Intern 141

Chapter 141

Ashcroft didn't even look up. Just groaned. "This day just got interesting."

Ethan's eyes flicked briefly to the others at the table. "Sorry-am I interrupting breakfast?"

Before Maya could answer, Trina rose with polished ease, all businesslike warmth and immaculate posture.

"Mr. Miller," she greeted, extending a hand with a practiced smile. "I'm Trina, Supervisor for Event Planning under the Blackwood Enterprises PR Department. Welcome to Isla Aurelia."

Ethan shook her hand firmly, smile charming and appreciative. "Pleasure's all mine. And please-just Ethan is fine."

"Of course," Trina replied smoothly. "We're thrilled to have you on board for the campaign shoot. Let me introduce you to the rest of the team."

She gestured toward the table. "This is Sienna-she handles Communications for our core PR team."

Sienna offered a kind smile and a small wave. "Nice to meet you, Ethan. We're excited to work with you."

“Likewise,” Ethan said, grinning, model-polish slipping effortlessly into place.

“And this is Jessa, in charge of design elements,” Trina continued.

Jessa nodded politely. “Looking forward to seeing how the visuals come together.”

Trina moved on without missing a beat. “Harper, our Senior Special Events Organizer.” Harper raised a brow with a playful smirk. “Already a fan, Miller. No pressure-but you’ve got some high expectations to live up to. We’ve seen the horse and the helicopter campaign.” Ethan chuckled. “Noted. I’ll try to keep the helicopter stunts to a minimum this time.”

A few team members laughed, but Maya barely heard it. Her eyes stayed on Damien- motionless, a glacier wrapped in silk.

“And with us as well,” Trina added, “Mary from Human Resources, and Aimee representing

Finance.”

Mary gave her warm, measured smile. “It’s always good to meet one of the faces behind the brand.”

Aimee, reserved, nodded. “Welcome aboard.”

Trina hesitated for just a heartbeat-Maya caught it.

“And it looks like,” she said delicately, “you already know Maya-also on Special Events.”

Ethan’s smile softened, eyes returning to Maya. “Oh, we go way back. University days.”

He looked like he might say more, but Trina-ever the tactician-pressed on before the conversation veered too far into personal history.

She turned slightly, motioning with a graceful hand. “And beside him, Mr. Blackwood’s close friend-Mr. Nicholas Ashcroft of the Ashcroft Consortium.”

“And finally,” she said, voice lifting in formality, “Mr. Damien Blackwood, Founder, President, and CEO of Blackwood Enterprises.”

Ethan’s eyes widened slightly, a flicker of recognition and respect crossing his face. He’d heard plenty about Ashcroft-one of the top families in the country, controlling major hospitals, businesses, and more. The weight of the two men’s power settled between them, unspoken but unmistakable.

He extended his hand toward Ashcroft first, nodding with respect.

“Mr. Ashcroft, it’s an honor. Your family’s influence is well known.”

Ashcroft’s gaze flicked over Ethan, but he didn’t shake his hand. A slow, knowing smile curled his lips.

“Mr. Miller, forgive me if your name doesn’t ring a bell. I don’t bother with the usual headlines or glittery names. My influence lies in the shadows-where things really move. But… thanks. for recognizing my family’s influence. I’m… flattered.”

His tone dripped with sarcasm, the last word hanging like a quiet challenge.

Then, with a cold edge, he added, “I don’t need to shake your hand either. We have no business together.”

Ethan swallowed hard, then quickly pulled his hand back. Masking his embarrassment, he offered a polite bow.

“Of course. Understood.”

Then he turned to Damien, offering his hand.

“Mr. Blackwood-pleasure to finally meet you. It’s an honor to work with your company. I’ve followed your work closely. Truly impressive.”

Damien didn’t move right away. He set down his glass of water with deliberate calm, as if the moment-and the pace of it-belonged entirely to him.

Then he stood.

Unhurried. Controlled. Power in every inch of his frame.

The handshake he offered was firm-but far from warm.

“Mr. Miller,” Damien said, his smile polite but unreadable. “Thank you for joining us. I don’t

tend to keep track of who our PR team partners with-I trust them. I only care about results.”

Ethan let out a quick breath of laughter-light, practiced.

“Of course. Results are everything,” he said, masking the flicker of discomfort in his eyes. Looking forward to proving myself.”

There was a pause. Just long enough to taste.

Then Damien added, “I wasn’t aware you and Maya were… acquainted.”

Ethan’s eyes flicked toward Maya, and for a second, the corners of his mouth lifted. Her seat suddenly felt hotter than the island sun.

“We went to the same university,” he said casually. “May was a junior at the time.”

His gaze lingered just a little too long.

“I guess you could say I was one of her biggest fans back then.”

Harper let out a low whistle behind her drink. Jessa quietly looked away.

Maya cleared her throat lightly.

“Ethan was two years ahead of me. We worked on a few student projects together.”

Ashcroft’s voice cut in from the other side-unhurried, velvet-smooth, and laced with that same shadowed edge.

“Interesting,” he murmured, his gaze drifting between Maya and Ethan. “Sounds like quite the reunion. Seems fate’s handing you a rare opportunity, Mr. Miller. Not many men get a second shot at charming the one who got away.”

A slow, deliberate smile curled at the corners of his mouth.

“But… be careful with second chances,” he added, lifting his coffee cup, “They don’t always come without… consequences. Sometimes more than you bargained for.”

Damien’s stare snapped to Nick-sharp, unreadable-but Ashcroft only sipped calmly, that half-smirk still playing on his lips, like he’d merely commented on the weather.

Ethan let out a short laugh.

“Funny how life circles back sometimes, huh?”

He casually rubbed the back of his neck, playing it cool-yet his jaw tightened for a split second, betraying the effort.

He turned to Maya again, eyes warm.

“I never forgot you, you know.”

Maya’s breath caught, a flutter of warmth and fear tangled in her chest. She tried to speak,

but the words lodged stubbornly in her throat. Her gaze flicked sideways-where Damien now sat, motionless, a glacier wrapped in silk, his unreadable eyes fixed on her like a quiet warning.

The island sun beat down, but all she felt was the cold weight of his stare-and the quiet echo of something unfinished, still pulsing beneath the surface.

Chapter 142

Some kisses change everything.

The night had cracked something open between them-quiet and dangerous. But morning came with new eyes watching, old names reappearing, and unspoken lines being redrawn.

And Maya? She was about to find out that sometimes, the past doesn’t knock.

It just… pulls up a chair.

“Mr. Miller, your briefing is in an hour,” Trina said, voice ever-professional as she stepped forward. “Please feel free to enjoy breakfast with us while you wait.”

Ethan smiled, eyes still on Maya.

“Would love to.”

But when he moved to sit near her, Damien spoke.

“There’s space at the end,” he said, tone mild but final.

Ethan paused, just slightly.

Then nodded and moved down the table.

Maya didn’t look at Damien.

But she felt him-close and consuming.

And though no one said it aloud….

Everyone felt it.

The air was no longer just humid.

It was charged.

Maya’s breath hitched. She could feel Damien’s silent claim, like a tether pulling her closer even when she wanted to pull away.

And then there was Ethan-his eyes held something more than nostalgia; a quiet obsession

that hadn’t dimmed with time.

No matter how much time had passed, some things-some feelings-never really faded.

Damien didn’t touch his food again.

Didn’t need to. The heat under his collar was already simmering with every casual word Ethan Miller directed at Maya.

The man was all smooth polish-perfect smile, tailored charm, a gleam in his eye like he’d stepped straight out of a magazine. The kind of man who thrived on being noticed. The kind who always assumed he had a shot.

Damien kept his gaze down, but his ears were tuned like a blade.

"…you were always sketching in the back row. That café near campus-the one with the cheap lattes-you practically lived there, remember?"

Maya's voice answered softly, "Yeah, I guess I did."

The words were light, almost careless, but Damien caught the flicker of hesitation in her

eyes.

And then-she laughed.

Soft. Too soft.

It wasn't her real laugh. Not the kind she gave Ashcroft, or the one she'd given Damien that morning, that full-bodied, unguarded laugh that bloomed from somewhere honest.

This one was different. Tight around the edges. Like she didn't quite know where to place herself.

Damien didn’t like it.

He didn’t like the way Ethan leaned in across the table-elbows propped, body angled, eyes fixed on her like he still had a place in her life. Like she was some unfinished story he meant

to rewrite.

And the others noticed. Their glances were subtle, but curious. Watching. Reading between lines that didn’t belong to them.

Damien took a slow sip of water, not for thirst-but for control. Something to do with his hands. Something to stop him from reaching across the table and snapping the tension in

two.

Focus.

Maya’s posture wasn’t as relaxed as it seemed. Not to him.

He saw it-the slight stiffness in her neck, the way her fingers curled once under the table before smoothing over her lap. Her smile stayed in place, but her replies were clipped, her

eyes darting just a beat too quickly between faces.

Ethan kept talking anyway. As if the years hadn't passed. As if her discomfort didn't matter.

And then-Maya's fingers brushed his under the table.

A quiet, searching touch. No flourish. No show.

Just a hand finding his.

Damien froze.

It wasn't a performance. Wasn't for the team, or for Ethan, or for the conversation unraveling around them.

It was for him.

A pulse of warmth, silent and certain. Her way of anchoring him. Of saying I know.

He turned his palm slowly beneath hers and laced their fingers together, pulling their joined hands toward him-not far, just enough. A small shift. A private declaration.

Maya didn't pull away.

She didn't look at him either. But her thumb began to stroke gently over his, like she could feel the storm behind his silence. Like she wanted to be the one to calm it.

Chapter 143

His pulse steadied-just enough to hear the next thing out of Ethan's mouth.

"You used to love that sketchy barbecue place by the sidewalk," he said, smirking. "I'd tease you all the time – told you one day you'd grow a third eye from all the mystery meat you were inhaling. You remember that?"

The table laughed. Light, harmless.

Damien didn't.

He stared at Ethan instead.

And saw it.

That look.

Want.

Not curiosity. Not fondness.

But that specific, territorial kind of hunger. The kind that reached back. The kind that didn't care how much had changed. The kind that remembered how she used to laugh when no one else could hear it.

And worst of all?

Maya hadn't recoiled from it.

She was being polite-too polite. Her grip stayed firmed, but her smile turned fragile-like she was being polite for all the wrong reasons.

It was enough to make something ancient stir inside him.

Because Ethan hadn't earned the Maya he was looking at now.

Not the woman who had grown, endured, transformed.

Not the Maya who reached for him when she needed steady ground.

And he sure as hell wasn't going to take her from him.

Not when Damien knew-felt-that whatever Ethan was reaching for belonged to him now.

Clare

Half an hour later, breakfast was over, the table cleared, but the undercurrent of tension lingered thick in the warm island air.

Damien's hand was still wrapped around Maya's beneath the table-a quiet claim, an anchor in the storm. Without breaking their touch, he rose and gently tugged her to her feet.

And that's when Damien saw it.

A flicker.

Sharp, unguarded.

Just for a second-but enough.

Ethan's eyes had snapped to their interwoven hands, and something ugly passed behind them. Surprise. Jealousy. Maybe even something territorial.

But then-just as quickly-it vanished. Smoothed over with that easy grin, like it had never been there at all.

Damien didn't grin back.

He didn't need to.

His hand stayed right where it was-wrapped around what was his.

Together, they stepped out into the brilliant sunlight, joining Harper, Sienna, and Jessa as they made their way toward the Garden Pavilion.

The path wound through lush tropical landscaping – towering palms swayed lightly in the ocean breeze, ferns unfurled their delicate fronds, and vibrant bougainvillea climbed the rustic stone walls. The scent of jasmine and gardenia filled the air, mingling with the faint salt tang of the sea nearby.

The Garden Pavilion itself was a breathtaking spectacle: an open-air sanctuary draped in billowing white silk curtains, crystal chandeliers dangling from ancient mahogany beams, and tables set with polished silver and handcrafted porcelain. Around the pavilion, the manicured lawns gave way to exotic flowerbeds bursting with color-orchids, hibiscus, and rare tropical blooms that shimmered under the sunlight.

“It’s absolutely stunning,” Maya murmured, the tension in her chest easing just a fraction.

Harper nudged her playfully. “Perfect backdrop for the shoot-and perfect drama, apparently.”

Sienna smiled but glanced sideways at Maya. “So… how well do you really know Ethan Miller?

Maya kept walking, steady despite the questions. “We went to the same university. He was a senior but failed a class and had to retake it, which put him in one of mine. Our professor assigned us to the same group for a project-that’s how we met. A year later, I dropped out and never saw him again… until today.”

She paused, frowning slightly. “But… something feels different with him. I mean, sure-people change. Time changes them. But I don’t know… I can’t explain it. It’s just… off.”

Jessa’s voice was soft but deliberate. “You’re not the only one who feels it. There’s

something about him… I don't know. Unsettling."

Harper slowed her steps slightly, then glanced sideways. "Sienna?" She nudged her gently." Penny for your thoughts?"

Sienna hesitated, her brows furrowing as if she was still trying to sort through the feeling herself. "I'm just… I don't know. I feel like something's not right."

They all fell silent for a beat, the gravel crunching softly beneath their sandals as they walked through the lush path that led toward the garden terrace.

Then Sienna added, more slowly, "The truth is… his arrival caught me off guard. I never saw any confirmation about the talent, but I definitely didn't expect it to be Ethan Miller."

Jessa turned her head. "What do you mean?"

Sienna exhaled. "Last week, I accidentally saw a document on Trina's desk-it had the name Altair Creative Group on it. That's a boutique agency, smaller but legit. But Ethan Miller… he's with Orion Models, right? That's a completely different agency. Big, flashy, international."

Harper blinked. "Wait-so if Altair was on the doc, but Ethan's from Orion, then…?"

Sienna nodded, her expression tight with unease. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

Jessa tilted her head. “Maybe the deal with the first agency fell through? That’s why Ms. Trinal had to switch to another one last minute?”

Sienna bit her lip, then shook her head slowly. “I thought about that. But from what I know, the budget we have for the talent isn’t anywhere near Ethan Miller’s range. He’s top tier now. Just one photo shoot with him usually starts in the six digits.”

Harper’s brows shot up. “For one day?”

Sienna nodded. “This is a three-day shoot. I seriously doubt Trina would throw a huge chunk of our budget on a single model-especially when we don’t need the influence. The fact that Isla Aurelia is a Blackwood Enterprise project? That already carries enough weight in the luxury market.”

Maya’s lips parted slightly, a prickle rising beneath her skin.

Sienna continued, her tone edged with quiet concern. “In fact… we don’t even need a familiar face for the campaign. The whole point was to focus on the place-the island, the exclusivity, the lifestyle. So why him?”

Damien’s gaze remained fixed ahead, but his fingers tightened around Maya’s hand, grounding her.

“Sienna’s right,” Damien said, his voice low and deliberate. “The fact that Isla Aurelia is one of Blackwood Enterprises’ crown jewels is influence enough. We don’t need a big name to carry this campaign.”

He paused, then added-quieter, but with unmistakable weight-

“And for the record, Blackwood Enterprises doesn’t do business with Orion.”

Chapter 144

The sun filtered through the lattice roof of the Garden Pavilion, casting soft shadows over the team as they moved with focused precision.

“Alright,” Harper said, clapping her hands lightly, “time to make this place sing.”

Maya nodded, mentally pulling herself into the task.

Yet, beneath the busy surface, her mind kept circling back. Why now? Why him? Her fingers adjusted the hem of a fabric swatch, but her eyes were distant, gaze unfocused.

Jessa was snapping reference photos from multiple angles, her tablet in one hand, stylus in the other, noting which frames matched the mood board. Sienna hovered near the layout plan, pointing at spots where props would be arranged, her voice low but clear. Harper, ever the connector, coordinated with the production team, smoothing over questions about timelines and deliverables.

Maya was with them-physically, at least. But her heart was elsewhere.

She didn’t hear Harper the first time.

“Hey,” Harper said gently, nudging her elbow. “Maya, you okay?”

“Huh? Oh… yeah.” She blinked. “I’m fine.”

Harper wasn’t buying it. “Is it about Miller?”

Even just hearing the name made Maya’s chest tighten. “I… I don’t know,” she admitted softly. “But something tells me none of this is a coincidence.”

“What do you mean? I thought you said you never saw him again after you dropped out of university, that was what? Like 4-5 years ago?”

“Yes. And even when I went back 2 years ago, I never heard anything about him again. Maybe once, at the coffee shop where I used to work, just in passing. Some girls were talking about a new actor… the name sounded familiar. But that was it.”

Harper tilted her head. “Okay… so do you think he took the gig on purpose? Like, just to cross paths with you?”

“I don’t think so.” Maya hesitated. But doubt was a strange thing-it crept in, slow and slippery. “But… have you noticed how he keeps pushing Damien’s buttons? Like he’s testing the waters-bringing up university memories, playing the familiarity card, seeing what kind of reaction he gets. And when he walked into the room… he said my name first. But it didn’t look

like he was surprised to see me there.”

Jessa and Sienna joined them then, both holding clipboards.

“I noticed that too,” Jessa murmured. “That’s why I said earlier-something feels off. His presence is unsettling, the way he talks about you feels different, I can’t quite put a finger on it, but it’s awkward, like watching a kid trying to brag about how he’s better because he knows you even before boss does.”

Sienna folded her arms, her brow drawn. “And let’s talk about Trina’s actions.” she added. She acted strange when he mentioned he was here for the shoot. Like she was expecting someone else instead. You can tell she’s uncomfortable, but just trying to keep it all professional.”

The air shifted with unease. Then Maya recalled the name of the agency Sienna mentioned handling Ethan – Orion.

The name struck something in her chest-hard and cold. She’d heard of it before. Not in meetings or strategy decks, but in passing. Hushed mentions. Vague warnings. Always paired with a shift in tone… and eyes that didn’t quite meet hers.

Harper turned serious. “There’s something strange about all this. We have to be careful around that Miller guy.” Then she looked up, eyes scanning the three ladies standing beside her. “Let’s be cautious around this guy, especially on what we’re saying-about Maya, the boss, everything. We don’t know his intentions. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

And the ladies nodded their heads in agreement.

Meanwhile, back at the resort, Trina ushered Ethan and his manager into a sleek, glass-walled conference room overlooking a polished courtyard. Cool and modern, the space was outfitted in polished oak and minimalist chrome finishes-elegant, but impersonal, sunlight bouncing off the glass walls. Mary and Aimee were already inside, projecting calm authority as they laid out the agenda. Aimee's tablet pinged softly as she reviewed the proposed figures. Mary's expression remained pleasant but sharp, her pen poised above the printed contract.

Chapter 145

And last to enter was James.

Earlier, before the team had dispersed, Damien had given James a direct order: attend the contract meeting.

Damien had made it clear-he wanted him there. No room for negotiation.

Eyes on Ethan. Every move. Every word. No detail too small.

Whatever Ethan was here for, Damien wasn't about to take chances-not when something already felt off. He wanted a close eye in the room for any surprises.

The glass doors slid shut behind them with a quiet hiss.

Inside the sleek conference room, the polished mahogany table gleamed under the soft overhead lights. Ethan's manager-a sharp-faced woman in a tailored suit-placed a leather portfolio on the table and began laying out the final details of the contract.

Trina stayed poised, tablet in hand, her eyes flicking between the screen and the faces around her, Mary and Aimee sat nearby, ready to answer questions about budget, compliance, and HR protocols.

James sat beside her, silent but watchful, his presence a subtle reminder that this was no ordinary meeting.

Ethan's easy charm was still there, but now a flicker of something sharper-guarded, maybe even wary-peeked through his practiced smile.

"So? Let's get all the paperwork out of the way. I'm excited to begin!" Ethan said smoothly,' the campaign dates are set for the third week of August, right?"

"Yes," Trina confirmed. "Third week of August is our target launch date. The island's best spots-from the Garden Pavilion to the beach cliffs and the private yacht. We want to showcase every stunning aspect of Isla Aurelia."

Mary chimed in, "All models and staff will adhere to our wellness and safety protocols. Any dietary restrictions or medical concerns must be flagged in advance."

Ethan nodded, flipping through the contract. "Understood. No issues there."

Aimee spoke up, “Mr. Miller, I understand you made changes to the contract just minutes ago. I am looking at the copy now, and it appears there’s a mistake with your contract. It says here that you’re giving 100% full endorsement rights exclusivity during the campaign period

to Blackwood Enterprises and besides full accommodation and food, you’re not asking for any fee.”

Ethan’s manager interjected, “That is correct. Initially, Mr. Miller’s fee was 50% of his normal fee for photoshoots. But, during breakfast, he wanted me to change it and do this campaign at no cost.”

“That’s right, I didn’t expect to see a Maya, even more I will get the chance to work closely with her. I’m already happy with that; I don’t need the money. The opportunity to spend time with Maya again after so many years is enough.”

James’s gaze sharpened as he interrupted, “Mr. Miller, Blackwood Enterprises doesn’t do handouts or charity work when it comes to business deals. Money is not an issue when it comes to worthwhile business dealings. And this campaign is one of the newest Crown Jewels of the company.”

Ethan responded, “I know, please don’t get me wrong Mr. Horton, but I am not underestimating the capability of Blackwood Enterprises to pay. It is my personal decision to not charge anything. In fact, I owe you guys even. You’ve given me the opportunity I never thought I’d still have.”

James interjected, “That’s sentimental, but we don’t use emotions when doing business. If this is your choice, that’s fine. But I want to make it clear that our staff is not obliged to provide you with any services, time or energy outside their assigned tasks-especially Ms. Maya Thompson. I understand that you’re acquainted with her, but she is not and will never be part of this contract. I want to make it clear

and make sure that you understand that Ms. Thompson is only obliged to perform her duties assigned to her as Special Events coordinator. You cannot bother her for non-work related stuff while on the clock, especially when off the clock. Are we clear?”

The room fell silent. The air became tense.

Something dark flickered in Ethan’s eyes, but it did not linger. He blinked and placed that practiced smile back on his face. “Mr. Horton, I get it, business is business. Don’t worry, you can count on my professionalism.”

James felt off about it but continued- “I’m glad I made myself clear. About the exclusivity clause-your endorsement rights during the campaign period. Can you clarify your current

Commitments? We need full transparency.”

The manager shifted uncomfortably. “Ethan’s primary focus is here, with Blackwood Enterprises. Other endorsements are being reviewed, but no conflicts are expected.”

James’ expression hardened slightly. “We take exclusivity seriously. We expect your full

cooperation. Any deviation, and the contract is void.”

Ethan’s smile tightened. “Understood.”

Trina smoothly guided the group toward signatures and final remarks, but the atmosphere had subtly shifted. The friendly ease of breakfast was gone, replaced by razor-edged caution.

As the meeting edged toward close, a shared undercurrent pulsed beneath the polished professionalism: something unspoken, a quiet wariness of what Ethan Miller truly brought with him-and what it might mean for Maya, Damien, and the fragile balance they all tried to maintain.

Outside, Ashcroft's silhouette appeared at the terrace window, phone pressed to his ear. Damien had returned and found Ashcroft standing in the shadows, voice low but firm.

"…double the surveillance and make sure to keep me posted with any new movements."

He hung up just as Damien reached him.

Ashcroft didn't bother hiding the tension in his jaw. "There's movement in Moldova. Nothing. alarming yet, but it's worth keeping an eye on. One of my men reported two black SUVS arriving two nights ago. They went underground, so we couldn't confirm who was in them. They stayed for nearly three hours. That location's been quiet for years. Business as usual- until now. These 'visitors' came not long after we left Russia."

Damien's expression turned unreadable. "They're starting to notice something. But it's too early for them to move." He paused. "Keep eyes on everything. Every single thing."

Ashcroft nodded. "Already ordered it. Surveillance has been doubled."

Damien’s gaze darkened. “That’s not our only problem.”

Ashcroft raised a brow, his dark eyes flicked toward the conference room, unreadable and unread. “I know… that piece of shit actor?”

“Sienna said she saw a document on Trina’s desk-it had the name Altair Creative Group on it. That’s the agency she was supposed to pull a contract talent from. But Ethan Miller? He’s from Orion Models.”

Ashcroft straightened. “Wait… Orion? Isn’t that-”

“Yes,” Damien cut in. “I have a bad feeling about this. This isn’t random.”

Ashcroft’s tone dropped. “This is arranged.”

Chapter 146

Damien’s phone buzzed in his pocket.

He glanced down, read the message from James, and quietly typed a reply. Without missing

a beat, he slipped the phone back into his pocket and looked at Ashcroft.

“I told James to attend the meeting,” he said, voice low and clipped. “Let’s head back to the suite. He’s waiting.”

Ashcroft gave a short nod, falling into step beside him.

They crossed the villa property in silence, weaving through manicured garden paths and open courtyards touched by the golden sun. The warmth of Isla Aurelia didn’t soften Damien’s expression. His jaw was tight. His eyes unreadable.

When they reached the penthouse, James was already outside the door, standing at attention like he’d been stationed there for hours.

“Sir,” James greeted with a nod. “Mr. Ashcroft.”

“Let’s talk inside,” Damien said, already unlocking the door.

The heavy door swung open and shut behind them with a thud of finality.

James didn’t waste a second. He went straight into the recap.

“The contract negotiation was civil-but far from ordinary,” he began. “Ethan seemed very comfortable. The only thing he asked about was the campaign schedule. Then Aimee flagged the updated contract-one that appeared to have been modified just minutes before the meeting.”

He glanced at Damien, his tone sharpening. “The revised terms grant Blackwood Enterprises full exclusivity on endorsement rights for the entire campaign window. No fee. Just accommodations and meals.”

Damien’s jaw flexed, the muscle ticking.

“And when asked why,” James continued, “he said he doesn’t need the money. That he didn’t expect to see Ms. Maya here, and just having the opportunity to spend time with her was enough.”

Ashcroft let out a scoff, arms folded across his chest. “Theatrical little bastard.”

James gave a single nod. “He played the humble card. Said it was his personal choice-and

that he actually felt indebted to us. Claimed we were giving him something he thought he’d lost for good.”

He paused, then added, “He’s smooth. Really smooth. Said all the right things. Every word felt intentional.”

Damien didn’t respond. He shifted his gaze to James, his tone low and absolute. “Get Trina. I want her here. Now.”

James gave a short nod and stepped aside.

Ashcroft exhaled hard through his nose. “This wasn’t luck-and it sure as hell wasn’t some destiny bullshit.”

Damien’s gaze cut toward the window. “No shit. This was deliberate.”

He turned back, voice low and razor-edged. “Orion doesn’t operate like that unless someone’s pulling strings. He didn’t just show up-he was sent.”

Ashcroft’s jaw clenched. “And he’s easing his way in like he’s just another pretty face.”

A bitter smirk tugged at his mouth. “You really gonna let him circle Maya like a vulture in designer silk?”

Damien’s reply came low, lethal. “Let him circle. I want the puppeteer behind him… before I cut the strings and clip his wings.”

About fifteen minutes later, a knock echoed through the penthouse.

James checked the peephole, then opened the door. “It’s her.”

Trina stepped inside, composed as ever, though the flicker of unease in her eyes betrayed her.

“Mr. Blackwood,” she said. “You wanted to see me?”

Damien didn’t waste time. “Explain Ethan Miller.”

Trina blinked, visibly steadying herself. “I… I was caught off guard too, sir. Our original model was contracted through Altair Creative Group. Two days before the trip, they called to cancel. Said they were overbooked and would pay the penalty-two million dollars. The funds hit our account that same day.”

Ashcroft’s brow rose. “That fast?”

“Yes. Less than ten minutes later, I got a confirmation call from Finance. The money cleared. Then, about an hour after that, I received an sss from Orion Models. They said they wanted to collaborate on the campaign. I turned them down at first. We’ve never worked with them

before, and honestly, we didn’t need their influence – especially not for this campaign.”

Chapter 147

Damien’s gaze sharpened. “So what changed?”

“They insisted. Said they’d send their ‘least influential’ talent and only charge half the regular fee. All they wanted was the experience for their roster. I asked who it would be-they didn’t say. Just that they’d send the talent directly, and if we didn’t like him, they’d replace him at no extra cost.”

“And you agreed?” Ashcroft asked.

Trina hesitated, guilt shadowing her expression. “I shouldn’t have, but it seemed like a bargain, and we were tight on time. But when Ethan Miller walked in.”

She shook her head. “He’s not some mid-tier model. He’s one of Orion’s biggest names. That’s not what we agreed on.”

“And you didn’t pull the plug?” Damien asked.

“I tried,” she said quickly. “I called Orion before the meeting and said we were declining. They pushed back-told me Mr. Miller had already contacted them directly and updated the contract himself.”

Damien’s brows pulled tight. “And those terms?”

“No fee. He’s waiving everything. Just asked for accommodations and meals. Said he wanted to be part of the campaign-for free.”

Ashcroft let out a dry laugh. “Generous.”

“I thought the same. It felt off. It was… too good to be true. So I called Media Relations, thinking maybe he had a scandal and this was damage control.”

Damien’s voice was cold. “And?”

“Nothing. Clean. No rumors, no controversies. His record is spotless.”

Ashcroft’s tone dropped, eyes flicking to the door like he expected someone listening. “That’s not a coincidence. It reeks of orchestration.”

mien didn’t respond right away. His eyes were distant, jaw clenched, the silence between nem heavy with calculation.

Then, without looking at her, his voice sliced through the air-measured, cold, and deliberate.

“Keep eyes on him. Every move. I don’t want Maya alone with him-ever. Limit interaction.

None is better.”

Trina stiffened. “Understood.”

“Don’t trust a word he says. No matter how harmless he seems.”

A pause, then a darker edge crept into his tone.

“If there’s any clean way to get rid of him-do it,” Damien added coldly. “I don’t care if he walks out on his own or decides this isn’t worth his time. Make it happen.”

There was a pause before Trina replied, her voice steady despite the tension crackling in the room. “I’ll handle it, Mr. Blackwood.”

“You may go,” Damien said, his tone final.

Trina gave a crisp nod and turned, her footsteps tapping softly against the polished marble- each one echoing like the start of a silent countdown.

The door had barely closed when Damien turned to James.

“Make sure Lee is with Maya,” he said, voice low but commanding. “Close enough to intervene. I don’t care if she knows. His priority is her safety.”

James gave a crisp nod. “Understood.” He hesitated, then asked, “And his manager?”

Ashcroft stepped in, arms crossed. “My men will handle her. I’ll assign someone to shadow her movements, tap her phone-whatever it takes.”

Damien’s gaze was steel. “Good. I want every angle covered. No more surprises.”

A pulse of silence hung in the air, heavy with tension. Damien’s fists curled at his sides, jaw ticking-this wasn’t business as usual anymore. Someone had orchestrated this, and Maya was the bait. That thought alone made something cold and violent settle in his chest.

“Ethan won’t make a move yet. He’s testing boundaries.”

Ashcroft scoffed. “And trying to charm his way past every one of them.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed. “Let him try. The moment he crosses the line… we end the show.”

The air in the penthouse turned heavier, silence stretching like a loaded wire between them.

Ashcroft’s brow lifted, catching the sharp gleam in Damien’s gaze. “You already have a plan.”

“I always do,” Damien replied coolly, his voice like velvet over steel. “But I need to know who’s in the director’s seat. Ethan’s just the actor-well-rehearsed, charming, dangerous when

underestimated. But someone wrote this script. Funded it. Orchestrated the casting.” Ashcroft folded his arms. “Do you think this is connected to Moldova?”

Damien’s jaw flexed, but he didn’t answer right away. His gaze was locked on the distant horizon, as if the waves themselves might give him answers.

“Too many coincidences,” he said at last, voice low. “Moldova. The agency switch. Ethan showing up out of nowhere, practically gift-wrapped. Someone’s pulling strings-and they’ve been planning this longer than we thought.”

Ashcroft’s brow furrowed. “You think it’s personal?”

Damien’s eyes turned sharp. “It always is. Business doesn’t warrant this much subtlety. This -“he gestured vaguely toward the door where Trina had exited, “-this is precision. Someone wants access. Or disruption. Or both.”

Ashcroft’s tone dipped. “And Maya?”

Damien’s response came without hesitation. “She’s the leverage.”

A beat of silence stretched between them.

Then Damien added, colder now, “But they miscalculated. She’s not a weakness… she’s a fuse. And if they keep pushing-” his voice dropped, lethal, “-they’ll find out exactly what she ignites.”

Ashcroft said nothing, but the look they exchanged spoke volumes.

The game had shifted.

Somewhere out there, the real player moved another piece across the board.

The pieces weren’t just moving anymore-they were closing in.

Beyond their sight, a shadowy hand was tightening the noose.

But Damien Blackwood would not be strangled.

He would break every bone in the game if he had to.

Because in this war, only the ruthless survive.

and he intended to be the last one standing.

Chapter 148

The sun had climbed higher by the time they finished prepping the last of the table markers and floral arrangements. A warm breeze drifted through the Garden Pavilion, stirring the scent of orchids and sea salt. Maya stepped back, wiping her palms discreetly against her skirt as she exchanged a nod with Jessa.

“That’s the last of it,” Sienna said, stretching her arms above her head. “If I stand another minute under this sun, I might melt into the gravel.”

Harper chuckled. “Then let’s go before we have to carry you to lunch.”

Their group turned, weaving back through the resort’s winding path, shoes crunching softly on the pale stone walkway. Laughter and light chatter floated among them, the mood lighter now that the setup was complete.

But as they neared the restaurant terrace, Maya’s steps slowed.

Walking toward them from the opposite direction-like a scene rehearsed and waiting for its cue-was Ethan Miller.

He looked freshly showered, a linen button-down rolled up to his forearms, sunglasses hooked casually at the neck. His eyes locked onto Maya the second he saw her.

Harper stiffened beside her. Sienna's smile dimmed.

"Afternoon, ladies," Ethan greeted smoothly, slowing as he approached. Then his gaze lingered-too long-on Maya.

"Maya," he said, his voice lower now. "You look radiant in the sun."

A quiet hush fell over the team.

Maya blinked, her breath catching before she smoothed her expression into something neutral. "Ethan," she said evenly. "Didn't expect to see you here."

He smiled. "I was hoping to bump into you."

There was something in the way he said it-too polished. Too rehearsed.

And suddenly, the warmth of the day didn't feel quite so golden anymore.

already briefed by James, didn't miss a beat. He stepped forward smoothly, his voice professional but firm.

“Ms. Maya, lunch is ready. We should head in.”

Before Maya could reply, Ethan flashed his signature grin. “Perfect! I’m starving. Let’s have lunch together!”

Maya hesitated-just a breath-but it was enough. She pressed her lips into a polite line and gave the faintest nod, wordlessly agreeing. She didn’t want to cause a scene. Not here. Not with the others watching.

As they moved toward the restaurant, Lee deftly maneuvered to walk beside her, body angled just enough to create a buffer between her and Ethan. Harper slid in on Maya’s other side without a word, her protective energy loud in its silence.

The moment they stepped into the cool embrace of the restaurant’s air-conditioning, a collective sigh of relief passed between them. The heat of the garden gave way to crisp comfort-and maybe, Maya hoped, a moment of peace.

“Ahh, this feels so much better,” Harper exhaled with a grin, lifting her hair off her neck.

Inside, Trina, Mary, and Aimee were already seated, sipping iced tea and flipping through printed event notes.

Trina looked up. “How’s the prep going?”

Jessa smiled as she slid into the booth. “It’s done! We went with serene garden wedding vibes. We can shoot our first set after lunch.”

“Perfect,” Trina said warmly. “Well done, ladies.”

But peace was short-lived.

The doors opened again-and this time, Damien entered.

He walked in alongside Ashcroft and James, the weight of his presence enough to shift the air in the room. His gaze immediately found Maya-and then Ethan.

They arrived just in time to hear Ethan’s voice float above the soft restaurant chatter.

“Maya!” he said brightly. “I remember you once told me how you dreamed of a garden wedding, right? You said you wanted it full of lavender and tulips… and that warm light you love in the late afternoon. I’ve been picturing that scene lately.” He gave a soft laugh, nostalgic. “At the time, it gave me motivation too. I told myself that after we graduate, I’d work hard so I could give-”

I won’t be necessary.”

Chapter 149

Damien’s voice cut clean through the air-low, smooth, but sharp enough to draw blood.

“Whatever Maya once imagined, I’ll make reality look better.”

He stepped forward without hesitation, his presence shifting the entire energy in the room. With practiced ease, he slid his hand to the small of Maya’s back, a possessive gesture that said she was already claimed.

“If she wants lavender and tulips,” he murmured, gaze locked on hers,

“I’ll plant her a kingdom of them.”

Ethan’s smile faltered, but before he could respond, Ashcroft’s voice followed-cool, amused, and laced with a warning.

“Careful, Miller.” He leaned just slightly forward, his grin lazy but his eyes razor sharp.

“Fantasies tend to end badly.”

Maya’s breath caught-not because of Ethan anymore, but because of Damien’s quiet promise. It wasn’t performative. It wasn’t for show.

It was personal. It was deliberate. It was him, claiming her-without fanfare, without fear.

Lunch resumed like nothing had happened, the staff bustling in with plated servings and refilled glasses. But everyone at the table felt it-that subtle shift. Like gravity had quietly realigned.

Maya sat between Damien and Harper, with Ethan across the table-far enough to pretend distance, close enough to still matter.

Light conversations returned. Harper teased Jessa about her Pinterest board. Trina reviewed the schedule with practiced ease. But the ease was a mask.

Beneath the clinking of cutlery and polite laughter, the game had begun.

And every seat at this table… was part of it now.

The peaceful atmosphere of lunch was interrupted when Ethan once again opened his

y, May… by the way," Ethan said casually, dabbing the corner of his mouth with a napkin.

"How's Jamie doing?"

The fork in Maya's hand paused just short of her lips.

Her eyes flicked up, startled. The mention of her brother-Jamie-landed like a pebble in still water, sending ripples through her chest.

His name carried weight. He was her weakness.

And hearing it spoken aloud in Ethan's voice… brought with it a tide she wasn't ready for.

She hadn't expected him to remember.

Not Jamie. Not after all this time.

She blinked, caught off guard. A quiet breath escaped her lips as she composed herself. Then she looked at him, offering a small, gentle smile.

"He's doing well… thank you for asking."

Damien's jaw ticked.

The scene unfolding in front of him didn't sit well. Not one bit.

The way Ethan said “May”-so casual, too familiar. It grated. No one called her that. No one should-except the boy Damien had already come to respect. Jamie was the only one who earned that kind of closeness.

Damien hadn’t even dared.

And yet Ethan tossed it out like a shared secret, like he knew exactly how to tug the strings that led to Maya’s heart.

What made it worse was Maya’s response-calm, polite, soft. Too soft. As if Ethan knew where her vulnerabilities lived. As if he’d been there once.

Damien’s fingers curled slightly around his glass. Then his voice cut in-low, cold, and smooth as glass,

“So, Mr. Miller,” he said, eyes locked on Ethan,

“I take it you’ve met Maya’s brother too?”

Maya felt the weight of his voice, heavy and unmistakable. The tension around them had shifted. It didn’t just linger now-it loomed, stretching tight above them like a dark cloud

to crack.

Lihan, on the other hand, seemed to sit taller. There was a flicker of smugness in his eyes, the edge of a smile threatening his lips.

Clair

Super “A Kongagome Mensbre-2

As if he’d just won something.

As if he’d pushed the right buttons-and watched Damien Blackwood bleed beneath the surface.

Ethan leaned back in his seat, swirling his water glass slowly, his tone deceptively light.

“You know, I still remember the first time I met Jamie.”

Maya stiffened beside Damien.

“It was finals week,” Ethan continued, gaze drifting to the view like he was reminiscing.

“We were buried under that brutal advertising project. Everyone was panicking about deadlines, but Maya…” He chuckled, as if sharing some private joke.

“She kept checking the time-over and over. Couldn’t sit still for more than a minute.”

He glanced at her, smile soft but knowing.

“I asked if she had a hot date or something. She didn’t answer-just grabbed her bag and bolted.”

Maya’s fingers curled subtly on her lap.

Ethan’s grin grew.

“I followed her.”

Damien’s fork paused in mid-air.

“From a distance, of course,” Ethan added innocently.

“Didn’t want to freak her out. I saw her stop by this tiny bakery. Watched her count every coin she had-literally poured out her purse-just to buy a single cupcake. Blue frosting, I remember.”

He shifted his eyes to Damien, still smiling.

“It didn’t make sense at first. But then I followed her home… and I saw.”

He gave a small, deliberate pause.

“A little boy was lying in bed-looked sick. Maya knelt beside him and sang Happy Birthday.

le cupcake. Just the two of them. And yet…” He exhaled, like the memory filled him

something warm.

“The way his face lit up? Man. You’d think he’d been handed the world.”

He let that hang, then added, quieter this time:

“Then I saw him struggle to sit up… just so he could throw his arms around Maya and say, ‘ You’re the best sister in the world, May.”

Ethan let the word May linger just a second longer than necessary.

He looked directly at Damien then, calm, composed-but his eyes sparkled with challenge.

Damien said nothing, but the air around him darkened. Palpably.

Chapter 150

The room hung heavy with silence, the weight of unspoken truths pressing down like the summer heat outside. Maya’s heart thundered in her chest, every breath feeling too loud in the stillness. Across the table, Ethan’s eyes gleamed with a mix of nostalgia and challenge, breaking the fragile quiet.

Then, as if picking up the thread of a story long paused, he leaned forward slightly and began.

“I ran out after that,” Ethan went on. “Got whatever I could. Cake, snacks, even a toy truck. Knocked on her door half an hour later-” he shot Maya a sideways look “-and she looked like she’d seen a ghost.”

Ethan’s smile curved slightly as he continued, swirling the glass in his hand with an air of comfortable nostalgia.

“She asked me what I was doing there, standing at her front door. I came up with something quick-told her she’d mentioned it was her brother’s birthday the other day, and since I happened to be in the area, I grabbed a few things to celebrate and thought I’d drop by.”

He turned to Maya, chuckling softly. “I can still remember the way you looked at me that night. Eyes wide. Guarded. Like a very protective mama bear-ready to pounce if I took even one more step.”

The amusement faded from his eyes, replaced by something softer-almost wistful.

“Then I heard Jamie from inside-‘Who’s at the door?’ And you said…” His voice dipped gently as he looked at Maya, “Nobody… wrong door.”

A beat. Then Ethan let out a low laugh.

“I knew you were going to shut it on me. So I just… jumped on the moment. I called out, ‘Hey, buddy! Happy Birthday! I’m Ethan-your sister’s classmate. Can I come in?”

He shifted in his seat and glanced briefly at Damien, acknowledging his presence without breaking the flow of his story.

“I saw it in your eyes, Maya. That frustration. That helpless look you get when Jamie’s worried, and you don’t want him to feel it. And sure enough… Jamie asked if everything was okay.”

He shrugged, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“And to keep him from worrying… you let me in.”

Then he turned deliberately and locked eyes with Damien.

“She let me in.”

He laughed, quiet and satisfied. “I’ll never forget that night. We ate instant noodles and cake. Jamie was so happy… kept driving that little truck across the table like it was the best thing he’d ever owned.”

He finally looked at Damien again.

“So,” Ethan said, clearing his throat. “That’s the story. Not really a flex-just something that’s stayed with me. Sometimes the simplest memories stick the hardest, don’t they?”

Damien didn’t flinch. But his silence cut sharper than any insult.

He reached for his water, took a single, slow sip, then set the glass down with deliberate calm. His gaze lifted-not to Ethan, but to Maya.

“Sounds like a sweet memory,” he said softly, almost like a statement. “I’m glad Jamie had someone looking out for him when he needed it.”

His voice was even, polite… and ice-cold.

Then, with surgical precision, his eyes shifted back to Ethan. And just like that-the mask dropped.

“But you see, Mr. Miller,” Damien continued, his tone now dangerously smooth, “there’s a difference between being let in once… and being allowed to stay.”

Silence gripped the table.

Even the clink of cutlery faded.

Ethan’s smirk twitched-still present, but no longer confident. He sat back slowly, hands folded in front of him, as if deciding whether to laugh or lunge.

Then he leaned back, resting an arm casually over the back of his chair. “I missed them both.

Damien gave a slow nod. No expression. But Maya saw it-that flicker behind his eyes. A calculation. A warning.

Harper looked from one to the other and exhaled. “Okay. That’s enough testosterone for one morning.”