. Someone who can move information quickly—inside and outside the building.”

Laksmi’s pen tapped once. “And Dimas?”

Aira inhaled. “Dimas is involved. But he’s not the only one who can move a story this fast.”

Adrian’s voice cut in. “She’s right.”

Silence.

Laksmi studied Adrian. “You’re willing to put your name on that?”

Adrian’s eyes didn’t blink. “Yes.”

Laksmi leaned back slightly. “All right.”

Then she looked at Aira again, and her voice lowered—less boardroom, more human.

“Bu Aira,” she said, “this won’t end with logs.”

Aira held her gaze. “I know.”

Laksmi nodded slowly. “They’ll come for your credibility. Your faith. Your family. They’ll try to make you look like a symbol instead of a professional.”

Aira’s throat tightened, but her voice didn’t. “Then we keep it clean.”

Laksmi’s eyes sharpened. “Clean doesn’t always win.”

Aira answered quietly, and for the first time, she allowed faith into the room without apologizing for it.

“Clean is what I can answer for in front of God.”

The legal member looked away, uncomfortable. The operations member stayed still, thoughtful.

Adrian didn’t move—just watched her, like he’d finally understood why his father had used the word **amanah** with such weight.

Laksmi exhaled once. “Fine.”

She reached for a folder and slid it toward Adrian.

“Here’s what we do,” she said. “We authorize full internal investigation authority—access to all departmental devices, all exec-route logs, all comms related to the incident. And we appoint an independent investigator to supervise Audit.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “Independent?”

“Yes,” Laksmi said. “Because if we only investigate ourselves, the market will assume we’re hiding.”

Adrian’s gaze flicked to Aira. Then back to Laksmi.

“Do it,” Adrian said.

Laksmi’s pen tapped once, final. “And one more thing.”

She looked directly at Aira.

“You will not be alone in this.”

Aira’s chest tightened unexpectedly—because she didn’t trust comfort in rooms like this.

But this wasn’t comfort.

This was strategy.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Aira said softly.

As they left the committee room, Aira’s phone vibrated again.

Security message.

“Ma’am. Your uncle is safe. No direct threat detected. But we’re monitoring.”

Aira released a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

For two seconds, her eyes stung.

She blinked it away.

Adrian walked beside her, silent.

At the elevator, he spoke quietly—so quietly it barely felt like the words belonged in a corporate building.

“They’re escalating.”

Aira nodded. “Because we touched a nerve.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Then we press harder.”

The elevator doors opened.

They stepped inside.

And as the doors slid shut, Aira caught her own reflection in the mirrored wall: a woman in a hijab, face calm, eyes holding storms.

She remembered the first morning.

The unwelcoming seat.

Now she understood:

The seat wasn’t just unwelcoming.

It was a battlefield.

Her phone buzzed once more.

A new message—this one without threat.

Just four words:

“Meet me. Alone. Tonight.”

Sender ID: blocked.

Aira stared at the screen, heart steady—but mind blazing.

Because that message could only mean one thing:

Someone from inside the snake pit wanted to talk.

And Chapter Nine would ask the most dangerous question of all—

When truth invites you to a private room...

...is it an offer?

Or another trap?

Chapter 9

The Legal Mask

The elevator rose like it was lifting something heavier than people.

Aira stood perfectly still, eyes fixed on the glowing floor numbers as they climbed. The building hummed—soft, expensive, confident. Nusatech always sounded like it knew it would win.

In her head, one sentence looped like a warning siren:

“Instructions from Mr. Rahman.”

He’d sat at the board table earlier, polished and composed, talking about governance and investor confidence. He’d suggested—so gently, so *reasonably*—that Aira be “temporarily separated” from the investigation for the sake of “stability.”

A calm voice.

A clean suit.

A knife hidden inside a sentence.

And now he’d sent an official email—legal letterhead, formal tone—demanding the investigation be stopped.

Aira let out a slow breath.

When your enemy speaks softly and stamps everything with law, you have to be twice as precise.

The elevator doors opened to the executive floor.

Nisa was already waiting. Her face was pale, but her eyes were sharp—trying to be braver than she felt.

“Ma’am,” Nisa said, offering her tablet with both hands. “It’s here.”

Aira skimmed the email fast.

The words were icy, professional, weaponized:

“procedural breach,”
“potential defamation,”
“exposure risk,”

and then the line that made her jaw tighten:

“...any internal investigation must be coordinated with board legal counsel to ensure compliance.”

In other words:

Let us hold the steering wheel. Let us choose what the truth looks like.

Aira handed the tablet back. “Forward it to Internal Audit, Security, and... Adrian.”

“Already did, Ma’am.” Nisa swallowed. “But Mr. Adrian hasn’t replied yet.”

“He’s with the board,” Aira said.

Nisa nodded, then hesitated. “And the press statement... Comms is ready. But Corporate Affairs is insisting we hold it until Legal reviews it.”

Aira’s eyes narrowed. “Corporate Affairs *which* team?”

Nisa’s throat bobbed. “Some of Mr. Dimas’s people are still active. They’re saying it’s ‘procedure.’”

Aira gave a small, humorless nod. “Procedure... or a brake pedal.”

Nisa fell silent.

Aira pushed open the war-room door.

Inside, the air felt like a cable pulled too tight—one wrong move and it would snap.

Screens glowed with logs, device lists, timestamps. A whiteboard held a timeline like a skeleton of the last forty-eight hours. Security moved with clipped urgency. Audit spoke in low voices. Someone was on the phone with IT. Somewhere, a printer spit out a report nobody wanted to read.

Raka stood near the board, staring at evidence like he was calculating the shape of the storm.

When Aira entered, heads turned.

She didn't waste a second.

“We've got escalation,” she said.

She mirrored the email onto the main screen.

The Head of Internal Audit exhaled through his nose. “He wants to take control of the investigation.”

Security made a low sound of disgust. “If Legal holds it, evidence can be... curated.”

Aira nodded once. “Exactly.”

Raka lifted a hand carefully. “Ma’am... if Rahman is involved, that means this is bigger than Dimas. Dimas might be the operator, not the architect.”

Aira’s gaze locked on him. “Agreed.”

The Head of Audit looked at her. “Next step?”

Aira turned to the whiteboard and wrote one word in thick marker:

ESCALATE.

“We take this to the Audit Committee,” Aira said. “Not Legal. And from this moment on, chain-of-custody becomes sacred. Because they’re going to attack the evidence next.”

Security nodded sharply. “We can move all physical evidence to the audit storage room. Sealed. Logged.”

“Do it,” Aira said.

Raka leaned forward. “We should also hash-verify every log file and CCTV extract. Encrypted offsite copy too—handled by an external cyber firm. If anyone touches the originals, we’ll know.”

The Head of Audit’s eyes flicked to Aira—approval, cautious but real. “That would make tampering visible.”

Aira held Raka’s gaze. “Do it. But through Audit. Clean, documented, repeatable.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Raka said.

Nisa slipped back in, moving fast. “Ma’am—message from Mr. Adrian.”

Aira took the phone. Read quickly.

Her shoulders softened only a fraction.

“Release it,” Aira said, returning the device. “But through Adrian’s office. And make sure it doesn’t mention my guardian—my uncle—not even indirectly. We’re not extending their slander.”

The Head of Audit nodded. “We stick to facts and process.”

Security shifted. “Legal can still claim the statement is unauthorized.”

Aira looked at him calmly. “If the statement only affirms an ongoing investigation and commitment to governance, it isn’t a violation. The

violation is the person who leaked a smear in the first place.”

The Head of Audit gave a thin smile. “You’re starting to sound like someone who’s been forced to learn how stamped paper works.”

Aira didn’t smile back. “I’ve been forced to learn fast.”

While the war-room moved, the building had another pulse—one quieter, colder.

An hour later, Adrian stepped inside.

He looked like a man who’d just walked out of a room where people smiled while sharpening blades. His face was composed, but his eyes were harder than usual.

Everyone stood instinctively.

Adrian raised a hand. “Sit.”

They sat.

“Rahman tried to stop the investigation,” he said flatly. “He called it ‘procedure.’”

Aira nodded. “And the truth?”

Adrian stared at her. “The truth is... he’s panicking.”

The Head of Audit frowned. “What did the board say?”

“Split,” Adrian said. “Laksmi is with us. Surya wants to ‘protect investors.’ And Rahman...” He paused. “Rahman wants the remote control.”

Aira's voice stayed soft. "Does Rahman know we have the instruction chat?"

Adrian's jaw tensed. "Not yet. I held it. I wanted him to talk more first."

Aira understood immediately.

Let the snake think it's safe—so it moves. So it reveals where it lives.

Adrian continued, "He threatened to send a letter to investors claiming we're noncompliant if we move without board Legal."

Security hissed under his breath. "Reputation sabotage."

Aira met Adrian's eyes. "We have evidence he instructed staff to leak the smear to the PR vendor. That's sabotage too."

Adrian's gaze didn't move. "Which is why we need the right moment."

Aira stood, folder in hand. "If we wait, they'll control the narrative first. We brief the Audit Committee now. And we bring in an external cyber firm today. Give the investigation a formal shield Rahman can't touch."

The door opened before anyone could respond.

Mrs. Laksmi stepped into the war-room without knocking.

The room rose to its feet like the air itself had snapped to attention.

She was a senior commissioner, chair of the Audit Committee—known for being quiet in public and ruthless in private. Her expression was serious, but her eyes had a steady, bright anger in them—the kind that hated dirty games.

"Good," she said simply. "I've heard enough."

Aira's throat tightened. "Ma'am—"

Mrs. Laksmi's gaze pinned her. "Five minutes. Tell me what you have. And tell me why I should believe this isn't an ego war between departments."

Aira didn't speak like a woman defending herself anymore.

She spoke like someone placing evidence on a courtroom table.

"One," she said, switching the screen. "Approvals under my name happened before my first login."

"Two." Aira clicked. "Delegation was created from a Corporate Affairs admin role. Not from my office."

"Three." Another click. "Log deletion attempts occurred during the board meeting."

"Four." She held up her folder. "The media smear was instructed to our PR vendor by staff under Mr. Rahman's direction. We have the chat."

"Five." She turned a page. "We have a witness who loaned a laptop to Mr. Dimas. And CCTV confirmation pending."

Mrs. Laksmi listened without interruption.

When Aira finished, she looked at Adrian.

"This is not an ego war," Mrs. Laksmi said, voice cold as glass. "This is a war of integrity."

Adrian nodded. "Agreed."

Mrs. Laksmi looked back to Aira. "Are you prepared for what it means to have enemies inside the board?"

Aira swallowed once.

Then the answer came out steady, almost frighteningly calm.

“I’ve had enemies since the day I walked in. I only just learned their names.”

Mrs. Laksmi gave the smallest nod. “Good.”

Then she said, “Rahman will join us in the Audit Committee meeting. And I want you there.”

Aira blinked. “Me?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Laksmi replied. “Because they attacked you. And they need to see you don’t collapse.”

Aira nodded. “Understood.”

The Audit Committee meeting was held in a smaller room—tighter, quieter, harder to perform in.

Inside: Mrs. Laksmi, one independent commissioner, the Head of Audit, Adrian.

Aira sat as presenter, her evidence folder in front of her like armor. A security officer stood behind, not speaking, just **present**.

The door opened.

Mr. Rahman walked in as if he were arriving to fix children’s behavior.

His suit was immaculate. His face was neutral. The smile he offered was faint—polite enough to be plausible, sharp enough to be insulting.

“Good afternoon,” Rahman said gently. “I understand an internal investigation has been conducted without coordination with board legal. That isn’t healthy.”

Mrs. Laksmi's stare didn't soften. "What isn't healthy is a slander campaign in the press."

Rahman sighed, performing concern. "Slander is wild, Ma'am. We need to contain it."

Aira spoke quietly, almost conversational. "Contain it by steering it?"

Rahman turned his head like he'd only just noticed she was there.

"Ms. Aira," he said, voice still soft. "My suggestion is you focus on your work. Don't involve yourself in politics."

Aira felt the room tighten.

She opened her folder anyway.

"Mr. Rahman," she said, calm as a blade. "This is the chat retrieved from Satria's phone. Your message."

Rahman didn't blink. "Chats can be fabricated."

The Head of Audit spoke evenly. "The phone was taken under procedure. We have chain-of-custody documentation. We have hashed the export file. If you want to contest it, we can verify with internal providers."

Rahman gave a small smile. "Are you threatening me?"

Mrs. Laksmi tapped the table once.

"Rahman," she said. "Don't play with words. Answer."

Rahman looked to Adrian, searching for leverage. "Mr. Adrian, are you truly going to drag board legal counsel into internal drama? It will look terrible."

Adrian's voice was colder than anyone else's. "What looks terrible is board legal counsel instructing staff to spread a smear."

Rahman sighed again, still calm, still smooth. "You don't understand. I'm protecting the company. If rumors about **pengajian** connections spread—religious gatherings, informal networks—investors will panic. I only—"

"—redirected the gunfire," Aira cut in softly.

For the first time, Rahman's eyes hardened.

"Ms. Aira," he said, "the corporate world is not your ideal world."

Aira met his gaze without flinching.

"And the corporate world is not an excuse," she said, "to destroy decent people's names."

Silence fell.

Rahman gave a tiny laugh—no warmth in it. "You're brave."

Aira nodded. "Because I have evidence."

Rahman's eyes shifted—briefly—to Mrs. Laksmi, then to Adrian, calculating a new angle.

"If you proceed," Rahman said quietly, "you open doors you can't close. There are histories here. Connections. People who will regret standing beside this... crusade."

Adrian's jaw tightened. "Don't."

Rahman smiled. "Don't what? Mention your father?"

The room froze.

Adrian's voice sharpened. "Do not bring my father into this."

Rahman's smile thinned. "Your father made choices, Adrian. Choices about people. Choices about appointments. And I can make certain things look very... unprofessional."

Aira felt cold spread up her spine.

Mrs. Laksmi stood.

Her voice stayed even, which somehow made it more lethal.

"Rahman. Effective immediately, you are removed from all access and involvement in this matter until the audit is complete. You will not represent the board here."

Rahman's eyes flashed. "You can't—"

"I can," Mrs. Laksmi cut him off. "Because I chair the Audit Committee."

Rahman turned to Adrian as if grasping for the last remaining rung on a ladder collapsing beneath him.

"Adrian—"

Adrian answered with one word. "Done."

Rahman rose slowly. Smoothed his jacket.

The same gesture Dimas did when he didn't want to look defeated.

Before leaving, Rahman looked directly at Aira.

"Ms. Aira," he said softly. "You think you've won."

Aira held his gaze. "I think the truth is being protected."

Rahman's smile returned—thin, controlled. "Truth is expensive."

He leaned slightly forward, just enough to make it personal.

"And you," he said, "don't yet know the bill."

Then he left.

The door closed.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Mrs. Laksmi let out a slow breath. "We just lit a bigger fire."

Aira nodded. "I know."

Adrian looked at her. "What did he mean by 'the bill'?"

Aira stared at the surface of the table as if it might reveal a hidden trapdoor.

"I don't know," she said carefully. "But I'm afraid..."

She looked up.

"I'm afraid the bill won't be paid by me."

Adrian frowned. "Meaning?"

Aira swallowed, remembering the earlier threats—how easily they'd dragged her uncle's name into their narrative. How casually they'd weaponized faith as if it were dirt.

"My guardian," she said quietly. "My uncle."

The room went still again.

Mrs. Laksmi's gaze softened a fraction—only a fraction. “If they dare touch a religious figure, we have to move faster.”

Adrian nodded. “I’ll assign security to monitor.”

Aira immediately shook her head. “Don’t let him feel watched.”

Adrian didn’t argue. “Fine. Subtle.”

Aira inhaled slowly, forcing her heartbeat to obey her.

Outside that room, Jakarta kept moving. Cars, lights, late meals, prayer calls that floated over neighborhoods like mercy.

Inside, Aira understood something with terrifying clarity:

They had cut off two heads of the snake.

But snakes didn’t die easily.

They struck back.

Her phone vibrated.

Unknown number.

Aira stared at the screen for one second too long, then opened the message.

“Good. You’re brave. Now watch who falls: you... or that ustaz.”

Aira closed her eyes.

For a heartbeat, she let the fear exist—small, sharp, real.

Then she opened her eyes again.

She looked at Adrian.

She looked at Mrs. Laksmi.

“We can’t wait,” Aira said quietly.

Adrian nodded once. “No.”

Far below, the city lights trembled under thickening clouds—as if the sky itself was holding its breath before a storm.

Chapter 10

The Price of Truth

Aira didn’t go home that night.

Not after the Audit Committee meeting.

Not after Rahman’s access was suspended and his polished calm finally cracked.

Not after the anonymous message landed on her phone like a pebble thrown through glass:

Good. You’re brave. Now tell me who’s going to fall— you, or that ustazd.

She sat in the war-room with the lights dimmed low, staring at the timeline on the screen until the rows of dates started to blur into one long threat. Names, departments, access logs, meeting notes—everything looked like it belonged to a world made of systems and decisions.

And yet one name—one human name—kept pulling her out of the corporate maze and back into something older, softer, and far more dangerous.

Ustadz Harun.

Her uncle’s name wasn’t in Nusatech’s directory. He didn’t have an employee ID. He didn’t sign NDAs, didn’t sit under boardroom lights, didn’t speak in quarterly targets or investor confidence.

But now he was the easiest door for them to kick in.

Aira pressed two fingers to her temple. *They can't sink me with technical evidence,* she thought. *So they'll try the shortcut: honor. Reputation. The kind of damage you can do with one cropped video and a caption designed to explode.*

The Head of Security stood near the door, arms crossed. His posture was professional—tight, prepared, used to emergencies. But his face carried the tension of a man who knew this wasn't a normal threat.

“Ma’am,” he said carefully, “we can send a team. Discreet security around your uncle’s area.”

Aira looked up, slow. Her voice stayed calm, but there was steel under it.

“Security is fine,” she said. “But it can’t look like security.”

He blinked. “Understood.”

“He’s not a suspect,” she added, and the words tasted bitter. “He can’t feel watched. He can’t become a spectacle. They want to turn a man of faith into a headline.”

The Head of Audit, seated across the table, nodded. “We can frame it as threat monitoring. Not an escort. We keep it outside his circle.”

Aira exhaled, relieved—not because she liked the plan, but because it preserved something she refused to let the company destroy: *dignity.*

In the corner, Adrian had been quiet. Tonight, his silence didn’t feel like distance. It felt like a man holding his breath, choosing each move like it could trigger a collapse.

He finally spoke, voice low.

“I have a way,” he said.

Aira’s eyes flicked to him.

Adrian hesitated just long enough to show he was asking permission without saying the words. “We coordinate with someone he trusts. Someone close enough to show up without raising suspicion.”

Aira frowned. “Who?”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “My father.”

For the first time in hours, something in Aira’s chest loosened.

Pak Hendra.

Aira had met him only a few times, always in settings that felt more like shelter than strategy—after a lecture, in a quiet corner of a mosque, his voice steady and measured in a way corporate leaders rarely were. He wasn’t loud. He didn’t posture. But he carried the kind of authority that didn’t require a title.

“He knows your uncle,” Adrian added. “He’s seen him. If my father visits, it won’t look like corporate security. It’ll look... normal.”

Normal. Aira almost laughed at the word.

She nodded once. “Call him.”

Adrian didn’t waste time. He stepped away from the table, pulled out his phone, and walked to the corner of the room like the walls themselves might eavesdrop.

It rang twice.

Then a voice came through—older, deeper, controlled.

“Adrian.”

Aira couldn’t hear everything, but she heard enough. Adrian’s responses were short, clipped, carrying a pressure he didn’t bother hiding.

There was a pause—then Pak Hendra spoke again, and Adrian’s posture shifted as if the man on the other end of the line had just grabbed the reins.

Adrian returned to the table and placed the phone down on speaker.

Pak Hendra’s voice filled the war-room.

“Assalamu’alaikum,” he said.

“Wa’alaikumussalam,” Aira answered softly, almost automatically. The greeting felt like a thread to something stable.

Pak Hendra didn’t waste words. “Aira. Tell me what happened.”

Aira explained. Not dramatically—never dramatically. She gave him facts, the way she’d learned to survive in rooms full of men who mistook emotion for weakness: the smear campaign, the legal counsel’s involvement, the threat message, the shift from attacking her work to attacking her uncle.

When she finished, Pak Hendra was quiet for a moment.

Then he said, “They’re testing your spine.”

Adrian scoffed softly. “They’re threatening a religious teacher, Yah.”

“Yes,” Pak Hendra replied. “Because it works. People fear public shame more than they fear God.”

Aira lowered her gaze.

Pak Hendra continued, “I’ll go to Harun. Not as ‘your father the commissioner.’ Not as anyone from Nusatech. I’ll go as a friend who checks in. I’ll tell him what he needs to know, and I’ll keep the circle small.”

Aira’s voice caught slightly, but she kept it steady. “Thank you, Pak.”

Pak Hendra's tone softened—just a little. “Don’t thank me. Protecting the innocent is not a favor. It’s an obligation.”

Adrian’s fingers tapped once on the table. “Board will demand a scapegoat. Tonight they already started floating names.”

Pak Hendra’s voice sharpened. “Then don’t give them an easy one.”

Adrian leaned back, eyes cold. “And what do you suggest?”

“Stand,” Pak Hendra said. One word. Heavy as a verdict. “Stand on facts. Stand on process. If necessary, announce publicly that the investigation is led by the Audit Committee—officially—so no one can frame it as one new director’s personal agenda.”

Adrian didn’t answer immediately.

In the pause, Aira realized something: a sentence like **stand on facts** sounded simple, until you understood the price. In Nusatech, facts weren’t just facts. Facts were weapons. And whoever held them would become the target.

Adrian finally said, “I can do that.”

“You will be tested,” Pak Hendra replied, quieter now. “People will force you to choose: comfort or truth.”

Aira looked at Adrian. For a second, he didn’t look like a CEO. He looked like a man staring into an uncomfortable mirror.

“I choose truth,” he said.

Aira felt the words land in her chest—not romantic, not soft, but human. Rare.

The call ended.

For a moment, the war-room stayed silent except for the faint hum of the air conditioner. Even the screens seemed to flicker more carefully.

Then the Head of Security's phone buzzed. He glanced down, and his expression shifted.

"Ma'am," he said, "we recovered a device."

Aira straightened. "From where?"

"Corporate Affairs storage," he answered. "It was checked out on a temporary loan. Signed under a staff member's name: **Rendi Pramana**."

Aira's stomach tightened. A new name. The kind of name you used when you didn't want fingerprints on the knife.

"Bring it," she said. "Sealed. Logged."

Minutes later, the device arrived in a clear evidence bag, the seal unbroken, the chain-of-custody form attached like a warning label: *Handle with care. This can burn you.*

Aira glanced at the Head of Audit. "We call HR. We do this properly."

He nodded. "Recording on. Witness present."

They brought Rendi in.

He looked like a man who had been living inside a panic attack for days—pale, shaking, eyes darting toward the door as if he expected someone to save him or punish him.

Aira didn't loom. She didn't threaten. She simply sat across from him with the stillness of someone who had learned that calm could be a weapon too.

"Rendi," she said gently, "we're not accusing you. We're verifying."

His throat bobbed. “Y-yes, Ma’am.”

“You checked out this laptop?”

He nodded too fast. “Yes. Yes.”

“What for?”

Rendi swallowed. His gaze flicked to HR, then to Security, then back to Aira. “For... an investor deck,” he whispered.

Aira nodded as if it was plausible. “Who asked you to check it out?”

Rendi’s lips parted, but no sound came out. Fear sat on his tongue like a gag.

The Head of Audit leaned in slightly. “Rendi, you’ll be protected if you tell the truth. But you’ll become the victim if you cover for someone who won’t protect you.”

Rendi’s eyes squeezed shut.

Then, like the name was poison he couldn’t swallow anymore, he whispered, “Pak Dimas.”

Aira’s hand didn’t move, but something in her gaze sharpened.

“Pak Dimas,” she repeated softly.

Rendi nodded, almost crying now. “He said... he needed it for something urgent. He said not to tell anyone. He said it was for the company.”

Aira held Rendi’s stare. “Did he tell you what he used it for?”

Rendi shook his head. “He just told me to deliver it. And then... later he told me to bring it back and act normal.”

The room felt colder.

Aira looked at the evidence bag again. *The smiling man,* the anonymous email had warned.

And Pak Dimas smiled the kind of smile that made investors feel safe while he rearranged reality behind their backs.

Aira stood.

“Rendi,” she said, “listen carefully. You did something wrong, yes. But you also have a chance to stop something worse.”

Rendi nodded, tears gathering.

Aira turned to Security. “Document everything. HR, provide support. And no one speaks about this outside official channels.”

She glanced at the Head of Audit. “We take this to Adrian. Not as suspicion. As evidence.”

The Head of Audit nodded. “Chain stays intact.”

Aira stepped out into the corridor, needing air. The glass walls reflected her back at her: a woman in a neat hijab, face composed, eyes tired in a way no makeup could hide.

Her phone buzzed.

Another unknown number.

A single line:

You’re moving fast.

Then a second message followed, slower, like the sender enjoyed the timing:

Move faster. Tomorrow morning, he won't be just a name.

Aira's fingers went cold.

She didn't reply. She didn't block. She screenshotted everything—quietly—and forwarded it to Security through the official channel.

Then she walked back into the war-room and said the words that sealed the next phase of the war:

“We’re not waiting until morning.”

Adrian looked up. “What?”

“They want to choose the battlefield,” Aira said, voice steady. “They want the public to see the first strike and believe the first story.”

She pointed at the screen—Ustadz Harun’s name, blinking among corporate timelines like a misplaced prayer.

“We change that,” she continued. “We protect him before they can frame him.”

The Head of Security nodded. “We can mobilize.”

“Discreetly,” Aira reminded. “No intimidation. No cameras following him. No corporate branding near a mosque.”

Adrian’s gaze stayed on Aira longer than usual. In his expression, there was something beyond calculation now—something like reluctant respect.

“Do you realize what this will cost you?” he asked quietly.

Aira met his eyes.

“I know what it will cost if I don’t,” she replied.

For a moment, Adrian didn't speak.

Then he said, "I'll do my part. Tomorrow, I announce the investigation is officially under the Audit Committee. If they try to hang you alone, they'll have to hang the process too."

Aira nodded once. "Thank you."

Adrian's voice dropped, almost human. "I don't care about your past, Aira. But I care about your safety."

The sentence hit her like a door opening—not into romance, not into comfort, but into something rarer in a corporate war: *someone admitting you are a person.*

Aira didn't let her emotions show. She simply answered, "I appreciate it, Sir."

He studied her for a second, then looked away as if staying too long in that moment would make him vulnerable.

"Get some water," he said. "You'll need your head clear."

Aira nodded, but she didn't move.

Instead, she closed her eyes for half a beat and whispered a prayer so small it barely belonged to language.

Ya Allah... don't let me win by sinning. Don't let me lose by being silent.

When she opened her eyes, the war-room lights felt harsher.

Not because the bulbs were brighter.

Because now she could see the price tag on truth.

And the bill had already been issued.

Chapter 11

The Visit Without Cameras

The next morning, Nusatech woke up pretending everything was normal.

Lobby screens still flashed growth charts. Espresso machines still hissed like tiny engines. People still smiled in hallways—too quickly, too politely—like the building had trained them to keep their faces clean no matter what rotted underneath.

But the war-room knew better.

By 7:10 a.m., Aira was already seated with a cup of tea she hadn't touched, eyes on the evidence tracker, listening to Security's low-voiced briefing.

“Update on your uncle,” the Security Lead said. “No direct threat detected overnight. No suspicious vehicles parked long. But there were two unfamiliar accounts trying to access his public lecture schedule.”

Aira's fingers tightened on her pen. “From where?”

“Two IPs,” he replied. “One local. One masked. We're still tracing.”

Aira nodded once, calm on the outside, cold on the inside.

They weren't watching her uncle like a target.

They were watching him like a *tool*.

Aira turned to the Head of Audit. "External cyber firm?"

"Confirmed," Audit said. "They'll start today. Independent oversight. Hash verification. Offsite encrypted mirror. If anyone tampers, we'll see it."

Good. Proof that couldn't be "edited" by office politics.

Adrian entered the war-room without a greeting, jacket already on, face sharp with sleep deprivation and pressure.

"Statement goes out at nine," he said. "Audit Committee oversight. No names. No speculation."

Aira stood. "And if they push a smear before then?"

Adrian's eyes narrowed. "Then we don't chase it. We pin the truth to the wall and let them run into it."

That was Adrian's style: not emotional, not reactive—just forceful clarity.

Aira nodded, then said what she'd been holding back since the threat message:

"Pak Hendra is going to my uncle today."

Adrian's jaw tightened. "He's already on the way."

Raka—sitting at the far end, laptop open, sleeves rolled—didn't look up when he spoke.

"It's smart," he said quietly. "No corporate shadow. No obvious security."

Aira didn't respond to his approval. She couldn't afford warmth. Warmth got misread. Warmth became a screenshot.

She only said, "We keep it discreet."

At 8:22 a.m., Aira's phone buzzed.

A call—not unknown this time.

Pak Hendra.

Aira stepped into the small side corridor near the pantry and answered.

"Assalamu'alaikum, Pak."

"Wa'alaikumussalam," he replied. His voice was steady, but there was movement behind it—car noise, distant horns. "I'm almost there."

Aira swallowed. "How is he?"

Pak Hendra didn't soften it. "He's fine. But someone has already tried to provoke him."

Aira's blood cooled. "What do you mean?"

"Two young men came yesterday after Maghrib," Pak Hendra said. "They asked questions that weren't questions. They tried to steer him into statements about Nusatech, about you, about 'connections.'"

Aira closed her eyes for half a second.

A video. A cropped quote. A caption like a grenade.

"Did he answer?" Aira asked softly.

Pak Hendra's voice carried something like pride. "Harun doesn't speak carelessly. He told them: 'If your intention is to learn, ask properly. If your intention is to trap, go home.'"

Aira exhaled a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

"But," Pak Hendra continued, "they'll come again. And next time, they'll bring a camera."

Aira's grip tightened around her phone. "Please tell him—"

"I will," Pak Hendra interrupted gently. "And I'll do it in a way that doesn't frighten him. He doesn't need fear. He needs preparation."

Aira's throat tightened. "Thank you, Pak."

"Don't thank me," he replied. "Protect your intention. Do not let their dirt drag you into dirt."

The line went quiet for a beat, then Pak Hendra added something that landed heavier than the threats.

"Aira... your uncle will refuse security if he feels it insults his dignity. So we must protect him without making him feel protected."

Aira nodded, even though he couldn't see it. "Understood."

The call ended.

Aira stared at the blank screen for two seconds, letting the fear exist—but only long enough to acknowledge it.

Then she walked back into the war-room with the same calm face she wore into boardrooms.

At 9:00 a.m. sharp, Adrian released the internal and external statement.

It was clean. Short. Official.

The investigation is under Audit Committee oversight. Evidence integrity is being handled through internal and independent controls. Any interference is misconduct.

No mention of Aira. No mention of a “new director.” No permission for the story to become personal.

Aira watched people’s phones light up in the war-room. Messages pinged. Screens refreshed.

For the first time in days, the air felt like it had a spine.

Then—like the building itself wanted to punish them for standing tall—Security’s radio crackled.

“Executive floor. We have movement.”

Aira’s eyes sharpened. “Where?”

“Evidence storage corridor,” Security replied. “Someone attempted access. Badge scan failed twice. Then they walked away.”

Aira stood instantly. “Who?”

Security’s voice turned grim. “Badge ID: **Internal Audit junior staff.**”

The Head of Audit’s head snapped up. “That’s impossible.”

Aira’s blood ran colder.

Impossible didn’t exist in a war like this.

Only *unexpected*.

Adrian's eyes narrowed to a dangerous calm. "Bring the staff member in. Quietly. No public scene."

Aira held up a hand. "And pull CCTV. Now. Before anyone 'loses' it."

Security nodded and moved.

Raka finally looked up, and in his eyes Aira saw what she didn't want to see: confirmation that the snake was still alive.

"It's spreading," Raka said quietly. "They've got hands inside places we thought were clean."

Aira met his gaze, voice controlled. "Or someone is being used."

Raka's jaw tightened. "Either way, it's a breach."

Aira nodded once. "Then we treat it as one."

Ten minutes later, CCTV played on the main screen.

A figure in a company lanyard approached the evidence corridor—walked with the confidence of someone who belonged there—scanned a badge twice, failed twice, then looked up... directly at the camera.

Not panicked.

Not confused.

Almost... deliberate.

Then the person left calmly.

Aira felt the hair rise on the back of her neck.

That wasn't an accident.

That was a message.

We can reach your proof.

Adrian's voice was low. "They want to make you doubt your own walls."

Aira didn't blink. "Then we build stronger walls."

The Head of Audit swallowed. "I know that staff. He's quiet. He's not—"

"Quiet people get used to," Aira cut in, soft but firm.

She turned to Security. "Bring him in with HR. Recording. Witnesses. And no intimidation."

Security nodded.

Raka's fingers moved across his keyboard at speed. "I'm checking access logs for the evidence vault system. If he tried to badge-scan, there might be a digital trace too."

Aira watched him for half a second.

This was the version of Raka she remembered—sharp, focused, useful.

And it hurt, faintly, that usefulness used to mean something else.

She shoved the thought away.

Not now.

While they waited, Aira's phone buzzed again.

A message from Pak Hendra:

“Harun is safe. I spoke to him. He understands the risk, but he refuses drama. Two men came again. They left when I arrived.”

Aira’s chest loosened a fraction.

Then a second message arrived:

“They asked about you. They asked about Adrian’s father. They want to turn this into ‘religious nepotism.’ Be careful.”

Aira stared at the words until they blurred.

So that was the new angle.

Not “hijab executive messed up.”

Not “security breach.”

But something more poisonous—something that could stick even without proof:

She got in through religious connections.

Aira forwarded the message to Security via the official channel.

Then she stood, faced the war-room, and spoke with a calm that didn’t come from peace.

“New narrative attempt,” she said. “They want to frame this as religious networking—improper influence. If they succeed, evidence won’t matter. It becomes ideology.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “Then we keep it procedural. Cold. Unromantic.”

Aira nodded. “Exactly.”

Raka's laptop chimed.

He looked up. "Someone tried to access the delegation feature config again—ten minutes ago."

Aira's eyes sharpened. "From where?"

Raka swallowed. "Not Corporate Affairs."

The room tightened.

"From..." he hesitated, then read it out, voice controlled, "***Board legal office subnet.***"

Silence dropped like a curtain.

Adrian's expression didn't change much—but something in his eyes turned darker, sharper, more personal.

"Rahman," he said quietly.

Aira didn't answer with a name.

She answered with a strategy.

"We treat it like an infected branch," she said. "Contain. Mirror. Preserve. Then cut."

The door opened.

Security entered with HR, and between them walked a young man—Audit junior staff—face pale, hands clenched tight like he'd been holding his breath for hours.

He looked at Aira and didn't meet her eyes.

He looked at Adrian and nearly flinched.

Aira's voice stayed gentle, controlled. "Sit, please."

He sat.

HR started the recording. Audit opened the chain-of-custody form.

Aira leaned forward slightly—not aggressive, not soft—just present.

"Tell us the truth," she said quietly. "Who told you to go to the evidence corridor?"

The young man's throat bobbed. His hands shook.

"I—" he whispered.

Aira waited. Silence was a tool too.

Finally, he spoke.

"Someone texted me," he said. "They said... they said there was a mistake in the file. They said I needed to 'verify' it before the external auditors saw it."

Aira's voice stayed calm. "Who?"

He swallowed hard. "It was a number I didn't know."

Adrian's eyes narrowed. "Show it."

The young man pulled out his phone with trembling hands.

Security took it, logged it, and placed it in an evidence bag like it was already radioactive.

Aira's chest tightened.

This was what they did.

They didn't always pay people. They didn't always threaten them.

Sometimes they just used the softest weapon in corporate life:

the fear of being blamed for a mistake.

Aira looked at the young man, voice steady. "You didn't access anything. The badge failed. Why did you look at the camera?"

His eyes flicked up, startled—caught.

"I... I don't know," he said quickly. "I just—"

Raka's voice cut in, calm but sharp. "Because someone told you to."

The young man's face crumpled.

And then the truth fell out, broken.

"They said... they said it was a test," he whispered. "They said if I did it, they'd make sure I kept my job."

Aira's blood went cold again.

A test.

A message.

A warning wrapped in an offer.

Adrian leaned back, eyes hard. "They're recruiting inside Audit."

Aira nodded once, slow. "Because they know the evidence is winning."

Raka stared at the timeline like he wanted to tear it in half.

Aira exhaled carefully and said the words that made the room go still:

“Then we stop acting like this is a leak.”

She looked at Adrian. Looked at Security. Looked at Audit.

“This is a coup,” she said softly. “A quiet one.”

Adrian’s gaze didn’t leave hers.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we end it.”

Aira’s phone buzzed again.

Unknown number.

One sentence:

“Nice walls. We still got in.”

Aira didn’t reply.

She only screenshotted it, forwarded it, and lifted her chin.

Because now she knew exactly what Chapter Twelve needed to become:

Not defense.

Not survival.

A clean, documented counterstrike—sharp enough to cut the head this time.

And somewhere, inside Nusatech or just outside it, someone was already preparing the next move—

hoping Aira would finally get emotional, get messy, get **human** in the wrong way.

But Aira had learned something they hadn’t expected:

In a war of narratives, the calm person with evidence was the most dangerous person in the room.

Chapter 12

Operation Canary

The war-room had stopped feeling like a meeting room.

It felt like a control tower—screens glowing, radios crackling, evidence bags stacked like fragile explosives. Everything was quiet in the way hospitals were quiet: not peaceful, just disciplined.

Aira stood at the whiteboard and wrote two words in thick marker:

****CLEAN COUNTERSTRIKE****

Then she drew a line underneath and added:

****NO DRAMA. ONLY PROOF.****

Adrian watched from the corner, arms folded, eyes narrowed like he was calculating how many more enemies the building still had.

Raka sat with his laptop open, jaw tight, fingers moving in short bursts—checking logs, cross-referencing IPs, pulling a map of the internal network like it was a crime scene.

Internal Audit and Security stood near the evidence shelf, faces serious, bodies still. Everyone in the room could feel it now:

They weren't just being attacked.

They were being tested for panic.

And panic was exactly what their enemy needed.

Aira exhaled slowly and turned to the room.

"They can't beat us on evidence," she said. "So they're trying to make us lose it."

Security nodded. "They're probing chain-of-custody."

Audit's voice was tight. "And they're trying to recruit inside Audit."

Aira's gaze sharpened. "Which means they believe they'll get another chance."

She tapped the board.

"So we give them one," she said.

The room went still.

Raka lifted his head. "You want to bait them."

Aira nodded once. "We don't bait with lies. We bait with a *canary*."

Adrian's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

Aira drew a small rectangle on the whiteboard and wrote:

CANARY FILE

Then beneath it:

- * **Unique watermark**
- * **Unique access trail**
- * **Hidden beacon**
- * **Zero impact on real evidence**

“If anyone tries to tamper again,” Aira said, “they won’t find our core evidence. They’ll find something designed to scream the moment it’s touched.”

Audit frowned. “You want a decoy.”

“A decoy that’s legal,” Aira corrected calmly. “Authorized by the Audit Committee. Logged. Disclosed to the independent investigator. This isn’t entrapment. This is evidence-protection.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened like he liked the idea but hated the risk.

“And if they don’t touch it?” he asked.

Aira’s answer was immediate. “They will.”

She didn’t say it arrogantly.

She said it like someone who’d learned a pattern the hard way:

People who play dirty don’t stop when you catch one hand.

They move to the other.

At 10:30 a.m., the external cyber firm arrived.

Two people entered the war-room—one man carrying a sealed equipment case, one woman with a badge that read *Independent Forensics Lead*. Her posture was calm, her eyes sharp, and her tone was all business.

“Ms. Aira,” she said, offering her hand. “Maya Kwan. We were retained under Audit Committee oversight.”

Aira shook her hand. “Thank you for coming quickly.”

Maya glanced around the room, taking in the setup, the evidence bags, the tense faces, the whiteboard with **CLEAN COUNTERSTRIKE** written like a threat.

“Someone inside is trying to destroy your chain,” Maya said simply.

Aira nodded. “Yes.”

Maya’s gaze flicked to Adrian, then back to Aira. “Then the first rule is this: your proof cannot live in only one place.”

Within minutes, the firm began mirroring critical logs into encrypted storage—hash-verified, time-stamped, sealed under independent custody. The war-room’s air shifted slightly, like adding an outside witness made the building’s shadows less confident.

Raka leaned closer to Aira, voice low. “This makes tampering expensive.”

Aira replied just as quietly. “That’s the point.”

Maya turned toward Aira. “Now. About the Board Legal subnet access.”

The room tightened.

Maya pulled a report onto the screen. “The attempt to access delegation config is real. But it didn’t come from Board Legal’s physical office.”

Aira’s eyes narrowed. “Meaning?”

“Meaning,” Maya said, “someone used a route that makes it *look* like Board Legal. A VPN tunnel inside the building.”

Adrian’s face hardened. “So they’re framing Legal.”

Maya shook her head slightly. “Not framing. Hiding behind it.”

Aira felt cold move through her ribs.

A hiding place that powerful wasn’t chosen randomly.

It was chosen because someone believed no one would dare inspect it.

Aira looked at Adrian. “We need Audit Committee authorization to audit Board Legal network routes.”

Adrian’s gaze was sharp. “We get it.”

At noon, Mrs. Laksni arrived again—without ceremony, without smile. She read the plan, listened to Maya, then looked at Aira like she was weighing steel.

“You’re proposing a decoy file,” Laksni said.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Aira replied.

“And you believe they will touch it.”

Aira nodded. “Because they already touched everything else.”

Laksni’s pen tapped once—final.

“Authorized,” she said. “Under Audit Committee scope. Document every step. If we’re going to cut the head, I want the blade clean.”

Aira exhaled slowly. “Understood.”

By late afternoon, ***Operation Canary*** was live.

The “canary file” wasn’t a random document.

It was a carefully constructed report titled:

****AUDIT COMMITTEE FINDINGS — FINAL (DRAFT)****

Inside it were harmless, non-sensitive placeholders—enough to look real, enough to tempt someone desperate.

The file carried invisible watermark markers unique to its version.

It lived in a controlled evidence folder with restricted access.

And most importantly—

It had a beacon.

Not a spyware beacon.

Not something illegal.

A simple access-triggered alert tied to the file’s unique watermark, designed to record ***who, when, where***.

A trap that didn’t harm.

Only revealed.

Aira stared at the screen after Maya finished configuring it.

A strange calm settled over her—the calm of someone who finally stops asking, *Why is this happening?* and starts asking, *What do I do next?*

Adrian walked in behind her.

“You’re building a trap,” he said.

Aira didn’t turn. “A mirror.”

Adrian’s voice lowered. “And you’re okay with the risk? If they touch it, they’ll strike back harder.”

Aira finally turned to him, her expression steady.

“They’re already striking,” she said softly. “We’ve just been bleeding politely.”

Adrian held her gaze for a long beat.

Then he nodded once. “Okay.”

Raka’s voice came from the table, controlled but tense. “They’re going to move tonight.”

Aira’s eyes flicked to him. “Why?”

Raka tapped the log timeline. “Because your statement went out. Audit Committee is now the owner. Their window is closing.”

Aira nodded once. “Then we stay awake.”

Night arrived, and Nusatech turned deceptive.

Most floors dimmed. Most desks emptied.

But the war-room stayed lit.

Security stationed two silent officers near the evidence corridor—no uniforms, no radio chatter that could travel. Just presence. Just readiness.

At 11:47 p.m., Aira’s tea was cold and untouched. Her eyes were gritty from exhaustion. Still, her posture stayed straight—because she’d learned something in this building:

Fatigue made people careless.

And carelessness made people guilty—even when they weren’t.

Maya’s laptop chimed—one sharp sound that sliced through the room like a blade.

Maya’s eyes narrowed. “Canary triggered.”

Aira’s body went still.

“Where?” Adrian asked, immediate.

Maya’s fingers moved fast. “Access attempt through a secure route... disguised as Board Legal again.”

Raka leaned forward, voice tight. “Who?”

Maya didn’t answer with a name yet.

She answered with certainty.

“Someone is inside the building.”

Security’s earpiece crackled.

“Movement,” Security whispered. “Evidence corridor. One person. Walking fast.”

Aira stood. “CCTV.”

The screen switched.

A figure moved down the corridor—hood up, lanyard tucked, trying to look like a shadow in a place built for glass.

The person stopped at the restricted door.

Swiped a badge.

Failed.

Swiped again.

Failed.

Then, just like earlier, the figure looked up—directly at the camera.

A deliberate pause.

A message.

Then the person turned and walked away.

Adrian’s voice was cold. “They’re daring us.”

Aira’s eyes didn’t leave the screen. “No.”

Her voice dropped, quieter, sharper.

“They’re not daring us.”

She pointed at the time stamp.

“They’re synchronizing.”

Raka's head snapped up. "Synchronizing with what?"

Maya's fingers moved again.

"Another access event," she said, tense. "Remote. Someone is pulling the canary file through a tunnel."

Aira's heart hammered once.

Twice.

Then she forced it back into control.

"They want us to chase the corridor," she said. "While the real theft happens remotely."

Adrian's gaze sharpened. "So we don't chase."

Aira looked at Security. "Lock the corridor exits. Quietly. No alarms."

Security nodded and moved.

Aira turned to Maya. "Trace the tunnel endpoint."

Maya's eyes narrowed. "Give me thirty seconds."

Aira didn't breathe.

Raka's fingers flew over his keyboard. "If it's a VPN route, the endpoint might map to a registered device—"

Maya cut in. "Found it."

She rotated her laptop.

On screen: a device ID, an internal asset tag, and—most dangerous of all—a registered office location.

BOARD LEGAL — PRIVATE ROOM B

Silence dropped like a curtain.

Adrian's expression turned to stone.

Aira felt cold crawl up her spine.

Because Private Room B wasn't a general meeting room.

It was where documents were reviewed away from cameras.

Away from eyes.

Away from accountability.

Adrian's voice was low and lethal. "We go."

Aira moved with him—not rushing, not panicking, just purposeful.

Security converged silently.

They reached Board Legal's corridor within minutes.

The door to Private Room B was closed.

No noise from inside.

Adrian didn't knock.

He swiped his executive access, and the lock clicked open like a confession.

They entered.

A single desk lamp glowed.

A laptop was open.

And sitting in the chair, frozen like someone caught mid-breath—
was not Rahman.

Not Dimas.

Not a senior board member.

It was a young legal associate—face pale, eyes wide, hands hovering near the keyboard like he didn't know whether to run or beg.

Aira recognized him.

She'd seen him once behind Rahman—quiet, obedient, always carrying files.

His name tag read:

SATRIA

Adrian's voice cut through the room like a blade.

“Step away from the laptop.”

Satria's hands lifted slowly, shaking.

“I—Sir—” he stammered.

Security moved in, sealed the device, documented the scene.

Aira stepped forward, her voice calm enough to terrify.

“Satria,” she said softly, “who told you to open that file?”

His lips trembled. “I... I didn't open—”

Maya's voice came from the doorway. “The canary beacon doesn't lie.”

Satria's face crumpled.

And then, like fear finally ran out of room inside his chest, the words spilled out.

"They told me it was... damage control," he whispered. "They said the company needed to survive."

Aira's eyes stayed steady. "Who is 'they'?"

Satria swallowed hard.

His eyes flicked to Adrian.

Then to Aira.

Then down to the floor like the name was too heavy.

Finally, he whispered it.

"Mr. Rahman."

Aira felt something tighten in her ribs.

Not surprise.

Confirmation.

Adrian's jaw flexed, and for a second, his cold CEO control looked like it might crack into anger.

But when he spoke, his voice was quiet.

Too quiet.

"Where is he?" Adrian asked.

Satria shook his head rapidly. “I—I don’t know. He didn’t come. He only sent instructions.”

Aira leaned in slightly, her voice still gentle.

“Show us,” she said. “The instructions.”

Satria hesitated, then pointed weakly toward his phone on the desk.

Security bagged it.

Audit started recording.

Aira watched the screen as the message thread opened under official capture.

And then she saw the line that made her blood go cold in a completely different way.

Because it wasn’t about destroying Aira anymore.

It wasn’t about scapegoating.

It was about something bigger.

A single instruction from an unknown saved contact:

“Phase 3: Make it look like Adrian approved it.”

Aira’s breath caught.

Adrian stared at the message, face unreadable.

But his eyes—

his eyes turned darker than she’d ever seen.

Aira swallowed.

Because now she understood what “the bill” meant.

They weren’t only coming for her.

They were coming for the CEO.

And if they could make the company believe the CEO himself was dirty—
then nobody would be safe.

Not the hijab-wearing director.

Not the man in the corner office.

Not the truth.

The war had just changed targets.

And Chapter Thirteen would decide who got framed first.

Chapter 13

Phase Three

Private Room B smelled like paper, toner, and something else Aira had learned to recognize in corporate buildings:

fear that didn’t want to admit it existed.

Satria sat frozen in the chair, hands lifted like surrender, eyes wide enough to swallow the desk lamp’s light. The sealed laptop lay on the table now,

bagged and tagged, its evidence strip gleaming like a warning: **DO NOT TOUCH.**

Adrian stood near the doorway, shoulders squared, voice so quiet it felt more dangerous than shouting.

“Read it again,” he said.

Aira didn’t need to. The sentence was already carved into her ribs.

Phase 3: Make it look like Adrian approved it.

She looked at Satria—not with anger, not with contempt. With the kind of calm that made guilty people spill the truth faster than threats ever could.

“Satria,” she said softly, “you’re not the target right now.”

His throat bobbed. “Ma’am—”

“You’re a witness,” Aira continued. “If you cooperate fully, we can protect you. But you have to tell us everything.”

Satria’s eyes flicked toward Adrian like he was afraid the CEO might crush him with a word.

Adrian didn’t move. He didn’t soften. But he didn’t explode either.

“Talk,” Adrian said. “Now.”

Satria swallowed hard. “Mr. Rahman... he—he said the company needed stability. He said the Audit Committee was overreacting and that Legal had to ‘restore compliance.’”

Aira’s voice remained level. “How did he contact you?”

Satria hesitated, then nodded toward his phone—now sealed in a bag on the desk.

“WhatsApp. Sometimes Signal. Sometimes he used a staff group—then he’d delete messages.”

Aira glanced at Maya, the external forensics lead, who was already documenting everything with the dispassionate precision of someone who didn’t care about office politics—only facts.

“Any calls?” Aira asked.

Satria’s lips trembled. “Yes. But he didn’t want voice records. He told me —” he stopped, swallowed, “—he told me to use ‘private rooms’ because cameras don’t capture screens. He said… he said if anyone asked, I should say I was reviewing compliance drafts.”

Adrian’s jaw flexed.

Aira kept the pressure gentle, steady, unavoidable. “What exactly did he want you to do tonight?”

Satria’s eyes squeezed shut.

“He wanted me to access the Audit Committee draft,” he whispered. “He said it would ‘reduce investor panic’ if Legal saw it first. He said he had authority.”

Aira didn’t flinch. “And after you accessed it?”

Satria shook his head rapidly. “I didn’t know. I swear. He just said—he just said Phase Three starts tomorrow.”

Aira’s stomach tightened. Tomorrow. Morning. Headlines. Board meeting. A perfect time for a “breaking scandal.”

Aira turned slightly to Adrian. “Sir… Phase Three is likely a public hit.”

Adrian’s gaze stayed on the message thread like he could burn it through glass. “It’s a hit on my name.”

Aira nodded. “Yes.”

The room fell silent for a beat, and in that beat Aira saw the shape of the enemy more clearly than ever: not messy, not impulsive—strategic. Clean. Patient.

They weren’t trying to ruin one person.

They were trying to collapse trust at the top—so everyone else would surrender.

Aira lifted her chin. “We need to lock your identity down. Tonight.”

Adrian’s eyes flicked to her—sharp, listening.

“Digital signatures, approval tokens, delegated routes,” Aira said, voice steady. “Everything tied to ‘CEO approves’ must become two-person control until we finish investigation.”

Raka—who’d arrived behind them with Security, quiet as ever—spoke for the first time, voice tight.

“She’s right. If they can forge your approval even once more, it’ll be enough for a smear. People don’t wait for forensic truth.”

Adrian looked at Raka. For a second, the CEO’s stare was cold enough to slice.

Then he looked back at Aira. “Do it.”

Aira didn’t smile. She didn’t thank him. She moved.

They returned to the war-room like the building was a hostile country and the room was their embassy.

Security sealed the Private Room B scene. Audit documented the seizure. Maya's team began extracting Satria's phone and laptop under strict protocol.

Aira stood at the whiteboard and wrote:

****PHASE THREE COUNTERMEASURES****

1. Freeze CEO tokens + rotate credentials
2. Disable delegated approvals (company-wide)
3. Implement two-person rule for executive approvals
4. Pre-brief Audit Committee + independent investigator
5. Prepare counter-narrative (facts + process, no names)

Adrian watched her write, the way men watched people build things they didn't fully understand but desperately needed.

“Two-person rule?” he asked.

Aira nodded. “Any approval that can be used as a weapon should require two separate keys. Yours and the Audit Committee chair’s, for example. Or yours and Internal Audit.”

Adrian’s mouth tightened. “So I share control.”

“For now,” Aira said calmly. “Until we know the system is clean.”

There was a pause—small, heavy.

Then Adrian nodded once. “Fine.”

Aira turned to Security. “Freeze all executive-route approvals. Immediately. Any attempt triggers an alert that goes to Audit Committee and the external cyber firm.”

Security nodded. “Already building it.”

Aira turned to Maya. “Can you support key rotation tonight?”

Maya’s answer was immediate. “Yes. But it needs executive authorization and IT cooperation.”

Adrian didn’t hesitate. “You have it.”

Aira looked at the Head of Audit. “We brief Mrs. Laksmi now. Not in the morning. Now.”

Audit nodded. “I’ll call.”

Aira’s phone buzzed again—unknown number.

She didn’t even open it. She screenshotted the notification preview and forwarded it to Security without reading it first.

Adrian noticed.

“You’re not curious?” he asked.

Aira’s voice stayed flat. “Curiosity is what they bait. Procedure is what I feed.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed slightly—then, a fraction softer. “Good.”

At 2:17 a.m., Mrs. Laksmi answered the call.

Her voice on speaker was calm in a way that made the room sit straighter.

“Talk,” she said. No greeting. No delay.

Aira spoke first, concise and precise. “Ma’am, Operation Canary triggered. We caught an access event traced to Board Legal Private Room B. Satria was present. He confessed instructions came from Mr. Rahman. We have a message: ‘Phase 3: Make it look like Adrian approved it.’”

Silence.

Then Mrs. Laksni said, colder than the night: “Rahman.”

Adrian’s voice was clipped. “He’s trying to frame me.”

“I know,” Laksni said. “And now we act like adults, not like a company scared of its own shadows.”

Aira swallowed once, then continued. “We’re rotating CEO credentials tonight and implementing dual control for executive approvals. We’re disabling delegated approvals temporarily. External cyber firm is mirroring logs under independent custody.”

“Authorized,” Laksni said instantly. “I’m sending written approval to Audit and IT.”

Adrian exhaled once. Relief wasn’t his style, but the sound carried something close.

Laksni’s voice sharpened. “And Aira—listen carefully. If Phase Three is public, they will not wait for morning.”

Aira’s chest tightened. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“Which means,” Laksni continued, “you prepare for the worst headline before breakfast.”

Adrian’s jaw flexed. “We can counter it.”

Laksni’s reply was blunt. “You can counter it, but it will still stain. So we must prevent the headline, not just fight it.”

Aira looked at the board.

“We stop their ability to generate ‘CEO approved’ artifacts,” Aira said quietly.

“Exactly,” Laksmi said. “And Adrian—tomorrow morning, you and I will stand together. Publicly.”

Adrian went still. “Publicly?”

“Yes,” Laksmi said. “Not to gossip. Not to defend romance rumors. To show the market the Audit Committee owns the investigation, and the CEO is cooperating under governance.”

Adrian didn’t answer for a beat.

Then: “Understood.”

Laksmi ended the call with one final line, sharp as a blade:

“And if Rahman calls you tonight, don’t pick up alone.”

The line went dead.

Aira stared at the speaker for two seconds.

Then she turned back to the room and said, soft but firm:

“We don’t sleep.”

By 3:40 a.m., IT had rotated executive signing credentials and disabled delegated approvals across critical systems. Maya’s team verified the changes with independent logging. Security set alerts to scream if any “executive-route” behavior attempted to slip through old tunnels.

Raka worked the technical side with Maya—less conversation, more precision. His focus was ruthless. But Aira caught it in small details: he didn’t stand too close, didn’t speak directly to her unless necessary, didn’t offer personal warmth that could become a screenshot.

He was obeying the boundary she drew.

And somehow, that discipline hurt more than a thousand apologies.

At 4:08 a.m., the war-room screens flashed a warning:

****UNUSUAL AUTH ATTEMPT — EXECUTIVE ROUTE****

Aira’s heart hammered once—hard.

Then she forced it down.

“What is it?” Adrian asked immediately.

Maya leaned forward, eyes sharp. “It’s an attempt using old credentials. Someone is trying to push a request through a dead tunnel.”

Aira exhaled. “They’re testing whether Phase Three still works.”

Raka’s fingers flew over keys. “Origin?”

Maya’s gaze narrowed. “Same pattern as before. Masked. But—” she paused, then looked up, “—it’s failing. The credentials are invalid now.”

Aira felt a thin relief slice through her chest.

Adrian didn’t. His face stayed stone.

“They’ll pivot,” he said.

Aira nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Because enemies like Rahman didn't stop when a door locked.

They simply looked for windows.

At 6:02 a.m., as the sky began to lighten into a dull gray, Nisa rushed in—eyes wide, breath tight.

“Ma’am—Sir—” she said quickly, holding up her phone. “It’s out.”

Aira’s stomach dropped.

“What is?” Adrian asked.

Nisa turned the screen toward them.

A headline. Bold. Fast. Hungry.

****CEO LINKED TO UNAUTHORIZED APPROVALS, SOURCES CLAIM — INTERNAL POWER STRUGGLE AT NUSATECH****

Under it: a blurred screenshot of an “approval log” with Adrian’s name—low resolution, just convincing enough to trigger panic before anyone asked questions.

Aira’s blood went cold.

Maya leaned in, scanning. “That screenshot is... old.”

Raka’s voice was tight. “Old tunnel logs. Before credential rotation.”

Aira felt her jaw tighten. “So Phase Three already had materials prepared.”

Adrian stared at the headline, face unreadable.

Aira expected anger.

Instead, Adrian's voice came out calm—too calm.

“They fired anyway.”

Aira nodded once, slow. “Because they know headlines don’t wait for verification.”

Nisa swallowed. “Reporters are downstairs again.”

Security’s radio crackled: “Lobby crowd increasing. Side entrance too.”

Adrian looked at Aira, and something in his gaze shifted—steel and warning.

“They’re going to ask one question,” he said quietly. “And any hesitation will be used as guilt.”

Aira kept her voice steady. “Then we don’t hesitate.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Laksmi wants us to stand together.”

Aira nodded. “We do.”

Raka spoke softly, careful. “If you go public, they’ll escalate again. They might release the slander package about Aira.”

Aira turned slightly—calm, deliberate. “Let them.”

Raka’s brows drew together. “Aira—”

She cut him off gently, but firmly. “If we keep hiding to avoid slander, we’ll live inside their script forever.”

Adrian stared at Aira for a beat longer than usual.

Then he nodded once.

“Okay,” he said. “We take the stage.”

Aira’s phone buzzed.

Unknown number.

She opened it this time.

Just one message—short, smug:

“Too late. The CEO is dirty now.”

Aira’s fingers went cold.

Then she screenshotted it, forwarded it, and lifted her chin.

Because now Chapter Fourteen wasn’t just about catching Rahman.

It was about something more brutal:

Whether Nusatech would believe the truth...

...or believe the first lie that arrived with a logo and a headline.

Chapter 14

Voting Day

Aira woke before her alarm, the way people did on days their life might be rearranged by someone else’s decision.

It wasn’t fear that sat in her chest—fear was loud, dramatic, obvious. This was heavier than that. A small stone pressed against the center of her ribs, not sharp enough to cut, but stubborn enough to remind her it was there.

Today, something will be dropped.

She washed, prayed, and stayed seated on the prayer mat longer than usual. Not to ask for her enemies to be crushed. Not to beg for an easy ending. She repeated one simple request with a steadiness that surprised even her:

Don't let me become what I hate.

Her phone lay face-up on the bedside table. The anonymous message from last night still glared like a bruise.

Tomorrow you'll see something bigger: vote.

Vote.

Board vote.

And sometime after midnight, Raka had found a file name that felt like a threat dressed as planning:

Board Vote Scenarios.

Aira dressed quietly. Mocha hijab, pinned smooth. Blazer pressed. Expression trained into calm. She packed only what she needed: a sealed flash drive, a printed summary, a term sheet copy she had not been meant to see, and one document that mattered more than all the rest—

a timeline of the smear, and evidence that the “truth” they’d sold to the public had been edited like propaganda.

When she arrived at Nusatech, the executive floor greeted her with a kind of politeness that didn’t feel like respect.

It felt like people practicing neutrality.

Hallway greetings were softer. Eye contact shorter. Smiles offered like receipts—proof that no one was **openly** taking a side, even though most of them already had.

Inside the war-room, the air was cold and over-lit. Screens blinked. Logs scrolled. The hum of machines tried to imitate certainty.

Nisa met her at the door, face tight.

“Ma’am… there’s an invitation. Extraordinary board meeting. Ten o’clock,” she whispered.

Aira nodded once. “Who called it?”

Nisa shook her head. “Chair’s name is on it. But… the wording—”

“It’s written by someone who wants it to sound inevitable,” Aira finished for her, voice even.

Before Nisa could answer, the Head of Security entered with the kind of urgency that didn’t require running.

“We have an update,” he said. “The person who tried to access the mosque CCTV.”

Aira’s throat tightened, but her expression didn’t shift. “Who?”

He hesitated half a second. Long enough to tell her he already knew how much this mattered.

“Name: Satria.”

Aira closed her eyes briefly.

So Satria wasn’t only the anonymous messenger. He had tried to retrieve mosque CCTV footage—tried to pull it before the long version could reach Aira, before it could be hashed, sealed, preserved.

Before it could ruin the story someone was trying to sell.

She opened her eyes. “Is he secured?”

“Being questioned. He claims he was ordered.” The Head of Security’s voice lowered. “And the one giving orders wasn’t Dimas.”

Aira didn't need a second guess. The name formed on her tongue like a bitter prayer.

“Rahman.”

Security nodded.

Aira breathed in slowly, as if air itself could become discipline. “Alright.”

The Head of Audit stepped forward. “More important: Mrs. Laksmi will chair. She wants you present. But you do not speak unless asked.”

Aira nodded again. “Understood.”

“We keep it clean,” Audit added. “We keep it procedural.”

Aira’s lips pressed together. “We play it properly.”

At 9:52, Adrian walked into the war-room.

He didn’t look panicked. He didn’t look angry. He looked like a man who had decided emotion was a luxury he could not afford.

There was a hard line at his jaw—the restraint of someone holding fire behind his teeth.

Aira stood. “Sir.”

He nodded once. “You ready?”

“Yes.”

His eyes flicked to her evidence folder. “Bring the summary only. Not everything.”

She understood immediately.

If the board saw the full arsenal, they'd stop debating what was true and start calculating how to bury it.

She slid the thicker folder back, kept the lean packet. "Done."

Adrian took a half-step closer—then stopped, as if he'd bumped into an invisible line.

"Whatever happens in that room," he said quietly, "hold your face. Don't give them the satisfaction."

Aira met his gaze. "I won't."

He nodded. And walked out first.

The boardroom at exactly ten o'clock felt like a courtroom where the verdict had already been printed.

Mrs. Laksmi sat at the head, posture straight, eyes like winter.

Around her, the rest of the board arranged themselves like chess pieces: some calm, some performatively neutral, some too still—like men who had rehearsed the ending.

Two chairs stood empty.

Rahman's.

And Dimas's.

But their absence didn't remove them.

It made them a presence.

On the side, Investor Relations and Internal Legal sat as scribes—quiet, watchful, ready to record history the way it benefitted the company.

Aira took the seat she'd been assigned at the back. Present, but not spotlighted. A witness, not a performer.

Adrian stood to open.

“Thank you for coming on short notice,” he said, voice flat in the way leaders learned to sound when everything was on fire. “We have two issues. First: the staging access incident and the misuse of approvals. Second: investor pressure and governance rumors.”

He didn’t rush. He didn’t defend himself like an accused man. He spoke like someone laying out a case.

“The crisis you’re seeing,” Adrian continued, “didn’t happen naturally. It was engineered.”

Across the table, Surya lifted one eyebrow. “Engineered?”

Adrian nodded. “Audit has found a planned operation.”

A small sound of disbelief—almost laughter—escaped Hadinata, a senior board member who wore confidence like a suit. “Are you suggesting a conspiracy?”

Mrs. Laksmi’s gaze cut to him. “Not a conspiracy. Documents.”

Adrian signaled to the Head of Audit.

The screen lit up.

Not the full files—only a summary. Mrs. Laksmi was careful that way: enough to prove the point, not enough to give away what they could still weaponize later.

Bullet points appeared like a confession:

- * a **conditional term sheet** tied to “leadership restructuring”
- * a **PR playbook** built around dragging a cleric’s reputation into corporate controversy
- * a spreadsheet titled **Board Vote Scenarios** with “pressure points”
- * file metadata showing authorship linked to **Dimas** and **Rahman**

The room shifted. Backs straightened. Hands tightened around pens.

Surya’s color faded slightly. “That’s… serious.”

“Where did you get this?” Daryono asked, voice tight.

“Digital evidence,” Audit replied, professionally cold. “Sealed. Hashed. Chain-of-custody documented. Being verified by an external cyber firm.”

Hadinata leaned forward. “You’re accusing board counsel of involvement?”

Mrs. Laksmi’s voice didn’t rise. It didn’t need to.

“Rahman has already been deactivated by the Audit Committee pending investigation,” she said. “And we have instruction logs and chat evidence showing PR leaks directed under his authority.”

Eyes flicked to each other. The board loved deniability—until it became expensive.

Adrian took the opening.

“This means the investor pressure today is not neutral,” he said. “Someone created a storm, then offered the board an umbrella—if we agree to the outcome they want.”

Hadinata tapped the table like a gavel. “And yet the reality remains: the company is in chaos. The CEO is responsible.”

Adrian looked directly at him. “I am responsible. Which is why I won’t surrender to a manufactured crisis.”

Surya exhaled sharply. “Investors don’t care if it’s manufactured. They care about certainty. They want stability.”

Mrs. Laksmi leaned in. “Then we show them integrity as stability. We show them we investigate, we preserve evidence, we expose manipulation.”

Daryono swallowed. “If we refuse to vote today... what is the concrete step?”

Adrian answered without hesitation. “We announce third-party verification. We formalize a report to the appropriate authorities. And we inform investors that their pressure is part of what’s being examined.”

Hadinata’s mouth curved. “You want to bring this outside? That will worsen everything.”

Aira kept her face still, but inside her mind a quiet thought landed, sharp and clean:

They don’t fear mess. They fear light.

An IR representative cleared their throat. “There is something else. One investor group has indicated their commitment is contingent on action today. If a vote isn’t held, they will reconsider.”

The room cooled another degree.

Mrs. Laksmi’s eyes turned to Adrian. “Which investor?”

A name was spoken. Not loudly, but clearly.

Aira didn’t write it down. She didn’t need to.

She remembered enough to match it to the term sheet in her folder.

Adrian's gaze slid to Audit. "The same investor tied to the conditional offer?"

Audit gave a single, grim nod.

Adrian's mouth tightened—not in surprise, but in confirmation.

"So it's not pressure," he said quietly. "It's leverage."

Silence fell like a curtain.

Hadinata broke it first. "Fine. Then we vote. We end this."

Mrs. Laksmi exhaled, controlled. "I don't like voting under designed pressure. But if we vote, we do it after brief clarification."

Her eyes turned to the back of the room.

"Ms. Aira."

Aira stood. "Yes, Ma'am."

Mrs. Laksmi's voice turned precise. "Explain—briefly—whether you have evidence that a PR operation was planned to use a religious figure's reputation to trigger governance controversy."

Aira didn't blink. She didn't plead. She didn't perform offense.

She spoke like an incident report.

"Yes, Ma'am," she said. "We found a structured PR playbook. We also have evidence of an attempted retrieval of mosque CCTV footage by internal staff, in connection with controlling the narrative."

Hadinata's smile thinned. "You're sure?"

Aira met his eyes politely, without fear. “I’m not speaking in belief, Sir. I’m speaking in evidence. Sealed. Hashed.”

The room held its breath.

Mrs. Laksmi looked around the table. “Then we proceed knowing this: we are voting inside a pressure field someone designed.”

She paused. “But we will vote.”

Aira’s fingers curled once against her palm, hidden at her side.

The vote began.

One by one, board members named their choice: keep Adrian as CEO, or appoint an interim “for stability.”

Daryono hesitated. Then, softly: “Interim.”

Another member: “Keep.”

Surya’s voice came sharper than Aira expected. “Interim.”

An independent member: “Keep.”

Heads turned to Mrs. Laksmi.

As Chair of the Audit Committee, her vote felt heavier. Not because it counted more—but because it would reveal what kind of woman she was.

Mrs. Laksmi inhaled.

“I vote... keep,” she said. “Because I will not sign extortion.”

Now the count balanced.

All eyes shifted to the last seat.

Yudhistira.

A board member who rarely appeared, and when he did, usually floated with the current rather than against it.

He stared at the screen, then at Adrian, then at the summary titled **Project Eclipse**.

He was quiet long enough for the silence to become a verdict waiting for ink.

Finally, he spoke.

“I choose... keep.”

The air changed.

Not bright. Not celebratory.

Just... relieved, like a body narrowly avoiding impact.

Adrian remained CEO.

But victory didn't taste sweet.

It tasted like stepping away from the edge of a cliff and realizing the cliff was still behind you.

Hadinata exhaled, annoyed. “Fine. You stay. But don't blame us when investors run.”

Adrian looked at him calmly. “I won't blame you. I'll prove you wrong.”

Mrs. Laksmi tapped the table. “The meeting isn't over.”

Tension snapped back into the room like a rubber band.

She turned toward IR. “Investor X who attempted to pressure us—answer them. Inform them their pressure is being examined due to indications of manipulation.”

Surya’s face paled. “Ma’am—”

Mrs. Laksmi cut him off. “Surya. If you want safety, be a guardian of cash. Don’t be a guardian of slander.”

Surya swallowed the rest of his sentence.

Mrs. Laksmi looked at Adrian. “Next steps?”

Adrian nodded. “We file a formal report. We request audit to examine potential insider trading and valuation manipulation. We don’t let extortion dictate governance.”

Hadinata stood, sharp. “This is madness. You’ll invite regulators into the company.”

Adrian’s expression didn’t change. “Better regulators than blackmailers.”

Mrs. Laksmi closed her folder. “Meeting adjourned. And Ms. Aira—remain on the task force. This isn’t over.”

Aira inclined her head. “Yes, Ma’am.”

When the room emptied, Adrian stopped Aira in the corridor—not close, not careless, but near enough for his voice to drop.

“You saw it,” he said quietly. “They really tried to remove me.”

Aira nodded. “I suspected.”

He let out a slow breath. “Thank you.”

For a second, it sounded too simple for everything it carried.

“If you hadn’t found Eclipse,” Adrian continued, “I might’ve been forced to surrender.”

Aira kept her gaze steady, her posture formal. But her voice softened—warmth contained inside boundaries.

“I only did what I was entrusted to do, Sir.”

He nodded once, then spoke again, and this time the words landed differently.

“And I... appreciate it,” he said. “More than I can say.”

Aira’s lashes lowered for a fraction of a second.

Then she returned the only safe answer.

“We focus on the work, Sir.”

A small, restrained smile touched his mouth—no mockery in it. Just acceptance.

“Right,” he said. “Work.”

Back in the war-room, the team looked like people who had survived a wave and were still standing, dripping, shivering, not yet safe.

They’d won a round.

Not the war.

The Head of Security entered fast, carrying news the way a medic carried blood.

“Ms. Aira,” he said, “Satria finally talked.”

Aira’s pulse steadied rather than spiked. She’d learned that panic was a gift to enemies.

“He says Rahman isn’t the only one,” Security continued. “There’s another name. Someone outside. Giving instructions.”

Aira’s breath held.

“Who?”

Security spoke the name of a senior partner at Rahman’s firm—someone with ties to investor circles.

Audit closed his eyes briefly. “So it’s a network.”

Aira turned to the whiteboard, picked up a marker, and wrote one word in capital letters.

THE HEAD.

“They lost the vote,” she said softly. “So they’ll change weapons.”

Nisa’s lips parted. “What weapon?”

Aira stared at the word she’d written as if it could answer back.

Then she turned, her face calm in a way that wasn’t peace—it was readiness.

“The kind that doesn’t need board seats,” she said. “The kind that only needs the public to believe.”

And somewhere inside her, the stone in her chest shifted—no lighter, no heavier.

Just... positioned.

Like a blade being placed back into a sheath, waiting for the next hand to pull it out.

Chapter 15

The Evidence They Invented

The war room felt smaller after the vote.

Not because more people came in—if anything, bodies were drifting out, as if victory granted permission to breathe again. But pressure didn’t always come from numbers. Sometimes it came from what everyone could suddenly imagine.

Aira stood at the whiteboard with a marker in her hand and a tightness behind her ribs that didn’t belong to fatigue. The kind of tightness that

arrived when the world decided your work wasn't enough, and it reached for your name instead.

Her phone lay face-up on the conference table.

One anonymous message, short as a blade:

Tomorrow, it's your turn. "Evidence" about you and Adrian.

She turned the screen off, as if darkness could refuse what was coming. Then she lifted her chin.

"Everyone. Listen."

Her voice wasn't loud. It didn't need to be. It had that steady, clean edge that made people sit up without thinking.

"We won the vote," she said, "but we also lit them up. They'll hit back in the cheapest way possible."

The Head of Audit—Mr. Pratama—nodded once, expression stone. "They'll frame it as conflict of interest. That this investigation isn't clean."

The Head of Security added, "Or they'll make it look like the CEO is protecting you for... personal reasons."

Nisa's mouth tightened. "But you've been careful, Ma'am. You've kept distance."

Aira looked at her gently, almost sadly. "Exactly. Because we've kept distance, they'll have to invent something."

Raka pushed back his chair. His voice came out rough, like he'd been swallowing his anger for days. "If they're inventing, they'll need raw material. A photo. A clip. A screenshot. Anything they can cut the way they cut your uncle's video."

Aira nodded. “Right. So we do two things.”

She tapped the marker against her palm once—an anchor, a signal to herself.

“First, we minimize the material. Second, we prepare rebuttals based on verifiable proof. Not emotion. Not denial. Proof.”

Pratama’s brows knit. “Minimize the material… meaning?”

Aira turned to the board and wrote in clear block letters:

72-HOUR BOUNDARY PROTOCOL

Then, beneath it, she began to list.

1. **No one-on-one meetings** between Aira and Adrian. *Open rooms. Witnesses.*
2. **All communication via official channels**—email, team threads, documented meetings.
3. **No personal chats. No rides. No “helpful” gestures** that can be twisted into intimacy.
4. **Audit access logs** for executive-floor cameras and entry points.
5. **Security monitors major accounts and PR vendors** for coordinated drops.

Nisa nodded fast, relief and fear mixed together. “That’s… safe.”

Security leaned forward. “We can pull corridor CCTV angles now. If they try to publish a photo, we’ll have a second angle.”

“Do it,” Aira said.

Raka raised his hand, the way he always did when he was trying not to interrupt and failing anyway. “I can also create a fingerprint system for fake

screenshots. If they release a chat, we request message-ID logs from IT. If it doesn't exist, it's fabricated."

Pratama gave a single approving nod. "Good."

Aira met Raka's eyes. "Do it. But you follow procedure. Chain-of-custody. No shortcuts."

Raka's jaw clenched. "Yes, Ma'am."

For a moment, the room settled into something close to purpose. Not calm—calm was a luxury. But clarity.

Then the door opened.

Adrian stepped inside with the kind of speed that made people stand up in their own minds. He carried a folder in one hand and the expression of a man who didn't enjoy being forced into games.

"Investor X is getting aggressive," he said, not bothering with greetings. "They sent a letter."

Aira lifted an eyebrow. "About what?"

Adrian exhaled once, sharp. "They're threatening to pull support and 'release their findings' to the media if we report anything to a regulator."

"What findings?" Pratama asked, already reaching for the folder.

Adrian's eyes flicked to Aira—brief, restrained, like he was choosing where to place his trust without turning it into a spectacle.

"They claim they have evidence of an ethics violation in leadership," Adrian said. "That's their phrase."

Aira felt her throat go dry.

The anonymous message hadn't been a guess. It had been an itinerary.

"They've prepared it," she said quietly.

Adrian nodded. "I didn't open this in front of anyone else. I brought it here."

Pratama scanned the page. The muscles in his face hardened as he read.

"This is a disguised threat," he said, voice flat. "It's a barter offer. You stay quiet about manipulation; they stay quiet about personal scandal."

Aira didn't look away from Adrian. "We don't barter."

Adrian didn't give her a speech. He gave her posture—straight spine, still shoulders, eyes like steel.

"No," he said. One word. The decision inside it was heavy. "We don't barter."

Aira swallowed, then moved into the next step like she'd practiced it in prayer.

"We need to be faster than them," she said. "If they want to release 'ethics evidence,' we prepare a transparency packet."

Adrian's gaze sharpened. "A packet for who?"

"Not for the public," Aira answered, precise. "For the committee. For records. We document context now. So if they twist and cut, we can show what they're cutting from."

Pratama nodded. "A pre-emptive record. I agree."

Adrian stared at the whiteboard, then at the protocol list, then back at Aira. "Okay," he said. "We do it."

Aira hesitated just long enough to choose the right words.

“And you,” she said softly, not accusing—reminding. “You have to protect the boundary too. Don’t give them a crack.”

Adrian held her gaze. There was something unreadable there—pressure, respect, maybe a shadow of gratitude.

“I understand,” he said.

The afternoon bled toward evening.

The office didn’t feel victorious. It felt watched.

Aira stepped into the pantry for water, and the glass dispenser clinked softly as she filled a cup. For a few seconds, the only sound was the hum of fluorescent lights and the faint heartbeat of a building that never truly slept.

Then a voice behind her.

“Director Aira.”

She turned.

Mr. Surya stood in the doorway. Perfect suit. Perfect hair. And eyes that looked like they’d been holding a secret too long.

“Mr. Surya,” Aira said, polite and guarded.

He lowered his voice. “I don’t have much time. And I don’t know if you’ll believe me.”

Aira didn’t move closer. “You can speak.”

Surya stepped half a pace forward, then stopped—like even he understood the air between them mattered.

“They’re going to release something about you and Mr. Adrian,” he said.
“Not tomorrow. Tonight.”

Aira didn’t react. Not visibly. But her pulse climbed, one notch at a time.

“How do you know?” she asked.

Surya swallowed. “There was a call this afternoon. From one of the parties pushing the vote. They said if Adrian stays stubborn, they’ll ‘clean up the personal problem’ by dropping evidence.”

Aira stared at him. “And you’re warning me.”

Surya’s mouth tightened, as if he hated how that sentence made him sound. “I’m... tired,” he said, and for a second the man beneath the executive showed through. “I’ve watched people play rough. But dragging an ustaz, dragging a woman who just arrived... it’s filthy.”

Aira nodded once, a small movement heavy with meaning. “Thank you.”

Surya’s eyes flicked sideways, scanning the corridor like he expected it to listen. “One more thing. Don’t trust everyone who looks like they’re on your side. They can place people close.”

Aira kept her face calm. “I understand.”

Surya left without another word.

Aira stood alone with her cup of water, suddenly feeling the weight of it as if it were a warning.

Tonight.

She walked back to the war room fast enough that her heels didn't echo. Or maybe they did, and nobody mentioned it.

“Update.”

Her voice cut through the room like a clean slice.

“They’re releasing the scandal tonight.”

Everyone stiffened.

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Who told you?”

Aira didn’t say Surya’s name. Not yet. Not until she knew whether the warning was genuine or bait.

“An internal source,” she said. “We treat it as credible.”

Security spoke immediately. “I’ll increase monitoring on major accounts and PR vendors.”

Pratama nodded. “We prepare a response plan. But we don’t act defensive.”

Raka stood, already moving mentally. “If they publish fake chats, we counter with logs.”

“And if they publish a photo or video,” Aira added, “we counter with CCTV context and witnesses.”

Adrian exhaled through his nose. “Okay.” He looked at the protocol list. “Boundary Protocol begins now.”

Aira nodded. “Now.”

*** 8:37 p.m.

Aira was home, but the war room lived on through her screen.

Her living room was quiet—too quiet for a day like this. A single lamp glowed near the sofa. Her bag sat on the floor. Her phone sat on the table like a loaded object.

On the video call, Nisa's face looked pale. Raka was still at the office with Audit and Security. Pratama's voice came in short bursts, all structure, no panic. Adrian had stepped out of frame—presumably to handle something else without turning it into theater.

Then notifications began to arrive in a violent rhythm.

Nisa was first.

MA'AM. IT'S UP.

Aira swallowed once and opened the link.

A thread—already exploding—posted by a large account with a verified badge and the smug confidence of someone who'd never been sued.

The headline screamed:

**BOMBSHELL: Nusatech CEO & New Director—A Secret Relationship?
**

Under it, a numbered list of “proof.”

1. A screenshot of a WhatsApp chat that looked like Adrian's number sending affectionate messages to Aira.
2. A blurred photo in a basement parking area—two silhouettes standing too close, angled like the photographer had been hiding behind a pillar.
3. A caption: *She didn't rise by competence. She rose by closeness.*

Aira felt her fingers turn cold.

But her voice stayed steady.

“Raka,” she said into the call, “check the chat.”

Raka didn’t hesitate. “Already on it. That’s not our internal WhatsApp environment. The interface is inconsistent. The time stamps don’t match device formatting. And the number used—” he paused, then said it like a verdict, “—isn’t Mr. Adrian’s registered number.”

Pratama leaned forward into his camera. “We need a rebuttal that a public mind can understand. Not forensic jargon.”

“I can make a visual breakdown,” Raka said quickly. “Font differences, metadata inconsistencies, number mismatch, no message ID trace. Simple slides. Easy for people to see.”

Aira’s eyes went back to the basement photo.

“Security,” she said. “That location—Nusatech basement parking?”

“Yes,” Security replied. “But that corner has CCTV.”

Aira nodded once. “Pull the footage for that timestamp. Full context, not a clip. And get witness confirmation. They may have captured a normal moment—greeting, passing—and framed it as intimacy.”

Adrian appeared on screen. His face was hard, but his voice was controlled.

“I’ve seen it,” he said. “We don’t answer with emotion.”

Aira nodded. “We answer with facts. But... you speak. I stay behind.”

Adrian paused—just long enough for the room to feel the weight of that boundary.

“Agreed,” he said.

Pratama said, “We release a statement: fake chat, edited photo framing, evidence submitted to the Audit Committee. We request takedown for misinformation.”

Aira’s throat tightened. “I don’t want my uncle to see this in the morning.”

Nisa’s eyes filled. “Ma’am… this is evil.”

“It is,” Aira said softly. “But we prepared for it.”

*** 9:05 p.m.

Raka sent the breakdown.

Security sent the basement footage.

Aira watched the CCTV with the kind of focus that didn’t blink.

There she was—stepping out of the elevator with Nisa and the Head of Security, the day they’d been moving between meetings like soldiers without uniforms. Adrian stood several meters away. He didn’t approach. He didn’t touch. He didn’t lean close. They spoke briefly, at distance, like people who knew the walls had eyes.

Then Aira and Nisa walked to the car.

No romance. No secret. Only crisis and procedure.

Aira released a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding.

“This is good,” Pratama said. “This context destroys the narrative.”

Adrian nodded. “I’ll release a statement. Now.”

Aira looked at him through the screen. “Be careful with wording,” she said. “They’ll look for a crack.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “I know.”

He muted for a moment.

Minutes later, the official statement went live across Nusatech channels:

- * Allegations of a personal relationship are misinformation.
- * The chat screenshot is invalid; the number does not match the CEO’s registered line.
- * The company holds CCTV footage showing the full context of the basement moment.
- * A structured investigation into reputational manipulation and investor pressure is ongoing; evidence has been submitted to the Audit Committee.

Aira didn’t smile.

Because truth didn’t end wars. It only changed the weapons.

*** 10:11 p.m.

Her phone vibrated again.

Unknown number.

One message:

Nice. You have CCTV.

But you forgot something.

CCTV can “disappear.”

Aira went very still.

Then she typed into the security group chat so fast her thumbs didn't tremble until after she hit send:

Back up all basement and executive corridor CCTV NOW. Offsite. Hash it.

A reply came instantly:

On it.

Aira stared at her screen, breathing slow.

They were right. Evidence could vanish. Logs could be “accidentally” overwritten. Footage could become corrupt at the most convenient moment.

But if it was hashed and copied offsite, disappearance became its own form of proof.

If they erase it, it means they fear it.

On video, Nisa watched Aira with the look of someone waiting for her to fall.

Aira gave her a thin smile—not happy, just steadyng.

“We’ve reached the stage,” Aira said softly, “where they’re no longer trying to prove I’m wrong.”

She paused, choosing the sentence that felt like the truth without melodrama.

“They’re only trying to make people believe.”

Pratama nodded. “Which means we change the battlefield.”

Aira's eyes narrowed. "To what battlefield?"

"Hukum," Pratama said, switching languages for one word because English didn't always carry the same weight. Then he translated, clinical. "Law. Regulators. Where narrative loses to evidence."

Adrian nodded. "Tomorrow we move."

Aira looked at the dark window behind her reflection—Jakarta lights blurred by the night, like the city was holding its breath too.

"If we go official tomorrow," she said quietly, "they'll get more vicious."

Adrian's voice didn't soften, but it steadied. "I know. But if we don't, they'll keep extorting. They'll keep trading silence for shame."

Aira nodded.

Outside, the night felt heavier, as if the air itself understood what would happen when a private war entered a public court.

Her phone vibrated one last time.

Unknown number.

Congratulations. You passed the first test.

Now the second test: Are you brave enough to make it all official?

Aira turned her phone face-down.

Then, in the quiet of her living room, she whispered—not to the room, not to the people watching her, but to the One who watched even when no one else did:

"Bismillah... we'll make it official."

And somewhere in the city, the people who sold lies began to prepare for a more expensive kind of fight.

Chapter 16

Make It Official

Morning arrived with the dull gray light of a city that didn't care who was being hunted.

Aira walked into Nusatech with her spine straight and her stomach tight, carrying a slim folder that felt heavier than it looked. Not because of the pages—because of what the pages represented now.

They weren't just defending reputations anymore.

They were about to trigger consequences.

In the war-room, the team was already assembled. Audit. Security. Maya's independent forensics crew. Two external counsel reps brought in under the Audit Committee—faces calm, eyes sharp, pens ready to turn chaos into admissible truth.

Adrian stood near the glass wall, silent, hands in his pockets, gaze fixed on the city like he was memorizing what “normal” looked like before it disappeared.

Mrs. Laksmi entered at exactly 8:30.

No greeting. No small talk.

“Show me the packet,” she said.

Aira slid the folder onto the table.

Not the full archive—only what could stand on its own in front of anyone, anywhere.

Maya started projecting:

- * **Timeline of unauthorized access** and the delegated-approval manipulation
- * **Operation Canary results** (beacon triggers, endpoint trace, device custody)
- * **Evidence of attempted tampering** (failed badge scans, corridor probes, deletion attempts)
- * **Smear package artifacts** (fake chats, number mismatch, metadata inconsistencies)
- * **CCTV full-context exports** with hashing + offsite mirror logs
- * **Investor pressure letter** (conditional demands, threats of “findings” release)
- * **Board vote manipulation materials** (scenario planning, pressure points)

Maya’s voice was clinical. “Everything here is hashed. Every device is sealed. Every export has a chain-of-custody trail. If someone claims fabrication, we have independent custody and verification.”

One of the external counsels, Ms. Farah, nodded slowly. “This is strong. But once you go official, you’re stepping into a new arena.”

Aira didn’t blink. “That’s why we’re here.”

Farah glanced at Mrs. Laksmi. “If you file, expect retaliation. They’ll escalate smears. They’ll attempt counter-filings. They’ll try to flood the narrative before the authorities even open the case.”

Mrs. Laksmi's expression didn't change. "Let them try."

Then she looked at Adrian. "Are you prepared to be publicly inconvenienced?"

Adrian's jaw tightened. "If it keeps the company from being blackmailed, yes."

Aira heard that word again—blackmail—said without hesitation now, said like a fact instead of a fear.

Good. Naming the weapon removed some of its power.

Farah leaned forward. "Then we need clarity: what do you want the official record to say?"

Aira answered before Adrian could. Not to steal control—only because she'd been living inside the trap long enough to know what mattered.

"We want the record to say three things," Aira said, calm and precise.

"One: there was unauthorized access activity and internal manipulation of approval systems."

"Two: there is evidence of deliberate interference—attempts to erase logs, steal evidence, and control external narratives."

"Three: there is coordinated pressure tied to governance outcomes and reputation attacks, consistent with extortion tactics."

Silence held.

Then Mrs. Laksmi tapped her pen once. "Approved."

Adrian exhaled—one short breath, not relief, more like readiness.

"Then we file," he said.

They called it **The Regulatory Packet**, even though no one in the room said the regulators' names out loud. Too many walls had ears. Too many "coincidences" had happened to pretend confidentiality was automatic.

Audit compiled the cover memo.

External counsel cleaned the language.

Maya attached hashes and verification sheets like armor.

Security locked the evidence room and added a second layer of custody—dual-key control: Audit + Security. No exceptions.

Aira sat at the end of the table, hands folded, watching the packet become something that could no longer be reshaped by office politics.

This was the part most people never saw: not the scandal, not the headlines—just disciplined paperwork, done correctly, because correct paperwork was the difference between justice and theater.

Nisa stepped in quietly and placed her phone facedown beside Aira's folder.

"Ma'am," she whispered, "social media is still trending the rumor."

Aira didn't look. "Let it trend."

Nisa's eyes widened. "But—"

"We're not fighting a fire with wind," Aira said gently. "We're changing the building's wiring."

Across the table, Raka didn't speak. He only worked—silent, careful, always visible to witnesses. He didn't drift near Aira. He didn't soften his tone. He didn't give anyone even one frame they could crop into a story.

Aira noticed anyway.

And it hurt anyway.

Because discipline was what they needed—and it also reminded her how much damage a past could do inside a present.

At 11:04, the final packet was ready.

Mrs. Laksmi stood.

“This leaves this room with my authorization,” she said. “Audit Committee ownership. Independent verification. Full chain-of-custody.”

She looked at Aira. “You will not send it alone.”

Aira nodded. “Understood.”

She looked at Adrian. “And you will not sign anything alone.”

Adrian met her gaze. “Understood.”

Farah, external counsel, held up a sealed envelope. “Physical copy. And encrypted digital submission via secure channel. We send both.”

Maya added, “And we retain an immutable mirror in independent custody. If anyone claims ‘it was never submitted’—we can prove submission.”

Security’s radio crackled softly: movement in the lobby, press cluster forming again.

Adrian didn’t look away from the table. “Let them wait.”

Aira felt her heartbeat thump once—harder than she wanted.

She thought of her uncle, Ustadz Harun. The threats. The attempts to film him. The cheap, filthy tactic of dragging faith into corporate mud.

Then she steadied her breathing and reminded herself:

Protect intention. Protect process.

Mrs. Laksmi nodded once. “Send it.”

The submission went out at 11:27.

Aira watched the progress bar move like it was carrying a piece of her life into a room she couldn’t control.

When it hit 100%, no one celebrated.

They just sat in the silence that followed, waiting for the world to respond the way it always did when you stop playing privately.

It responded loudly.

Maya’s laptop chimed.

Not the canary alert.

Something worse.

Her eyes narrowed as she read.

“Someone just emailed a document to a major media outlet,” Maya said slowly, voice tense. “A document that looks like... our submission.”

Aira went still.

Adrian’s head turned sharply. “Impossible.”

Maya shook her head. “Not impossible. A counterfeit. Same title. Similar formatting.”

Farah’s expression hardened. “What does it say?”

Maya hesitated half a beat, then projected it.

The top page looked like their cover memo.

But there was one line—one poisonous line—inserted like a needle:

“The CEO acknowledges approval oversight and accepts responsibility for unauthorized access activity.”

Aira’s stomach dropped.

Because that sentence wasn’t technically a confession—and that’s what made it lethal. It was phrased to sound honest, noble, and guilty all at once.

Adrian stared at the screen, face turning to stone.

“I never approved that language,” he said.

Farah’s voice was sharp. “You didn’t. We didn’t. That’s not in our packet.”

Maya pulled up the hash comparison. “Our official packet hash does not match this document. This is altered.”

Aira’s hands stayed folded, but her nails pressed into her palm.

“So they anticipated we’d go official,” Aira said quietly. “And they prepared a duplicate envelope.”

Raka’s voice came out tight. “They’re trying to replace your official record with a media narrative. If the public believes the ‘submission’ is a confession, the regulators will be pressured before they even read the real packet.”

Mrs. Laksmi's eyes flashed—controlled fury. "Who sent it?"

Maya's fingers moved fast. "Spoofed address. But the route—" she paused, eyes sharpening, "—the route touches an internal relay."

Security straightened. "Inside the building?"

Maya nodded once. "Inside."

Aira exhaled slowly.

Not panic. Not disbelief.

Confirmation.

They hadn't been fighting rumors.

They'd been fighting a printing press.

Adrian's voice was low and dangerous. "Then we identify the relay."

Farah added, "And we notify the authorities immediately that a counterfeit packet is circulating. We anchor the timeline."

Aira looked at Mrs. Laksmi. "Ma'am—permission to send an addendum?"

Mrs. Laksmi didn't hesitate. "Do it. Right now. Time-stamp it. Hash it. Make the counterfeit part of the case."

Aira nodded once.

Then her phone vibrated.

Unknown number.

She opened it.

Just two words:

“Good filing.”

A second message followed immediately:

“Now bleed.”

Aira’s throat tightened—but her voice didn’t shake when she said it out loud.

“They know we filed.”

Adrian’s eyes didn’t leave the counterfeit document on the screen. “Of course they know.”

Aira looked around the war-room—Audit, Security, Maya, Farah, Nisa, Raka.

Everyone was waiting for the same thing:

The next move.

Aira lifted her chin.

“Okay,” she said softly. “If they want to turn ‘official’ into a weapon...”

She paused, voice turning colder.

“...then we make the truth louder than their copy.”

And somewhere in Nusatech—behind glass, behind badges, behind “procedure”—someone had just revealed the real battlefield:

Not whether the truth existed.

But whether the world would ever get to see it.

Chapter Seventeen was already writing itself—because now Aira didn’t just need evidence.

She needed to catch the hand that swapped the envelope.

Chapter 17

The Envelope Swap

The counterfeit “submission” spread faster than truth ever did.

By noon, it had already jumped from private group chats to a mid-tier news site, then to social media accounts that specialized in outrage. Screenshots were cropped, captions sharpened, and the same phrase appeared again and again like a curse:

“CEO admits wrongdoing.”

Aira stared at the projection in the war-room and felt something settle inside her—not fear, not shock.

Resolve.

Because this wasn’t random.

This was choreography.

And choreography meant there was always a rehearsal room.

Farah, the external counsel, spoke first. “We need to anchor the official timeline. Now.”

Maya nodded. “I can generate a verification statement with hashes and timestamps, signed by independent custody. It won’t convince everyone, but it will convince the people who matter.”

Mrs. Laksmi’s voice came through on speaker, crisp and sharp. “Do it. And make sure the regulator receives it before the afternoon closes.”

Aira turned to Audit. “Addendum. Immediate.”

Pratama was already typing. “On it.”

Security leaned forward. “And what about the internal relay? If it touched our system, we can trace it.”

Aira’s gaze narrowed. “Yes. We find the relay. We find the hand. We stop the printing press.”

Adrian’s eyes were cold. “We treat this like an internal hostile actor.”

Aira nodded. “Exactly.”

She picked up the marker and wrote on the board:

OPERATION SWAP

Then she drew three boxes:

1. **Origin** — Who created the counterfeit file?
2. **Relay** — Who sent it through internal routes?
3. **Distribution** — Who planted it with media?

The war-room fell silent as if everyone could feel the next step was no longer corporate.

It was criminal.

*** 1:14 p.m. — The Anchor

The addendum went out first.

Maya's firm produced a one-page statement—clean, blunt, unromantic:

- * Official submission hash: **(redacted)**
- * Submission timestamp: **11:27**
- * Custody: Audit Committee + independent forensics
- * Statement: A counterfeit document is circulating. It does not match the official submission.

Farah routed it through secure channels to the regulator and copied the Audit Committee.

Then Aira insisted on one additional move.

“We also send it to the outlet that received the counterfeit,” she said.

Farah frowned. “That gives them attention.”

“It also gives them liability,” Aira replied calmly. “If they publish after receiving proof it’s counterfeit, it’s not ignorance. It’s choice.”

Farah studied her for half a beat, then nodded. “Fine. We send. Documented.”

Aira didn’t smile. But inside, something quiet steadied.

Truth didn’t always win.

But it left tracks.

And tracks were what she needed now.

*** 2:02 p.m. — The Relay

Maya stood at the main screen, pulling up network routing data like she was opening a map to a hidden tunnel.

“The counterfeit was emailed from a spoofed address,” she said, “but the sending route touched an internal relay server used for outbound legal communications.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “Board Legal again.”

“Not necessarily,” Maya corrected. “The relay is shared. But access to it is not public. It requires credentialed entry.”

Raka spoke quietly, eyes on his laptop. “So whoever did it is either: Board Legal staff... or someone with stolen Board Legal credentials.”

Aira’s voice stayed even. “Or someone with privileged IT access.”

Security nodded. “We narrow it.”

Pratama lifted a hand. “We can’t pull every credential in the company. That would set off alarms.”

Aira looked at him. “We don’t pull every credential. We pull the *smallest possible* list that explains the behavior.”

She pointed at the screen. “Who had access to the relay within the fifteen-minute window around 11:27?”

Maya typed. The logs populated.

A list of IDs appeared.

It wasn’t long.

It never was.

Aira scanned the names—some IT, some Legal operations, one from Executive Admin services.

And then she saw a name she recognized from the earlier breach wave:

Satria.

Adrian's eyes narrowed. "Him again."

Aira didn't jump to conclusions. She didn't need to. The evidence did the jumping.

Maya tapped the entry. "Satria's ID accessed the relay at 11:31. Four minutes after your official submission."

Farah's voice tightened. "Meaning he had the counterfeit ready and waited for your timing."

Aira exhaled slowly. "So the swap wasn't physical."

Raka looked up. "It was a timing swap. They used your filing as a trigger—then injected their version into the media pipeline."

Adrian's face hardened. "We bring Satria in. Again."

Aira shook her head slightly. "Not yet."

Adrian's eyes snapped to her. "Why?"

Aira's gaze stayed calm. "Because if Satria is the hand, someone else is the head. If we confront him now, we'll only get fear. We need him to move."

Security's brow furrowed. "You want to let him think he's still safe."

Aira nodded once. "We run another canary. A softer one."

Raka leaned forward. “A controlled leak?”

“Not a leak,” Aira corrected. “A test of contact.”

She wrote a new phrase under OPERATION SWAP:

CANARY CONTACT

*** 3:10 p.m. — Canary Contact

Aira’s plan was simple and clean.

They would create a harmless internal notice—an “urgent correction” memo—stating that the regulator had asked for “clarification” and that the audit team would be sending a supplementary file at **6:00 p.m.**.

The memo would be placed only in one controlled folder—accessible to a short list, including Satria’s role.

The memo would include a unique watermark phrase—something no one would naturally repeat.

Aira chose the phrase carefully:

“Appendix Sigma.”

If that phrase appeared outside their controlled environment, they’d know exactly where the leak came from.

Farah frowned. “Are you sure this isn’t too risky?”

Aira met her gaze. “This is not false evidence. It’s an internal scheduling note. If anyone weaponizes it, that’s on them. And it will reveal their channel.”

Maya nodded. “Legally defensible.”

Mrs. Laksmi’s voice came through again, cold and approving. “Do it.”

Adrian didn’t look thrilled. But he didn’t block her.

“Fine,” he said. “But you don’t do it alone. Audit signs the memo.”

Aira nodded. “Audit signs. Security logs.”

By 3:42 p.m., **Appendix Sigma** existed.

A harmless sentence in a harmless memo.

A canary that would sing if someone touched it.

4:18 p.m. — The Song

It didn’t take long.

Nisa burst into the war-room with her phone held out like it was burning her hand.

“Ma’am,” she said, breath tight. “It’s spreading.”

Aira’s eyes sharpened. “What is?”

Nisa showed the screen.

A group chat screenshot, posted by one of the same smear accounts, with a caption:

****BREAKING: Nusatech rushing ‘Appendix Sigma’ to regulators — cover-up continues.****

Aira didn't blink.

She didn't even inhale sharply.

She just nodded once.

“Good,” she said.

Everyone stared at her.

Raka's voice came out tight. “Good?”

Aira pointed at the phrase on the screen. “They repeated the watermark.”

Maya's eyes widened. “That means the source is inside the controlled folder list.”

Pratama looked grim. “And that list includes Satria.”

Aira nodded. “Now we move.”

*** 4:31 p.m. — The Interview Room

Satria was brought into a small meeting room near Audit—no windows, neutral walls, one table, two chairs, three witnesses, recording on.

Aira sat across from him. Adrian stood behind, not looming—but present.

Farah sat at the corner with her notebook, eyes sharp.

Satria tried to keep his face blank, but his hands gave him away—fingers rubbing against each other, a subtle tremor, a man walking a wire he didn't believe he'd fall from.

Aira placed her phone on the table and turned it so he could see.

The screenshot with **Appendix Sigma**.

She didn't accuse.

She simply asked, voice soft:

“Satria... how did that phrase leave our internal folder?”

Satria's eyes widened for a fraction of a second—then he caught himself.

“I don't know,” he said quickly. “Maybe someone else—”

Aira nodded slowly. “Possible.”

Then she slid a printed log across the table.

“Your ID accessed the relay at 11:31,” she said calmly. “And your role had access to the folder that contains this memo.”

Satria swallowed.

Aira kept her voice gentle. “I'm giving you a chance to be a witness instead of a shield.”

Satria's lips parted. No sound.

Adrian's voice cut in, low. “Satria. Don't be stupid. You're already caught.”

Satria flinched.

Aira lifted one hand slightly, signaling Adrian to hold.

Then she leaned in, voice calm, almost kind.

“Who is paying you?” she asked.

Satria shook his head fast. “No one—”

Aira's eyes didn't move. "Then who is threatening you?"

That question landed differently.

Satria's face tightened. He looked down.

Aira waited. Silence did more than shouting ever could.

Finally, Satria whispered, "They said... if I don't help, they'll say I stole documents. They'll ruin me."

Aira nodded once. "Who is 'they'?"

Satria swallowed hard. "Mr. Rahman."

Farah's pen stopped. "Rahman is suspended."

Satria's eyes darted. "Suspended doesn't mean powerless," he whispered. "He still has people."

Aira's voice stayed steady. "Names."

Satria's throat bobbed. "There's... a partner. At Rahman's firm. He talks to investors. He talks to media. He—he calls it 'damage control.'"

Aira leaned forward. "Name."

Satria hesitated, shaking.

Adrian's voice dropped to ice. "Say it."

Satria's eyes squeezed shut.

Then he whispered a name—an external senior partner with long arms in investor circles.

Farah's expression turned grim. "That's not just internal misconduct. That's coordinated influence."

Aira nodded slowly. "And the media outlet?"

Satria's voice was barely audible. "They... they gave me an address. A journalist. They said to send through the internal relay so it looks credible."

Aira's gaze narrowed. "Who gave you the journalist's contact?"

Satria swallowed. "Rahman. Through... through a staff member."

"Which staff member?" Aira asked.

Satria looked up for the first time, eyes wet.

"Surya," he whispered.

The room froze.

Aira didn't react outwardly—but inside her chest, something flipped over like a table.

Surya had warned her.

Surya had played *concerned.*

Surya had said he was "tired" of dirty games.

And now his name sat on the table like a blade.

Adrian's jaw flexed. "Surya?"

Farah's voice was sharp. "That's a serious claim."

Satria nodded frantically. "He's the one who said... 'make it look like governance.' He said he could calm investors if Adrian fell."

Aira's fingers pressed into her palm.

So the CFO wasn't just a nervous bystander.

He might have been a conductor.

Aira kept her face calm—because if she showed shock, Satria would panic and shut down.

Instead, she asked the only question that mattered:

“Do you have proof?”

Satria nodded, trembling. “Messages. Call logs. He told me to delete some, but... I didn't delete all.”

Aira exhaled slowly and turned to Security.

“Secure his phone under chain-of-custody,” she said.

Security nodded and sealed it.

Farah looked at Adrian. “If the CFO is involved, this changes everything.”

Adrian's face didn't move, but his eyes darkened.

Aira lifted her chin.

“We don't collapse,” she said quietly. “We do what we've been doing.”

She looked at Farah, then Maya, then Audit.

“We verify.”

As Satria was escorted out, Aira stepped into the corridor for air.

Her phone vibrated.

Unknown number.

One message:

“You found the hand. Now find the heart.”

Aira stared at it, breathing slow.

Because she knew what Chapter Eighteen would be now:

Not just catching a legal counsel’s network.

But confronting a CFO who could move money, people, and fear.

And money was always louder than truth—until truth became official enough to freeze accounts and open doors that couldn’t be closed again.

Chapter 18

Follow the Money

The moment Satria said **“Surya”***, the war-room didn’t explode.

It *hardened*.

That was the dangerous kind of silence—the kind that meant everyone understood the rules had changed. A CFO wasn’t like Dimas. A CFO wasn’t even like Rahman. A CFO was infrastructure. Money. Payroll. Forecasts. Investor calls. The man who could whisper panic into a spreadsheet and make the entire company obey.

Aira kept her face still while Security sealed Satria’s phone in a bag and Farah’s pen scratched faster across her notebook.

“Do you have proof?” Aira had asked.

Satria had nodded. *Messages. Call logs. Some deletions. Not all.*

Now the proof was sitting inside a plastic bag like a heart that still needed to be tested to confirm it was beating.

Adrian stood near the glass wall, eyes dark, jaw tight. He didn’t speak for a full ten seconds—which, for a man who lived on decisions, was a long time.

Then he said quietly, “We verify. Then we move.”

Aira nodded once. “Yes.”

Farah looked between them. “Careful. If the CFO even senses this... he’ll rewrite the building.”

Maya, the independent forensics lead, didn’t soften her tone. “Then we take the phone now. Immediate extraction. Before anyone can push a wipe request.”

Security gestured toward the evidence shelf. “Already locked.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “Maya. Extract. Audit witness present. Chain-of-custody stays continuous.”

Maya nodded. “Understood.”

Raka was standing a step back from the table, eyes on the sealed bag like it was a snake.

When he finally spoke, it was careful. “If Surya is involved, he won’t have written anything directly. He’ll have used intermediaries. If we find anything, it’ll be... pattern proof.”

Aira met his gaze. “Pattern is enough if it’s clean.”

Raka nodded once and looked away, as if holding eye contact too long could create a story.

Aira didn’t blame him.

Stories were weapons now.

*** The Extraction

They moved into the small secured room adjacent to Audit—the one with neutral walls, a fixed camera, and a table cleared down to bare wood.

Maya worked fast, clinical, almost emotionless.

Farah sat with her notebook. Audit sat with a printed chain-of-custody form. Security stood behind, silent. Aira watched without blinking.

The phone powered on.

A list of messages populated—some deleted, some restored, some fragmented enough to feel like someone had tried to tear a page out and burn it but forgot the corner.

Maya's voice was flat. "We're recovering from cache. If it was deleted recently, it often leaves residue."

Aira's mouth tasted dry. "Do we have timestamps?"

"Yes," Maya said. "And device identifiers."

The first clear thread surfaced under a contact name that wasn't a name.

S.

Aira's pulse stayed steady, but she felt her body go cold from the ribs outward.

Maya scrolled.

Short instructions. Clinical. No emojis. No warmth. No romance.

Just control.

- > "Use the relay. It needs to look official."
- > "Don't mention Rahman's name in writing."
- > "If Audit asks, say compliance review."
- > "Phase 3 must land before market open."

Farah's pen stopped.

Adrian's voice came out low. "That's him."

Aira didn't agree yet. She didn't disagree either.

She leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "We need attribution."

Maya nodded and tapped the screen. “Metadata shows the ‘S.’ contact is tied to a number that *matches Surya’s known secondary line* from internal records.”

Security’s posture stiffened. “He has a secondary?”

“Most executives do,” Maya replied. “Especially those who don’t want the primary line logged in obvious places.”

Aira’s fingers curled once beneath the table, hidden.

Adrian stared at the messages like he was watching a betrayal unfold in real time.

Farah exhaled slowly. “This is no longer ‘internal politics.’ This is coordinated interference.”

Aira’s voice stayed measured. “We still need to connect Surya to the distribution channel.”

Maya scrolled again.

Another message appeared—longer than the rest, written like someone trying to sound reasonable while giving a knife directions.

> “The board needs stability. The market needs certainty. This is damage control, not a crime. Don’t improvise. Follow steps. And delete after you confirm delivery.”

Aira held her breath for half a second, then released it slowly.

Damage control, not a crime.

That was exactly how people justified anything.

Aira looked at Audit. “Hash all of this.”

Audit nodded. “Already.”

Security’s phone buzzed—he glanced and looked up. “Ma’am... Surya is requesting a meeting with you.”

The room tightened.

Adrian’s voice was flat. “Now?”

Security nodded. “Now.”

Aira didn’t move immediately.

This wasn’t coincidence.

This was instinct.

Surya could smell turbulence like an animal could smell rain.

Farah frowned. “Do not go alone.”

Aira nodded. “I won’t.”

Adrian’s eyes fixed on her. “We go together.”

Aira paused—because together was exactly what their enemies loved to frame.

But this wasn’t a hallway whisper or a midnight ride.

This was governance.

“Audit witness,” Aira said. “And the meeting is not in his office.”

Adrian understood instantly. “Agreed.”

Aira looked at Security. “Reply: We’ll meet in Conference Room 3. Audit and Legal counsel present. Recorded.”

Security nodded and stepped out.

Aira stood. Straightened her blazer. Smoothed the edge of her hijab with a hand that didn’t tremble.

Inside, she whispered one sentence she didn’t allow to reach her face:

Ya Allah... keep my tongue clean.

*** The CFO Arrives

Conference Room 3 was bright enough to feel merciless.

A long table. Two pitchers of water no one touched. A camera set in place with visible recording light—because visibility was protection now.

Aira sat on one side with Farah and the Head of Audit. Adrian sat slightly offset—not beside Aira, not close, but present. Security stood outside the glass, just a shape of authority.

When Surya entered, he brought the room’s temperature down with him.

He was immaculate, as always. Calm. Controlled. A man built to look like he belonged on investor decks.

He smiled politely, eyes sliding over the witnesses, the camera, the seating arrangement.

Then his gaze settled on Aira.

“Director Aira,” he said, voice smooth. “You’ve become... very formal.”

Aira returned the politeness like a shield. “Good morning, Pak Surya.”

Surya’s eyes flicked to Adrian. “CEO.”

Adrian’s response was minimal. “CFO.”

Surya sat without being invited, as if chairs were his birthright.

He folded his hands. Smiled again—this time with the soft patience of a man who believed he was teaching children.

“I heard you’re going to regulators,” Surya said.

Farah’s pen moved. Audit didn’t blink. Adrian’s expression stayed stone.

Aira answered evenly. “An official submission has been made under Audit Committee oversight.”

Surya nodded like he expected that. “And the rumors last night?”

Aira didn’t look away. “We addressed misinformation with verifiable context.”

Surya sighed, almost fond. “You’re very... principled.”

His eyes lingered for a fraction too long on the word.

Then he leaned back slightly, voice lowering into something quieter—more dangerous because it sounded like advice.

“I warned you,” Surya said, looking at Aira. “I told you they’d release something. I tried to keep things... civil.”

Aira held his gaze. “Then we appreciate your concern.”

Surya smiled faintly. “Don’t mistake me. I didn’t do it out of kindness.”

He turned his attention to Adrian. “I did it because chaos is expensive.”

Aira’s mouth stayed neutral, but her heart tightened.

Here it comes.

Surya continued, still calm. “Nusatech can’t afford a public war with investors. The market doesn’t care who started it. It cares who looks unstable.”

Farah spoke first. “Pak Surya, what is the purpose of this meeting?”

Surya turned to her, smile intact. “Purpose? To prevent this company from burning down because people are chasing villains in the walls.”

Aira’s voice stayed soft, controlled. “We aren’t chasing villains. We’re following evidence.”

Surya looked at her like she’d said something adorable.

“Evidence,” he repeated. “Evidence can be framed. Context can be debated. And reputations...” He paused slightly, letting the word hang. “Reputations are fragile.”

Aira didn’t flinch.

Surya tilted his head. “I’ll be direct. Step back from the task force. Quietly. Let Audit run it without you as the face. The rumors stop. The noise stops. Your uncle gets left alone.”

The room went still.

Aira’s blood cooled.

That last line wasn’t business.

That was coercion dressed as compromise.

Adrian's voice turned sharp. "Watch your words."

Surya held up a hand. "I'm not threatening. I'm offering stability."

Farah's pen stopped. "That is not how stability is offered, Pak Surya."

Surya shrugged, almost bored. "Then call it what you want."

Aira took a slow breath.

She didn't raise her voice.

She didn't accuse him of anything yet.

She didn't give him the satisfaction of seeing emotion.

Instead, she said quietly, "We don't negotiate under pressure."

Surya's smile thinned. "That's idealism."

Aira replied, same tone, same stillness: "That's governance."

Surya stared at her for a beat—then his eyes flicked to the camera's red light.

He recalibrated, like a man remembering he was being recorded.

"Fine," Surya said smoothly. "Then I'll speak in governance terms too."

He leaned forward.

"As CFO," he said, "I'm responsible for investor confidence. If this becomes a public scandal, budgets will tighten. Projects will stall. Heads will roll. That is not a threat—it's math."

Aira nodded once. "We understand the impact of instability."

Surya's gaze sharpened. "Do you?"

His eyes slid briefly to Adrian, then back to Aira, and his voice lowered again—just enough to feel personal while still sounding polite.

"People like you," he said softly, "think truth is a sword. But truth without timing is... stupidity."

Aira held his gaze.

"Then we'll choose timing," she said. "But we won't surrender truth."

Surya's expression finally cracked—barely. A tiny flash of irritation, like a mask slipping.

Then the smile returned.

"Good," he said. "So you're refusing."

Aira didn't answer the bait.

Farah did, her voice cold and precise. "This meeting is concluded, Pak Surya. Any further requests should go through the Audit Committee."

Surya stood slowly.

He smoothed his jacket—Dimas used to do the same thing when he wanted to look untouchable.

Surya looked at Aira one last time.

Still smiling.

"Director," he said, "since you like evidence... here's some free advice."

He leaned slightly toward the table—enough to feel like a whisper, not enough to cross any obvious line.

“Evidence doesn’t disappear,” Surya murmured. “It gets... reclassified.”

Then he straightened and walked out like he hadn’t just told the room exactly what he intended to do.

*** After He Left

For a full second, nobody spoke.

Then Adrian turned to Aira, voice low. “He just threatened your uncle on camera.”

Aira’s chest tightened, but she kept her voice steady. “He tried. But we have it recorded.”

Farah’s eyes were hard. “That wasn’t subtle. He’s escalating.”

Aira nodded. “Because he knows we have something.”

Raka entered quietly—he’d been outside, waiting, respecting the boundary. He didn’t look at Aira first. He looked at Adrian.

“Sir,” he said, “Maya’s team found something else in the phone extraction.”

Maya followed, holding a printed report.

“There’s a calendar entry,” Maya said. “Satria met Surya’s executive assistant twice. Both meetings aligned with major leak windows.”

Farah frowned. “That links Surya to the handoff.”

Maya nodded. “And there’s one more thing.”

She placed the report down.

“Small payments,” Maya said. “Not from Surya directly. From a vendor account tied to Corporate Affairs—still under cleanup. Payments to a shell marketing agency. The agency’s contact is connected to the same influencer account that dropped the rumor.”

Aira stared at the paper.

Money. Vendors. Shells.

Follow the money.

Her phone vibrated.

A message—from Pak Hendra this time, not anonymous.

“Harun heard there are men asking about you again. He is calm. But be careful. Fitnah loves the morning.”

Aira swallowed hard.

She looked at Adrian, then Farah, then Audit.

“Okay,” Aira said quietly. “We have enough to request urgent Audit Committee action.”

Farah nodded. “You mean: restrict Surya’s access.”

Aira corrected gently. “Not ‘punish.’ Contain. Temporary controls. Two-person approvals on finance communications. Freeze vendor payment approvals related to PR and comms. Mirror CFO comms logs under independent custody.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “He’ll fight.”

Aira nodded once. “Yes.”

Raka's voice was careful. "If he's the heart, he won't sit still. He'll try to move money and narrative fast."

Aira's eyes narrowed. "Then we move faster."

She turned to the whiteboard and wrote the next operation name in clean, bold letters:

****OPERATION LEDGER****

Then beneath it:

****CUT THE MONEY. CUT THE MESSAGE.****

Aira didn't feel victorious.

She felt ready.

Because now she understood the shape of Phase Four:

Not a headline.

Not a smear.

A financial choke-point—where truth and money collided, and only one of them could keep pretending this was "just PR."

And somewhere in Nusatech, Surya was already making calls... hoping his spreadsheet power would outshoot the evidence.

Chapter Nineteen would decide whether the company followed the money

or followed the fear.

Chapter 19

Operation Ledger

By the time Aira walked back into the war-room, the building felt different.

Not louder. Not more chaotic.

Just... *smarter.*

Like the enemy had stopped throwing stones and started adjusting the architecture.

On the whiteboard, **OPERATION LEDGER** stared back at her in thick black marker—two words that sounded boring to anyone outside Nusatech, and lethal to anyone inside it.

Money didn't just fund a lie.

Money *made* lies move: vendors, “consultants,” media buys, crisis firms, influence accounts, private investigators, false “research,” legal intimidation—everything that looked legitimate when you stamped it with an invoice.

Aira placed her phone beside her folder and looked at the team.

“We cut the money,” she said evenly. “And we cut the message.”

Maya nodded. “Then we need three datasets, immediately.”

Aira lifted her chin. “Go.”

Maya ticked them off like a checklist.

“Accounts payable approvals and vendor master changes. Corporate cards and reimbursements. And any ‘crisis management’ spend routed through Corporate Affairs or Finance.”

Raka's fingers were already moving. "I can pull system logs for vendor onboarding and bank file uploads. But if Surya has admin-level finance tools—"

"He does," Audit Pratama said, jaw tight. "CFO-level access."

Aira didn't flinch. "Then we reduce what his access can do **today.** Temporary controls."

Farah, external counsel, watched Aira for a beat. "You'll need Audit Committee authorization. Otherwise it'll look like you're kneecapping him personally."

Aira nodded once. "We get authorization."

Adrian was silent, but his stillness had changed. It wasn't "let's see what happens" anymore.

It was "tell me where to hit."

"Call Laksmi," Adrian said.

Aira didn't hesitate. "Already drafting the request."

*** 9:08 a.m. — The Switch

Mrs. Laksmi didn't come in person this time.

She didn't need to.

Her voice arrived on speaker like a gavel.

"Tell me," she said.

Aira spoke in facts, not feelings.

“Ma’am, we have verified messages tying ‘S.’ to relay instructions and Phase Three timing. We have vendor payment traces linked to smear distribution. We have evidence of attempted reclassification threats made on camera. We request temporary containment of CFO financial communication and vendor approval paths under Audit Committee authority.”

Silence.

Then Laksmi’s voice sharpened. “Approved. Immediate. Minimum necessary scope.”

Pratama nodded, already writing. “Dual control on finance communications. Freeze new vendor creation and changes without Audit sign-off. Any PR-related spend requires committee co-approval.”

Laksmi’s voice cut cleanly through the plan. “And Aira—do it clean. No shouting. No humiliation. If Surya is guilty, we win by procedure, not spectacle.”

Aira’s throat tightened, but her voice stayed steady. “Understood, Ma’am.”

The call ended.

No encouragement. No pep talk.

Just authority handed down like a blade.

Security moved first—locking evidence vault rules tighter.

Then IT moved—quietly activating restrictions across finance systems.

Aira watched the control changes appear on screen:

NEW RULE: Vendor creation requires dual approval (Finance + Audit Committee delegate).

NEW RULE: Bank file upload requires two-person verification.

NEW RULE: PR/Comms spend category flagged for Audit review.

Raka exhaled once. “That’s going to irritate him.”

Aira’s eyes stayed on the screen. “Good.”

*** 10:17 a.m. — The False Emergency

The ping came like a heartbeat in a quiet room.

A finance alert.

Maya leaned forward. “We have an attempt.”

Aira’s body went still. “What kind?”

Maya’s voice stayed clinical. “Vendor master change request. Someone is trying to update banking details for a vendor tagged under Corporate Affairs.”

Raka’s fingers flew. “Vendor name?”

Maya read it off. “***Kestrel Consulting Group***.”

Aira didn’t recognize the name.

Which meant it was either new... or designed not to be remembered.

Raka’s eyes narrowed. “That sounds generic. Where was it used?”

Pratama pulled AP history. “Small payments. Multiple. Under ‘strategic advisory.’”

Aira's jaw tightened. "That's how you fund dirty work without screaming dirty work."

Security's radio crackled. "CFO executive assistant is at Finance bay. She's moving fast."

Aira didn't even look up. "He's moving. He felt the switch."

Adrian's voice was flat. "Stop the change."

Pratama's fingers moved across the approval console.

Denied.

A second request came in within thirty seconds—same vendor, different initiator ID.

Denied again.

A third request.

Denied.

Raka stared at the initiator list. "They're rotating IDs. Finance ops staff."

Aira's eyes narrowed. "They're using subordinates to test the new locks."

Maya tapped the screen. "They're not just testing. Look at the reason note."

Aira read it.

URGENT: update banking details due to "vendor audit." Payment must go out before noon.

Aira's mouth went dry.

That wasn't a normal note.

That was a forced urgency note—the kind written by someone who needed money to move **today**.

Aira looked at Pratama. “Do we have any authorized payment scheduled?”

Pratama’s face hardened. “There’s a scheduled transfer at 11:45. Large. Tagged ‘Crisis Response Retainer.’”

Aira’s blood cooled.

Not because of the money.

Because of what money like that could buy in a few hours: planted stories, fabricated “expert opinions,” paid testimony, paid silence.

Aira turned to Adrian. “We need to freeze that transfer pending Audit Committee review.”

Adrian nodded once. “Do it.”

Pratama clicked.

****Transfer status: Pending Review.****

Aira exhaled slowly. One small victory.

Then she felt the truth settle into her bones:

Surya wasn’t trying to cover the past anymore.

He was trying to fund the next attack.

***** 11:02 a.m. — The Polite Rage**

Surya didn’t storm the war-room.

He didn't slam doors.

He didn't raise his voice.

He used the weapon he loved most: calm indignation, delivered with a clean smile.

He walked into Conference Room 3 with two Finance staff behind him—both tense, both looking like they wanted to disappear.

Adrian was there. Farah was there. Audit was there. Aira sat across the table, posture straight, hands folded.

Recording on.

Surya's eyes flicked to the red light.

Then he smiled, as if the camera was a colleague.

"I'm surprised," Surya said smoothly, "to see Finance being obstructed."

Adrian didn't blink. "Finance is being contained under Audit Committee authority."

Surya's smile thinned. "Contained. Interesting word."

Aira kept her voice gentle. "Temporary controls. Minimum scope. To preserve integrity while an investigation is active."

Surya looked at her like she'd just used the word "integrity" in a language he didn't speak.

"My team is trying to pay a vendor," Surya said. "A legitimate vendor. And your 'controls' are stopping an urgent retainer."

Farah's pen moved. "Which vendor, Pak Surya?"

Surya didn't hesitate. "Kestrel Consulting Group."

Aira's gaze stayed steady. "What service are they providing?"

Surya's smile returned—smooth, ready.

"Crisis communications," he said. "To protect investor confidence."

Aira nodded once. "So you're paying a crisis comms vendor on the same day a counterfeit submission was circulated to media."

Surya didn't flinch. "Correlation is not guilt."

Aira's voice stayed calm. "And urgency is not innocence."

Surya tilted his head, amused. "Director Aira, you're using courtroom language in a business crisis."

Aira held his stare. "Because this business crisis is being driven by criminal tactics."

Surya's eyes flashed—tiny, quick—then the mask returned.

"Fine," Surya said softly. "Let's do this in 'governance' terms, then."

He turned to Adrian.

"CEO," Surya said, voice polite enough to be dangerous, "I recommend you reverse these controls. Your audit team is spooking investors and freezing necessary response actions."

Adrian's voice came out cold. "I'm not reversing anything without Audit Committee agreement."

Surya's smile faded slightly. "So you're allowing your new director to dictate financial response?"

Aira didn't move. She let Adrian answer.

Adrian's gaze stayed on Surya. "I'm allowing governance to dictate it."

Surya nodded slowly, as if disappointed.

Then he leaned back and said the quiet part out loud—still polite, still smooth.

"Investors don't wait for governance," Surya said. "They react. And when they react, budgets shrink. People lose jobs. Projects die. That's not a threat. It's reality."

Aira felt the trap opening under the sentence:

If you proceed, you'll be blamed for layoffs.

She didn't let it land.

"We're not freezing Finance," Aira said evenly. "We're freezing one vendor payment pending verification. If the vendor is legitimate, it will clear."

Surya's eyes narrowed slightly. "Verification by who?"

Aira's voice didn't change. "Audit Committee. Independent forensics. External counsel. Documented."

Surya smiled again—this time, without warmth.

"You're building a bureaucracy in the middle of a fire," he said.

Aira met his gaze. "No. We're building a firewall in the middle of an arson."

For a beat, Surya's expression tightened.

Then he stood slowly.

“Fine,” he said, smoothing his jacket. “Verify. Delay. Do your little procedures.”

He looked at Aira—just Aira—voice lowering a fraction.

“But don’t forget,” he murmured, “fires spread.”

Then he walked out.

The finance staff behind him looked apologetic as they followed, like people trapped under a powerful man’s shadow.

Aira watched them go and felt nothing like triumph.

Only the cold certainty that Surya would move another way.

*** 12:26 p.m. — The Move Around the Locks

Maya’s laptop chimed again.

“Attempted bank file upload,” she said.

Raka’s head snapped up. “From where?”

Maya read it. “Finance server. Different pathway. It’s not the vendor master. It’s a manual upload.”

Pratama’s face hardened. “He’s trying to bypass AP controls.”

Aira’s voice stayed steady. “Can we block it?”

Maya nodded. “We can block the upload... but we should capture it first. If he’s trying to push money out, we want the proof.”

Aira didn’t hesitate. “Capture. Hash. Then block.”

Raka's fingers flew. "I'm tracing the initiator session."

On screen, a progress bar began—someone uploading a bank instruction file.

Aira's pulse stayed controlled, but she could feel her heartbeat in her throat.

Maya spoke quietly. "If it completes, money moves."

Aira's eyes narrowed. "Block at 98%."

Raka glanced up sharply. "Why 98?"

"Because we want to see exactly what he tried to send," Aira said. "We want the file. We want the destination. We want the amount. And we want him to believe it **almost** worked—so he panics and makes mistakes."

Adrian's gaze flicked to her, then back to the screen.

He didn't argue.

At 97%—

Maya clicked.

****UPLOAD BLOCKED — POLICY VIOLATION****

The room exhaled.

Raka opened the captured file.

He went still.

"Aira," he said quietly, "it's not one payment."

Aira leaned forward. "What is it?"

Raka looked up, eyes tight. “It’s a batch.”

Maya scanned. “Multiple transfers. Different recipients. Split amounts.”

Farah’s voice went sharp. “That’s laundering behavior.”

Aira stared at the list as names scrolled by—shell companies with clean names and cheap websites:

Kestrel Consulting Group

Northbridge Advisory

Silverline Research

Marrow Media Lab

And then one line that made Aira’s stomach drop:

PAYMENT NOTE: “Community monitoring.”

Aira’s blood turned ice.

Community monitoring didn’t mean investors.

It didn’t mean press.

It meant mosques, gatherings, religious circles—people like her uncle.

Aira’s fingers curled under the table hard enough to hurt.

Adrian’s voice turned low. “What is ‘community monitoring’?”

Aira forced her voice to remain calm. “Surveillance.”

Farah’s pen stopped. “That’s potentially criminal.”

Aira swallowed slowly.

Pak Hendra's message from the morning echoed in her head:

Fitnah loves the morning.

And now money was literally scheduled to fund it.

*** 1:43 p.m. — The Call That Shouldn't Exist

Security's phone buzzed.

He listened, face tightening, then stepped into the war-room and spoke quietly.

“Ma’am... someone called the mosque admin office.”

Aira didn’t blink. “Who?”

“Blocked number. They asked for CCTV footage again. And they mentioned Nusatech.”

Aira closed her eyes for half a second.

So Surya wasn’t only funding “monitoring.”

He was still trying to control footage—control context—control truth.

Aira opened her eyes and said, voice steady:

“Move the mosque footage offsite. Full export. Hash. Independent custody.”

Security nodded. “Already coordinating with Pak Hendra.”

Aira exhaled slowly, relief and fear tangled together.

Adrian's gaze stayed sharp. "We need to lock Surya out."

Farah lifted her eyes. "If you lock him out abruptly, he'll run to the board claiming you're staging a coup."

Aira nodded once. "So we do it by law. By policy. By the Audit Committee."

Pratama's voice was tight. "We request immediate temporary suspension of CFO system privileges pending investigation into attempted financial bypass."

Maya nodded. "And we provide captured bank batch as evidence."

Aira looked at Adrian. "You'll need to sign the request. But not alone."

Adrian's mouth tightened. "Laksmi."

Aira nodded. "Yes."

*** 2:18 p.m. — The Committee Blade

Mrs. Laksmi arrived in person this time.

Not with security.

Not with drama.

Just with that look that made rooms behave.

She listened to Maya. Read the captured batch. Studied the payment notes.

Then she looked at Aira.

"Community monitoring," she repeated.

Aira nodded. “Likely surveillance related to my uncle’s circle.”

Laksmi’s face didn’t change much, but her eyes sharpened like winter.

“This has crossed governance,” she said quietly. “This is intimidation.”

She turned to Adrian. “Authorize temporary CFO access restriction. Immediate. Under Audit Committee authority.”

Adrian didn’t hesitate. “Done.”

Laksmi’s pen tapped the paper once, as if signing wasn’t a formality but a verdict.

Then she looked at Aira again.

“Aira,” she said, voice low, “this will provoke him.”

Aira met her gaze. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Laksmi nodded. “Good. Because provoked men make mistakes.”

*** 3:06 p.m. — The Mistake

Surya didn’t come back to argue.

He didn’t send another polite email.

He made the move people made when doors closed:

He tried to open a window.

Raka’s screen flashed a new alert.

“Remote login attempt—CFO privilege token,” he said. “From outside network.”

Maya’s eyes narrowed. “He’s trying to access through a stored token.”

Pratama’s voice was cold. “Denied?”

Raka nodded. “Denied.”

Then another alert.

Another.

And then—one more that made everyone go still:

Attempted purge request — Finance logs (past 72 hours)

Aira’s blood chilled.

“He’s trying to wipe the trail,” she said.

Maya shook her head. “Too late. We mirrored it.”

Aira’s voice went quieter. “He doesn’t know that yet.”

Adrian’s jaw flexed. “Let him keep trying.”

Aira stared at the screen, breathing slow.

Because now Surya’s calm mask had slipped far enough to show the truth:

He wasn’t a worried CFO.

He was an operator.

And operators didn’t stop when they were cornered.

They escalated.

Nisa rushed in, face pale.

“Ma’am,” she said, voice shaking, “someone posted a new thread.”

Aira’s chest tightened. “What kind?”

Nisa swallowed. “It’s not about you and Adrian.”

Aira’s stomach dropped.

“It’s about your uncle.”

Nisa turned the phone around.

A grainy photo—taken from far away—of Ustadz Harun walking near the mosque.

Caption:

“RELIGIOUS FIGURE LINKED TO NUSATECH POWER NETWORK — WHO IS REALLY PULLING THE STRINGS?”

Aira felt the room tilt.

Not because she was weak.

Because they had done exactly what she feared:

They had touched someone innocent to force her to bend.

Adrian’s face hardened. “We shut this down.”

Farah’s voice was sharp. “We respond carefully. Anything emotional will be used as confirmation.”

Aira stared at the screen, pulse pounding once, twice—then she forced it into calm.

“Security,” she said softly, “increase discreet protection around my uncle’s route.”

Security nodded immediately. “Already mobilizing.”

Aira looked at Laksmi. “Ma’am… this is intimidation.”

Laksmi’s gaze turned icy. “Then treat it like intimidation.”

Aira turned back to the whiteboard and wrote one more line under **OPERATION LEDGER**:

If they weaponize faith, we weaponize procedure.

Then she picked up her phone and sent one message to Pak Hendra:

“Please keep Uncle Harun inside safe circles today. No statements. No reactions. We will handle this.”

Aira stared at the wall for a moment, breathing slow.

And then she looked at Adrian, voice steady again.

“They want me to panic,” she said.

Adrian nodded once. “Don’t.”

Aira’s gaze sharpened. “I won’t.”

She turned to the team.

“We have Surya’s bypass attempt. We have the batch file. We have payment notes implying surveillance. We have smear escalation targeting a cleric.”

Her voice stayed calm, but the words were steel.

“Now we stop treating this as ‘internal misconduct.’”

She looked at Farah.

“We treat it as a coordinated operation.”

Farah nodded slowly. “Then we prepare the next packet.”

Aira’s phone buzzed.

Unknown number.

Two words:

“Pay attention.”

Aira didn’t reply.

She lifted her chin and said, softly:

“We’re paying attention.”

Because now she understood what Chapter Twenty would become:

Not a meeting.

Not a headline.

A confrontation—where money, fear, and truth finally collided in the open... and somebody would be forced to show their real face.

Chapter 20

The Face Behind the Numbers

The photo of Ustadz Harun stayed on Aira's screen like a stain that refused to wash off.

Aira didn't cry. She didn't shout. She didn't even curse.

She did what she had learned to do in rooms full of powerful people:

She turned pain into procedure.

“Document,” she said softly.

Security nodded. “Already archived. Screenshots. Time-stamp. Source account ID.”

Farah added, “This is intimidation. And it's now part of the case.”

Mrs. Laksmi's gaze didn't move from the image for a long beat. When she spoke, her voice was cold enough to make even seasoned executives sit straighter.

“They crossed a line,” she said.

Aira nodded once. “Yes.”

Adrian's jaw flexed, controlled rage behind it. “If Surya is behind this—”

Aira cut in gently, firmly. “We don't convict in anger.”

Adrian looked at her, eyes dark. Then he nodded once—tight, unwilling respect.

“Fine,” he said. “We verify. Then we cut.”

Aira turned to Maya. “Where are we on the finance-batch recipients?”

Maya projected a table of the captured bank file.

“Four shell entities,” she said. “Two registered locally with recent creation dates. One overseas mailbox address. One is a ‘media monitoring’ agency that’s basically a front.”

Raka leaned forward. “We can cross-match recipients with the influencer account’s ad spend patterns.”

Aira nodded. “Do it.”

Pratama spoke quietly. “If we can connect payments to smear distribution, we can justify stronger action—suspension, law enforcement, regulatory escalation.”

Laksmi’s eyes sharpened. “And we can justify it cleanly.”

Aira’s voice stayed steady. “We need Surya to put his fingerprints on a decision. Something he signs.”

Farah frowned. “He won’t, now that he’s contained.”

Aira shook her head slightly. “Not with a signature. With behavior.”

She turned to the whiteboard and wrote:

****CONFRONTATION WITHOUT DRAMA****

Then she wrote one more word under it:

****CHOICE****

“People like Surya don’t confess,” Aira said. “They choose. And in choosing, they reveal.”

Adrian studied her. “What choice?”

Aira looked at Pratama. “We can offer a controlled path: cooperate with Audit Committee oversight and independent investigators—give full access, surrender devices, stop vendor activity.”

Farah’s eyes narrowed. “And if he refuses?”

Aira’s gaze didn’t move. “Then we act.”

Laksmi nodded once. “Bring him in.”

*** 4:40 p.m. — The Audit Committee Room

This wasn’t Conference Room 3.

This was the Audit Committee’s room.

Smaller. Cleaner. Harder to manipulate.

The camera light was on. External counsel present. Independent forensics present. Audit present. Security present.

And, crucially—

Mrs. Laksmi was present.

Surya walked in five minutes late.

Not enough to be outrageous, just enough to remind everyone he liked controlling clocks.

He stopped at the doorway for a fraction of a second, scanning faces, scanning posture, scanning threat level.

Then he smiled.

“Ma’am,” he said to Laksmi with respectful warmth. “I didn’t expect to be called like a suspect.”

Laksmi’s expression was unmoved. “Sit.”

Surya sat.

He looked at Adrian. “CEO.”

Adrian didn’t soften. “CFO.”

Surya looked at Aira last, smile faint. “Director.”

Aira returned a neutral nod.

No warmth. No hostility.

Only distance.

Farah opened, voice professional. “Pak Surya, this meeting concerns attempted financial bypass actions and potential coordination of external influence activity.”

Surya sighed, as if tired of people being dramatic.

“I’m aware Finance has been obstructed,” he said calmly. “If you want to discuss policy, I’m happy. But if this is a witch hunt—”

Aira didn’t let him finish.

“Pak Surya,” she said softly, “we’re not discussing feelings. We’re discussing facts.”

Maya projected the captured bank batch file.

Surya's eyes flicked to the screen.

A small pause.

Then he smiled again. "A batch file. Finance operations often generates batch files."

Aira nodded. "Correct. But this one was initiated after your payment was blocked. It was an attempted workaround."

Surya's smile thinned. "You're assuming motive."

Aira's voice remained calm. "We're presenting sequence."

Pratama leaned forward. "We also have the attempted purge request for the last 72 hours of finance logs."

Surya looked mildly offended. "If logs are being mirrored and handled by third parties, of course Finance will request cleanup. It's standard hygiene."

Maya's voice cut in, clinical. "Requesting a purge after an active investigation begins is not 'hygiene.' It's obstruction."

Surya's eyes narrowed—just a flicker.

Then his face smoothed.

"So what is your accusation?" he asked, still polite. "That I'm incompetent? That I'm reckless?"

Aira held his gaze.

"That you are coordinating," she said softly.

Silence.

Surya laughed once—quiet, controlled. "Coordinating what?"

Aira nodded to Security.

Security placed a printed packet on the table and slid it across.

It wasn't everything.

Just enough.

A screenshot of the smear post targeting Ustadz Harun.

A timeline showing it went live within hours of the payment attempts.

A connection map—shell vendors, influencer account, prior leaks.

Surya looked at the packet.

His smile stayed.

But his eyes stopped smiling.

“That’s unfortunate,” he said calmly. “But you can’t prove I did that.”

Aira didn’t rush.

“No,” she agreed. “Not with that alone.”

Surya’s smile returned, relieved too early.

Then Aira said, softly, “We also have message residues recovered from Satria’s device.”

The room cooled.

Surya’s eyes flicked for the smallest instant—toward the exit, toward the camera, toward the ceiling.

A survival scan.

Aira continued, calm as ever. “A contact labeled ‘S.’ gave instructions about the relay and Phase Three timing.”

Surya’s smile didn’t move, but his jaw tightened slightly.

Farah spoke. “We’re offering you two options under Audit Committee authority.”

Surya leaned back, eyes calm again. “Options.”

Farah lifted a document. “Option one: You cooperate. You surrender your corporate devices for independent imaging. You allow Audit Committee oversight of CFO communications routes for the next fourteen days. You cease any vendor activity connected to PR and ‘monitoring’ immediately.”

Surya’s eyebrows rose slightly. “And option two?”

Farah’s tone stayed cool. “Option two: We proceed with a formal internal finding and expand the regulatory submission to include attempted financial bypass, obstruction indicators, and intimidation patterns.”

Surya laughed quietly. “So: cooperate or be charged.”

Laksmi’s voice cut in—flat, deadly. “Cooperate or be removed.”

Surya’s smile finally slipped—just enough to show annoyance.

He looked at Adrian. “CEO, are you comfortable destroying Finance stability over suspicion?”

Adrian’s reply came out cold. “I’m comfortable destroying blackmail.”

Surya’s gaze sharpened. “Blackmail is a strong word.”

Adrian didn’t blink. “So is ‘community monitoring.’”

Surya’s eyes narrowed.

Aira watched the micro-expression—tightness around the mouth, a flash of anger behind the eyes.

That was the face behind the numbers.

Not a worried CFO.

An operator caught on camera.

Surya leaned forward, voice soft. “You’re all making a mistake.”

Aira answered, same softness. “Then prove it.”

Surya’s smile returned—thin, sharp. “Proof is expensive.”

Aira didn’t flinch. “We’re willing to pay.”

For the first time, Surya’s politeness cracked.

He turned slightly, looking past Aira like she was no longer relevant, and spoke to Laksmi with an edge that wasn’t respectful anymore.

“Ma’am,” he said, “do you really want a regulator inside our company? Do you really want press camping in the lobby for months?”

Laksmi’s voice didn’t rise. “I want the truth.”

Surya’s eyes flashed. “Truth won’t pay salaries.”

Aira spoke, voice still steady, but now with a sharper line underneath:

“Lies won’t either. Not for long.”

Silence.

Surya stared at Aira—really stared—for the first time as if he finally understood she wouldn’t be bullied into disappearing.

Then he made his choice.

He smiled.

And he said, calmly, “No.”

Farah blinked. “No?”

Surya nodded. “I won’t surrender my devices. I won’t allow you to hijack Finance operations. This is overreach.”

Aira’s pulse stayed controlled.

Because she’d expected it.

Because refusal was a confession in this kind of room.

Laksmi looked at Adrian. “CEO?”

Adrian’s voice was cold as glass. “Then, effective immediately, Surya is placed on administrative leave pending investigation.”

Surya’s smile vanished.

“Adrian,” he said sharply, “you can’t—”

“I can,” Adrian cut him off. “Under Audit Committee authority.”

Surya’s eyes went hard. “You’ll regret this.”

Aira leaned forward slightly, voice calm. “Threats don’t help you now.”

Surya looked at her as if he wanted to say something cruel—something personal—something that would spill dirt into the room.

Then he remembered the red recording light.

He stood abruptly.

He smoothed his jacket—again that gesture, always the same.

And as Security opened the door for him, Surya turned and delivered his final line like a promise:

“You think you’ve contained me,” he said softly.

He glanced at Aira.

“But you didn’t contain the market.”

Then he walked out.

*** 5:12 p.m. — The Market Move

Aira didn’t even have time to exhale.

Nisa rushed in, face pale. “Ma’am—Investor X just released a public statement.”

Aira’s stomach tightened. “What kind?”

Nisa showed the phone.

A statement framed like concern:

“Due to governance uncertainty at Nusatech, we are pausing our commitment pending clarity.”

There it was.

Surya’s prediction.

A controlled market tremor.

Not a collapse yet—but a warning shot that could spook other investors into following.

Adrian's jaw tightened. "They're coordinating."

Farah nodded. "Of course they are. This is leverage warfare."

Maya's laptop chimed again.

"New activity," she said. "Someone is attempting to access archived finance logs... with an external token."

Aira's eyes narrowed. "Surya's."

Maya nodded. "Likely."

Aira didn't panic.

She pointed at the screen. "Block. Capture."

Maya captured the attempt. Blocked it.

And then she added, voice tense, "We're going to need to secure Surya's home devices too. If he used personal hardware—"

Farah cut in. "That requires legal process."

Aira looked at Laksmi. "Ma'am. Emergency injunction route?"

Laksmi's eyes turned sharp. "We can petition. And we can request preservation orders."

Aira nodded. "Then we do it."

Because the war was no longer only inside Nusatech.

It was outside now—investors, media, shells, influence accounts, and a CFO who had just been removed and would now act like a cornered man.

A cornered man didn't apologize.

He burned evidence.

He burned reputations.

He burned bridges.

Aira's phone buzzed.

Unknown number.

A single message:

“You chose law. Now we choose fire.”

Aira stared at it, breathing slow.

Then she turned to the room, voice steady.

“Alright,” she said softly. “If they want fire...”

She picked up her folder—the real one, the heavier one.

“...we bring water with legal force.”

And Chapter Twenty-One began in her mind before she even said the words out loud:

Preservation. Injunction. The race to stop the burn.

Chapter 21

The Preservation Order

They didn't sleep.

Not because they were heroic—because they were outnumbered.

The moment Surya walked out of the Audit Committee room, something in Nusatech shifted from **corporate crisis** to **active containment.** Like a ship realizing the leak wasn't theoretical anymore.

Aira stared at the message on her phone:

****“You chose law. Now we choose fire.”****

She didn't show it to everyone. Not yet.

She forwarded it—quietly—to Security and Farah through the official channel, then slid her phone face down like that could stop the words from crawling into her skin.

Farah looked up from her laptop, eyes sharp. “That's intimidation. And it's good for us.”

Aira's voice stayed calm. “It's also a timeline.”

Adrian stood near the window, watching the lobby lights below. Press bodies were visible like dots—waiting to feed.

“Fire means distraction,” Adrian said quietly. “And in distraction, they destroy evidence.”

Aira nodded once. “So we freeze the evidence before they can touch it.”

Mrs. Laksmi didn't waste breath. “Proceed.”

*** 6:11 p.m. — The Only Weapon That Beats Panic

Farah opened a new document and typed the title like she was carving it into stone:

****URGENT PRESERVATION + NON-DESTRUCTION NOTICE****

Not pretty. Not dramatic. The kind of thing people feared because it didn't go viral—it went to court.

Aira spoke while Farah wrote.

“List every category,” Aira said. “Finance logs. Vendor onboarding records. Payment batch files. CFO communication routes. Relay server logs. PR vendor communications. CCTV exports. Device images.”

Maya added, “Also backup system snapshots and deletion request tickets. And access token audit trails.”

Farah nodded, fingers moving fast. “Good. We’ll serve it internally and externally. Vendors too.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “Vendors will pretend they ‘didn’t know.’”

Farah didn’t look up. “Not after they receive this.”

Aira leaned forward. “And we need an emergency order. Not just a notice.”

Farah paused. “An injunction?”

“A preservation order,” Aira corrected gently. “A court-backed freeze. Devices. Logs. Accounts. Anything tied to Surya’s operational footprint.”

Mrs. Laksmi’s voice was flat. “Make it happen.”

Farah finally looked up. “If we file tonight, we need a judge on duty. And we need to justify urgency with proof.”

Aira slid the captured bank batch file across the table.

“Here,” she said. “Attempted bypass. Attempted purge request. Intimidation escalation targeting a cleric. And the spoofed official packet.”

Farah scanned the documents, eyes narrowing with each page.

“This is enough,” she said. “But the clock is your enemy. If evidence vanishes before we file, we’ll spend weeks proving absence.”

Adrian’s expression turned to stone. “Then we file before they erase anything.”

Aira’s voice stayed steady. “We file now.”

*** 6:44 p.m. — Operation Ledger Goes External

The war-room became a conveyor belt of disciplined work:

- * Audit printed the chain-of-custody log summaries.
- * Maya’s firm generated fresh hash sheets and independent verification statements.
- * Security compiled intimidation artifacts: threats, smear escalation timing, “community monitoring” payment notes.
- * Farah built the legal narrative: **why** this wasn’t internal drama, but a coordinated interference pattern.

And Aira did something she hated:

She called Pak Hendra.

Not because she wanted her uncle to feel watched.

Because “fire” didn’t always mean data.

Sometimes it meant a person.

Pak Hendra answered on the second ring. “Aira.”

Her throat tightened, but her voice stayed calm. “Pak... please keep Uncle Harun inside trusted circles tonight. No public statements. No walking alone.”

Pak Hendra didn’t ask why. He didn’t say “InshaAllah” in a casual way. His tone sharpened into something protective.

“Understood,” he said. “There are two men outside the mosque again. Not inside. Just... waiting.”

Aira’s heart thumped once, hard.

“Do you have support there?” she asked.

“Yes,” Pak Hendra replied. “And I’ve already called someone.”

Aira exhaled slowly. “Thank you.”

When she ended the call, she didn’t sit down.

She stood, hands folded, breathing carefully—because the moment she allowed fear to bloom, her brain would start making mistakes.

And mistakes were what the enemy wanted.

*** 7:19 p.m. — The First Spark

Maya's laptop chimed.

Not the canary. Not a log alert.

A social monitoring alarm.

Nisa's voice came through shaky on the war-room line. "Ma'am—new thread is rising. It's claiming... layoffs. They're saying Nusatech is collapsing and the CEO is hiding fraud."

Aira's eyes narrowed. "Source?"

Nisa swallowed. "Same network. Same style. But this one is being boosted by finance-themed accounts."

Adrian's face hardened. "Investor panic engineering."

Farah didn't blink. "They're trying to make your filing look like guilt."

Aira nodded once. "And while people stare at headlines... they move the real fire."

As if to prove her point, Security's radio crackled.

"Alert. Data retention policy changed request submitted."

Aira went still. "By who?"

Security's voice turned grim. "A ticket submitted under Finance Ops—requesting accelerated log rotation for 'storage optimization.'"

Aira's blood cooled.

That wasn't incompetence.

That was arson with a spreadsheet.

“Stop it,” Adrian said instantly.

Maya shook her head. “Don’t just stop it—capture it. Preserve the request.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “Capture. Hash. Then deny.”

Within seconds, the request was locked and mirrored into independent custody.

Farah looked up from her laptop, eyes sharp. “Good. That becomes part of the injunction request: active attempts to destroy evidence.”

Aira didn’t smile.

Because she knew what came next.

If they couldn’t erase the logs...

They’d try to erase the people holding them.

*** 8:02 p.m. — The Courier Who Didn’t Belong

Security moved quickly into the war-room with a sealed package in his hand.

“Delivered downstairs,” he said, voice tight. “For you.”

Aira didn’t touch it. “From who?”

“No sender,” he replied. “Just your name.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t open it here.”

Farah stood. “Evidence protocol. Photograph, scan for hazards, log it.”

Security nodded and placed the package on a separate table like it might breathe.

They recorded it. Tagged it. Ran basic checks.

Inside was a single printed page.

Aira recognized the formatting immediately—corporate memo style, but slightly off.

At the bottom: a forged-looking signature line.

“CEO Authorization: Approved.”

Aira’s stomach tightened.

They weren’t just spreading rumors.

They were manufacturing artifacts—trying to create a trail.

Farah’s voice went cold. “This is tampering with governance documentation. It strengthens our request.”

Adrian stared at the page, jaw tight. “They want to plant paper evidence so later they can say—‘See? It existed.’”

Aira’s voice stayed quiet. “And if anyone panics and reacts wrong, they’ll claim guilt.”

Mrs. Laksmi’s tone was lethal. “We don’t react. We record.”

Aira nodded once. “We record everything.”

*** 9:17 p.m. — The Filing

Farah's team finalized the emergency request.

It wasn't long.

It was sharp.

It said, in clean legal language:

- * There is credible evidence of active evidence-destruction attempts.
- * There is credible evidence of financial bypass attempts.
- * There is credible evidence of intimidation and reputational manipulation tied to governance outcomes.
- * Immediate preservation is necessary to prevent irreparable harm.

Aira read the final page once, then looked at Adrian.

“This changes the war,” she said softly.

Adrian's gaze didn't move. “Good.”

He signed—under dual control with Mrs. Laksmit's written authorization.

No secrecy. No lone signatures. No cracks.

Then Farah pressed “submit.”

Aira watched the confirmation populate on screen.

A timestamp.

A case reference.

A digital receipt.

The kind of receipt liars hated, because it couldn't be cropped into a rumor.

For a beat, the room went quiet.

And Aira almost—almost—let herself breathe.

Then Maya’s laptop chimed again.

Her face changed.

Not panic. Something worse.

Focus.

“Someone is accessing the offsite mirror,” Maya said.

Aira’s spine went cold. “From where?”

Maya’s fingers moved fast. “A legitimate credential… but not ours.”

Raka leaned forward, voice tight. “That means someone stole vendor credentials.”

Maya’s eyes narrowed. “Or someone inside the vendor is compromised.”

Adrian’s voice turned sharp. “Can they delete it?”

Maya shook her head. “Not fully. But they can attempt corruption. Slow damage. Make it look unreliable.”

Aira felt her heartbeat hammer once, then forced it down.

“Lock it,” Aira said. “Rotate keys. Freeze access to read-only under independent custody.”

Maya nodded. “Doing it now.”

On screen, access attempts spiked—then slammed into a wall.

ACCESS DENIED.

For a moment, the war-room held its breath.

Then Security's phone buzzed.

He listened, face turning pale.

"Ma'am," he said quietly, "Pak Hendra called."

Aira's chest tightened. "Put it on speaker."

Pak Hendra's voice came through—steady, but with something urgent underneath.

"Aira," he said, "two men tried to approach Harun outside the mosque. They didn't speak to him. They spoke to the admin."

Aira's throat went dry. "What did they want?"

Pak Hendra's voice turned cold. "They wanted him to 'clarify' publicly that you are using religion to influence the company."

Aira closed her eyes for half a second.

There it was.

The fire wasn't only digital.

It was social—faith turned into weapon, dignity turned into bait.

Pak Hendra continued, "I refused. They left. But they said something before they walked away."

Aira's voice was barely above a whisper. "What did they say?"

Pak Hendra paused.

Then: “They said, ‘Tomorrow, the video comes out.’”

Silence swallowed the room.

Aira opened her eyes, calm on the outside, ice in her veins.

“What video?” Adrian asked.

Aira’s voice stayed steady. “A fabricated one. Or a cut one.”

Farah’s pen moved fast. “That’s escalation.”

Mrs. Laksmi’s tone was sharp. “Then we pre-empt. We notify authorities of imminent smear escalation tied to intimidation.”

Aira nodded once.

She didn’t look at Adrian.

She didn’t look at Raka.

She looked at the whiteboard—**“**OPERATION LEDGER**”**—and wrote one more line underneath:

“OPERATION FIREBREAK**”**

Then she turned back to the room and said, softly, like a prayer that had become a plan:

“Tonight we freeze what we can freeze.”

“And tomorrow...”

Her voice sharpened a fraction.

“...we stop the video before it becomes truth.”

And somewhere out there—behind numbers, behind vendors, behind “concerned” investor statements—someone was smiling, convinced that one clip could burn everything Aira had built.

But Aira had finally learned the only real defense against fire:

you starve it of oxygen.

Chapter 22

Operation Firebreak

Aira didn’t sleep.

Not because she was brave—because her body refused to believe the threat was only words.

“Tomorrow, the video comes out.”

The sentence had the shape of something already edited, already scheduled, already sitting in someone’s drafts folder waiting for a perfect hour—when people were half-awake, half-angry, and fully ready to believe the first thing they saw.

At 4:58 a.m., the war-room lights were still on.

Maya’s team sat in their quiet, ruthless focus. Farah had a legal pad filled with bullet points that looked like prayer beads—each one a step, each one a defense.

Security had two phones. One for internal comms. One for the outside world.

Raka stared at the monitor like he was trying to see the future in log lines.

Aira stood at the whiteboard and wrote:

****OPERATION FIREBREAK****

Then, beneath it, three lines:

1. ****PRE-BUNK**** (truth **before** the lie)
2. ****PRESERVE**** (capture everything)
3. ****STARVE**** (cut oxygen: money + distribution)

She turned to the room.

“They’re not going to debate,” she said softly. “They’re going to **publish.**”

Adrian’s voice came out low. “So we stop the publish.”

Aira nodded once. “Or we make publishing useless.”

Farah leaned forward. “We can’t stop someone from uploading a video. But we can take away its credibility and reduce its reach with fast legal and procedural steps.”

Maya added, “And we can fingerprint it.”

Aira pointed at Maya. “Do it.”

***** 5:21 a.m. — The Fingerprint**

Maya projected a simple plan:

- * Create a **watch list** of accounts already linked to the smear network.
- * Set up **audio and frame fingerprinting** triggers for anything featuring Ustadz Harun's voice, face, or the mosque exterior.
- * Pre-draft takedown requests with evidence: intimidation timeline, prior falsifications, preservation filing receipt.

Raka raised his eyes. "If they upload on multiple accounts, we'll need speed. Automated detection + human confirmation."

Aira nodded. "You get speed. But we don't guess. We confirm."

Security spoke quietly. "Pak Hendra said two men approached the mosque admin. We should document that too—formally."

Aira didn't hesitate. "Yes. We need statements."

She looked at Adrian. "Not from my uncle on camera—no emotional defense. From the admin. From Pak Hendra. Calm. Factual."

Adrian's jaw tightened. "And we protect them."

"Discreetly," Aira reminded.

*** 6:07 a.m. — Pre-Bunk

Farah typed while Aira dictated.

Not a public apology.

Not a defensive rant.

A pre-bunk memo—short, clinical, anchored in process.

- * There is an ongoing investigation into coordinated reputational manipulation.
- * There have been repeated attempts to obtain mosque CCTV footage.
- * There is credible indication of an imminent manipulated video drop.
- * Nusatech has filed preservation requests and is working with independent forensics.
- * Any circulating video should be treated as **unverified** pending full-context verification.

Farah paused. “We can’t name your uncle publicly in this memo.”

Aira nodded. “We don’t. We reference ‘a community religious figure’ and ‘attempted intimidation.’”

Adrian looked at the draft. “When do we release it?”

Aira’s answer was immediate. “When the first clip drops. Not before.”

Raka frowned. “Wouldn’t earlier be better?”

Aira met his eyes. “Earlier looks like we’re nervous. We don’t look nervous.”

Farah nodded once, approving. “We look prepared.”

*** 7:12 a.m. — The Oxygen

Aira turned to the piece that made her stomach cold: **distribution**.

“You can’t burn a building without fuel,” she said. “Find the fuel.”

Maya pulled up the captured bank batch recipients again: the shells, the media lab, the “community monitoring” note.

“Marrow Media Lab,” Aira said, tapping the screen. “That’s not an accident.”

Raka’s fingers moved. “I’m checking procurement—contracts, NDAs, vendor contacts.”

Pratama leaned in. “If the smear network is being paid through a vendor chain, we can serve preservation notices to those vendors too.”

Farah nodded. “We already drafted them last night. We can send immediately.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “Send.”

Within minutes, preservation notices went out—quiet legal pressure sliding into inboxes like a hand on a throat.

Not to choke.

To stop movement.

*** 8:39 a.m. — The First Ember

Nisa called in from her desk upstairs, voice tight.

“Ma’am. There’s chatter.”

Aira’s chest tightened. “Where?”

“Telegram groups,” Nisa said. “They’re sharing a ‘countdown.’ Not a video yet, but... they’re teasing ‘exclusive footage’ at 10:00 a.m.”

Raka’s head snapped up. “A scheduled drop.”

Maya's eyes narrowed. "If we can identify the account posting the countdown, we can pre-alert the platform."

Farah's voice sharpened. "We do not contact them. We contact the platform and document everything."

Aira nodded. "And we prepare our response package."

Adrian's gaze went to Aira. "Are you okay?"

Aira didn't lie. "No."

Then she lifted her chin. "But I'm steady."

Adrian held her gaze for half a second, then looked away like steadiness was contagious and he didn't want anyone to see him taking comfort in it.

"Good," he said. "Stay steady."

*** 9:18 a.m. — The Mosque Statement

Pak Hendra arrived in person.

He didn't look like someone seeking attention. He looked like someone carrying responsibility carefully.

Aira stood when he entered—not dramatic, just respectful.

"Pak," she said.

Pak Hendra nodded. "Aira."

They didn't hug. They didn't perform closeness. They didn't give the building anything it could crop.

Farah guided them into a recorded, formal statement setting—camera on, not for social media, but for evidence.

Pak Hendra spoke calmly:

Two men approached. They demanded “clarification.” They implied a video was coming. They suggested that a refusal would be “seen as confirmation.”

Then the mosque admin—on speaker—confirmed the same. Names unknown. Faces partially covered. The words were the key.

Aira listened without blinking.

Because every sentence was another brick in the wall they were building against the fire.

When the recording ended, Aira lowered her gaze for a moment.

“Please tell my uncle,” she said softly, “not to respond.”

Pak Hendra’s eyes softened just a fraction. “He won’t. He said something simple.”

Aira’s throat tightened. “What?”

Pak Hendra answered, steady: “He said, ‘If you chase the tongues of people, you will never finish your work. Do your duty.’”

Aira swallowed hard.

And then she returned to the war-room like she could carry that sentence as armor.

*** 9:57 a.m. — Ten Minutes to Burn

The building went quiet in the tense way theaters went quiet right before the curtains rose.

At 9:58, Maya's laptop chimed.

"Upload detected," she said.

Aira's spine went cold. "Where?"

"Not public yet," Maya replied, fingers flying. "A private link created. Same smear network channel. They're preparing distribution."

Raka leaned forward. "Can we see the file hash?"

Maya nodded. "Partial hash. Enough."

She pasted it into the fingerprinting tool.

The screen returned a hit—fast.

Raka went still.

"Aira," he said quietly, "it matches a file that existed in a vendor workspace."

Aira's eyes narrowed. "Which vendor?"

Raka didn't look up when he answered. "Marrow Media Lab."

Adrian's jaw flexed. "So the money trail and the media trail are the same trail."

Farah stood instantly. "We serve them—now. Preservation plus emergency cease-and-desist. And we notify authorities that a coordinated intimidation clip is about to be published."

Aira's voice stayed calm, but it sharpened. "Also: we capture it the moment it goes live. Full file. Full context. No reliance on screenshots."

Maya nodded. "Ready."

*** 10:00 a.m. — The Drop

It went live like a match struck in dry grass.

A "leak account" posted it first—short clip, grainy, designed to look like a hidden recording:

Ustadz Harun walking, voice faint in the background, a sentence cut mid-thought. A caption laid over it in bold:

****"RELIGIOUS NETWORK CONTROLS NUSATECH —
CONFESSiON CAUGHT ON CAMERA."****

Aira's blood ran cold.

Not because the clip was convincing.

Because it was **familiar.**

The same strategy as the earlier threats: take something normal, remove the beginning and end, slap a narrative on top, and let the public do the rest.

Maya's voice snapped through the room. "Captured. Hashing now. Full file stored."

Farah was already sending the pre-drafted memo—pre-bunk activated—time-stamped and routed to the right parties, not shouted into the void.

Adrian's voice was tight. "Do we respond publicly?"

Aira shook her head once. “Not with emotion. With structure.”

She pointed at the screen where the clip played again.

“We do three things,” Aira said, voice steady.

“One: We publicly state the clip is manipulated and under active legal preservation review.”

“Two: We provide a **neutral**, full-context counter—without drama. Just the longer, verified footage if we have it.”

“Three: We cut off the distribution pipeline by hitting the vendor and the accounts with preservation + takedown requests.”

Raka’s fingers flew. “I’m pulling metadata clues from the video container.”

Maya leaned in. “Compression signature indicates it went through a specific editing workflow before upload.”

Farah’s eyes narrowed. “Can you identify the software?”

Maya nodded slowly. “Yes.”

She tapped the screen.

“Export tag,” Maya said. “And... a project label embedded.”

Aira’s chest tightened. “What label?”

Maya’s voice dropped.

“ECLIPSE_F4_HARUNCUT.”

The room went still.

Because “Eclipse” wasn’t a rumor anymore.

It was a name hiding inside the fire.

Adrian's voice went low. "They labeled it."

Aira stared at the screen, heart pounding once, twice—then she forced it down into clarity.

"They didn't just plan it," she said softly.

"They produced it."

Farah exhaled sharply. "This is evidence of premeditation."

Aira nodded once. "And now we have their fingerprint."

Her phone buzzed.

Unknown number.

One line:

"See? One clip. One match."

Aira didn't reply.

She looked at the team and said, voice calm, almost gentle:

"Okay. We don't chase the match."

Her eyes hardened.

"We find who's holding the lighter."

They were racing a production pipeline... and the next clip was already queued.

Chapter 23

The Lighter

The clip didn't just go live.

It *infected*.

Ten minutes after the first upload, it was everywhere—cropped, re-captioned, re-uploaded by accounts that didn't look connected unless you watched them the way Maya watched them: as a network, not as individuals.

Aira stood in the war-room with her hands folded so tightly her knuckles whitened, listening to the rhythm of the building—keyboards, radios, the muted breath of people trying not to panic.

On the main screen, the video played again: Ustadz Harun walking. A sentence cut mid-thought. Bold caption screaming a confession that wasn't there.

Aira's stomach churned, but her voice stayed even.

“Capture confirmed?” she asked.

Maya didn't look up. “Captured. Hashed. Stored in independent custody. Multiple redundant locations.”

Farah was already typing. “Takedown notices drafted and queued. Platform trust-and-safety contacts pinged. The intimidation context is attached. So is the preservation filing receipt.”

Raka's eyes were fixed on metadata. “Compression signature is consistent across the smear network's uploads. Same export pipeline. Same editor workflow.”

Adrian's jaw was tight enough to crack enamel. "So they didn't just plan it. They built a factory."

Aira watched the file label Maya had pulled from the container header:

****ECLIPSE_F4_HARUNCUT.****

It was so casual it felt obscene—like naming a weapon after you'd already fired it.

She exhaled slowly.

"Okay," she said softly. "We don't argue with the crowd."

Nisa, on the call, sounded like she was about to cry. "But people are believing it, Ma'am. Comments are—"

Aira cut in gently. "I know."

Then her voice sharpened into clarity.

"We fight the factory."

***** 10:14 a.m. — The Clean Response**

Farah pushed the pre-bunk memo live—now, not as a plea, but as a record:

- * an ongoing coordinated manipulation investigation,
- * credible intimidation attempts,
- * the newly published clip is unverified and shows signs of editing,
- * legal preservation actions are active,
- * independent forensics is engaged.

No emotional language. No “how dare you.” No begging.

Just procedure.

Adrian signed the statement under dual control. Laksmi approved it. Audit archived it.

Aira didn't feel relief.

She felt... alignment.

This was the only way to survive: become too documented to be rearranged.

Maya turned her laptop so Aira could see.

“Now,” Maya said, “we find the production environment.”

Aira nodded. “Show me.”

*** 10:27 a.m. — The Fingerprint in the Ash

Maya pulled up a technical view that looked like nonsense to anyone who didn't live in logs.

“To get this label inside the export,” Maya said, “they used a project template. That template lives somewhere. We find *where*.”

Raka's fingers moved. “If it came out of Marrow Media Lab, they likely used a shared storage path. Editors don't rename everything manually.”

Maya nodded once. “Exactly. And this export tag...”

She zoomed in and pointed.

“...includes a workstation signature. A machine name.”

Aira leaned closer. “What is it?”

Maya read it out.

MM-EDIT-07

Aira blinked. “That’s... obvious.”

Farah’s mouth tightened. “Obvious means they assumed no one would ever look.”

Adrian’s voice was low. “Or they wanted us to look—at Marrow—while the real hand stays hidden.”

Aira’s gaze didn’t move from the screen. “We don’t choose one. We follow both.”

She turned to Farah. “Can we compel cooperation from Marrow?”

Farah nodded. “We can pressure it hard. Preservation notices went out. And if Marrow is under contract with Nusatech—even indirectly—we may have audit rights.”

Raka’s eyes lifted. “They were in procurement history. That vendor name appeared in the batch.”

Pratama, Audit, pulled up a dashboard. “Marrow Media Lab is registered as a vendor under... Corporate Affairs.”

Aira’s blood cooled.

Corporate Affairs had been messy since the beginning—PR, “crisis consultants,” narrative management. It was the perfect camouflage.

Adrian’s voice turned sharp. “Corporate Affairs head—where is she?”

Security answered. “In office. Says she’s ‘monitoring sentiment.’”

Aira stood. “Bring her in—formal. Recorded. Not alone.”

Adrian moved, then stopped himself. “You go with Audit.”

Aira nodded. “Audit and counsel.”

Because even now, he was watching the angles. Keeping space. Starving the camera.

Aira didn’t have time to feel grateful.

She only had time to be precise.

*** 10:46 a.m. — The Doorway Witness

Corporate Affairs Head—Mira—walked into the interview room with her shoulders squared and her face too neutral.

She sat the way people sat when they’d rehearsed innocence.

Aira didn’t accuse. She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t mention her uncle.

She started small.

“Mira,” Aira said calmly, “are you currently using any external agencies for media monitoring or crisis communication?”

Mira smiled, professional. “We always have partners, Ms. Aira. Standard.”

Farah’s pen moved. “List them.”

Mira’s smile faltered a fraction. “I can provide a list later.”

Aira nodded once. “Provide it now.”

Mira swallowed. “I—need to check with Finance.”

Adrian’s voice cut in from the side—cold and steady. “Finance doesn’t control facts.”

Mira’s eyes flicked toward him, then back to Aira. “Marrow Media Lab is one of them,” she said quickly. “They monitor public sentiment, track trending topics, advise response.”

Aira kept her tone neutral. “Do they produce content?”

Mira blinked. “Sometimes they help with formatting statements. Graphics. Not—”

“Videos,” Aira said softly.

Mira paused. Too long.

Farah leaned forward. “Answer the question.”

Mira’s voice tightened. “They can. But only for public messaging.”

Aira slid a printed screenshot across the table:
ECLIPSE_F4_HARUNCUT.

Mira stared at it.

Aira watched her face—watched the small shift behind her eyes when she recognized something she wasn’t supposed to recognize.

“You’ve seen this label before,” Aira said quietly.

Mira’s mouth opened. Closed.

“No,” she said too fast. “I haven’t.”

Aira didn’t push with emotion. She pushed with structure.

“Did Corporate Affairs commission any project named Eclipse?” Aira asked.

Mira’s hands tightened in her lap. “No.”

Pratama slid another document across: a vendor PO request with vague wording.

“Community monitoring and content packaging — priority.”

Mira’s face tightened. “That could mean—”

Aira cut in gently. “What does it mean in your department?”

Mira’s voice went thin. “It means tracking narratives. Packaging internal responses.”

Aira nodded once. “Who approved the PO?”

Mira hesitated.

Adrian’s voice was quiet—dangerous. “Mira.”

Mira exhaled like she was forced to choose which cliff to fall off.

“It came from CFO office,” she said. “We were told to treat it as urgent.”

Aira’s chest tightened.

“Who told you?” Aira asked.

Mira swallowed. “Surya’s executive assistant. Dita.”

Aira didn’t flinch.

She simply wrote the name on her notebook as if it were just another log entry.

Farah's voice stayed calm, but steel threaded it. "Did you understand what was being produced?"

Mira's eyes flicked to the camera light. She recalibrated, frightened.

"I thought it was about investor reassurance," she whispered. "I didn't know it would—"

Her voice broke.

"—I didn't know it would target a religious figure."

Aira's throat tightened, but her tone remained controlled. "Did you receive any files from Marrow?"

Mira nodded weakly. "Drafts. Clips. They would send previews to a secure folder."

Raka looked up sharply. "What folder?"

Mira gave a name—an internal shared drive alias used for corporate comms assets.

Aira's eyes narrowed. "Who has access?"

Mira swallowed. "Corporate Affairs. Some Finance. Executive Admin."

Adrian's jaw flexed. "So the pipeline touches inside."

Aira stood.

"Thank you," she said softly, not kind, not cruel. "Do not delete anything. Do not forward anything. You are under preservation notice."

Mira nodded rapidly, pale. "I understand."

Aira looked at Security. “Protect her device access. No unsupervised logins.”

Security nodded. “Done.”

As they walked out, Farah murmured, “She’s scared.”

Aira’s reply was quiet. “Good. Scared people stop improvising.”

*** 11:18 a.m. — The Vendor Door

Marrow Media Lab’s office wasn’t far from Nusatech, but it might as well have been a different country.

Glass-front building. “Creative” branding. Receptionist smile that didn’t match the tension in the air when Farah and Security walked in with formal notices and a sealed envelope.

Aira didn’t go in with drama.

She went in with paper.

Farah placed the preservation notice on the front desk with a calm that made the receptionist’s smile freeze.

“We need to speak to your legal officer,” Farah said. “Now. And we need your production systems preserved immediately. This is time-sensitive.”

The receptionist blinked. “We... we usually schedule—”

Farah’s voice stayed polite, but the edge was unmistakable. “If you delay and evidence is destroyed, you become part of the obstruction.”

Security didn’t say a word. He didn’t have to. His presence was the rest of the sentence.

Within minutes, Marrow's operations manager arrived—sweating in a clean shirt, carrying a clipboard like it could protect him.

"I don't understand," he stammered. "We're just a monitoring vendor."

Aira's voice was calm. "Then preserving your systems should be easy."

The manager's eyes flicked to the paper. "We—can't allow external imaging. Client confidentiality."

Farah smiled without warmth. "You're already under a preservation duty. And the client in question is a public company facing regulatory scrutiny. You can cooperate now... or explain later why you didn't."

The manager swallowed. "We need our CEO's approval."

Aira leaned slightly forward, tone gentle and deadly:

"Your CEO will not want to be the person who 'accidentally' deleted a project folder labeled *ECLIPSE_F4_HARUNCUT*."

The manager froze.

That was the moment Aira knew.

They weren't guessing.

They were right.

*** 11:42 a.m. — The Production Room

Marrow's "studio" wasn't glamorous.

It was computers, hard drives, timeline software, and a shelf of camera equipment that could make anything look like "evidence" if you filmed it

from the right angle.

Maya was on the line, guiding what to capture, how to hash, what to seal. Farah documented every step. The vendor's own IT watched with the tense face of someone realizing they'd been hired for "monitoring" and had become a crime scene.

Raka wasn't physically there—but he was present through his voice on speaker, steady and focused.

"Look for project directories," he said. "Anything with 'Eclipse' in naming."

The vendor IT hesitated. "We can't—"

Farah cut in. "Open it."

The folder appeared on screen.

ECLIPSE/

Inside it:

F1 — APPROVALS

F2 — BOARD VOTE

F3 — RELATIONSHIP

F4 — HARUN

F5 — CEO

Aira's breath caught.

Not fear—rage contained so tightly it turned cold.

They hadn't been reacting.

They had been *rolling out episodes.*

Maya's voice came through the speaker, low and controlled. "Capture directory listing. Hash. Now."

Farah nodded. "Do not open files yet. Just document structure first."

Aira stared at the names and felt something settle inside her like a stone becoming a weapon.

"F5 — CEO," Adrian's voice said behind her, like the words tasted bitter.

Aira didn't look at him.

She only asked, softly, "What's inside F5?"

The vendor IT's hands shook as he clicked.

A list of files populated.

One of them, bold as a gun on a table:

****ECLIPSE_F5_ADRIANRESIGN_FINAL.mp4****

Another:

****ECLIPSE_F5_BANKFRAUD_AUDIO.wav****

And then the one that made Aira's stomach tighten so hard it hurt:

****DROP_SCHEDULE.xlsx****

Farah's pen stopped.

"Do not open," she said sharply.

Aira met her eyes. "We have to."

Farah exhaled once. “Then we do it with documentation and hashing.”

Maya’s voice was firm. “Record screen. Hash file before and after access.”

They did it.

The spreadsheet opened.

And there it was—rows and times, like a factory schedule:

- * **12:30 p.m.** — “Investor panic package” (email blast list)
- * **1:00 p.m.** — “CEO confession audio” (leak accounts)
- * **2:15 p.m.** — “Resignation clip” (major outlet pitch + paid boost)
- * **3:30 p.m.** — “Community follow-up” (mosque narrative reinforcement)

Aira looked at the clock on the wall.

11:53 a.m.

Less than forty minutes.

Her heartbeat hit once, hard. Twice.

Then she forced it into calm.

“This isn’t content,” she said softly. “It’s a coup timeline.”

Farah’s voice sharpened. “We need an emergency hold on this distribution. Now.”

Raka’s voice came through, tight. “Also—look at the ‘Owner’ column.”

Aira’s eyes flicked to the right side of the sheet.

Owner: **S.**

Approver: **Dita (EA)**

Budget: **Kestrel / Northbridge / Marrow**

Notes: **“Use relay for credibility.”**

Aira felt something icy move through her ribs.

It wasn't just proof.

It was *attribution.*

Adrian's voice was low. “So Surya didn't just know.”

Aira finished the thought, voice steady:

“He coordinated.”

Farah was already on her phone, moving. “We file an emergency supplement. We notify platforms. We notify the regulator. We notify the police cyber unit if necessary.”

Maya's voice cut in. “And we lock down the raw files. If they publish, we can prove premeditation.”

Aira turned to the vendor manager—who looked like he might faint.

“You're going to preserve everything,” Aira said calmly. “If you cooperate, you're a witness. If you obstruct, you're a defendant.”

The manager nodded rapidly. “We'll cooperate.”

Aira didn't waste another second.

She looked at the team.

“We have thirty-seven minutes,” she said softly, like a prayer that had turned into a clock.

Adrian's jaw tightened. "Then we stop the first drop."

Aira nodded once.

And inside her, the fear she'd been holding back finally turned into something useful:

a clean, focused urgency.

Because now she didn't need to wonder who was holding the lighter.

She had the folder.

She had the schedule.

She had the names.

And Chapter Twenty-Four was already sprinting toward them—because the first email blast was set to launch... and someone was about to realize their factory had been found.

Chapter 24

The First Drop

The spreadsheet on Marrow Media Lab's screen didn't look like a crime.

It looked like a project plan—rows, timestamps, owners, approvers, budgets.

That was the part that made Aira's stomach twist.

Because evil rarely wore horns.

It wore calendars.

Aira stared at the time in the corner of the monitor.

11:55 a.m.

The first scheduled drop was **12:30**.

Thirty-five minutes.

Farah's voice was sharp, controlled. "We need to treat this like an active incident."

Maya didn't blink. "It is."

Adrian's jaw tightened. "What do we stop first?"

Aira's voice came out steady, even though her pulse hit hard once.

"We don't stop *content.* We stop *distribution*."

She pointed at the spreadsheet. "Investor email blast list. That's oxygen."

Raka's voice came through the speaker, tight and focused. "Look for the sending platform—Mail service, CRM, any third-party distribution tool."

The vendor IT's hands were shaking as he scrolled. "There's a folder—'Delivery'—it might—"

Farah cut in. "Open directory listing only. Document first."

Maya's team recorded the screen. Hash before access. Hash after.

The "Delivery" folder contained files with harmless names and lethal intent:

- * **INVESTOR_LIST_FINAL.csv**
- * **PRESS_PITCH_NOTES.docx**
- * **PAID_BOOST_INSTRUCTIONS.pdf**
- * **OUTREACH_TEMPLATE_EMAIL.html**

Aira's mouth went dry.

This wasn't one influencer uploading a rumor.

This was a machine.

Aira turned to Farah. "Can we serve an emergency restraint order to Marrow right now?"

Farah nodded. "We already filed a preservation request last night. This—" she tapped the drop schedule, "—gives us urgent grounds for an emergency application. But a court order won't arrive in thirty minutes."

Adrian's voice cut in. "Then what?"

Aira didn't hesitate.

"We hit the pipeline directly," she said. "Three strikes."

She lifted a finger for each one.

"One: lock Marrow's systems physically and logically. No outbound, no uploads, no deletions."

"Two: notify the platforms and the email distribution provider **now**, with the schedule as evidence of imminent abuse."

“Three: prepare a counter-drop to the regulator and, if needed, to investors: not a defense—an exposure of premeditation.”

Farah’s eyes narrowed. “If you contact investors directly, they’ll claim you’re panicking.”

Aira met her gaze. “If they get the first message uncontested, they’ll claim we confessed.”

Farah held the beat, then nodded. “Fine. We draft it as governance: ‘Potential misinformation campaign identified; verification pending; do not act on unverified material.’”

Adrian’s voice went low. “Do it.”

*** 12:03 p.m. — Locking the Factory

Security stepped forward, voice calm but firm, addressing the Marrow operations manager.

“From this moment,” Security said, “no one touches production machines without witnesses. No devices leave the premises. No remote connections.”

The manager looked like he might argue—then he saw the documents, the camera, the signatures.

He nodded quickly. “We’ll cooperate.”

“Not ‘we’ll’,” Farah corrected, polite and deadly. “You are cooperating ***now***.”

Maya moved with her team, issuing instructions like a surgeon calling for clamps.

“Disable external network uplinks. Freeze cloud sync. Snapshot drives. Make logs read-only.”

The vendor IT hesitated. “That will disrupt operations—”

Adrian’s voice cut through, cold and flat. “Good.”

Aira didn’t look at Adrian, but she felt the weight of his agreement in the room like a new kind of gravity.

They were aligned.

No theatrics.

Just action.

*** 12:08 p.m. — Cutting Oxygen

Raka, still on speaker from Nusatech, sounded like he was working with his teeth clenched.

“I found a reference,” he said. “The investor email blast appears tied to a third-party marketing automation tool—an account linked to Marrow’s admin.”

Aira’s eyes sharpened. “Can we contact the provider?”

Farah was already typing. “Yes. We’ll send a legal hold plus imminent abuse notice. Include the schedule, include the fake submission precedent, include intimidation evidence.”

Maya added, “And include the file hash of the outreach template.”

Farah nodded. “Done.”

Aira's phone buzzed—unknown number.

She didn't open it.

Not now.

Not with the clock bleeding minutes.

“Raka,” Aira said, “block any inbound from Marrow-linked domains to our investor relations mailbox. If they try to ‘seed’ confirmations through internal channels, we don’t let it land.”

Raka replied instantly. “On it.”

Adrian looked at Aira for a fraction of a second—like he wanted to say something, then decided silence was safer.

He turned to Farah. “What about the press pitch at 2:15?”

Farah’s voice stayed crisp. “If we stop 12:30 oxygen, 2:15 loses amplification. But we still prepare.”

Aira nodded. “We will.”

*** 12:14 p.m. — The Name That Kept Returning

Aira’s mind kept snagging on one column in the spreadsheet:

Approver: Dita (EA)

Dita.

Surya’s executive assistant.

Aira remembered what Mira had said: *Surya’s office treated it as urgent.*

That didn't mean Dita was the mastermind.

It meant she was the bridge.

And bridges could be interrogated.

Aira looked at Security. "Get Dita into a recorded room. Now."

Security nodded. "Already moving."

Adrian's voice turned low. "No intimidation."

Aira answered quietly. "Only procedure."

Because if Dita panicked, she'd delete, deny, scream.

If she felt boxed, she'd lie.

Aira didn't need her fear.

She needed her trail.

*** 12:19 p.m. — Counter-Drop

Farah drafted an investor-facing note in a tone that sounded boring—because boring was trustworthy.

Subject: **Governance Notice: Potential Coordinated Misinformation Activity**

Body:

* Nusatech is under an Audit Committee-led investigation into coordinated reputational manipulation.

- * Independent forensics has identified indicators of imminent misinformation distribution targeting leadership integrity.
- * Investors are urged not to act on unverified materials and to await official updates.

It never said “scandal.”

It never begged.

It didn’t even mention Aira.

It mentioned process, oversight, verification.

Adrian read it once.

Then he said, “Send to Investor Relations distribution only—no public posting.”

Aira nodded. “Controlled release.”

Farah hit send.

A timestamp appeared.

Aira felt a cold relief—not victory, not safety.

Just... one more oxygen pipe cut.

*** 12:24 p.m. — The Attempt

Maya’s laptop chimed.

Her eyes narrowed. “They’re trying to push it anyway.”

Aira's spine stiffened. "From where?"

Maya's fingers flew. "From Marrow's admin console. The automation tool is initiating a campaign."

Farah's jaw tightened. "We already sent the provider notice."

Adrian's voice was sharp. "Can they stop it in time?"

Maya replied, "If the provider acts fast—yes. If not, some portion will go out."

Aira didn't freeze.

She didn't pray for luck.

She did what she always did when uncertainty threatened to swallow control:

she narrowed the problem.

"Okay," Aira said, calm as steel. "If it goes out, we don't chase it everywhere. We respond where it matters: Investor Relations and the regulator. We already anchored that. Good."

Raka's voice cut in from Nusatech. "I'm seeing outbound attempts from Marrow-linked domains being blocked on our side."

Aira exhaled once. "Good."

But her mind was already on the next problem.

If Surya's network couldn't win with money...

they would try with fear.

The video was still scheduled.

The “resignation clip.”

The “confession audio.”

Aira looked at the folder names again:

F5 — CEO.

They weren’t coming for her now.

They were coming for Adrian’s legitimacy—because if they could make him fall, everything else would collapse into silence.

Aira’s mouth tightened.

Not because she cared about Adrian as a man.

Not today.

Because she cared about the company not being hijacked by extortion.

Because she cared about her uncle not being dragged again and again through filth.

Because she cared about truth surviving.

*** 12:28 p.m. — The Provider Blinked

Farah’s phone vibrated.

She checked the screen, eyes sharpening.

“They froze the campaign,” Farah said.

Aira’s chest loosened a fraction. “Confirmed?”

Farah nodded. “Provider confirms: campaign paused for abuse review. They preserved logs.”

Maya added immediately, “That’s evidence too—attempted distribution after notice.”

Adrian exhaled once, controlled. “Good.”

Aira looked at the clock.

12:29.

The first drop had been scheduled.

The building held its breath.

At **12:30**, nothing exploded.

No email blast.

No sudden investor stampede.

Just the hum of machines and the quiet shock of a plan that didn’t happen.

Aira didn’t celebrate.

She only said softly, “One match snuffed.”

And then she turned back to the schedule.

“Next,” she said. “One o’clock.”

*** 12:41 p.m. — Dita

Back at Nusatech, Security had done exactly what Aira asked.

Dita sat in a recorded room—pale, lips pressed tight, posture stiff with fear and pride.

Aira wasn't there physically.

She joined via secure video, with Farah and Audit present on-site.

Aira's voice stayed neutral. "Dita, this is not a disciplinary interview. This is evidence preservation. We need facts."

Dita's eyes flicked to the camera light. "I don't know what you mean."

Farah slid a printed page across the table—visible to Dita.

****DROP_SCHEDULE.xlsx**** — the column with her name.

Dita's face tightened. "I didn't create that."

Aira nodded. "We're not saying you created it. We're saying your name appears as approver. Did you approve any payments or requests related to Marrow Media Lab, Kestrel, or 'community monitoring'?"

Dita swallowed. "I approved what I was told to approve."

Aira's tone stayed calm. "Who told you?"

Dita hesitated.

Then she said it—like she'd rehearsed her excuse and discovered it didn't protect her anymore.

"Pak Surya," she whispered.

Adrian wasn't in the room, but Aira could almost feel his reaction through the air anyway—like a storm pressing against glass.

Aira continued gently. "Did he tell you what the deliverables were?"

Dita's voice shook. "He said it was for investor confidence. Crisis response. He said... the company would collapse if we didn't control the narrative."

Farah asked, crisp. "Did he mention the CEO?"

Dita's eyes lowered. "He said the CEO was... being stubborn."

Aira's chest tightened. "Did he mention Ustadz Harun?"

Dita flinched. "No. Not directly."

Aira leaned forward slightly. "Dita. Look at me."

Dita looked up.

Aira's voice remained soft, but there was something sharp under it now.

"Were you instructed to seek mosque footage or anything related to a religious figure?"

Dita's breath hitched. "No."

Then, weaker: "Not by him."

Aira held the beat. "By who, then?"

Dita's eyes filled. "Someone from Legal called me once. Said it was 'risk containment.' He didn't say his name. But... it was Rahman's voice."

Aira didn't react. Not outward.

Inside, the puzzle pieces clicked harder into place.

Surya wasn't alone.

Rahman wasn't alone.

This was a coalition.

Aira nodded once. “Thank you. You will surrender your work phone and laptop for imaging. This is not optional.”

Dita trembled. “Will I be arrested?”

Farah answered before Aira could, tone controlled. “Cooperation matters. Tell the truth, preserve evidence, and your position improves.”

Aira added softly, “And stop deleting anything. If you deleted, say so. We can recover.”

Dita’s shoulders sagged like she’d been holding her breath for weeks. “I deleted some messages,” she admitted. “But not all.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “That’s still something.”

The call ended.

Aira sat still for a second.

Not because she was emotional.

Because she understood what came next.

If Surya realized Marrow had been seized and Dita had been questioned—he would trigger the next drops early.

He would burn faster.

*** 12:58 p.m. — One Minute to One O’Clock

Back at Marrow, Maya’s eyes were pinned to the screen.

“If they have other vendor mirrors,” Maya said, “they might switch launch paths.”

Farah’s voice was tight. “We notified the primary provider. But there can be backups.”

Aira stared at the schedule again.

1:00 p.m. — CEO confession audio.

Audio was dangerous because people believed sound even when it was fabricated.

Aira’s phone buzzed again.

Unknown number.

She opened it this time.

A single line:

“You stopped the first. The second is inevitable.”

Aira stared at the words.

Then she looked up and said, calm and certain:

“No.”

She didn’t say it like hope.

She said it like a decision.

“Raka,” she said into the speaker. “Search for any audio deliverable path—file transfer, cloud share links, pitch emails. Anything labeled ‘confession’ or ‘audio.’”

Raka answered immediately. “Already scanning.”

Maya’s screen chimed again—an outbound attempt.

Her eyes narrowed.

“Here,” Maya said.

A link generator.

A new private share link created.

Different platform.

Different path.

Same fingerprint tag.

Aira’s jaw tightened. “They’re switching.”

Farah’s voice went sharp. “We send immediate abuse notice to this platform too—now—with the schedule.”

Adrian stepped closer—not close to Aira, but close enough for his voice to drop.

“If this becomes public,” he said quietly, “they’ll demand I resign again.”

Aira met his gaze for one steady second.

Then she said something simple—something not romantic, not soft, just true:

“Then we make resignation impossible to fake.”

Adrian’s eyes hardened. “How?”

Aira's answer was immediate.

"You don't speak alone. You don't sign alone. And when this is over—when the smoke clears—any personal path must be done cleanly. Not as a rumor."

Adrian's throat moved once, like the words landed deeper than "incident management."

His reply was low. "Understood."

Aira turned back to the screens.

Because the clock hit **1:00 p.m.**—

and the second match was already being struck.

Chapter 24 — The First Drop (Continued)

*** 1:00 p.m. — The Second Match

The clock on the wall didn't tick loudly.

But in Aira's head it was thunder.

1:00 p.m.

CEO confession audio.

The war-room didn't move like a group of people anymore. It moved like a single body—tight, trained, reacting to signals faster than words.

Maya's fingers flew over the keyboard.

“Private share link created,” she said. “Different platform. It’s being distributed through Telegram channels first—then it’ll spill into public accounts.”

Farah was already drafting an abuse escalation.

“Attach the drop schedule,” she said, voice clipped. “Attach the intimidation record. Attach the preservation filing receipt. Make it impossible for them to claim ‘we didn’t know.’”

Raka’s voice cut through the speaker from Nusatech. “I’m seeing a pattern in the link generator. Whoever’s doing this is using an account tied to... Northbridge.”

Aira’s eyes narrowed. “Northbridge Advisory.”

One of the shell entities in the batch.

Maya looked up. “So they’re switching vendors. Same project. Same pipeline. Different doorway.”

Aira didn’t waste time on anger. Anger was slow.

“Capture the link,” she said. “Full chain. Screen record the channel where it’s posted. Hash everything.”

Maya nodded. “Already.”

Adrian stood a pace behind the table—not close to Aira, not beside her, but present like a silent wall. His face was controlled, but his eyes were dark.

“If this audio spreads,” he said quietly, “they’ll demand a resignation again.”

Aira met his gaze for a single, steady second. No softness. No romance. Just clarity.

“Then we don’t let them own your voice,” she replied. “Not even for an hour.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “How?”

Aira turned back to the screens. “We prove it’s synthetic. Fast. And we anchor the official record faster than their rumor.”

Farah nodded. “If we can get an expert statement within minutes, we can cut reach. Especially with platforms.”

Maya’s mouth tightened. “I can produce a preliminary forensic note quickly, but...”

“But?” Aira asked.

Maya’s eyes stayed on her laptop. “If the audio is generated well, the public won’t care about technicalities.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “Then we don’t argue with the public.”

She pointed to the board and the words she’d written earlier:

STARVE

“We cut distribution. We cut credibility. We cut oxygen. If a few people hear it, fine. But it won’t become a *truth* if it can’t sit on an official timeline.”

Farah’s pen moved. “We need a regulator supplement now: imminent synthetic audio campaign tied to a documented drop schedule.”

Aira nodded. “Send it.”

*** 1:06 p.m. — The Audio Appears

Nisa's voice came through the call, breathless.

"Ma'am—It's in the Telegram group. They're calling it 'leaked voicemail.'"

Aira's stomach went tight. "Play it."

Farah lifted a hand. "We should play it on a device we can preserve. Not personal phones."

Maya mirrored it onto a forensic sandbox environment and pressed play.

A male voice—Adrian's voice, close enough to be a knife—spoke in a calm, resigned tone:

> "I approved it. I underestimated the risk. And I take responsibility..."

Aira felt the room tilt—not from fear, but from the obscene familiarity of it. The voice wasn't a parody. It wasn't clumsy.

It was **crafted**.

And that was the point.

Adrian didn't react outwardly. His face stayed carved from stone. But Aira saw it—the brief tightening at the corner of his mouth.

Not panic.

Disgust.

Maya stopped the playback. "Captured. Hashing."

Raka's voice was tight. "I'm pulling known samples of Adrian's public speeches. If this is synthetic, we can compare spectral patterns."

Maya nodded. "Already running voiceprint analysis."

Farah was already typing. “Legal position: malicious deepfake intended to manipulate governance and markets. We demand immediate platform action.”

Aira watched the waveform on the screen. It looked like truth.

Which was why it was dangerous.

“Listen,” Aira said softly, “they’re counting on one thing.”

No one spoke.

Aira continued, voice steady. “They’re counting on your silence, Adrian. They want the world to fill it with their voice.”

Adrian’s gaze stayed forward. “So I speak.”

Aira shook her head once. “Not alone.”

Adrian looked at her.

Aira held the line like it was a policy, not a feeling.

“Not alone,” she repeated. “Audit Committee. External counsel. Independent forensics. You speak with governance behind you. Otherwise it becomes another clip.”

Farah nodded instantly. “She’s right. One poorly-worded sentence becomes a week of headlines.”

Adrian exhaled once, controlled. “Fine.”

Aira’s eyes sharpened. “And we keep it boring.”

Adrian’s mouth tightened. “Boring.”

Aira nodded. “Boring is credible.”

*** 1:14 p.m. — Proof Without Poetry

Maya's preliminary results popped first.

She didn't celebrate. She simply spoke, as if reading a medical chart.

"The audio contains periodic artifacts consistent with a synthetic generation pipeline," Maya said. "Not definitive for laypeople, but strong for experts. Also—there's a mismatch in room tone. The background noise pattern repeats unnaturally."

Raka cut in, fast. "And the cadence. The micro-pauses are too uniform. Human speech has variance—this has algorithmic steadiness."

Farah's pen scratched. "That's enough for an urgent platform report."

Aira leaned forward. "Do we have something simpler? Something the public can understand?"

Maya nodded. "Yes. The audio claims it's a voicemail, but it has no metadata consistent with voicemail transport. The container format is wrong."

Aira exhaled. "Good. That's clean."

Farah stood. "We send: forensic note + metadata inconsistency + link to the regulator supplement + preservation filing receipt."

Aira nodded. "Now."

Within minutes, reports went out to the platform hosting the link, plus the trust-and-safety contacts Farah had lined up from earlier incidents.

Aira didn't pretend the platform would become righteous.

But platforms responded to risk.

And Farah's email made the risk very clear.

*** 1:22 p.m. — The Market Is Not a Courtroom

The audio wasn't fully stopped.

It leaked. It always leaked.

Aira watched as it jumped from Telegram into a handful of "leak accounts," then began to crawl toward bigger pages.

Not a flood.

Yet.

A controlled drip designed to become a river.

Adrian's phone buzzed—once, twice.

He didn't pick it up.

Aira noticed his eyes flick to the screen.

Unknown number.

She didn't ask. She didn't need to.

The enemy didn't call to talk.

They called to *record.*

Farah looked up. "We should assume they're trying to bait you into a response."

Adrian's voice was flat. "They won't get one."

Aira nodded. "Good."

Maya spoke quickly. "Platform is reviewing. They may take time."

Aira's gaze stayed sharp. "Then we do the next move now."

She looked at Farah. "We release the governance notice."

Farah hesitated. "If we release too much, it becomes a story."

Aira's voice stayed calm. "It already is a story. We're choosing whether it's *their* story or a documented incident."

Mrs. Laksmi—who'd been silent on the line—spoke suddenly, voice cold and precise.

"Release," she said. "Under Audit Committee authority. One page. No emotion."

Adrian nodded once. "Do it."

Farah posted the statement through official channels:

- * A synthetic audio file is circulating.
- * Independent forensics has identified indicators of manipulation and metadata inconsistency.
- * The matter is under active regulatory preservation.
- * Nusatech will issue formal updates through governance channels only.

It didn't say "I'm innocent."

It didn't plead.

It didn't perform.

It simply planted a flag in the official timeline.

Aira felt no relief.

Only a small tightening of control around chaos.

*** 1:39 p.m. — The Vendor Cracks

At Marrow Media Lab, the operations manager looked like a man watching his company become a cautionary tale.

He kept wiping his palms on his trousers, then apologizing.

“We didn’t know—” he started.

Farah cut in without cruelty. “You will tell us who commissioned Eclipse.”

The manager swallowed. “It came through Corporate Affairs. But the urgency... the urgency came from Finance.”

Aira’s eyes narrowed. “Names.”

The manager hesitated, then blurted, “A woman—Dita—she signed off on urgent routing. And a man—someone from Legal—gave us... ‘risk language.’”

Aira’s stomach tightened. “Rahman.”

The manager nodded quickly. “Yes. He didn’t always email. Sometimes he called. He said—” his voice dropped, “—he said the company needed to be ‘guided’.”

Aira stared at the folder list on the screen again:

F5 — CEO

DROP_SCHEDULE.xlsx

Guided.

No.

Hijacked.

Farah leaned forward. “Where did the audio file come from? Who provided the voice source?”

The manager swallowed hard. “We didn’t record the CEO. We were given voice samples. Public speeches. Investor calls. They said it was ‘for training a voice model to generate a test script.’”

Aira’s throat went dry. “And you did it.”

The manager’s eyes filled with panic. “We thought it was internal crisis simulation—”

Farah’s voice stayed cool. “That’s not a defense. That’s a confession.”

Aira’s voice softened a fraction—not kindness, but clarity. “Help yourself now. Show us the chain. Who sent samples. Where. When.”

The manager nodded rapidly and gestured to the screen.

A cloud folder.

A link history.

A sender account.

Maya captured it all, hashing as she went.

Then Raka’s voice came through the speaker like a blade finding its target.

“I see a sender alias,” he said. “It matches a Finance Ops admin identity—one that triggered the purge ticket earlier.”

Aira’s eyes narrowed. “So Surya’s network is still trying to burn the trail while pushing new content.”

Adrian’s voice went low. “Cornered.”

Aira nodded. “Yes.”

Cornered men didn’t negotiate.

They escalated.

*** 1:57 p.m. — Two Fifteen Is Coming

Aira looked at the drop schedule again.

2:15 p.m. — Resignation clip (major outlet pitch + paid boost)

That one was designed not for Telegram.

It was designed for legitimacy.

For “journalists.”

For newsroom inertia.

Aira felt her heartbeat punch once.

She didn’t let it become panic.

“Farah,” she said, “we need to pre-warn major outlets. Not all. Select. The ones that care about liability.”

Farah nodded. “We can send a narrowly-worded notice: an ongoing misinformation operation is targeting leadership; evidence is under preservation; any materials received should be treated as suspicious.”

Aira nodded. “Do it.”

Adrian’s eyes met hers briefly—still controlled, still distant.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, as if the words weren’t allowed to be larger.

Aira didn’t soften.

She only answered the safe truth.

“We protect the company. That’s all.”

Adrian nodded once.

And Aira felt something strange:

Not romance.

Not comfort.

Just a growing respect—because he kept accepting governance over ego, even when it cost him.

*** 2:09 p.m. — The Door That Didn’t Open

Maya’s laptop chimed again.

A new private link created.

A pitch email drafted.

A subject line visible in the vendor logs:

“Exclusive: CEO resignation video — urgent governance crisis.”

Aira went still.

“Capture it,” she said.

Maya nodded. “Already.”

Raka’s voice sharpened. “The recipient list—do we see any domains?”

Maya zoomed in. “Yes. Two major outlets. One mid-tier. One business blog.”

Farah swore under her breath—quietly, professionally. “We send now.”

She fired off the pre-warning notices with attachments:

- * proof of premeditation (drop schedule),
- * proof of prior falsification (counterfeit submission),
- * proof of intimidation pattern (mosque footage attempts),
- * proof of synthetic audio indicators.

Then she added one line that mattered:

“A court-backed preservation request has been filed. Destruction or publication of known-falsified materials may carry liability.”

Aira watched Farah hit send.

It felt like placing sandbags as the water rose.

Not glamorous.

Just necessary.

*** 2:15 p.m. — The Third Match

The room held its breath.

Maya watched the vendor-side logs. Farah watched her inbox. Raka watched Nusatech's inbound filters. Security watched the hallways, because chaos always invited opportunists.

At exactly **2:15**, the pitch emails attempted to leave.

Then—

Maya's screen flashed:

DELIVERY FAILED — ACCOUNT RESTRICTED

Farah's eyes widened. "The provider froze them."

Maya nodded tightly. "Our earlier report likely triggered a trust-and-safety hold across related accounts."

Aira exhaled slowly.

Not relief.

A grim acknowledgment: oxygen had been cut again.

But it also meant something else.

Someone out there had just realized their factory was compromised.

And compromised factories didn't wait politely for the next slot.

They burned fast. They burned loud. They burned messy.

Aira looked at the last line on the schedule:

3:30 p.m. — Community follow-up

Her uncle.

Again.

Aira's fingers curled beneath the table.

Adrian's voice came low. "They'll try to pull him in again."

Aira nodded once. "Yes."

Then she spoke the sentence that felt like a vow:

"They won't get him."

*** 2:23 p.m. — A Different Kind of Firebreak

Aira called Pak Hendra again—not from her personal phone, but through the formal channel, recorded and documented.

"Pak," Aira said softly, "please tighten the circle. No unknown visitors. No phone calls answered without verification. If anyone asks for 'clarification' or requests a video—refuse and document."

Pak Hendra's voice was steady. "Understood."

Aira hesitated, then added carefully, "If the story becomes louder today... please remind Uncle Harun: silence is not weakness."

Pak Hendra answered without hesitation. "He already knows."

Aira's throat tightened. "Thank you."

When she ended the call, she didn't show emotion.

But she did something small, private:

She lowered her gaze for a heartbeat and whispered, barely audible—

“Ya Allah, protect him.”

*** 2:37 p.m. — The Enemy Breathes

Aira's phone buzzed again.

Unknown number.

She didn't open it.

Instead, she handed it to Security.

“Log it,” she said. “Evidence.”

Security nodded, sealing the device in a protocol bag for later imaging if needed.

Adrian watched this—quietly.

Then he said, low enough that only Aira could hear:

“You keep choosing procedure even when it hurts.”

Aira didn't look at him.

She replied softly, like a rule.

“Procedure protects people.”

A beat.

Then Adrian answered, voice almost too quiet:

“When this ends... if we need to address anything personal... we do it properly.”

Aira’s heartbeat hit once.

Not because of romance.

Because of the **adab** inside the sentence.

She kept her voice steady.

“Yes,” she said. “Properly.”

Adrian nodded once, as if locking the promise into a drawer.

Then he stepped back again—distance restored, boundaries intact.

Aira turned to the screen where the Eclipse folders still glowed like a confession.

The factory had been found.

Two drops had been disrupted.

But the day wasn’t over.

The third match was still scheduled.

And now, with their pipeline collapsing, the operator behind it would stop being elegant.

He would get desperate.

Aira picked up the marker and wrote one more line under ****OPERATION FIREBREAK****:

Desperation creates mistakes. We collect them.

Then she looked at the clock.

2:42 p.m.

Forty-eight minutes until 3:30.

Enough time for one more attempt.

Enough time for one more lie.

Enough time... for them to try to burn something they couldn't control.

And Aira was ready.

Chapter 25

The Community Follow-Up

*** 2:45 p.m.

The war-room was quiet in the way a battlefield went quiet before the next wave.

Two drops had failed. The factory had been exposed. The platforms had started freezing accounts.

Which meant the people behind Eclipse would do what cornered operators always did:

They would stop being elegant.

They would stop being strategic.

They would reach for what still burned fastest—

people.

Aira watched the clock with the same discipline she'd used to watch system logs.

3:30 p.m. — Community follow-up.

The word *community* looked innocent in a spreadsheet.

In reality, it meant the soft places in a person's life.

Family. Mosque. Trust.

And in Aira's world, those weren't "messaging targets." They were sacred.

Adrian stood near the back of the room, arms folded, posture controlled. He looked calm, but Aira could read the tension in him now—the kind that came when a threat crossed from corporate to personal.

"They'll try to make him speak," Adrian said quietly.

Aira shook her head once. "They'll try to make people believe he spoke."

Farah looked up sharply. "Meaning?"

Aira's voice stayed steady. "They don't need my uncle's statement. They only need a clip that looks like one—an 'audio note from a mosque admin,' a 'witness testimony,' a 'community leader concerned.'"

Maya nodded. "A proxy voice."

Raka's voice came through the speaker from Nusatech. "And proxies are easier to manipulate. Less public voice samples needed. Less scrutiny."

Aira turned back to the board and wrote:

****PROXY RISK****

Then she drew three arrows:

- * Admin office
- * Congregation elders
- * Community WhatsApp groups

Security nodded. "We can protect the mosque perimeter discreetly. But the most likely channel is messaging apps. That's where rumors become 'truth.'"

Aira's eyes sharpened. "Then we don't chase the rumor in every chat."

She tapped the marker against her palm once.

"We anchor the facts in the right place, and we make it dangerous to spread their lie."

Farah's expression tightened. "Legal danger."

Aira nodded. "Legal danger."

*** 2:58 p.m. — The Shield

Pak Hendra called again—this time not with panic.

With *information.*

“Two women came,” he said, voice controlled. “Not men. They wore neat hijab. They said they were ‘journalists from a community channel.’ They asked for a quick interview with Harun. They brought a microphone.”

Aira’s stomach went cold.

“Did anyone let them in?” Aira asked.

“No,” Pak Hendra replied. “The admin refused. But one of them said—” he paused, as if choosing words carefully, “—she said there was already a video. She said if we don’t ‘clarify’ now, people will assume guilt.”

Aira closed her eyes for half a second.

Same tactic. Different costume.

“Pak,” Aira said softly, “thank you for refusing. Please document their faces if possible—without confrontation. And... keep everyone calm.”

Pak Hendra’s voice softened a fraction. “Harun is calm. He said he will not answer fitnah.”

Aira exhaled slowly, relief and fear tangled in her chest.

“Pak,” she said, steadying her voice, “if anything drops at 3:30, do not respond publicly. We will handle it.”

“Understood,” Pak Hendra said.

The call ended.

Adrian's jaw tightened. "They're trying to bait the mosque into a statement."

Aira nodded. "Yes."

Then she looked at Farah. "We're activating the firebreak protocol publicly in a controlled way."

Farah lifted a brow. "You want to go public about the mosque now?"

Aira shook her head. "Not the mosque. The pattern."

She spoke calmly, as if reading a policy.

"We release a governance notice: 'We have credible evidence of a coordinated misinformation campaign targeting community figures to influence corporate governance.' No names. No faces. No emotion."

Farah hesitated only a moment.

Then she nodded. "Okay."

*** 3:12 p.m. — The Calm Statement

The statement went out through official channels—short, clinical, undeniable:

- * There is credible evidence of coordinated misinformation activity.
- * Attempts have been made to pressure third parties to issue "clarifications."
- * Nusatech requests the public not act on unverified materials.
- * Relevant authorities have been notified under preservation process.

No mention of Aira.

No mention of Harun.

No mention of religion.

Just: **this is a known tactic, and it is being documented.**

Aira watched the posted statement for thirty seconds, then turned away.

Public statements weren't meant to heal.

They were meant to **anchor.**

*** 3:28 p.m. — Two Minutes

Maya's monitoring alarms began to blink.

Raka's voice came tight. "New content draft created. It's not video—it's an image set and a voice note."

Aira's spine stiffened. "Where?"

"WhatsApp broadcast," Raka said. "They're using a chain of community groups, then it'll get screenshot and reposted to public pages."

Maya nodded. "That's harder to take down. Messaging apps don't have centralized moderation."

Farah's pen moved fast. "But we can still document it and send to authorities. And we can respond with verification to investors and internal employees."

Adrian's gaze sharpened. "Internal employees?"

Aira nodded once. "Yes. That's the target too. If employees believe it, panic starts inside."

She looked at HR liaison on the call. “Prepare an internal note: ‘Do not share unverified content. Send suspicious materials to Security.’”

HR agreed immediately.

Aira looked at the clock.

3:29.

Her stomach tightened.

Not because she didn’t have a plan.

Because she hated that anyone could drag faith into this like a tool.

*** 3:30 p.m. — The Follow-Up Drops

It arrived exactly on time.

Not on Twitter first.

Not in public.

In the quiet channels where aunties and uncles forwarded “warnings” out of care.

Aira watched the content populate on Maya’s screen as it traveled.

A poster-style image: the silhouette of a mosque, dramatic filter, bold Indonesian caption:

“Ustadz Ternama Dibayar Untuk Melindungi Skandal Direksi!”
 (“Famous Cleric Paid to Protect Boardroom Scandal!”)

Under it, a voice note.

A male voice—older, calm—speaking in an Indonesian tone that sounded just close enough to mimic a respected elder.

> “Assalamu’alaikum... kita harus hati-hati... ada pengaruh perusahaan... jangan percaya semuanya...”

Aira’s blood went cold.

Not because the voice was convincing.

Because it was designed to sound like *concern.*

Concern was contagious.

Maya stopped the audio, face tight. “Captured. Hashing. The voice note has synthetic artifacts too.”

Raka’s voice cut in. “And they used a common greeting to lower defenses. Classic.”

Aira felt her breath tighten, then forced it slow.

“What matters,” she said softly, “is not whether the voice is real.”

She looked around the room, eyes steady.

“It’s whether we let it *move unchecked.*”

Farah’s voice sharpened. “We can’t stop WhatsApp forwards.”

Aira nodded. “We stop the effect.”

She turned to HR and Internal Comms. “Send internal note now. And send to investor relations too: ‘This is a coordinated misinformation operation; do not share; report channels.’”

HR nodded. “Now.”

Aira turned to Security. “We also send to community leaders—quietly—through Pak Hendra. Not a public rebuttal. A private guidance: ‘There is a known fake voice note circulating; do not forward; report if received.’”

Security nodded. “We can do that.”

Adrian spoke, voice low and controlled. “And what about the public?”

Aira’s answer was calm. “We don’t debate religious credibility online. We let law and evidence speak. The more we argue, the more they spread it.”

Farah nodded. “Agreed.”

*** 3:41 p.m. — The Proof That Matters

Maya’s analysis results popped up again—this time with a marker that made Farah sit up.

“There’s an embedded export tag,” Maya said, voice clipped. “Same naming pattern. Eclipse.”

Aira’s eyes narrowed. “Which?”

Maya zoomed in.

****ECLIPSE_F6_COMMUNITY_VN01****

Adrian’s jaw flexed. “So it’s part of the same production schedule.”

Aira’s voice went quiet. “Which means the spreadsheet wasn’t the only schedule.”

Maya nodded. “There are likely backups.”

Farah stood. “Then we have enough for the emergency supplement.”

Aira nodded once. “File it.”

Because now they had what courts loved most:

Not outrage.

Not feelings.

A repeated pattern of premeditation, documented across multiple releases.

Farah drafted the emergency supplement with crisp urgency:

- * Additional synthetic content drop targeting community groups.
- * Same Eclipse pipeline tagging.
- * Intent: intimidation and governance manipulation.
- * Request: emergency preservation and restraint orders expanded to vendors and related accounts.

Aira watched her type.

This was what firebreak looked like:

paper.

timestamps.

proof.

*** 4:03 p.m. — The Pivot

As the legal supplement went out, Security’s phone buzzed again.

He listened, face tightening.

“Ma’am,” he said quietly, “someone is trying a different angle.”

Aira’s stomach tightened. “What angle?”

Security swallowed. “They’re calling internal employees. Claiming they’re from an ‘independent audit office.’ They’re asking if the CEO is resigning.”

Adrian’s eyes went cold. “They’re manufacturing confirmation.”

Aira nodded slowly. “They’re trying to make rumor become fact through repetition.”

She turned to Internal Comms. “Lock it down. One company-wide message: ‘No one is authorized to comment. Direct all inquiries to official comms. Report suspicious calls.’”

Internal Comms nodded, already drafting.

Aira looked at Adrian. “They’re trying to push you into a reactive statement.”

Adrian’s voice was flat. “They won’t.”

Aira held his gaze for a brief second.

Then she said softly, “Good. We let the evidence do the speaking.”

Adrian didn’t soften, but something in his eyes steadied.

“Okay,” he said.

*** 4:28 p.m. — The Factory Starts Cracking

Farah's phone buzzed.

She checked, then looked up with a hard, satisfied calm.

"One of the outlets we warned forwarded our notice to their legal team," she said. "They're asking for proof of the drop schedule."

Aira nodded once. "Give it—through counsel. Controlled."

Farah nodded. "We do."

Maya added, "Platform froze the second link shares. The audio is being flagged."

Raka's voice came through. "And Marrow's admin accounts are locked. They can't generate new share links."

Aira exhaled slowly.

Not victory.

But traction.

They weren't stopping every spark.

But they were starving the oxygen.

*** 5:07 p.m. — Aira's Quiet Line

Aira stepped into the corridor for one minute of air.

The building smelled like cold AC and warm electronics. She rested her palm on the wall and closed her eyes—only for a heartbeat.

Then her phone buzzed.

Not unknown.

It was Pak Hendra again.

“Aira,” he said, steady, “Harun asked me to tell you one thing.”

Aira’s throat tightened. “What, Pak?”

Pak Hendra’s voice softened. “He said, ‘Tell her not to carry my name as a burden. I have Allah. She has her duty.’”

Aira swallowed hard.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

When she ended the call, she stood still for a second longer.

Not crying.

Just breathing.

Then she returned to the war-room.

Because Chapter 25 wasn’t ending with a viral clip.

It was ending with something quieter, and more dangerous for their enemies:

the factory was being documented.

And documented factories didn’t survive long.

*** 5:36 p.m. — The Next Step

Back inside, Farah placed her pen down and looked at Aira.

“We’ve built a strong chain,” she said. “But if we want to end this, we need the head—Rahman, Surya, the investor channel.”

Aira nodded once. “We already have part of it.”

She pointed at the spreadsheet’s “Owner: S.”

“Now we connect ‘S’ to the investor statement.”

Adrian’s voice was low. “Investor X.”

Aira nodded. “Yes.”

Maya leaned forward. “That’s financial territory.”

Pratama said, “We can request regulator assistance to examine communications between CFO office and investor reps.”

Farah’s eyes sharpened. “And we can request court-backed preservation for investor-side comms if there’s jurisdiction.”

Aira lifted her chin.

“Then we do it,” she said softly.

Because now Aira understood what the next chapter had to be:

Not another takedown.

Not another statement.

A move that would make Surya’s network lose its strongest weapon—

access.

Access to money. Access to investors. Access to the board.

And after that...

Only then could anything personal be handled cleanly.

Not in the smoke.

Not as rumor.

But as something done with adab—like a door opened properly, not kicked in.

Chapter 26

Cut the Access

The smear didn't stop.

It *slowed.*

And slowing was enough—because slowing meant the factory was choking.

Aira stood at the head of the war-room table, eyes on the wall screen where the Eclipse timeline sat like a confession no one could unsee.

The posts were still circulating in pockets. The voice note still moved through private groups.

But the big channels—email blasts, major outlets, paid boosts—had started to fail.

That meant one thing:

They were running out of oxygen.

Farah set her laptop down and spoke with the calm of someone holding a sharp instrument.

“We have premeditation,” she said. “We have attempted financial bypass. We have intimidation targeting third parties. We have vendor cooperation. We have synthetic indicators.”

Adrian’s face was controlled. “So why aren’t they dead yet?”

Aira answered quietly. “Because they still have access.”

Pratama nodded. “To investors.”

Maya added, “To cash.”

Raka’s voice came through the speaker. “To narratives.”

Aira lifted her chin. “We cut access. Not by fighting their lies one by one. But by collapsing the pipes.”

She drew three new boxes on the board:

1. **Investor Channel**
2. **Board Channel**
3. **Vendor Channel**

Then she wrote one line beneath all of them:

****FREEZE THE NETWORK, NOT THE NOISE****

*** 8:10 a.m. — Investor X

Investor X’s “pause statement” was still echoing.

It was framed like concern, but Aira knew what it was: a lever.

Farah spoke first. “We can’t accuse the investor publicly. But we can request regulator scrutiny on communications that influenced market-facing statements.”

Pratama added, “If CFO office coordinated with Investor X, there will be call logs, meeting notes, emails—something.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “If Investor X is complicit, they’ll deny everything.”

Aira nodded once. “We don’t need confession. We need **preservation.**”

She looked at Farah. “Can we send a formal preservation notice to Investor X?”

Farah nodded. “Yes, but it must be carefully worded: ‘As part of a regulatory matter, please preserve communications.’ Not a threat—an obligation.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “Send it.”

Farah typed:

- * preserve all communications with Surya, his office, Rahman, and any third-party crisis vendors,
- * preserve meeting notes, recordings, calendars, and attachments,
- * preserve any drafts of public statements and who edited them.

Then she sent it through counsel channels.

Adrian stared at the screen. “What will that do?”

Aira replied, “It does two things.”

“One: it makes deletion risky.”

“Two: it tells them we’re not guessing.”

*** 8:42 a.m. — The Board Gate

While Investor X was being served, Mrs. Laksmi arrived again—quiet, efficient, dangerous.

She didn’t sit. She stood at the end of the table like the room belonged to governance, not to panic.

“I’ve spoken to two board members,” she said. “They are nervous.”

Adrian’s jaw flexed. “Because of Investor X.”

Laksmi nodded. “And because people fear headlines more than facts.”

Aira didn’t react. She’d seen it already: fear wasn’t loud in boardrooms.

It was polite.

It wore phrases like *“for stability.”*

Aira stepped forward slightly. “Ma’am, we need a formal board-level firewall.”

Laksmi’s eyes sharpened. “Meaning?”

Aira spoke like she’d already written the policy in her head.

“Until the investigation concludes: all governance communications go through Audit Committee channels only. No private board lobbying by Finance. No side meetings with investor reps without minutes. No ‘informal updates.’”

Laksmi's mouth tightened. "They will resist."

Aira nodded once. "Then they reveal themselves."

Adrian didn't speak. But his silence said agreement.

Laksmi looked at him. "CEO, are you prepared to annoy your board?"

Adrian's voice was flat. "I'm prepared to protect the company."

Laksmi nodded. "Good."

She turned to Audit. "Draft the directive. I will push it."

*** 9:23 a.m. — The Vendor Channel

Marrow Media Lab was cooperating—barely, but enough.

Maya had their directory structure. Their logs. Their share-link history.

Now Aira needed one more thing:

The hand-off between vendor and Nusatech's internal bridge.

Because that bridge was how Eclipse stayed credible.

"Find the internal folder," Aira said.

Raka replied, "I've located the shared drive alias Mira mentioned. It's been accessed repeatedly by Finance Ops accounts—some already flagged."

Maya's eyes narrowed. "And the timing aligns with each drop."

Farah spoke quietly. "If we show internal access + vendor production, we can justify a full scope expansion."

Aira nodded. “Then we lock it.”

Raka hesitated. “If we lock it, they’ll scream.”

Aira’s gaze didn’t move. “Let them scream.”

Raka did it.

Access narrowed. Read-only for most roles. Upload disabled. Audit-only write privileges.

Within minutes, alerts pinged:

****MULTIPLE ACCESS DENIED ATTEMPTS****

Aira stared at the list.

Names she recognized now.

A pattern.

A network.

They were still reaching for the pipe.

Which meant they were still thirsty.

***** 10:02 a.m. — Surya’s Countermove**

Aira expected Surya to retaliate through noise.

Instead, he retaliated through the only thing that still hurt:

****people’s fear of layoffs.****

An internal anonymous email began spreading—forwarded faster than official messages ever were.

Subject: **“CONFIDENTIAL: BUDGET FREEZE LIST”**

It contained a list of departments supposedly “being cut” due to governance instability.

It was formatted like a finance memo.

It looked official enough to spark panic.

Nisa’s voice came in shaky. “Ma’am... people are scared. They’re asking HR.”

Adrian’s face hardened. “That’s him.”

Farah’s eyes narrowed. “Or someone using his style.”

Aira didn’t waste time.

“Verify,” she said. “Fast.”

Pratama checked. “The memo is fake. The formatting matches older templates but the policy codes are wrong.”

Maya added, “The metadata shows it was exported on a non-corporate workstation.”

Aira nodded once.

Then she did the move that cut fear at the knees:

She made the truth boring.

Internal Comms issued a simple statement:

- * The ‘Budget Freeze List’ memo is not official.
- * No decisions were made through that channel.
- * Employees should report suspicious emails.
- * Any real budget decisions will be communicated via HR + Finance jointly, with Audit oversight.

No blaming Surya. No drama.

Just a firm anchor.

Adrian exhaled once. “He’s trying to make the company turn on us.”

Aira’s voice stayed steady. “We don’t give them a crowd.”

*** 10:44 a.m. — Investor X Responds

Farah’s phone vibrated.

She glanced once, then looked up.

“They replied,” she said.

Adrian’s gaze sharpened. “What did they say?”

Farah read carefully. “They claim their statement was independent and based on ‘public signals.’ They deny coordination.”

Aira didn’t flinch. “Standard.”

Farah continued, eyes narrowing. “But they also say: ‘We are happy to cooperate with regulators and will preserve relevant communications.’”

Aira nodded once. “Good.”

Adrian frowned. “That’s just words.”

Aira replied calmly. “Words become evidence if they break them.”

Maya leaned forward. “If they delete anything after acknowledging preservation, that’s significant.”

Aira nodded. “Exactly.”

*** 11:18 a.m. — The Cut That Matters

Farah sat down and looked at Aira.

“If we want to cut access fully,” she said, “we need a stronger lever than internal controls.”

Aira’s gaze sharpened. “Regulator.”

Farah nodded. “Yes. We request a formal inquiry into potential market manipulation and intimidation, with preservation orders extending to investor channels.”

Pratama added, “And we include Eclipse’s drop schedule and payment batch.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “That will bring heat.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “Heat is fine. Fire is not.”

She looked at Laksmi. “Ma’am, can the Audit Committee formally request regulator assistance today?”

Laksmi nodded once. “Yes. And we will.”

Aira exhaled slowly.

This was the moment the game changed again:

Because once regulators asked questions, people stopped treating lies like “PR.”

They treated them like risk.

And risk made powerful men suddenly very cooperative.

*** 12:03 p.m. — The Call That Slipped

Maya’s screen flashed a new alert—something different.

“Recovered call log from Satria’s device,” she said. “A call placed the night before Phase Three.”

Aira leaned forward. “To who?”

Maya highlighted the number.

It wasn’t saved.

But Raka’s voice came through, tight.

“That number matches a switchboard routing for Investor X’s liaison.”

The room froze.

Adrian’s voice went low. “So there was contact.”

Aira’s mouth went dry.

Not because she was surprised.

Because confirmation always carried weight.

Farah's eyes sharpened. "That's not proof of coordination alone."

Aira nodded. "But it's enough to justify preservation scope."

Maya added quietly, "And the call lasted twelve minutes."

Twelve minutes was not "wrong number."

Twelve minutes was planning.

Aira stared at the call log and felt a cold steadiness settle into her chest.

They had been following the money.

Now the money had left fingerprints.

*** 12:41 p.m. — The Network Chokes

Once the regulator request was submitted, the air in the building changed again.

Not louder.

Sharper.

Vendors started returning calls faster.

Internal departments stopped "forgetting" deadlines.

People who had been confident yesterday suddenly became polite today.

And then Security walked into the war-room with a look that made Aira's stomach tighten.

“Ma’am,” he said quietly, “Surya’s personal assistant is asking to speak with counsel.”

Aira’s eyes narrowed. “Dita?”

Security nodded. “She says she has more.”

Farah stood instantly. “Bring her in. Recorded. Now.”

Adrian’s face remained stone. But his voice was tight. “He’s losing control.”

Aira nodded once. “And losing control makes people talk.”

*** 1:09 p.m. — Dita Talks

Dita sat across the table, eyes red, hands clasped like she was holding herself together by force.

Aira didn’t pressure. She didn’t threaten.

She gave her a path.

“Dita,” Aira said softly, “you can keep protecting someone who will never protect you... or you can protect yourself by telling the truth.”

Dita’s lips trembled. “He said if I ever spoke... he’d make sure I was blamed.”

Farah’s tone was calm. “We can protect you if you cooperate.”

Dita swallowed hard, then whispered:

“There’s a backup.”

Aira's spine went cold. "Backup of what?"

"The Eclipse folder," Dita said. "Surya said Marrow was 'too visible.' He said if anything happened, there was a second vendor holding the same project."

Maya's eyes narrowed. "Name."

Dita hesitated, then said it:

"***Silverline Research.***"

Aira felt the room tighten.

Silverline was in the captured bank batch.

Aira's voice stayed steady. "Do you have proof?"

Dita nodded shakily. "An email. From Rahman's office. It had a link. I didn't click it. But I saved it."

Farah's eyes sharpened. "You still have it?"

Dita nodded. "Yes."

Aira exhaled slowly, controlled.

This was it.

The factory had a second site.

And if they didn't seize it fast, the next drops could be relaunched from there.

Aira looked at Farah. "We serve preservation to Silverline now. Emergency."

Farah nodded. “Now.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “And we lock them out of vendor payments permanently.”

Pratama nodded. “With committee authority, yes.”

Aira looked at the whiteboard and drew a thick line across the three boxes.

Investor Channel — tightening.

Board Channel — tightening.

Vendor Channel — tightening.

Access was shrinking.

The network was choking.

And that meant the operator would do the last thing operators did when they lost pipes:

They would try to escape through the oldest exit—

a deal.

Aira’s phone buzzed.

A new message, from an unknown number, finally different in tone:

“Let’s end this quietly.”

Aira stared at it.

Then she handed it to Farah.

Farah’s eyes narrowed. “They’re offering negotiation.”

Adrian's voice turned cold. "Or a trap."

Aira nodded once. "Both."

She looked at the team.

"We've cut their access," she said softly. "Now they'll try to buy a door."

Aira's gaze sharpened.

"We don't sell doors."

And Chapter Twenty-Seven opened in her mind like a file labeled for the next stage:

The offer. The trap. The choice.

Because now the enemy's fire wasn't spreading.

It was being contained.

And contained fires did one thing before they died:

They hissed—and tried to burn the hands holding the hose.

Chapter 27

The Quiet Deal

The message sat on Farah's phone like a spider.

“Let's end this quietly.”

It wasn't an apology.

It wasn't even denial.

It was the tone of someone who believed the world was a boardroom—where anything could be settled behind a door, where truth was negotiable if the price was right.

Adrian didn't look away from the screen.

“Trap,” he said.

Aira nodded once. “Also a signal.”

Farah's brow tightened. “Signal of what?”

Aira's voice stayed calm. “They're losing oxygen. When operators offer peace, it's because their next move is either escape... or burn.”

Maya leaned forward. “We treat it as evidence. We don't respond casually.”

Farah nodded. “Agreed. If we respond at all, it's through counsel and under controlled conditions.”

Mrs. Laksmi's voice came through on speaker—sharp, decisive. “No private meetings. No unrecorded calls. If they want a conversation, they speak through formal channels.”

Aira exhaled slowly.

Good.

Because the temptation of a “quiet end” was strong—not for her, but for everyone else. People loved quiet endings because quiet meant they didn’t have to admit they’d been wrong to trust the wrong people.

But quiet endings also meant the next victim would be easier.

Aira looked at Farah. “We respond through counsel only. One line: identify yourself. State your representation. Provide an agenda. Anything else is harassment.”

Farah nodded and typed a short reply.

No warmth.

No anger.

Just:

> “Please identify yourself and your legal representation. Any communication regarding this matter must proceed through counsel channels. Unsolicited contact will be documented.”

Farah hit send.

Then the room waited—ten seconds, twenty.

Aira watched the security logs while waiting. Because “quiet deal” messages usually arrived with another move.

And she was right.

*** 2:18 p.m. — The Door Opens Sideways

Raka’s voice crackled through the speaker. “We’ve got something.”

Aira's spine stiffened. "What?"

"A calendar invite," Raka said. "Just hit multiple senior staff. From a spoofed internal address. Title: **'Emergency Leadership Briefing — CEO Resignation.'** Scheduled in fifteen minutes."

Adrian's jaw tightened. "They're trying to create internal confirmation."

Aira didn't waste time. "Cancel via official channels. Warn staff."

Internal Comms moved instantly:

* **The invite is fraudulent.**

* **Do not attend.**

* **Report spoof attempts.**

Maya added, "Capture the invite headers. Hash them. It's part of the pattern."

Aira nodded. "Done."

Farah's phone buzzed again.

She looked at it and went still.

"They replied," she said quietly.

Aira's pulse hit once. "What do they say?"

Farah read the message aloud.

"We can stop everything. The clips. The accounts. The investor pressure. But we need your cooperation. You've misunderstood who the real enemy is."

Adrian's expression turned to stone. "Classic."

Aira's gaze narrowed. "Who is 'we'?"

Farah scrolled. "No identification."

Aira nodded slowly. "Then we force identification."

Farah typed again, cooler this time:

> "Identify the sender, representation, and terms. Unidentified coercion is being documented and will be provided to authorities."

She sent it.

Then Aira said, softly, "Now we wait for the hook."

Adrian looked at her. "Hook?"

Aira's voice stayed steady. "They won't offer peace without asking for something."

*** 2:34 p.m. — The Ask

It came in the third message, exactly as Aira predicted.

"Remove Aira from the task force. Issue a statement that the investigation is 'under review' and you're 'returning to normal operations.' In exchange, we stop the campaign."

Silence hit the war-room.

Aira didn't move.

She didn't blink.

Because in that single demand, the enemy revealed the truth:

Aira wasn't collateral damage.

She was the obstacle.

Adrian's voice was cold. "No."

Farah looked at Aira, then at Adrian. "This is useful."

Aira nodded once. "Extortion terms. Documented."

Maya leaned forward. "We can tie this to the intimidation pattern. It's direct coercion."

Aira's throat felt tight, but her voice stayed calm. "They're demanding that I disappear so they can rebuild the pipes."

Adrian's jaw flexed. "You're not disappearing."

Aira didn't respond to the personal note. She kept it procedural.

"We reply once," she said. "Through counsel. No negotiation. Only: your demand is extortion; cease contact; all messages are preserved."

Farah nodded and typed exactly that.

*** 3:07 p.m. — The Trap in the Offer

The sender finally identified themselves—partially.

Not with a name.

With a meeting proposal.

A private room in a hotel. A time. A promise: *'No press. No lawyers needed. Just you and one person.'*

Adrian laughed once—without humor. “No lawyers needed.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “They want an unrecorded conversation.”

Maya’s eyes narrowed. “So they can fabricate another recording later.”

Farah shut her laptop slowly. “We do not go.”

Aira nodded. “We don’t go.”

Adrian’s eyes were hard. “We bring law.”

Farah looked at him. “We can, but carefully. If you send police prematurely without enough jurisdiction, they’ll disappear.”

Aira’s gaze sharpened. “We have enough now. We have Eclipse production folders, drop schedules, vendor trails, synthetic outputs, intimidation, attempted financial bypass, and explicit demand to remove me.”

Farah nodded. “Yes. We do.”

Mrs. Laksmi’s voice came through again, decisive. “Escalate to authorities. And widen the preservation net to Silverline immediately.”

Aira exhaled slowly.

This was the moment “quiet deal” became what it always was:

A last attempt to avoid consequences.

*** 3:28 p.m. — Silverline

They served preservation notices to **Silverline Research** with emergency language and the case reference.

But Aira didn't feel reassured.

Because the factory had already shown it could move locations fast.

Raka's voice was tense. "I'm seeing new outbound link generation attempts from a different vendor domain."

Aira's eyes narrowed. "Silverline?"

Raka hesitated. "Not sure yet. But the naming pattern is similar."

Maya's voice cut in. "They might have mirrored the same folder structure."

Aira felt her heartbeat spike once—then forced it down.

"Then we assume they have a second factory ready," she said. "And we starve it before it lights."

*** 4:05 p.m. — Aira's Line in the Sand

Aira stood alone for one minute near the window and looked down at the lobby.

Press still waited like hungry birds.

Employees walked quickly with their heads down.

The building was full of people trying to work while a war was being fought above their paygrade.

Aira touched the edge of her hijab lightly—not out of anxiety, but as a grounding ritual.

Then she walked back into the room and spoke without raising her voice.

“We’re not negotiating my removal,” she said.

Not as pride.

As policy.

“If governance can be manipulated by threats, then governance is already dead.”

Adrian’s eyes held hers for a beat.

Then he nodded once, slow and firm.

Farah exhaled. “Good. Then we proceed.”

*** 4:42 p.m. — The Backlash

The backlash came the way it always did when you didn’t accept a deal.

Fast.

Ugly.

Designed to overwhelm.

A new smear trend began rising—not about Ustadz Harun now, but about Aira directly.

A headline screenshot, fake but convincing:

“BOARDROOM HIJAB SCANDAL: SECRET RELATIONSHIP DRIVES INVESTIGATION”

Nisa’s voice came through, shaking. “They’re pushing the romance angle again.”

Aira's stomach tightened.

Not because it hurt her pride.

Because it threatened the investigation's credibility.

Adrian's face turned to stone. "They want to make this look personal."

Aira nodded once. "Because if it looks personal, it looks biased."

Farah's voice was sharp. "Do not respond emotionally."

Aira's voice stayed calm. "We don't respond to the rumor."

She looked at Adrian.

"We respond with structure."

Adrian's jaw tightened. "How?"

Aira's answer was immediate.

"We formalize everything."

She turned to Laksmi's speaker line.

"Ma'am," Aira said, steady, "we request an official board resolution stating the task force's mandate, oversight, and independence. No personal names highlighted. Just governance."

Laksmi's response was instant. "Granted. I'll convene it."

Aira nodded slowly.

If they wanted to paint her as an emotional actor—

she would become a procedural one.

So clean and documented that the smear would have nothing to hold.

*** 5:19 p.m. — The One Sentence

As everyone moved, Adrian stepped slightly closer—not into intimacy, just into audibility.

“Aira,” he said quietly, “when this ends... I don’t want our names to be a weapon.”

Aira’s heartbeat hit once.

She kept her face neutral.

“And they won’t be,” she replied softly.

Adrian hesitated, then said something that sounded like a vow, not a flirtation.

“Then we do everything properly,” he said.

Aira met his gaze for one second—steady, serious.

“Yes,” she said. “Properly.”

Then she stepped back into her role again.

Because their “properly” wasn’t for today.

Today was still war.

By the end of the day, the “quiet deal” had failed.

And failed deals turned into desperate moves.

Aira stared at the board resolution draft Laksmi had sent.

The words were boring.

Which meant they were powerful.

And as she watched the legal machines turn, Aira understood what Chapter 28 would be:

Not the next smear.

Not the next clip.

But the moment the board finally had to choose between fear and governance—

between Surya's old power and the company's survival.

And once the board chose—

the factory would either collapse...

or burn the building down trying.

Chapter 27 — The Quiet Deal (Continued)

*** 6:03 p.m. — The Resolution

The board resolution arrived like a sheet of ice sliding across a fire.

Not dramatic. Not emotional. Not even accusatory.

Just lines of authority—dry, structured, and impossible to twist without leaving fingerprints:

- * The task force operates under Audit Committee oversight.
- * Independent forensics is mandated and protected.
- * Communications must be centralized through defined governance channels.
- * Any intimidation or interference attempts must be reported and preserved.

Aira read it once, then twice.

Then she felt something unfamiliar:

A kind of quiet relief that didn't come from victory.

It came from **clarity.**

Because clarity starved rumors.

And rumors were the oxygen Eclipse lived on.

Farah looked up. “Once Laksmi pushes this through formal vote, anyone still trying to ‘side-channel’ the board becomes... exposed.”

Adrian’s voice was cold. “Let them expose themselves.”

Aira kept her tone calm. “They will try to twist it as power grab.”

Farah nodded. “They always do.”

Aira’s eyes remained steady. “Then we keep it boring.”

Adrian glanced at her—just a flicker.

He didn’t argue anymore when she said that.

*** 6:41 p.m. — The Side Channel

Raka's voice came through the line again, tight.

“Ma’am. We have a board member’s executive assistant calling Finance Ops asking for an ‘informal update.’”

Aira’s spine chilled. “Which board member?”

Raka named him.

One of the “nervous” ones—always worried about headlines, always hungry for reassurance.

Farah’s eyes narrowed. “That’s a side channel.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “Stop it.”

Aira shook her head once. “We don’t ‘stop’ a board member.”

She turned to Farah. “We respond correctly.”

Farah understood immediately.

She drafted a polite, lethal reply—sent to the board member via official governance channel, with Audit Committee copied:

> “Per the board-approved protocol, any updates must be routed through the Audit Committee and recorded. We will provide the next scheduled briefing at [time].”

It didn’t accuse.

It didn’t scold.

It simply closed the door.

With a timestamp.

Aira exhaled slowly.

A door closed properly was harder to kick in later.

*** 7:22 p.m. — The “Apology” That Wasn’t

Another message arrived from the unknown number.

Shorter.

Smoothen.

“You can still avoid embarrassment. Let us help you control the landing.”

Adrian’s lips pressed tight. “They’re obsessed with optics.”

Aira’s voice stayed quiet. “Because optics are the only court they still believe in.”

Farah didn’t even look up. “We don’t respond.”

Aira nodded. “No more responses.”

Maya leaned forward. “But we can use them.”

Aira’s eyes sharpened. “How?”

Maya tapped her screen. “We can analyze timing and routing patterns. These messages may be coming through a relay tied to the vendor network.”

Raka cut in. “If they reuse infrastructure, we can correlate with the same network that generated share links.”

Farah’s voice was crisp. “Do it. Any attribution is valuable.”

Aira felt the day’s tension tighten again in her ribs.

This was the exhausting part of governance war:

you fought for every inch, and the enemy tried to turn each inch into a rumor.

Still—inch by inch was how you crossed a minefield.

*** 8:11 p.m. — The Board Briefing Call

Mrs. Laksmi called an emergency board briefing—not a full gathering, but enough members to formalize the resolution’s teeth.

Aira wasn’t surprised when Surya tried to attend.

He was on administrative leave, but he was still a man who believed leave meant nothing if you had the right friends.

Security reported it first: “CFO is attempting to join the call using a personal number.”

Farah’s eyes narrowed. “He’s not authorized.”

Adrian’s face went cold. “Block him.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “And document the attempt.”

They did.

Farah sent a formal notice to the board secretary:

> “Surya is currently on leave pending investigation and is not authorized to participate.”

No drama.

Just rules.

Surya tried once more.

Denied.

The call began without him.

And that—more than any statement—was proof the pipes were narrowing.

*** 8:39 p.m. — Fear vs Governance

On the board call, Aira didn’t speak much.

She didn’t need to.

She let Audit present the evidence in the language board members couldn’t easily dismiss:

- * documented attempts at evidence destruction,
- * documented extortion demand (“remove Aira”),
- * documented vendor production of synthetic content (“Eclipse”),
- * documented intimidation patterns extending beyond corporate boundaries.

When it was her turn, Aira said only one thing—calm, measured, almost boring:

“We are not asking you to choose a person,” she said. “We are asking you to choose **process**. Because if process can be bullied, the company is already for sale.”

Silence.

Then one board member—the nervous one—asked the predictable question:

“And investor confidence?”

Adrian answered before anyone else could.

“Investor confidence built on lies is debt,” Adrian said, voice hard and steady. “It always comes due.”

Aira didn’t look at him, but she felt the weight of those words land across the call like a clean blade.

The resolution was reinforced.

Additional controls approved.

And for the first time since Eclipse began, the board sounded less like a frightened crowd...

and more like governance.

*** 9:18 p.m. — The Counterattack Fails

The smear network tried one last push that night—an “exclusive leak” claiming the board was split and Adrian would resign “within hours.”

But without the investor blast, without the major outlet pitch, without the paid boost budgets, it didn’t catch.

It sputtered.

It circled in small accounts, then died on the edge of credibility.

Maya watched the engagement graph flatten.

“They’re not getting traction,” she said quietly.

Raka’s voice was tense but satisfied. “Because their biggest pipes are blocked.”

Farah leaned back for the first time in hours. “Good.”

Aira didn’t celebrate.

She just felt the pressure in her chest loosen slightly—as if she’d been holding her breath in a room full of smoke.

*** 9:44 p.m. — The Quiet Moment

The war-room emptied in small groups.

Not because the war was over, but because human bodies needed to remember they were human.

Aira stayed behind to review one last set of logs.

Adrian remained too—standing near the window, hands behind his back, staring down at the city lights as if he could calculate tomorrow from them.

For a few minutes, neither of them spoke.

Then Adrian said quietly, “They asked for your removal.”

Aira didn’t look up. “Yes.”

Adrian's voice stayed controlled. "And you didn't flinch."

Aira's reply came soft, almost matter-of-fact. "If I flinch, they learn what works."

A beat.

Adrian said, lower now, "You protected me from responding alone."

Aira finally lifted her gaze—not warm, not distant.

Just honest.

"You're not the only target," she said. "You're the symbol. If they can make you fall publicly, the company collapses internally."

Adrian nodded once.

Then he said something that wasn't a compliment, but sounded like a truth he'd been forced to accept:

"You don't fight like PR."

Aira's mouth tightened slightly. "Neither do they."

Another beat.

Adrian's voice lowered further. "And about... the rumors."

Aira's spine stiffened just a fraction.

Adrian continued carefully, as if walking on glass. "They're using our names."

Aira's reply was immediate, steady. "That's why we keep distance. That's why we keep procedure."

Adrian nodded—then, quietly, “After this ends... I want to clear that the right way.”

Aira held the line, calm and firm. “Yes.”

Not “maybe.”

Not “we’ll see.”

Just: yes—**the right way**.

No softness needed.

Because in Aira’s world, a man saying “the right way” was not romance.

It was a promise of adab.

Adrian didn’t push further.

He stepped back into silence again—respecting the boundary like it mattered.

And Aira felt something settle inside her: not affection yet, not comfort—

Just a growing certainty that when the smoke cleared, they would not be forced into a narrative.

They would choose one.

Cleanly.

*** 10:16 p.m. — The Final Signal

Farah re-entered with her phone in hand, eyes sharp.

“Authorities responded,” she said. “They’re opening a formal inquiry track.”

Maya exhaled quietly.

Raka’s voice was relieved. “That changes the pressure.”

Farah nodded. “And one more thing—Silverline replied to the preservation notice. They’re suddenly ‘eager to cooperate.’”

Aira’s eyes narrowed. “Because they’re scared.”

Farah’s smile was thin. “Because someone told them the net is closing.”

Aira looked at the whiteboard where the pipes were drawn, and for the first time, she let herself believe the next chapters could move toward an ending—not because the enemy ran out of cruelty, but because they were running out of space.

She capped the marker and said softly:

“Okay.”

“Chapter 28 is the squeeze.”

“And after the squeeze...”

Her voice steadied.

“...we rebuild properly.”

Chapter 28

The Squeeze

By morning, Nusatech felt like a building holding its breath.

Not because the smear had stopped completely—it hadn’t. You could still find echoes of Eclipse in the corners of the internet, like smoke trapped in fabric.

But the **“big pipes”** were narrowing.

And narrowing pipes did something to powerful people:

They made them reckless.

Aira arrived early, hijab pinned neatly, face calm enough to look almost unbothered. She wasn’t unbothered. She was simply refusing to give fear the steering wheel.

In the war-room, Farah already had three folders on the table:

1. **“Regulator Correspondence”**
2. **“Emergency Preservation + Vendor Orders”**
3. **“Board Governance Controls”**

Maya’s team was set up with their usual quiet urgency—screens glowing, hashes running, logs scrolling like rain.

Adrian stood by the window, phone facedown on the table, posture rigid with restraint.

No new “quiet deal” messages overnight.

Which didn’t mean the enemy had calmed down.

It meant they were moving to a different channel.

Aira glanced at the whiteboard:

CUT ACCESS → SQUEEZE

Farah looked up. “The inquiry track is active. Not public yet, but active.”

Aira nodded. “Good. Quiet pressure works better than loud pressure.”

Maya spoke without looking up. “Silverline responded to the preservation notice at 2:13 a.m.”

Aira’s eyes sharpened. “What did they say?”

Maya’s tone was clinical. “They’re ‘eager to cooperate.’ They offered to hand over ‘relevant project materials’ if we provide formal scope.”

Farah’s mouth tightened. “Translation: they’re terrified.”

Adrian’s voice was low. “Terrified of whom?”

Aira answered softly. “Of being the last one holding the lighter.”

*** 8:06 a.m. — Silverline Opens the Door

Silverline Research didn’t look like a research firm.

It looked like a place designed to sound credible on invoices—clean logo, neutral lobby, polite receptionist, the kind of aesthetic that made you assume everyone was harmless.

Farah arrived with counsel credentials and formal notices.

Maya arrived with forensic protocol.

Security arrived with quiet authority.

Aira stayed inside Nusatech—not because she was afraid, but because she understood optics: the enemy loved turning her presence into a story.

This time, she would be a voice through official channels. Not a silhouette for someone else's caption.

On the secure call, Silverline's director appeared on camera. He smiled too much.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “We want to support transparency.”

Farah's voice didn't soften. “Then you will preserve everything and grant access under the preservation order.”

The director nodded quickly. “Yes. Of course.”

Maya spoke, calm and precise. “We will begin with directory listing and access logs. No deletions. No exports. No remote access. Everything documented.”

The director smiled again. “Naturally.”

Aira watched him through the screen and thought:

People who say “naturally” too quickly usually mean “not naturally.”

Maya's team walked Silverline IT through the process.

A folder appeared on screen.

Not named “Eclipse”—that would've been too obvious.

This one was named like a normal project.

NUS_STABILITY/

Inside:

- * **Audio Training**
- * **Board Drafts**
- * **Community Notes**
- * **Investor Messaging**
- * **Legal Angles**

Aira's stomach tightened.

So the factory hadn't moved.

It had *hidden.*

Maya's voice stayed flat, but Aira could hear the edge in it.

“Capture. Hash. Document structure.”

Farah leaned forward into the camera. “We need the original contract and the commissioning instructions.”

The director swallowed. “We were subcontractors. We didn't—”

Farah cut in. “You will show us who paid you.”

A beat.

Then Silverline IT opened the finance folder.

A payment record.

Clean, boring, damning.

- **Payer: Northbridge Advisory**
- **Approver: Dita (EA)**
- **Notes: ‘Priority — governance stabilization’**

Aira felt cold settle into her ribs.

Northbridge. Again.

Aira looked at Adrian across the war-room table. He was still, but his eyes had gone darker.

Farah's voice hardened. "And who instructed content scope?"

The director hesitated. "We received direction through a liaison. Not always in writing."

Maya said, "Name."

The director swallowed. "Rahman."

Aira didn't react outwardly.

Inside, she felt something lock into place.

Surya was the money and operational pressure.

Rahman was the language and "legality" varnish.

Eclipse was not a random smear.

It was governance manipulation with legal lipstick.

*** 9:11 a.m. — The Evidence That Ends Conversations

Maya's team didn't open files recklessly.

They did it like surgeons.

Hash. Record. Open. Document.

The first file they opened wasn't audio.

It was a briefing deck.

Title:

“Stabilization Pathways — Board Confidence”

Slide one: a narrative about “risk” and “credibility.”

Slide two: a flow chart that looked sickeningly familiar.

* *Discredit task force*

* *Force CEO isolation*

* *Trigger investor concern statement*

* *Offer ‘quiet resolution’ conditioned on Aira’s removal*

* *Restore Finance control*

Aira stared at the screen.

They had literally written it down.

Farah exhaled sharply. “This is intent.”

Maya’s voice stayed clinical. “And premeditation.”

Then Silverline IT opened a folder under “Audio Training.”

A file list populated.

One filename stood out like a gun on a table:

CEO_CONFESION_TAKE03.wav

Maya didn’t play it yet.

She captured metadata first.

Then she spoke, low and precise:

“Creation date is two days before the Telegram drop.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened.

Aira watched his hands—still, controlled—but she could see the cost of restraint now.

Farah turned to Silverline’s director.

“This is synthetic audio built for manipulation,” Farah said. “You understand the legal gravity of that?”

The director’s smile had vanished. He looked like a man watching his own future collapse.

“We thought it was... crisis simulation,” he whispered.

Farah’s tone stayed cool. “No, you didn’t.”

Silence.

Then Aira spoke—calm, not cruel.

“Help yourself now,” she said through the secure line. “Tell the truth completely. Who directed the drop schedule?”

The director swallowed hard.

Then he said the thing everyone in the room already suspected, but needed as a recorded fact.

“Surya,” he said. “Surya’s office was the pressure. Rahman was the script.”

Aira nodded once.

There it was.

Not a guess.

Not a theory.

A sentence you could take to a judge without blushing.

*** 9:47 a.m. — The Regulator Steps Closer

Farah's phone vibrated.

She glanced once and looked up at Aira.

“They want the full packet,” Farah said. “Now.”

Aira's voice stayed steady. “Give it.”

Maya's team compiled:

- * Marrow Eclipse directory structure and drop schedule
- * Silverline stability folder structure and audio training timestamps
- * Vendor payment chain linked to Northbridge/Kestrel
- * The extortion demand to remove Aira
- * The attempted finance bypass and purge requests
- * Intimidation pattern targeting community figures

Farah sent it through secure channels, with a cover memo that was clean and blunt:

Coordinated governance interference with synthetic media artifacts and financial routing. Active destruction attempts observed.

Aira didn't smile.

But she felt something shift.

When regulators asked for the full packet, it meant two things:

1. They believed you.
2. They were preparing to act.

Adrian's voice was low. "What kind of act?"

Farah answered without drama. "Preservation orders with teeth. Potential seizure authorizations. And interviews—formal."

Aira nodded once. "Good."

Because now the enemy couldn't settle this with captions and whispers.

Now they had to answer to a system that didn't care how confident they sounded.

*** 10:18 a.m. — Surya Tries to Escape Through the Board

As if sensing the net tightening, Surya made his move—not by posting, not by leaking, but by pushing his oldest advantage:

board relationships.

Raka's voice cut into the war-room line. "Surya is on-site."

Aira's spine stiffened. "He's on leave."

Raka replied, tense. “He’s trying to enter the board floor. He claims he has a ‘private briefing’ scheduled.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “He doesn’t.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “He’s trying to force a last-minute narrative.”

Farah stood. “Block access. Document attempt. If he presses, Security escorts.”

Adrian nodded once. “Do it.”

For a moment, the building was quiet—then Security’s radio crackled with controlled urgency.

“CFO attempted entry. Denied. He’s arguing.”

Aira exhaled slowly.

This was the squeeze working.

When operators lost their pipes, they tried to step into the room personally and dominate with presence.

But today, presence wasn’t power.

Procedure was.

*** 10:33 a.m. — Rahman’s Knife

If Surya pushed physically, Rahman pushed legally.

Farah’s inbox received a letter—stamped, formal, threatening.

A “cease and desist” aimed at Nusatech for “defamation” and “interference with contractual relations.”

It was laughable.

And still dangerous, because it was designed to intimidate weaker staff into hesitating.

Farah read it once and handed it to Aira.

Aira didn’t need to read every line.

She recognized the strategy: legal noise to slow the machine.

Aira looked at Farah. “We reply with one line.”

Farah nodded. “Yes.”

Their reply was cold and simple:

> “Your letter is received and preserved. It will be provided to authorities in the ongoing inquiry. Further intimidation attempts will be documented.”

No argument.

No debate.

Just: *we see you.*

*** 11:09 a.m. — The Board Chooses

Mrs. Laksmi convened a limited board session under Audit Committee authority.

Not to argue.

To decide.

Aira didn't attend in person.

Again, optics.

Again, discipline.

Audit presented the evidence. Farah presented the legal framework. Maya's firm provided forensic confirmation.

Then Adrian spoke—short, direct.

“We are not facing a PR problem,” Adrian said. “We are facing an interference operation.”

A beat.

“And I will not lead a company where governance is negotiable.”

There was silence on the line after that.

Not approval.

Not support.

But the kind of pause that happens when people realize the last comfortable exit has been blocked.

The board decision landed within the hour:

- * Surya's administrative leave remains in place, formalized and extended.
- * CFO system access is fully revoked pending investigation.
- * Rahman is restricted from legal routing on this case and any communications related to the smear operation.
- * A special committee is formed to interface with authorities and investors.

Aira listened to the summary and felt her shoulders loosen a fraction.

Not because the fight was over.

Because the company had finally chosen governance out loud.

*** 12:02 p.m. — The Human Cost

When the board session ended, Aira stepped out into the corridor for one minute of air.

Her phone buzzed.

Pak Hendra.

She answered immediately.

“Aira,” Pak Hendra said, voice steady, “Harun asked if the pressure has lessened.”

Aira swallowed. “Yes, Pak. A little.”

Pak Hendra’s voice softened. “Alhamdulillah.”

Aira hesitated, then said carefully, “Pak… tell him thank you. For staying quiet. For not giving them a clip.”

Pak Hendra chuckled once, small. “He said, ‘Silence is worship when it protects truth.’”

Aira closed her eyes for half a second.

Then Pak Hendra added—quietly, almost casually:

“And… he asked about you.”

Aira's heart tapped once, hard.

"What did he ask?" she said, still calm.

Pak Hendra paused, then answered carefully:

"He asked whether you are being supported properly in this storm. He said a woman should not carry a public war alone."

Aira's throat tightened.

She could hear what was behind that sentence—concern, not control. Protection, not ownership.

Aira answered softly, "I'm not alone, Pak."

Pak Hendra didn't ask who.

He didn't need to.

Instead, he said something that sounded simple but carried weight:

"When the smoke clears, do things the right way. Harun doesn't like rumors. He likes doors opened with adab."

Aira's chest tightened.

"Yes, Pak," she whispered. "The right way."

She ended the call and stood still for a moment longer than she needed.

Not crying.

Just breathing.

Then she walked back into the war-room.

*** 12:41 p.m. — The Enemy Runs Out of Room

Maya's screen chimed with a final, satisfying update.

“Silverline is giving us full access logs,” she said. “And... they have a recording.”

Farah's eyes narrowed. “A recording of what?”

Maya hesitated—a rare thing for her—then said:

“A call. Between Silverline’s director and someone they saved as ‘S.’ The director recorded it ‘for compliance’ because he felt pressured.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened. “Play it?”

Farah raised a hand. “Not until we hash and document.”

Maya did.

Then she played a short excerpt.

A male voice—controlled, crisp—speaking like money was law:

> “You deliver by schedule. Don’t improvise. And keep Aira out. She’s the problem.”

Aira didn’t move.

Adrian didn’t move.

Farah didn’t move.

Because in that moment, the case stopped being “strong.”

It became fatal.

Maya stopped the audio.

“Voice match to Surya’s samples is high confidence,” she said quietly.

Farah exhaled once. “That’s direct instruction.”

Aira’s voice stayed calm—almost gentle, but with steel underneath:

“Now we don’t have to convince anyone.”

*** 1:18 p.m. — The Last Flare

A cornered operation always tried one last flare before it died.

And it came, predictably, from a “leak account” posting a new claim:

“Nusatech fabricates ‘Eclipse’ evidence to cover internal affair—Director and CEO relationship!”

But it didn’t catch.

Not like before.

Because the board had spoken.

Because the vendors were cooperating.

Because authorities were watching.

Because platforms were freezing.

The lie didn’t find oxygen.

It floated, then fell.

Aira watched the engagement curve stall and felt something inside her loosen.

Not victory.

Just a reduction of smoke.

Adrian turned slightly—still keeping distance, still careful.

“We’re close,” he said quietly.

Aira nodded once. “Yes.”

Farah shut her folder with a clean snap.

“Chapter Twenty-Nine,” she said, “is cleanup and consequence.”

Maya added, “And recovery.”

Aira stared at the whiteboard where the pipes were drawn, most of them crossed out.

Cut access.

Squeeze the network.

Now what remained was the final, hardest part:

closing the case without letting the story become personal.

Aira looked at Adrian—not with softness, not with romance.

With clarity

“We end this clean,” she said.

Adrian’s voice was low, steady. “Clean.”

Aira’s pulse steadied.

Because “clean” meant something else too—something waiting at the end of the storm

Not whispers.

Not captions.

Not rumor.

A door opened properly.

And that door—when the case was sealed—would lead to Chapter Thirty.

But first...

they had to survive Chapter Twenty-Nine.

The fallout. The formal statements. The final trap.

And the last attempt of a cornered man to avoid consequences.

Chapter 29

The Cleanup

The last flare didn’t catch.

That was how Aira knew the fire was finally starving.

Not because the enemy had grown tired. People like Surya didn’t tire of control.

But because the company—at last—had stopped feeding him oxygen: board access, investor whispers, vendor pipes, and the soft human panic that made lies feel urgent.

By 7:30 a.m., the war-room looked less like a bunker and more like a command center transitioning into paperwork.

Which, Aira had learned, was the most dangerous phase.

Because when the flames died, people started rewriting the story.

And rewriting the story was how the guilty escaped consequences.

Farah arrived with a sealed folder and a look that meant, *today is about receipts.*

“The inquiry team wants formal interviews,” she said. “Not informal calls. Recorded, scheduled, and scoped.”

Aira nodded. “Good.”

Maya’s team had already prepared the evidence package in a way that courts liked: timestamps, hashes, chain-of-custody logs, and explanations written in plain language.

Pratama had the internal governance record ready: who approved what, when access changed, who attempted to purge logs, who initiated bypass uploads.

Raka was quieter now, but his screen still moved like rain.

And Adrian...

Adrian looked like a man holding a mountain on his back without letting his shoulders shake.

Not because he feared consequence.

Because he understood what consequence meant: the company would survive, but reputations would bleed—his included.

Aira didn't pity him.

She respected him.

Respect was steadier than pity.

*** 9:05 a.m. — The Formal Interview

The regulator team arrived in a conference room that had been stripped of anything emotional:

No slogans. No posters. No “team spirit.”

Just chairs, a recorder, and paper.

Aira sat beside Farah and Audit—not because she wanted proximity to power, but because her role demanded it.

The lead investigator was calm, almost bored. That was reassuring. Bored investigators cared about facts more than headlines.

“Director Aira,” the investigator said, “summarize what you observed.”

Aira did not tell a story.

She delivered a timeline.

- * Counterfeit submission circulated to media
- * Vendor payments attempted under crisis categories
- * Control changes triggered bypass attempts
- * Eclipse content pipeline located across Marrow and Silverline
- * Synthetic audio and community intimidation artifacts published according to a drop schedule

- * Extortion demand explicitly requesting Aira's removal
- * Recorded call instruction directing output, including "keep Aira out"
- * Evidence preservation filed before escalations

She didn't add adjectives.

She didn't defend herself.

She didn't mention feelings.

Because feelings were exactly what Eclipse tried to weaponize.

The investigator nodded once. "And your assessment of motive?"

Aira's eyes stayed steady. "Governance interference."

Farah added quietly, "With market-facing impact."

The investigator looked at Adrian next.

"CEO," he said, "did you authorize any resignation statement or confession?"

Adrian's answer was immediate. "No."

"And did you commission any synthetic crisis outputs?"

"No."

"Then why was your voice used?"

Adrian didn't flinch. "Because someone believed they could force me to become a headline."

The investigator made a note.

Bored pen. Serious ink.

*** 10:32 a.m. — The Device Images

Back in the war-room, Maya's team finished imaging two key devices:

- * Dita's work laptop and phone
- * A Finance Ops admin machine linked to the purge ticket

Maya didn't smile when the results came in.

She simply pointed.

“Recovered deleted messages,” she said. “And routing instructions.”

Farah leaned closer. “Anything tying Surya directly?”

Maya nodded. “We have directive language repeated across threads. Same phrasing as the recorded call. And—” she paused, “—a draft email to Investor X's liaison. Saved but unsent.”

Adrian's jaw tightened. “He was preparing to coordinate again.”

Aira looked at the draft. It wasn't a confession.

It didn't need to be.

It was a plan.

Plans were louder than apologies.

*** 11:20 a.m. — The Board Session

Mrs. Laksmi convened the board in a session that was finally, unmistakably official.

No side whispers.

No hallway votes.

No “informal alignment.”

Audit presented the evidence.

Farah presented the legal posture.

Maya’s firm presented forensic integrity.

Then Laksmi did something Aira hadn’t expected:

She told the board the truth without softening it.

“Someone attempted to purchase governance,” Laksmi said. “With money, fear, and fabricated evidence.”

Silence.

Then the nervous board member—predictably—asked, “And reputational recovery?”

Laksmi’s eyes hardened. “Truth is recovery.”

Adrian spoke once, short and clean.

“We will not keep leadership that funds interference operations,” he said. “If we do, we teach every future operator that the company can be hijacked.”

The board voted.

Not unanimously.

But decisively.

- * Surya's leave converted into formal suspension pending termination process and referral
- * Rahman removed from all legal routing and placed under internal investigation
- * All vendors tied to Eclipse suspended and referred
- * Investor communications frozen into official channels only
- * A recovery committee formed with independent oversight

Aira listened to the vote count and felt a quiet tightening behind her eyes.

Not tears.

Relief that didn't know where to go yet.

Because relief still felt dangerous—like lowering your guard too soon.

*** 12:08 p.m. — Surya, Contained

Security reported it: Surya had returned to the building again.

This time, he didn't demand access.

He demanded conversation.

He asked to see Adrian.

Alone.

Adrian didn't go.

He didn't even reply.

Farah replied instead, through counsel, with one sentence:

> "All communication must proceed through formal channels. You are not authorized to engage with company systems or board members directly."

Surya's last advantage—presence—had been neutralized.

Aira didn't feel satisfaction.

Only confirmation:

Operators hated paper because paper didn't flinch.

*** 1:15 p.m. — The Company Message

Aira didn't want a town hall.

Town halls were emotional, and emotion was Eclipse's playground.

But employees needed stability, and silence created rumors.

So they did what Aira had learned worked best:

A plain internal statement with a short live Q&A moderated by HR, with questions screened for safety.

Adrian stood at the front, posture controlled, and said only what was necessary:

- * There has been a coordinated misinformation and interference attempt.
- * The company has taken governance action.
- * Independent investigators are involved.

* Employees should not share unverified content and should report suspicious outreach.

* No layoffs are being decided based on rumor channels.

No heroic speech.

No dramatic villain naming.

No “I promise everything will be okay.”

Just: *this is the process, and the process is holding.*

Employees didn’t clap much.

But the room’s tension softened.

Not because they loved corporate truth.

Because they could breathe again.

*** 2:40 p.m. — The Mosque, Protected

Pak Hendra sent an update: the strange visitors had stopped.

No microphones.

No “community journalists.”

No shadow men pretending concern.

“Harun says alhamdulillah,” Pak Hendra wrote. “He says thank you for protecting the community from becoming a battlefield.”

Aira stared at the message for a long second.

Then she typed back, carefully:

“Please tell him I’m sorry he was dragged into this. And thank you for his patience.”

Aira didn’t add anything else.

Because apologies didn’t erase harm.

Only future protection did.

*** 3:18 p.m. — Aira’s Boundary

Late afternoon, the war-room began to empty.

Maya’s team stayed to finalize handover. Farah stayed to coordinate next legal steps. Audit stayed because Audit never truly left.

Aira stood at the whiteboard and erased **OPERATION FIREBREAK** slowly.

Not because it was over.

Because it no longer needed a name.

It was now a file.

A process.

A record.

Adrian remained in the room when most had left, careful to keep a respectful distance, as he always did.

He didn’t approach like a man chasing a feeling.

He approached like a man respecting a line.

“Aira,” he said quietly.

She looked up.

“Yes.”

Adrian’s eyes were tired, but steady. “The board decision is done. The inquiry track is active. The factory is documented.”

Aira nodded once. “Yes.”

Adrian hesitated—just enough to show he was choosing his words carefully.

“I owe you thanks,” he said.

Aira’s voice stayed calm. “You owe governance thanks.”

He accepted that without offense. “Then… I thank you as part of governance.”

Aira almost smiled.

Almost.

Then Adrian continued, even more careful now:

“And about what they tried to do with our names… the rumors… the captions…”

Aira’s spine stayed straight. “Yes.”

Adrian’s voice lowered. “I don’t want that chapter to be written by strangers.”

Aira held his gaze, steady. “Neither do I.”

A beat.

Adrian spoke like he was placing a document on a table:

“When the case is formally handed off and the company is stable... I would like to approach your wali.”

Aira didn’t react outwardly.

But inside her chest, something tightened—not fear, not excitement—just the gravity of a door being mentioned properly.

“You mean...” Aira began.

Adrian didn’t rush her. He didn’t soften it into flirtation. He stayed within adab.

“I mean,” he said, “if you allow it—after the dust settles—I want to speak to your family through the right door. Not as rumor. Not as pressure. Not as a distraction.”

Aira’s throat felt tight.

Not because the words were romantic.

Because they were *clean.*

Because for weeks, her life had been dragged through other people’s mouths.

And now someone was offering her a path that didn’t involve mouths.

It involved a door.

Aira breathed once, slow.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “But not now.”

Adrian nodded instantly. “Not now.”

Aira continued, voice steady. “When everything is closed and safe. And if my uncle agrees.”

Adrian’s answer was immediate. “I will not bypass him.”

Aira held his gaze for a second longer than usual.

Then she said something simple.

“Thank you.”

Adrian inclined his head slightly, the way he did when he accepted a rule.

“Then tell me when,” he said, “and I will come properly.”

Aira didn’t promise a date.

Not yet.

But she didn’t close the door either.

She simply nodded.

And Adrian stepped back again—distance restored, boundary respected, intention stated without forcing its timing.

*** 5:02 p.m. — The Last Page Before the Last Chapter

Farah entered with the final day’s summary.

“Regulator wants one more package tomorrow morning,” she said. “And then we transition to formal proceedings.”

Aira nodded. “Good.”

Maya added, “Platforms have taken down the major clips. Residual posts remain, but the network’s amplification is broken.”

Pratama said quietly, “Surya’s access is fully revoked. Rahman is contained. Vendors are under preservation.”

Aira looked at the room and felt something settle:

The war was moving out of the building and into systems designed for consequences.

Which meant the building could finally breathe.

Aira picked up her phone and typed to Pak Hendra:

“Pak, when the case is stable, may I come with counsel to explain formally to Uncle Harun? And... there is another matter I will seek his guidance on.”

Pak Hendra replied a minute later:

“He is ready. He likes guidance done with adab.”

Aira stared at the message, then set the phone down gently.

She didn’t smile.

But she felt peace touch the edge of her exhaustion.

Because Chapter 29 was the cleanup.

And the cleanup meant the story could finally end the way it should have begun:

Not with rumors.

Not with clips.

Not with coercion.

But with intention stated cleanly... and a door opened properly.

And that door—once Aira stepped through it—would be Chapter 30.

Chapter 30

The Proper Door

The building was quieter the next morning.

Not because everything was finished—formal proceedings rarely felt finished. But because the air had changed. The kind of change you felt when a storm moved away and left the city wet but standing.

In the war-room, the last packet for the regulator sat sealed on the table—hashed, numbered, signed.

Maya's team had handed off their final chain-of-custody logs.

Farah had confirmed the schedule for interviews and submissions.

Audit had locked the internal record so no one could “adjust” history later.

And Adrian—Adrian looked like a man who had learned something expensive: that leadership wasn't about controlling a narrative.

It was about protecting a process.

Aira watched him from across the table, keeping the respectful distance that had protected them both.

This wasn't the time for softness.

Not yet.

Farah closed her laptop. "That's it," she said. "From here, it's formal track. We've done our job."

Maya nodded. "If they try another flare, it won't catch. Their pipes are gone."

Pratama added, "And their fingerprints are everywhere."

Aira exhaled slowly.

For the first time in weeks, she felt like she could breathe without tasting smoke.

Adrian stood. "Thank you," he said to the room, voice simple. "All of you."

Then he looked at Aira—not long, not lingering.

Just long enough to acknowledge something that didn't fit neatly into minutes and memos.

"I'll take it from here," he said.

Aira nodded. "You should."

No one applauded. No one cried. They just filed out quietly, like people leaving a courtroom after a verdict.

When the room emptied, Aira stayed behind to erase the last marker line from the whiteboard—an old habit.

****FREEZE THE NETWORK, NOT THE NOISE****

She wiped it clean until the board looked blank again.

Blank boards meant the company could begin writing something new.

***** 11:07 a.m. — The Call**

Aira's phone buzzed.

Pak Hendra.

She answered immediately.

“Aira,” Pak Hendra said, voice warm but careful, “Harun can receive you today, after Dhuhur.”

Aira's throat tightened. “Thank you, Pak.”

Pak Hendra paused—just enough to suggest he knew there was more.

“And you said... there is another matter you want guidance on.”

Aira's grip on the phone tightened gently.

“Yes, Pak,” she said quietly. “There is.”

A beat.

Pak Henda's voice softened. "Come with calm. Harun respects calm."

Aira almost smiled.

"I will," she replied.

When the call ended, Aira stood still for a moment, breathing slowly.

This was the moment she'd promised herself she wouldn't rush.

Not after weeks of having her name used as a weapon.

Not after seeing how easily people turned private matters into public captions.

If something personal was to happen, it would happen **properly**.

*** 11:24 a.m. — The Request

Aira walked to Adrian's office—but she didn't go in alone.

She asked Farah to wait nearby, not as a chaperone for gossip, but as a witness of boundaries. Aira didn't want ambiguity anywhere near this.

Adrian's assistant announced her. Adrian opened the door himself.

He didn't invite her in with a smile.

He invited her in with respect.

"Aira," he said.

"Sir," she replied automatically.

He frowned faintly. "Not 'sir.' Not today."

Aira paused. Then corrected with calm precision.

“Adrian,” she said.

He nodded once.

Aira stood just inside the doorway, not crossing further than necessary.

“I’m going to the mosque today,” she said. “To speak with my uncle through Pak Hendra. To clarify the events and... to ask his guidance.”

Adrian’s eyes sharpened, but his posture stayed controlled. “You want to go alone?”

Aira shook her head. “With counsel. It’s still part of process.”

Adrian nodded. “Good.”

Aira held the line for a beat, then continued, voice steady.

“And... after the case stabilizes, you said you wanted to approach my wali properly.”

Adrian didn’t blink.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “If you allow it.”

Aira breathed once, slow.

“I allow it,” she said. “But it must be clean. No rumors. No hidden meetings. No forced timing.”

Adrian’s answer was immediate. “Agreed.”

Aira looked down for a second, then back up.

“My uncle values adab more than words,” she said. “If you come, you come with intention, not persuasion. And if he says no, we accept it.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened slightly at the last line—then he nodded.

“If he says no,” Adrian said, “I accept it.”

Aira felt something settle inside her chest.

Not romance.

Relief that the door was being treated like a door—not like an escape hatch.

Aira continued, voice calm. “Then I will tell you when he is ready. You don’t contact him directly. You wait.”

Adrian’s gaze stayed steady. “I will wait.”

Aira nodded once.

“Thank you,” she said.

Adrian’s voice dropped softer. “Thank you... for not letting this become cheap.”

Aira’s throat tightened, but she kept her tone steady.

“It’s not cheap,” she replied. “It’s serious.”

Adrian inclined his head slightly, accepting her words like a rule.

Aira turned to leave.

Adrian didn’t stop her.

He didn’t reach.

He didn't chase.

He let her walk out with her dignity intact—because dignity was part of adab too.

*** 1:18 p.m. — After Dhuhr

The mosque courtyard smelled of clean stone and afternoon heat.

Aira arrived with Pak Hendra and Farah—Farah stayed respectfully outside the inner space, waiting. Aira didn't bring Adrian. Not yet.

Not before the uncle had heard the facts.

Not before the storm had been sealed into lawful documents.

Pak Hendra led her into a quieter room, away from the main flow of people.

Ustadz Harun sat with his back straight, face calm, eyes that held both gentleness and authority.

Aira lowered her gaze.

“Assalamu’alaikum, Uncle.”

“Wa’alaikumussalam,” he replied, voice steady. “Sit, Aira.”

She sat.

For a moment, she couldn't speak.

Not because she didn't know what to say.

Because she wanted to say it correctly.

Aira began—not with emotion, but with truth.

She explained the intimidation attempts. The fabricated clips. The vendor pipelines. The way the campaign tried to use his name like fuel.

She didn't exaggerate. She didn't hide her own role.

She also admitted what had cost him peace.

“I’m sorry,” Aira said quietly. “That my work drew this to you.”

Ustadz Harun listened without interrupting.

When Aira finished, he was silent for a long moment.

Then he said, calmly, “Fitnah is old. Its costumes are new.”

Aira’s eyes stung slightly, but she didn’t cry.

He continued, voice gentle but firm.

“You protected the company with procedure. You protected the community with silence. That is not weakness.”

Aira swallowed. “Thank you, Uncle.”

Ustadz Harun studied her for a moment.

“Pak Hendra said you have another matter,” he said. “Speak.”

Aira’s fingers tightened in her lap, then relaxed.

“Yes,” she said softly. “There is.”

She raised her eyes only briefly—enough to show seriousness, not defiance.

“After everything stabilizes, there is someone who intends to approach you properly,” Aira said. “Through the right door.”

Ustadz Harun’s expression didn’t change dramatically. He simply nodded slowly, as if he had already sensed the direction of the wind.

“Who?” he asked.

Aira answered plainly.

“Adrian.”

Silence.

Not heavy.

Just... measured.

Ustadz Harun asked one question, simple and sharp.

“For what intention?”

Aira didn’t decorate it.

“For ta’aruf,” she said. “If you permit.”

Ustadz Harun’s gaze held hers for a long beat.

Then he asked, “Do you permit?”

Aira’s breath caught—then she steadied it.

“Yes,” she said, voice quiet but clear. “If it is done correctly, with boundaries, and with Allah as witness.”

Ustadz Harun nodded once.

“Then bring him,” he said. “Not today. Not in haste. But soon—when the dust has truly settled.”

Aira’s chest loosened, as if a knot had been slowly untied.

Ustadz Harun lifted a hand slightly, a gesture of permission and caution at once.

“And remember, Aira,” he said gently. “A door opened properly must be walked through properly. No private shortcuts. No hidden corners.”

Aira lowered her gaze.

“Yes, Uncle,” she whispered.

*** 4:06 p.m. — The Meeting

Three days later—after the regulator interviews, after the company stabilized, after the board publicly reaffirmed governance controls—Pak Hendra set the day.

Aira arrived first.

She sat beside her uncle, hands folded, calm enough to be steady.

Adrian arrived with one companion—an older man from his side, introduced respectfully. Not as a show.

As a sign that he understood what “proper” meant.

He greeted with adab. He asked permission before sitting. He didn’t look around like the room was his.

Ustadz Harun asked him questions that had nothing to do with money and everything to do with character:

- * Why do you want to marry?
- * What do you believe marriage is for?
- * How do you lead without humiliation?
- * How do you handle anger?
- * How do you protect a woman's dignity?

Adrian answered slowly, carefully.

Not perfectly.

But honestly.

And when the topic of the past weeks came up, Adrian said something that made Aira's throat tighten—not because it was sweet, but because it was principled.

"I saw how easily a woman's name can be thrown into noise," Adrian said. "I don't want Aira's name to be noise. I want it to be protected—by Allah first, then by me, in the lawful way."

Ustadz Harun watched him for a long moment, then nodded once.

He didn't say yes immediately.

He didn't say no.

He said the only thing a guardian should say when he feared for a woman but also respected her adulthood:

"We will proceed with ta'aruf properly," he said. "With conditions."

Adrian bowed his head slightly. "I accept."

Aira's chest felt full—still calm, but full.

Because nothing about this was stolen.

Nothing about it was forced.

Nothing about it needed hiding.

*** 7:18 p.m. — The End That Was Not Noise

Later that evening, Aira stood outside the mosque under soft lights, the air warm and quiet.

Pak Hendra walked beside her.

“You did it with adab,” he said.

Aira’s voice was soft. “Alhamdulillah.”

From a respectful distance, Adrian approached—but stopped several steps away, not closing the space without permission.

He nodded once, calm.

Aira returned the nod.

There was no dramatic confession.

No touching.

No lingering gaze for people to photograph.

Only something simpler, cleaner, and far stronger than a viral ending:

A promise to walk properly.

Aira looked up at the sky once, then lowered her gaze again.

The storm had tried to turn her life into a story for strangers.

But in the end, she chose who would write the next chapter.

And she chose a door.

The proper door.

The end.