Intern 301

Chapter 301

The cave still smelled of blood-iron thick in the air, sharp enough to taste. Yet somehow, between the flickering shadows and the steady thrum of torchlight, something heavier pressed between

them.

Harper shifted her stance, chin lifted, eyes hard. “Talk about what, exactly?” she snapped, her voice sharp but trembling at the edges. “I’m not in the mood for your games, Ashcroft!”

Ashcroft’s grin unfurled slow and knowing, the kind that promised trouble. “That’s quite bold coming from you. Between the two of us, you’re the one who loves playing games, Harper Lin.”

He stepped closer, the firelight slicing across his features in harsh gold and shadow. The silence stretched-taut, deliberate-before his tone dipped low, smooth as poison.

“Or should I say…” he paused, eyes glinting with cruel amusement, “…Harper Takahashi?”

Harper rolled her eyes, folding her arms with a huff. “So it’s about my identity, then. What else is there to talk about? You were there-Aunt Dahlia already said everything there is to know… and more, actually. But so what?” Her tone hardened, sharp and proud. “Of all people, you should understand why I did what I did. So yes, I’m a Takahashi. Big deal!”

Ashcroft’s gaze didn’t waver. “I get all that. But what happened between us last night-”

She cut him off before he could finish, her words tumbling fast, defensive. “Look, we had sex. And like you said, we’re both adults and it was consensual, so there’s no big deal, alright?” She lifted her chin, daring him to argue. “If you’re worried I’ll demand you ‘take responsibility,’ relax-that’s never going to happen. So there. Are we good now?”

Ashcroft’s smirk faded, replaced by something darker-quieter. He studied her, head tilted slightly, as if dissecting every word she’d just said.

He stepped closer, the distance between them shrinking until the cave walls might as well have disappeared. “You really think I’d let it be that simple?” he murmured, his gaze flicking to her lips before meeting her eyes again. “Because I don’t.”

Harper rolled her eyes, but her pulse gave her away, quick and unsteady. “What’s your problem? You know what? Don’t push it, Ashcroft. It was what it was. We both got what we wanted-end of

story.”

Ashcroft’s smile returned-slow, dangerous, dripping with amusement. “We both got what we wanted?” he echoed, his tone dipping low. “So you did want it, then… hmm?”

He leaned in, close enough for his breath to graze her skin, his voice a dark whisper. “Tell me,

Harper-did you stop thinking about it? Even once?”

Her breath caught. “Why… why would I even think about it? It was a mistake-a meaningless night.” She scoffed, but her voice cracked, betraying her composure. “In fact, if anything, I regret it! I should’ve just fucked some random guy instead of ending up in bed with you.”

Something flickered in Ashcroft’s eyes-dark, lethal. His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. ” Really? A meaningless night? A mistake you can just brush off?”

He closed the distance between them, his chest brushing hers, his breath a slow, heated drag over her lips. His eyes locked onto hers-dark, unyielding, claiming. “What was that?” he murmured, each word heavy with command. “You’d rather fuck some random man than me?”

He dipped his head, lips brushing the shell of her ear, voice dropping to a low, husky rasp. “Funny…” he whispered, letting his fingers trace a teasing line along her side without touching fully. “…your body tells me otherwise. The way it moved under me last night… the way you trembled when I was on top… your moans-telling me exactly what you couldn’t admit.”

He let the words linger, thick with ownership, every syllable curling around her like smoke. “Say it again,” he breathed, “and I’ll make sure you remember-every inch, every sound, every moment why you ended up in my bed.”

Chapter 302

Harper’s breath hitched, a sharp, uneven gasp betraying her careful composure. She lifted her chin, trying to smolder with defiance, but her pulse thundered, betraying every word she denied.

“Y-you’re ridiculous,” she spat, voice quivering despite her best effort. “I-It was just-don’t flatter yourself, Ashcroft!”

Her hands twitched at her sides, itching to shove him away, but her body lingered, drawn in despite her protests. She refused to admit it, refused to let him see, yet every nerve sang with awareness of him-his heat, his nearness, the memory of last night that still clung to her skin.

Ashcroft's eyes locked on hers, sharp, predatory. The heat between them almost unbearable. His hand found her hip, holding her firm, testing her reactions.

Harper's breath caught, her pulse racing. "What are you-" she started, voice sharp, but faltering.

Ashcroft's hand hovered at her hip for a moment, watching every microreaction-how her chest rose, the way her fingers twitched against his touch. Then, with careful intent, he slid his hand downward, brushing over the smooth curve of her thigh.

When his fingers finally found her sensitive folds, he pressed gently, the warmth and slickness meeting his touch immediately. Harper's eyes widened, breath hitching sharply, a soft, involuntary moan escaping her lips-betraying the heat she'd been trying to deny.

His thumb moved with calculated teasing, tracing slow, lazy circles over her sensitive core. The wetness beneath his touch spoke louder than her sharp words ever could.

Ashcroft's smirk deepened, sensing her betrayal. He leaned closer, lips brushing her ear, his voice a husky whisper that made her shiver. "Keep denying it," he murmured, voice a dangerous caress. But your body… never lies."

Harper blinked, caught between indignation and a heat she couldn't ignore, her lips parting slightly as if to argue-but no words came out, only a sharp, uneven exhale.

Testing the waters further, Ashcroft's hand didn't linger idly. He pressed a fraction harder, feeling her body respond-the subtle quiver of her hips betraying her even as she tried to hold herself still. Harper's fingers curled against his shoulders, a helpless mix of protest and surrender, her breath coming in shallow, ragged bursts.

His lips hovered near her ear, hot and teasing, brushing just enough to make her shiver violently." See?" he murmured, voice low, a predatory rumble threading each word. "Your body's already telling me everything you're too stubborn to admit."

Harper's pulse thundered, heat pooling low and wild. She parted her lips, trying to spit out some sharp retort-but instead, only a choked, involuntary moan escaped, echoing off the cave walls.

A slow, knowing grin tugged at Ashcroft's lips, dark and hungry. His thumb circled her core with maddening patience, each stroke slow and precise, coaxing every shiver she tried to hide.

"Shh…" he murmured, his voice low-rough silk laced with command. "Just feel." His breath brushed her ear, his tone dipping darker. "Let me see how much you crave me."

Harper forced her breath to steady and lifted her gaze to meet his. Her lashes fluttered once, then her eyes sharpened, bold again, glittering with defiance. Slowly, she pressed her palm flat against

his chest.

"Well," she murmured, her voice low and teasing, the corner of her mouth curling, "if this is your

idea of ‘talking’…”

Her hand slid downward, tracing the hard planes of his torso with unhurried confidence. Her touch lingered at his abdomen, the air between them humming with heat. Her gaze never wavered- playful, dangerous, knowing exactly what she was doing.

“Tell me, Ashcroft,” she breathed, the words brushing against his mouth like a challenge, “is that what this is really about?” Her fingers drifted lower, until her palm hovered just above the bulge pressing against her stomach. “Because it looks to me like you’re the one craving more.”

A teasing smirk curved her lips as she gave him a light, taunting squeeze. “What’s the matter? Did I leave that much of an impression last night?”

Chapter 303

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened-just barely-but she saw it, the twitch at the corner of his mouth, the

flare in his eyes. Her taunt had hit exactly where she wanted.

“Careful,” he murmured, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous rumble. “You’re playing with fire,

Harper.”

But she only tilted her head, lips curving into a daring smirk. “Oh?” she teased softly, her hand still resting against his bulge. “And what happens when I get burned?”

Something in his composure cracked-subtle, but undeniable. His hand left her now-damp core, catching her wrist before she could retreat. The warmth of his grip was searing, his thumb brushing the frantic beat of her pulse as he drew her closer, until her breath tangled with his.

“What if I say yes,” he murmured, each word measured, darkly intimate. “I like how you feel around me. And I can’t stop craving more.”

Harper’s lips parted, a sharp inhale betraying her composure, but she refused to back down.” Touché,” she breathed, her tone soft yet defiant. “Is that what you tell all the other women you’ve fu cked? Too bad-I’m not one of them.”

Ashcroft’s gaze darkened, his smirk curling-not playful, but primal. “You’re wrong,” he said, voice low and rough, like smoke. “I don’t go for seconds.”

He leaned in, his mouth grazing the curve of her jaw-a touch that sent shivers chasing down her spine. “… But you,” he whispered, his breath hot against her skin, “you’re different.”

His hand slid from her wrist to her waist, fingers digging in just enough to make her gasp, pulling her flush against him. “You make me crave more,” he breathed against her ear, each word soaked in control and hunger. “And the way your body reacts…” His lips brushed her temple, his tone dipping to a growl. “…tells me you want it too.”

Harper locked eyes with him, voice sharp and breathless, “Fuck you, Nicholas Ashcroft.”

Ashcroft’s smirk darkened, his gaze primal, challenged, “Fuck you, Harper Lin.”

Their eyes held each other in a tense, charged silence, the cave itself seeming to pause around them. Every heartbeat, every shallow inhale, hung like a promise in the air.

Then Harper’s lips curved into a daring smirk. “Fuck this!” she murmured-and lunged forward, capturing his mouth in a kiss that left no room for denial.

He responded immediately, fierce and hungry, a kiss deep and animalistic, pressing her back against the cold stone wall. His hand slid from her waist down to her thigh, lifting it to his hip,

claiming her as if she had always belonged there.

Harper’s fingers moved with equal urgency, fumbling at his pants as heat and need tangled them together. The kiss never broke-his dominance, her defiance, and the raw, unspoken desire between them igniting a fire that consumed everything else in the cave.

Ashcroft’s hand gripped her waist tighter, pulling her impossibly close, his breath hot against her

ear. Every nerve in her body screamed for him.

Chapter 304

The tension between them explodes in the cave, where defiance and desire collide. Every touch, every gasp, every stolen moment pulls them deeper into a storm of unrestrained passion. Harper and Ashcroft are no longer just testing each other-they're consumed by the fire they've ignited.

With a swift, fluid motion, he pushed the damp fabric aside, letting the heat of her body meet him fully. His c**k pressed against her slick entrance before he slid inside, eliciting a sharp, involuntary gasp from Harper that echoed off the cave walls.

"Ahhh…nghh…" she moaned, breathless, her body trembling against his.

Ashcroft's low, husky voice brushed her ear, thick with possession and hunger. "Fuck… you feel so

good."

Their bodies moved together in a single, primal rhythm, each thrust deep and claiming, every moan and shiver a testament to the fire between them, the cave alive with their shared, unrestrained

heat.

Harper's nails dug lightly into his shoulders, matching the rhythm of his hips as she gasped against his neck, breath ragged and uneven. "Ah… Nick…" she moaned, the sound trembling with both need

and defiance.

Ashcroft's grip tightened around her waist, tilting her just enough to press her fully against him, every movement scorching, claiming. "God, Harper… you're so… fucking perfect like this," he growled, his teeth grazing the shell of her ear, sending a shiver down her spine.

Her body arched instinctively, pressing harder into him, every curve and movement amplifying the friction between them. "Harder…" she gasped, lips brushing his jaw, teasing, daring him to lose

control.

Ashcroft's eyes darkened, and he obliged, thrusting deeper, harder, matching her need with his own. "Like this…?" he growled, low and rough, each movement sending her pulse skyrocketing.

"Ah… yes… oh God, yes!" Harper moaned, her back arching, nails raking down his shoulders. "Mmm

ahhh… nggg… ahh…!"

He groaned in response, the sound rough and possessive, as he pressed into her with unrelenting force. "Mmm… god, you feel so… perfect…"

Ashcroft's hands roamed with calculated hunger, one sliding between them to cup her heat, fingers finding her sore, swollen bud. They moved faster now, each stroke driving her higher, feeling her walls clench instinctively around him. Harper's hips pressed insistently into him, each movement a silent plea for more. Her moans grew desperate, loud and ragged, echoing off the

cave walls, mingling with his low, guttural growls.

“God… you’re so tight… so fucking perfect,” he rasped, voice thick with need, lips brushing her jaw, teeth grazing her earlobe. “Come for me, Harper… I want to feel your juice on my c**k…”

A deep growl rumbled from Ashcroft’s chest as he angled her slightly, pressing deeper, hitting the perfect spot that made her cry out. The sound echoed off the cave walls, mingling with their ragged breaths and the pulse of desire that neither could deny.

“Say my name, Harper,” he commanded, voice edged with hunger, his fingers tightening just

enough to make her gasp.

“Nick… Nicholas… oh God…” she moaned, her back arching into him, every nerve alight, every movement a surrender to the primal pull between them.

Harper’s cries filled the cave, breathless and ragged, each moan mingling with the echo of his growls, the rhythm of their bodies driving them closer to the edge, both on fire with need.

Ashcroft’s lips found hers again, capturing her in a hungry, possessive kiss. “You’re mine! Do you hear me? You’re mine! No other man can touch you!” His hands gripped, guided, and claimed, each movement a promise, a warning, a declaration that this moment and she-belonged to him

entirely.

The cave was alive with them, their heat, their fire, their unspoken need. Every thrust, every gasp, every shiver pushed them higher, closer, to a peak neither wanted to end, yet both knew would come with a shattering, unforgettable force.

Her body shuddered violently, back arching as a wave of fire tore through her. “N-nick… ahhh… yes…. yes!” she cried, nails digging into his shoulders, every sound raw and unrestrained.

Chapter 305

Ashcroft groaned deep in his chest, the vibration rolling through them both, his thrusts hard, relentless, hitting every sensitive point as he rode the edge. “That’s it… yes.. mine… only mine…” he breathed, his words a growl, possessive and intoxicating.

Heat pooled between them, thick and overwhelming, until a shattering climax ripped through Harper. Her walls clenched around him, a hot, tight grip that drove him over the edge. “Nick… oh God… I’m-!” she gasped, the words breaking into moans that tore from her throat.

Ashcroft followed immediately, every muscle tightening as his release hit, spilling deep inside her with a guttural roar. Their bodies convulsed together, shivering, trembling, each pulse and gasp syncing perfectly in the raw, primal rhythm of their shared ecstasy.

When the storm subsided, they clung to each other, ragged breaths mingling, sweat-slick skin pressed together, hearts hammering in unison. Even in the aftermath, the cave seemed alive with the echo of their fire-their desire, their possession, their unbroken, undeniable connection.

They stayed still for a long moment, chests heaving, breaths tangled, the echo of their climax vibrating through the cave walls. Harper's fingers rested on his chest, tracing the hard planes beneath her touch, before she pushed him gently, a slow, teasing smile curling her lips.

Ashcroft pulled back, letting his c**k slip free, their mingled juices spilling down her thighs, hot and slick. The scent of desire still hung thick between them, mingling with the faint tang of the cave's

air.

Harper blinked, knees still trembling from the intensity, and adjusted herself, fixing her dress just enough to feel semi-composed. Ashcroft, eyes dark and still smoldering, smoothed his pants and tucked himself back in, the movement slow, deliberate, as if marking the aftermath as his own.

Her gaze lifted, playful yet heated, lips catching the dim torchlight as she bit it lightly, a defiant laugh escaping her throat despite the haze of lust. "Yours, huh?" she teased, voice breathless but sharp. "That's a bold claim… don't you think?" Her eyes sparkled with mischief, the fire between them far from extinguished.

Ashcroft's smirk returned, dark and predatory, but softened slightly by the remnants of their shared heat. "Bold? Perhaps," he murmured, voice low and husky. "But only one thing's certain-no one else gets this, Harper."

Harper let out a throaty, unrestrained laugh, the sound echoing off the damp stone. "Too bad," she shot back, arching a brow, "in case you missed the memo, I have a wedding to plan soon." Something in Ashcroft's eyes darkened, a dangerous flash of possessiveness slicing through the

smolder. He stepped forward, closing the distance with a predator's ease, until her back met the

cold wall. “With who?!” His voice was sharp, almost a growl. “That Hiro guy?”

Harper placed her palms against his chest, trying to push him back, but he didn’t move-he was a wall of heat and muscle. He braced both hands on the stone beside her head, caging her in without touching her, his breath hot against her cheek. “We all have obligations to fulfill,” she said, chin tilting up defiantly, though her pulse betrayed her.

“He’s never touching you,” Ashcroft snarled, voice dropping low, fierce.

Harper’s lips curved into a bitter-sweet smirk. “You can’t do anything about it,” she said evenly, though her eyes glittered. “It’s normal for a husband and wife to consummate the marriage. It will happen, whether you like it or not.”

“Until you’ve said “I do,” Ashcroft cut in, voice dark and edged with hunger, “your body… your moans

your orgasms belong only to me. Do you understand?” The words rolled off his tongue like a command, like a vow-each one thrumming with something primal and dangerous.

For a heartbeat, Harper only stared at him, the air between them heavy and electric. Then she threw her head back and laughed-a sound soft but lethal, like silk sliding over a blade. Her eyes glittered as she leaned closer, lips curling with wicked amusement.

Chapter 306

“I must admit…” she purred, her tone a velvet drawl, “…you’re a damn good fuck.” She let her gaze flick down his body, then back to his eyes, daring him. “So sure-let’s be friends… with benefits.” Ashcroft’s jaw tightened, but Harper pressed on, her voice low and teasing. “Let’s make some rules: you satisfy my heat, I’ll satisfy yours. No strings attached. But it stays our little secret. After three months-once the engagement is final-we stop. I may be crazy and wild,” she added, her finger trailing lightly down the center of his chest, “but I am faithful.”

Her words hit him like a spark. Ashcroft’s eyes darkened, dangerous and unreadable. Something inside him snapped-part of his mind whispered that it was a damn good deal: no strings attached, just pleasure. But another part recoiled, uneasy. There was a weight in his chest, something unfamiliar and unsettling creeping in, threading through his control.

The air between them grew electric, the torchlight flickering across their faces. Ashcroft stared at her, jaw tight, eyes smoldering with heat and unspoken conflict. Harper, still trapped between his arms, tilted her head, lips curling with mischief, daring him to resist.

The cave seemed to pulse with their heat, lingering in the silence, every heartbeat a reminder of what had just passed-and what was far from over.

The intense moment was disrupted when footsteps echoed from the entrance of the cave. Ashcroft’s men-and Anko-had returned. Their eyes locked for a beat longer before Ashcroft dropped his hands and stepped back. Harper let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding, her chest loosening slightly.

She lowered her gaze for a moment, a bitter smile curling at the corners of her lips-one only she could see, a secret from the world. But when she lifted her head again, it was replaced with her usual bubbly, carefree smile, as if nothing had happened.

By the time the three men reached them, Harper was the first to speak. “You’re back! How was it? All done?”

Anko bowed respectfully. “Yes, it’s finished. We made sure that every trace of him is gone.”

Harper nodded approvingly. “Hmm, good! Well, it’s getting late. You know what to do-clean up this place, make sure not a single trace is left behind. I’ll head back now.”

She stepped forward, then paused suddenly, remembering something. “Oh, and you don’t need to hide anymore; they already know who I am. Meet me at the resort tomorrow morning-we’re heading home.”

Anko bowed again. “Hai, Bosu!”

As Harper began to walk out of the cave, Ashcroft’s gaze followed her-dark, intense, unreadable.

He stepped forward, and one of his men called out, “Boss,” holding up a ziplock bag containing

Ethan’s tongue. Ashcroft glanced at it and said, “Take it back and add it to my collection,” his tone

sharp but controlled. Then, he added, “Stay behind and help with the clean-up.”

The two men nodded, and Ashcroft strode past them, heading in the same direction Harper had

gone.

Chapter 307

By the time Ashcroft emerged from the cave, Harper was already gone-her jet ski cutting across the water, leaving a trail of white foam behind. With a low growl, he mounted his own, the engine roaring to life as he followed her path, keeping her in sight. Every wave between them seemed charged, he could feel deep in his chest that whatever heat they'd shared wasn't close to cooling.

The salt wind bit at his face, but it did little to clear the storm inside him. She rode like she was running-from him, from what had just happened-but she wasn't fast enough to outrun what was

between them.

He could still taste her on his tongue. Still feel the defiance in her breath when she whispered his

name like a curse.

Harper's figure grew smaller ahead, but he didn't speed up. Not yet. He wanted to give her space- to see where she went, what she'd do when she thought he wasn't watching.

Because one thing Nicholas Ashcroft had learned? Harper Lin always ran… but she never ran without reason.

And this time, he wasn't sure if she was fleeing him or herself.

Ashcroft's sharp eyes locked on her retreating figure-steady, focused, unrelenting. To him, she looked fearless, untouchable. The wind whipped her hair, under the cold glow of the moon, the sea stretched dark and endless, and she cut through the waves like a storm incarnate-untamed,

unstoppable.

But what he couldn't see-what the waves and distance hid-was the truth behind that image.

On the side where his gaze couldn't reach, Harper's vision blurred. The sting in her eyes wasn't from the salt or wind-it was the tears she refused to let fall. The sea spray mixed with them, masking her pain in the rush of speed.

Her throat tightened as she gripped the handle harder. The engine's hum drowned out the turmoil in her chest. She told herself last night was a mistake. And tonight… tonight should never have happened.

She knew better. She always did.

Getting that close to Nicholas Ashcroft had awakened something inside her-something she'd buried deep beneath logic and duty. He was danger, temptation, the one man she should've never allowed near her heart.

But the heat between them inside that cave had been unbearable. His breath on her skin, the

warmth of his touch-it had clouded her mind, stripped away reason, and made her surrender to temptation.

Now, her mind was clear; it had to be. She was a Takahashi-heir to a name that carried blood,

power, and promises. Yet her heart… her heart had always been her greatest weakness.

And somehow, every time she told herself to stay away from such distractions, she ended up

exactly where she shouldn't be.

Nicholas Ashcroft was only the second man to ever touch her. The first-the one she'd once told Maya about-was her first love. They'd known each other since grade school, friends who grew into something more. Their relationship lasted almost seven years. She gave him everything, including her first time.

What she told Maya-that "it didn't work out, they just grew apart"-was only half the truth. The real reason was far more painful. He came from a simple family, a normal life-just like everyone else. But not Harper's kind of normal.

In the end, she'd been forced to choose between her duty and her love. So she made the choice that shattered her-she broke her own heart to honor her legacy. She ended it, lying that she'd realized they were better off as friends.

They both agreed to preserve that friendship, but it broke her far more than it broke him- especially when she learned he got married three months later. It hurt even more when she met his wife… and saw how happy they were.

On the surface, she wore her armor well-thrill-seeker, hardheaded, carefree, the liberated woman most people admire. But behind that mask, beneath the laughter and rebellion, lived a woman who was terrified. Terrified of feeling again. Terrified of giving herself to someone, only to watch her heart shatter all over again.

Chapter 308

And she had kept that promise to herself-never to love, never to feel that deeply again. Not until

Nicholas Ashcroft.

With him, it was different. She didn't have to choose between love and legacy-because he lived in

the same ruthless world she did. He understood power, danger, control. With him, she didn't have

to pretend.

But commitment? That word didn't exist in Nicholas Ashcroft's vocabulary. He lived by his own

rules-wild, untamed, answering to no one.

That's why she'd made the offer she did-no strings attached. It sounded bold, almost reckless. But the truth was simpler, and far sadder.

It was her armor.

Her way of protecting herself from falling again-because she knew, deep down, if she ever truly let her guard down with him… she might never recover.

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand as the dock came into view, forcing herself to steady her breathing. The wind had already dried most of the tears on her cheeks, leaving behind only the faint sting of salt.

By the time she reached the dock, she'd slipped her mask back on-chin lifted, expression calm, eyes empty of everything that had just happened. She stopped the jet ski, cut the engine, and climbed off, her movements brisk, deliberate. Each step toward the resort felt heavier than the

last.

Not long after, the low hum of another engine broke the quiet.

Ashcroft.

She didn’t turn. Didn’t need to. She could feel his presence even before he reached the dock. His footsteps grew closer, faster, until she heard them echo against the marble floor of the resort.

The elevator chimed softly. Harper stepped inside, pressing the button without a glance behind

her.

The doors began to close-but a hand slid between them, forcing them open again.

Her heart gave a small, involuntary jump when she saw him. Ashcroft stepped in, his presence filling the confined space effortlessly.

Harper blinked, too drained to argue, too raw to meet his eyes. She exhaled quietly and moved to

the corner, leaning against the cool metal wall, her gaze fixed on the floor.

Ashcroft noticed something in her eyes-something raw and distant-that made his chest tighten in a way he didn’t like. But he said nothing as he stepped inside. The door slid shut behind him, sealing them in with the silence, the hum of the elevator the only sound between them.

As the lift began to ascend, the tension grew heavier, pressing into the small space. Finally, Ashcroft spoke, his voice low but uncertain.

“Harper, are you-”

She didn’t let him finish. She didn’t even lift her head. Her arms folded across her chest as she leaned back against the wall, eyes shut, voice barely above a whisper.

“Not now, please… I’m exhausted. I just want to sleep.”

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened, the muscle there ticking as he studied her.

She didn’t look at him-not once. Her lashes trembled against her cheeks, and for the first time since he’d met her, Harper Lin looked… fragile.

He wanted to say something-an apology, a reassurance, anything-but the words wouldn’t come. So he stayed silent.

The elevator chimed softly.

When the doors slid open, Harper stepped out first, not daring to glance back. The faint scent of the ocean clung to her skin, a lingering trace of the chaos they'd left behind, as she moved down

the hall.

Ashcroft lingered for a moment, gaze fixed on the empty space she'd vacated, chest tight. His hands curled into fists at his sides, nails digging into his palms. Finally, he stepped out, each long stride closing the distance between them.

Just as Harper reached for her door, he grabbed her arm, spinning her gently to face him.

Her eyes met his, and he froze. The sight hit him like a punch to the gut-Harper's tear-streaked cheeks, the tremor of her lips, the subtle shake of her hands. Words failed him, leaving only raw, uncomfortable emotion in their place.

"What do you want now?!" Harper snapped, voice sharp and brittle, defensive armor snapping into

place.

Chapter 309

Ashcroft blinked, caught between anger, desire, and a deeper, unnameable ache.

Harper wrenched her arm free, closing her eyes and drawing in a sharp, steadying breath. "Look! I'm too exhausted to even argue. Just… leave me alone, okay?"

She swiped her key card, stepped inside, and pushed the door shut with a soft click, the sound ringing far louder than she expected. The hallway fell silent-except for the muted thrum of his own heartbeat as he stood there, staring at the closed door, powerless and painfully aware of the space-and the emotions-she'd left behind.

Ashcroft's hand hovered in the air, torn between the urge to knock and the need to give her the space she clearly wanted. Unwanted thoughts gnawed at him-what had upset her? What had caused this sudden shift in her mood? Had he gone too far? Too hard? Had he hurt her more than he realized? The questions churned relentlessly, yet he remained frozen. A low, frustrated growl rumbled from his chest, betraying the storm of tension he couldn't release.

He leaned back against the wall, jaw tight, eyes narrowing as he ran a hand through his hair. Damn her… she was infuriating, maddening, and yet he couldn't deny the ache the look on her face had

left behind.

He ran a hand over his face. Who does she think she is? And why does it get under my skin so much? So what if she's upset? Let her be.

And still… that fiery, unyielding part of her-the part that wouldn't even meet his gaze-was exactly what made him want her even more.

Ashcroft's fists clenched. Every fiber of him screamed to reach out, pull her back, make her look at him and tell him what was going on inside her head, but reason held him in place.

He paced a few steps, fighting the pull in his chest, fighting the heat that lingered from the cave, from her, from every touch, every gasp, every whispered plea.

Damn it, he muttered under his breath, jaw tightening. I can't… I shouldn't…

And yet, the stubborn ache of desire, worry, and something else-something far more dangerous- coiled in his gut, refusing to be silenced. He stopped, letting out a low, frustrated growl, the sound barely contained, as his gaze drifted toward the door she'd disappeared behind.

Inside her room, Harper sank onto the edge of the bed, legs trembling from adrenaline and exhaustion. She pressed her face into her hands, taking a deep breath, trying to calm the storm of emotions swirling inside her. Anger, frustration, fear, and desire collided, and she hated herself for feeling all of them so intensely.

Slowly, she stood and moved to the bathroom. She turned the faucet on, filling the tub with hot

water, hoping the heat would soothe her nerves and settle the chaos in her chest.

Outside, Ashcroft lingered by the door, silent and unmoving. Minutes stretched, heavy and still.

Finally, with a sharp exhale, he pushed off the wall and walked to his own room. He entered,

closing the door behind him, leaving the hallway-and the tension between them-empty, thick with

unspoken words.

Chapter 310

The first light of dawn crept over the horizon, washing the sea in soft strokes of gold and rose. The resort still slept, wrapped in silence save for the rhythmic hush of waves kissing the shore. It was the kind of morning that promised peace-yet to Nicholas Ashcroft, peace felt like a foreign

concept.

He stood on the balcony of his suite, shirtless, the breeze whispering against his skin. In his hand, a glass of whiskey-amber and gold-caught the newborn sunlight, glowing like fire in the quiet

dawn.

Below, the waves rolled in slow, lazy folds toward the sand, their calm rhythm mocking the storm

that churned inside him.

The wind carried the faint scent of salt and jasmine, but all he could think about was her-Harper. Her eyes, glassy and guarded, that look that cut straight through him. It had followed him into his dreams, and now, even in the fragile light of morning, it refused to let him go.

He hadn't slept much. Every time he closed his eyes, the cave replayed in fragments-the sound of her breath, the warmth of her skin, the moment she'd looked at him like he was both danger and

escape.

And then the hallway. The door closing between them like a sentence he couldn't finish.

Down below, the early morning staff began setting up the beach loungers and umbrellas. Life moved on, indifferent to the mess in his chest.

He needed to get his head straight. Whatever happened last night-it couldn't happen again. He told himself that. Over and over.

But even as he said it, his eyes drifted toward the horizon. Her voice echoed in his head, clear and

inexorable.

"Let's be friends with benefits. Let's make some rules: you satisfy my heat, I'll satisfy yours. No strings attached. But it stays our little secret. After three months-once the engagement is final-we stop. I may be crazy and wild… but I am faithful."

The memory made his jaw tighten. Faithful.

The word shouldn’t have hit him the way it did.

He should’ve laughed at the absurdity of it-her making rules for something that had already spiraled far beyond control. But the truth was, that offer-that challenge-had unsettled him more than he cared to admit.

At first, he thought it was just lust-a convenient distraction between two people who understood the game. But last night, the look in her eyes when she said stop…. the tremor in her voice when she told him to leave her alone-it didn’t feel like a game anymore.

And that bothered him. More than it should have.

Nicholas Ashcroft didn’t do attachments. He didn’t need to. He built his life on control-on never

giving anyone the power to shake him.

But Harper Lin? She was chaos wrapped in elegance. Fire in silk. The one mistake he couldn’t

seem to stop making.

He exhaled sharply, raking a hand through his hair. “Three months,” he muttered under his breath, the words bitter on his tongue. “We’ll see about that.”

He tipped the glass to his lips and downed the remaining whiskey in one long swallow. The burn hit hard-sharp, clean-but it did nothing to dull the edge twisting in his chest.

He set the empty glass on the counter and turned back into the suite. The morning light bled through the curtains-pale, cold, and unkind-illuminating the wreckage of a sleepless night: a half-empty bottle, half-drawn curtains, and a bed he hadn't touched.

He strode into the bathroom and turned the shower on cold. The first rush of water hit his skin like ice, dragging a hiss from his throat. He welcomed it-the sting, the shock, the bite of clarity. Anything to drown out the heat that shouldn't still be there… and the woman who'd put it there in

the first place.

Minutes later, he stepped out of the shower, towel-dried, and dressed, the lines of his jaw still set in quiet tension. He packed the last of his things, zipped his suitcase shut, and paused in front of the

mirror.

His reflection stared back-controlled, composed, but with a hint of something restless beneath.

Breakfast. He'd see her again. The thought alone sent a flicker through him-unwanted, sharp, and

far too familiar.

He exhaled once, steadying himself, then turned away. Time to move.

He opened his door and looked across the hall. Her door was still closed.

He wasn't sure why his eyes went there first-it wasn't intentional. It just… happened. Like a reflex

he couldn't unlearn.

For a man who prided himself on control, that simple act irritated him more than it should have. W hy the hell was he looking? Why was she still in his head?

She'd said it herself last night-it was just a good fuck. Nothing more.

So why did it feel anything but casual now?

He exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his hair, jaw tight. This-whatever the hell it was- wasn't supposed to happen. She wasn't supposed to make him restless.

And yet, she did. Effortlessly.

The sharp click of a door latch snapped him out of his thoughts. His head turned toward the sound just as Damien's suite door opened. Lee stepped out first, hauling their suitcases down the hall

with efficient precision.

As he passed, Lee paused and gave a polite bow. "Good morning, sir."

Ashcroft gave a faint hum in acknowledgment. "Morning."

Moments later, Damien and Maya emerged hand in hand, stepping out of the suite. When they reached him, they paused.

"Good morning!" Maya greeted brightly, her smile as effortless as ever.

He managed a small grin. "Hey, sis. Morning."

Damien's gaze, however, swept over him from head to toe, unimpressed. "You look like shit."

Ashcroft let a dry smirk curl across his lips, eyes flicking toward Harper's door. "Well… I feel like shit

too.”

Maya shot him a sideways glance, half amused, half exasperated, while Damien only shook his