

## Chapter 9

The plane cut through the clouds, and Jayde Rosario looked down at the shrinking city below. She felt a sense of release. She closed her eyes and slept for the entire flight.

When she woke up, the plane was landing in California. The sun was bright, the air was warm. It felt like a new world.

She walked through the arrivals gate and saw him immediately. Her father, Farrell Conner, was standing there, holding a sign with her name on it. He looked older, with more gray in his hair, but he smiled warmly when he saw her.

"Jayde," he said, pulling her into a hug.

"Dad," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. She let herself cry for just a moment, a single tear rolling down her cheek before she pulled back and wiped it away. She was composed again.

"You look good, Dad. Successful," she said, noticing his expensive watch and well-tailored suit.

He laughed. "Business has been good. I'm just glad you're finally here."

They walked out to his car, a sleek black sedan. As he drove, he glanced at her. "So, is this a permanent move? Or just for college?"

"Permanent," Jayde said firmly. "I'm not going back."

He nodded, a look of approval on his face. "Good. The company is growing. I need someone I can trust. You can focus on your studies, but I want you to start learning the ropes. This will all be yours one day."

"Okay, Dad," she said, feeling a sense of security she hadn't felt in a long time.

"So," he started, a little hesitantly, "did you and Brendan... did you two have a fight?"

Jayde turned to look out the window at the palm trees flying by. "We didn't fight. We just... grew apart. It's better this way." She wanted to close that chapter of her life completely.

Farrell seemed to sense her reluctance to talk about it. He saw the change in her, the way she held herself. He decided not to push. "Alright. A new start, then."

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, Brendan Maynard sat in a sterile boardroom. He couldn't focus on the presentation. An unsettling feeling had been gnawing at him all day.

It was his birthday, and he hadn't heard from Jayde.

Not a text. Not a call. Nothing.

For ten years, without fail, she had been the first person to wish him a happy birthday, usually with a handmade card or a thoughtful, personal gift.

Her silence was louder than any argument they could have had.

That night, back at the Blue Sea Apartments, he couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, his mind replaying their last few interactions. Her quietness. The way she looked at him.

He picked up his phone. Chloe had sent him a message an hour ago.

[Thinking of you. Can't wait for our life together.]

He ignored it. He scrolled through his contacts, his thumb hovering over Jayde's name.

He checked his messages again. Nothing.

He tried to convince himself it was a good thing. She was finally growing up, moving on, not clinging to him anymore. This is what he wanted, wasn't it? For her to be independent.

But despite telling himself that, a hollow, empty feeling spread through his chest. It felt like a piece of him was missing.