head, muttering something under his breath.

Ashcroft's eyes drifted once more to Harper's door-still closed, still silent. That small, stubborn

barrier felt heavier than it should. It shouldn't matter. And yet, it did. The ache in his chest pressed

harder, a slow, unwelcome pulse that refused to fade.

Damien checked his watch, then motioned toward the elevator. "Let's go. Mom's already waiting at

the breakfast lounge-you know how she gets when people are late."

Ashcroft said nothing, only nodded. But as they started down the hall, his thoughts betrayed him.

Maybe she's already downstairs.

The group walked toward the elevator, the soft click of their footsteps echoing in the quiet corridor. Lee stepped aside as they approached, holding the doors open. One by one, they stepped inside, the doors sliding shut with a muted whoosh, sealing them in the confined space.

Inside the elevator, Maya's gaze found Ashcroft in the mirrored reflection. Her brow arched, curiosity flickering in her eyes as she took in the faint shadows beneath his.

“Rough night?” she asked, her voice gentle but probing.

Ashcroft exhaled slowly, letting one shoulder rest against the mirrored wall. “Yeah… something like

that. Couldn’t sleep.”

Damien’s eyes flicked to him through the reflection, amusement lacing his casual tone. “You and Harper just disappeared last night. What were you two up to? Kim said she saw you heading toward the dock.”

For a heartbeat, Ashcroft froze-like a boy caught sneaking sweets before dinner. He cleared his throat, forcing a nonchalant shrug. “Oh… that? Yeah. I just helped her take out some trash.”

Damien’s brow lifted ever so slightly, the faintest smirk tugging at his lips. He knew exactly what kind of “trash” Ashcroft was referring to.

“All clear?” Damien asked, voice low and knowing.

Ashcroft met his gaze, lips twitching. “Yup. All clear.”

Maya blinked, looking between the two of them. “I don’t get it… isn’t there housekeeping for that?”

Damien and Ashcroft exchanged a look. Damien leaned closer to her, lowering his voice. “A different kind of trash, love.”

Maya’s brows knitted together in confusion-until realization dawned. Her eyes widened, lips parting into a small, startled “O.”

“Oh…” she breathed, glancing from Ashcroft to Damien, her expression teetering between

amusement and mild scandal. “May I ask how?”

Ashcroft didn’t miss a beat. “Sharks’ dinner,” he said coolly.

Maya blinked once-then twice-before her jaw dropped slightly, a mix of horror and disbelief flashing across her face. “You’re kidding-right?”

Damien chuckled under his breath. “He’s not.”

Ashcroft only smirked faintly, the ghost of satisfaction flickering in his eyes. Then, as the elevator chimed and the doors slid open, his gaze drifted away-back to that distant, unreadable calm that masked the chaos still simmering beneath.

As the elevator doors slid open, Lee immediately stepped off, wheeling Damien and Maya’s suitcases toward the waiting yacht.

At the lobby entrance, a staff member approached, bowing slightly, his hand gesturing toward

Ashcroft’s luggage.

“Good morning, sir. May I have this loaded onto the yacht for you?”

Ashcroft gave a brief nod, his tone controlled, measured. “Go ahead.”

They moved forward, following the path toward the al fresco breakfast area. With each step, the gentle hum of the ocean grew louder, mingling with the soft rustle of the morning breeze.

Beneath a wide cream canopy, the resort staff had arranged an impeccable spread-white linens, crystal glasses catching the sunlight, and tropical fruits glistening as if jeweled.

From a distance, Ashcroft spotted Dahlia already seated at the head of the table, a porcelain cup of coffee cradled in her hands. She radiated poise and quiet authority, every gesture graceful, every glance measured.

Beside her, Kim stood a step or two away, silent and alert, her eyes occasionally drifting to the horizon where sea met sky.

James lingered at the edge of the tent, hands clasped behind his back, posture calm and disciplined-a quiet signal that everything was in order.

Ashcroft's gaze swept the table, instinctively searching for the one presence that had haunted him all night-the woman whose memory had left his bed untouched, whose absence had left his mind

restless.

But she wasn't there. No wild hair catching the sunlight, no sharp, teasing eyes meeting his. Just empty chairs, the faint scent of salt and coffee, and the echo of waves rolling onto the shore.

The thought pricked at his chest, a restless tug he could not ignore.

Where the hell is she?

Chapter 312

As they neared the table, Dahlia looked up, her expression soft but discerning. "Good morning," she

greeted smoothly. "You all took your time."

Maya smiled first. "Good morning, Aunt Dahlia." She leaned forward and gave her a quick peck on

the cheek.

Dahlia leaned forward in return, resting her head briefly against Maya's and pressing a soft kiss to her cheek. Gently taking her hand in hers, she smiled warmly. "Maya, sweetheart, please sit beside

me."

Maya settled into the seat beside her, a small smile lingering on her lips.

"Morning, Mom," Damien said, leaning down to kiss Dahlia's cheek before taking the seat beside

Maya.

"Son," Dahlia replied softly, a flicker of pride in her eyes.

Her gaze returned to Maya. "Did you have a good rest, dear?"

A faint flush crept up Maya's cheeks before she could stop it. Her eyes flicked briefly toward Damien-just long enough for Dahlia to notice the tiny, telling glance-before she answered with a shy smile.

"Mm… yes," she murmured, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "I did. Slept… really well, actually.

Damien's lips twitched into the faintest smirk beside her, while Dahlia's knowing eyes softened with

quiet amusement.

Dahlia's gaze lingered on the two of them and a gentle warmth bloomed in her chest. There it was, unmistakable: the spark between them. The way her son's usual cool, shadowed demeanor softened in

Maya's presence. The light she brought to him, effortlessly, without even trying. It made Dahlia's heart flutter in quiet delight.

Maya, noticing the tender look, quickly composed herself and smiled. "Um… how about you? Did you sleep well?"

Dahlia let out a soft chuckle, a flicker of guilt crossing her features. "I won't deny it took me a while -my mind was everywhere." She paused, a small laugh escaping her lips. "But surprisingly, I slept deeply in the end."

Her eyes drifted toward the horizon, where the first streaks of sunlight brushed the still sea.

Maybe it's because, for the first time in so long, there's a sense of… clarity," she murmured, her tone

soft, thoughtful.

The breeze caught her words, almost stealing them away. "The worry, the endless anxiety over finding Malia… not knowing where to even begin… it's been replaced by knowing. By this quiet, steady peace of finally knowing."

Maya's lashes fluttered, her chest swelling with emotion. In Dahlia's words, she heard echoes of her own longing, and their eyes met in a moment heavy with unspoken grief and the quiet courage of moving forward.

The quiet moment was broken as Ashcroft stepped forward and took his seat across from Dahlia. He inclined his head politely. "Morning, Aunt Dahlia," he said, his voice steady and respectful, carrying a measured warmth without overstepping.

Dahlia studied him carefully, her eyes attentive and discerning, catching the restless fatigue shadowing his features. A faint, knowing smile touched her lips. "Nicholas… you look like you hardly slept. Are you alright?"

He gave a half-shrug, voice low and controlled. "Yeah… one of those nights."

Her eyes softened for a moment, then sharpened with quiet curiosity. She lifted her cup with effortless grace, the curling steam framing her words.

“Nicholas… you and Harper missed dinner last night. What were you two up to?”

Ashcroft raised his coffee, then paused mid-sip, letting the warmth of the cup linger in his hands. He leaned back in his chair, jaw tight, eyes flicking briefly toward the empty space where Harper should have been. A faint, almost imperceptible smirk tugged at his lips.

“Just… took care of something,” he said smoothly, voice even, measured. “And I gave her a hand with… some trash.”

His words were casual, but the subtle weight behind them-the memory, the guilt, the thrill-hung in the air. He let the silence stretch, letting Dahlia fill the gap with her own curiosity.

Dahlia’s brows lifted slightly, a spark of curiosity in her eyes, though she kept her tone measured. “I see… I hope that ‘something’ didn’t involve any trouble.”

Chapter 313

He let his gaze drop to the untouched cup of coffee before him, masking a flicker of guilt with a

faint, knowing smirk. “Nothing I couldn’t handle,” he said, the words calm-but carrying the weight

of more than he let on.

His hand stirred the coffee in front of him, motionless almost, eyes repeatedly drifting toward the

resort entrance, half-expecting Harper to appear.

But she didn’t.

The absence settled around him like a weight, the soft morning light doing nothing to warm the

ache that had settled in his chest overnight.

Though the morning sun spilled warmth across him, a cold unease lingered-a sharp ache that neither last night's whiskey nor the gentle sea breeze could soothe.

Maya's gaze flicked to him, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. She and Damien exchanged a brief, knowing glance-a silent acknowledgment that something was happening between Nick and

Harper.

Her curiosity tugged at her, urging a question, but a subtle shake of Damien's head was enough to still her lips before any words could form.

The conversation moved on-Dahlia outlining their departure schedule and the preparations for the family dinner that evening, James giving updates on the yacht's readiness-but Ashcroft barely registered a word.

His

gaze drifted once more toward the resort entrance, the subtle tension in his jaw betraying how little control he actually had.

He couldn't help it any longer. His voice cut through the gentle hum of conversation.

"By the way… looks like the crazy lady is still enjoying her sleep, huh?"

The comment earned a few curious glances, Maya's brows knitting together in mild amusement, Damien suppressing a smirk, and Dahlia raising an eyebrow but staying silent, her expression

unreadable.

Ashcroft's lips curved into a faint, knowing smirk, eyes distant as if trying-and failing-to erase her image from his mind. "Seems she's taking her time," he said, casual, but the edge in his voice was unmistakable.

A sharper grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Don't tell me we're supposed to wait for the 'prin cess' before we leave. Last I checked, the world doesn't revolve around her."

He leaned slightly, mock-serious, letting the sarcasm roll off him. "Or should we send a search party? Maybe a royal decree? Heaven forbid she misses her morning beauty nap."

Ashcroft tilted his head, smirk widening. "Honestly, at this rate, I'm expecting a parade and confetti

when she finally shows up."

Maya's eyes flicked toward him, the corners crinkling with mischievous curiosity, as if daring him to

say more.

Before anyone could respond, James cleared his throat, stepping slightly closer. His tone was calm, measured-but a sly glint betrayed a teasing undercurrent. "Um… excuse me, sir. But… Ms. Lin already left."

The words hit Ashcroft like ice. Every muscle in his body tensed, his mind snapping into sharp

focus.

"She left?" His voice was low, clipped, dangerous-the calm façade cracking just enough to reveal the flicker of restlessness beneath.

James nodded. “Yes, sir. Before sunrise. She also submitted a last-minute leave request for a week

said there was an emergency she needed to attend to.”

Ashcroft’s fist tightened above his lap, knuckles whitening. “What emergency?!”

Dahlia spoke casually, taking the last sip of her coffee, her voice deceptively light. “Her father… sent some men to handle a matter. But when they arrived at the location, it was a trap. They were locked in, exposed to gas poisoning. A few didn’t make it, but most survived-including Hiro. The poison is… potent, and no one has been able to identify it. Time is running out, so they have no choice but to call on Harper.”

Ashcroft’s eyes narrowed, sharp and incredulous, a flicker of frustration tugging at the edges of his otherwise controlled facade.

His mind filtered through Dahlia’s words, and everything blurred-except one name. Hiro. The man who had always carried the image of perfection, the so-called “ideal husband,” and now, just hearing his name, a tight knot of irritation-and something darker-coiled in Ashcroft’s chest.

“But… why her?” His voice was low, controlled, but the edge betrayed the storm underneath. “What could she possibly do? Entertain them with her loud mouth? She’ll just annoy them with her yipping and yapping.” The sarcasm dripped from his tone, but beneath it, every word carried a pulse of restrained worry-and something else he wasn’t ready to name.

Dahlia set her cup down, she gently shook her head, a soft smile tugging at her lips. Her gaze remained steady. “Don’t underestimate Harper,” she began, her voice calm but carrying an edge of

Charm

warning. “You may know her as the rebel, the loud, carefree young woman who laughs too easily… but that’s only the surface. When she said she’s been training since she was young, calling it’ training’ is an understatement.”

She leaned back slightly, letting the weight of her words settle. “While you and Damien were enjoying summer vacations at elite programs, building connections. Harper spent hers in the mountains under a Kodoku master-one of Japan’s last remaining experts in ancient poisons.” Ashcroft’s lips twitched into a dry smirk. “Oh, so she’s some little poison prodigy now?”

Dahlia’s gaze didn’t waver. “There, she learned not only antidotes and rare herbs, but techniques and secrets even most modern scientists would call impossible. Dangerous knowledge… and she mastered it.”

Her eyes flicked toward Ashcroft, steady and unwavering. “They’re counting on her to find the antidote. Because if anyone can… it’s Harper.”

She paused, letting the weight of her words settle, then continued, her tone calm but firm. Besides, she’s already accepted her role as their Oyabun. It’s her responsibility to take care of her people.”

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened, a flicker passing through his eyes-sharp, restless, unspoken. Worry, irritation, and a possessive edge he refused to name all tangled together, tightening his chest. He let out a low, sardonic laugh, voice clipped. “Great. So the reckless little rebel is suddenly the only one who can fix this mess. Perfect.”

His words dripped with sarcasm, but beneath it, the tension in his body betrayed the storm inside- he wasn’t just annoyed. He was restless, unsettled… and the thought of Harper with Hiro coiled something dark in his chest.

It burned low and hot-an ache that made him want to break something, anything, just to drown out

the feeling.

Chapter 314

Across the table, Damien caught it-the flicker in Ashcroft's eyes, the muscle ticking in his jaw, the faint, involuntary clench of his fists against his knees. He knew him too well to miss it; beneath that cool exterior, Ashcroft was seething.

Damien cleared his throat lightly, slicing through the charged silence.

"Why are you so worked up, Nick?" he asked, his tone smooth but laced with quiet amusement. "I thought you wanted to avoid her as much as possible. Shouldn't you be thrilled she'll be gone for a

week?"

He paused, watching the faint twitch in Ashcroft's jaw before adding, almost lazily,

"Maybe even longer?"

A faint smirk tugged at his lips,

"No one to butt heads with, right?"

The jab caught Ashcroft off guard. For a split second, something flickered across his face-guilt, unease, maybe even panic-but he buried it fast, forcing a dry, dismissive laugh.

“Who says I’m worked up? Of course not,” he said, leaning back with feigned ease, though his voice came a touch too quick. “I was just curious, that’s all. And you’re right-nice to get a break from

that woman.”

But the words tasted wrong. Heavy.

Because the truth was, the thought of her being gone didn’t feel like relief at all. It felt like something sharp and restless gnawing at his chest, and he hated it.

For a long moment, he simply stared at the empty chairs around the breakfast table, his thoughts a storm he couldn’t quiet. Her absence-sudden, unannounced-scraped at him, a hollow ache he

couldn’t reason away.

He exhaled slowly, forcing his posture back into its usual calm, controlled lines. But even as he straightened, his mind refused to settle.

The vacant seats seemed to mock him-a silent testament to the void she’d left behind. The thought of her tending to Hiro, of her attention elsewhere, sparked a flare of something he loathed to name: jealousy.

Every instinct screamed to move, to call, to find her.

But he stayed rooted, letting the tension coil tighter inside him.

Control-always control-yet the gears in his mind spun relentlessly, threatening to crack the composed mask he wore so carefully.

Damien, Maya, and Dahlia exchanged a quick glance-the kind that spoke louder than words. A few steps away, James and Kim shared the same look of quiet realization.

Everyone saw it now. The storm beneath Ashcroft's calm was no longer subtle; it was cracking through the surface.

The silence was broken by a sharp vibration on the table. Maya blinked down at her phone-the screen flashing 'Harper Video Call.'

She smiled faintly and answered.

"Bestie!!!" Harper's voice exploded through the speaker, bright and effervescent. Her face filled the screen, eyes sparkling before she squinted playfully. "Oh! You're still there? Great!"

Ashcroft suddenly stiffened at the sound of her voice. His eyes narrowed, a faint crease forming between his brows, and his jaw tightened as his fingers drummed against the table. Every note of Harper's bubbly tone seemed to cut at the raw edge of his frustration-the way she had shut him out last night, the way she'd left this morning without a word while he sat in his room with a bottle of whiskey, trying to burn away the unease she had stirred.

And now, here she was-bright, energetic, all her usual spark-while he was left behind, stripped of control, his chest twisting with emotions he couldn't name. He forced himself to maintain a calm façade, but the restlessness inside him coiled tighter with every word that spilled from the phone.

Maya laughed, shaking her head. "Hey, Harper! Yeah, we're still here. Having breakfast. How about

you?"

The screen shifted as Harper swung the camera around, revealing the plush interior of a private jet, sunlight spilling through the windows. She flopped back into her seat dramatically. "Still in the sky," she sighed, exaggerating the distance. "Twelve more hours before we land. But hey-can I ask

a favor?"

Chapter 315

"Sure," Maya said, smiling easily.

"Great!" Harper grinned. "Do you mind stopping by the souvenir shop before you leave and

grabbing me some magnets?"

Maya tilted her head. “Sure, do you have any specific ones in mind?”

Harper’s grin widened, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “All of them!”

Maya blinked. “Excuse me?”

“All of them!” Harper repeated, laughing, eyes wide with mock innocence. “One of each-pretty please! I was going to buy them earlier, but you know… zero time.” She leaned closer to the camera, grin widening. “So, can you just grab me every single design? I’ll wire you the money right now!”

Then she paused-her expression shifting, that familiar spark of mischief lighting her gaze. “Oh, wait…” she drawled, lips curving. “Boss is with you, right?”

Maya raised a brow. “You mean Damien? Yeah, he’s right here.” She angled the phone to show him.

Harper’s grin stretched wider, eyes glinting with trouble. “Ahhh, even better!” she sang out, leaning close to the camera. “Hey, Boss! Just take it out of my paycheck, yeah?”

Damien said nothing for a beat-then exhaled, his voice steady and amused. “Sure.”

“Yesss! You’re the best!” Harper whooped, throwing a small fist in the air.

From the side, James pretended to cough into his fist. “Didn’t know you’re cheap, Ms. Lin.”

Harper gasped theatrically, hand flying to her chest. “Ohh, James, I am offended!” she declared with mock indignation. “I’m not cheap-just… spiritually cautious.”

Maya snorted. “Spiritually cautious? But you spend so much on coffee everyday at work.” Harper nodded solemnly, then leaned close to the camera, lowering her voice like she was sharing a sacred truth. “Asian superstition. Spend money early in the morning, you’ll spend money all day. I’m just protecting my wallet’s energy. Coffee doesn’t count-it’s… an investment in my energy. Totally different.”

James chuckled, shaking his head. “Right. Purely financial feng shui.”

Harper grinned. “Exactly!”

“Understood,” James said, raising an eyebrow. “I’ll make sure it’s deducted from your final pay.”

“Final pay??” Harper’s eyes widened.

James smirked. “I assumed… after all, you might be leaving your position…

“Hold it right there!” Harper snapped, jabbing at the camera. “I’m only taking a week off, not

quitting!”

“But…” James began.

“No buts!” Harper cut him off sharply. “Don’t even think about giving my position to someone else,

or I’ll take it straight to HR!”

James raised his hands, surrendering with a chuckle. “Alright, alright.”

Harper clapped her hands, delighted. “Good! I like my job exactly where it is!”

Then, with a sudden gleam in her eyes, she added, “Oh! And that huge purple teddy bear?” Her excitement bubbled over. “If it’s for sale, please get that too, okay? I’ve been eyeing that baby since

we got there!”

Before Maya could even answer, movement flickered in the background. From behind Harper, a man stepped into view, bowing slightly. “Bosu-san, jama shite gomen’nasai,” he said, his voice low and respectful. Then, switching to English, “Good morning, Ms. Maya.”

Harper rolled her eyes then beamed, “Oh! Maya, this is Anko-personal bodyguard, assistant, cook …basically everything.”

“Oh, hello, Anko. Nice to meet you,” Maya said warmly. Then her eyes narrowed as a spark of recognition flickered. “Wait… I know you! I saw you at the parking lot! You two were talking, and when I asked-you told me he was just asking for directions!”

Harper giggled, waving at the screen. “Busted! Yup, that’s him!”

Anko bowed once more, his expression composed and respectful.

Harper glanced at him with mock impatience. “By the way, what is it?”

Anko’s voice was calm and formal. “Anata no otōsan ga denwa ni dete imasu.”

Chapter 316

Harper groaned dramatically. “Ugh… fine.” She glanced back at the camera, her voice softening, almost affectionate. “My dad’s on the line, so I’ve gotta go. I’ll call you again when we land. And

don’t forget my souvenirs, okay? Love you!”

With that, the call ended, leaving Maya chuckling softly at the chaos Harper always seemed to bring with her.

Maya set her phone down with a soft chuckle. “Well… Harper didn’t waste any time, did she?” She glanced at Ashcroft, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Might as well pick up a few things for Jaime

and Ms. Janice while I’m at it.”

Damien nodded easily, his voice soft. “Just take whatever you want, love.”

Maya’s eyes widened, and she let out a quiet laugh, shaking her head. “No, we’re not doing that. Business is business-I’ll pay for what I’m buying.”

Damien smirked slightly. “What’s mine is yours… and what’s yours is yours alone.”

Maya shook her head firmly. “That’s sweet, but no. I can’t accept that.”

Damien’s voice softened, a hint of insistence threading through it. “Maya-”

He was about to say more when Dahlia’s voice cut through gently, but with quiet authority. “I won’t push it if I were you, son.”

Damien’s lips pressed into a thin line, acknowledging the subtle rebuke.

She turned her gaze to Maya, eyes soft yet unwavering, radiating effortless confidence.” Blackwood men have a certain… superiority complex. They tend to spoil the women in their lives- his father was no different. But I only allow him to do so when I choose. You’ll get used to it, sweetheart. You’ll learn quickly that it’s as much a test of patience as it is of generosity. Their way of showing ‘love’ can be… possessive, even a little annoying at times.”

Maya’s lips curved into a small, amused smile. She met Damien’s eyes and murmured, “Noted,” the warmth in Dahlia’s words wrapping around her like a gentle embrace.

Across the table, Ashcroft watched Damien and Maya with a quiet intensity, noting the easy warmth between them-the gentle glances, the soft smiles, the unspoken understanding. For a brief, fleeting moment, a pang of envy struck him. His best friend had someone, someone to care for, someone to spoil… and the thought settled uncomfortably in his chest.

But then, his mind was hijacked by Harper’s face. Her bright, bubbly expression flashed vividly- eyes sparkling with mischief, her grin infectious, that playful tilt of her head. He recalled her voice

on the call earlier, the way she’d lit up over the smallest things: magnets, the huge purple teddy bear she’d been eyeing since they arrived. How something so trivial could make her so alive, so happy… it tugged at him in a way he wasn’t ready to admit.

He cleared his throat, forcing his posture into its usual calm, measured stance. “Excuse me,” he muttered, voice low, controlled. Rising abruptly, he added, “Need to-uh-go to the washroom.”

He walked away casually, but even as he moved, the image of Harper’s face and her infectious laughter lingered in his mind, a reminder of the chaos she could cause with just a smile-and how much he hated, and perhaps secretly craved, it.

Chapter 317

Damien's gaze sharpened with quiet amusement as he watched Ashcroft stride away. A faint smirk tugged at his lips as he murmured, "He's done." He lifted his glass, taking a slow sip of water.

Maya blinked, curious. "What do you mean… he's done?"

Dahlia's lips curved into a knowing smile, her tone casual but edged with insight. "It seems Nicholas has finally met his match."

Ashcroft's footsteps echoed down the marble corridor, his mind still tangled in the chaos Harper

had left behind. He'd told them he was heading to the washroom-but his feet had other plans-

and before he knew it, he was standing in front of the resort's souvenir shop.

He exhaled, jaw tight. Perfect. Of all places.

Harper's voice replayed in his head, bright and bubbly through the phone-"Don't forget my

souvenirs, okay? Love you!"-and something in his chest twisted.

Love you? he thought dryly. What if she was saying that to me? The idea made him snort under his

breath. Heck no. Love you? Too damn cheesy. The thought alone gave him goosebumps. He shook

it off, muttering under his breath.

That woman. She didn't even bother asking about him. Not one question. Not after what happened

last night-the heat, the silence, the way her breath caught when he leaned too close in that cave.

He could still feel the warmth of her skin, still hear her soft voice whispering his name like she

wasn't supposed to. And then-just like that-she switched. Back to that sunshine-filled, bubbly

self, like none of it ever happened.

His jaw flexed, a muscle ticking. Magnets and teddy bears. That's what gets her excited. Not… me.

Never me.

He scoffed, turned as if to leave-then stopped. Before he could even think, his feet carried him. forward and through the door.

The shop's air-conditioning hit him, sharp and cool. A young staff member behind the counter brightened immediately. "Good morning, sir! Welcome! Looking for something in particular?"

Ashcroft slid his hands into his pockets, his tone flat but steady. "Yeah. Give me one of each magnet you've got."

The staff blinked. "All of them, sir?"

He nodded once. "Every damn one."

"Um… sir," she hesitated, glancing toward the backroom, "it's just that-we only have what's on

display right now. The rest of the stock isn't here yet. Deliveries are scheduled for tonight since the

resort isn't fully open yet."

Before he could respond, movement outside caught his attention. The floor manager happened to

pass by, noticed him inside, and immediately stepped in with a polite bow.

“Mr. Ashcroft, sir-good morning.”

Ashcroft’s gaze shifted toward him, cool and steady. “Your staff says your delivery hasn’t come in

yet.”

The manager straightened quickly, his polite smile tightening. “Ah, yes, sir. The first batch was only for staging-the full inventory isn’t scheduled to arrive until tonight.”

Ashcroft gave a slow, measured nod. “That’s fine. I want to buy all the magnets you currently have on display. You can restock once the next shipment comes in, yes?”

The manager hesitated, his fingers brushing the back of his neck. “Ahh… well-uhm-yes, of course, sir! Of course.” He turned to the sales associate, voice brisk. “Go ahead and pack everything Mr.

Ashcroft requested. Quickly now.”

As the staff started pulling the magnets from the racks, his gaze fell on a purple teddy bear sitting on the top shelf-soft, ridiculous, bright as her personality.

“I want that too,” he said, pointing toward it.

The manager hesitated. “Umm… sir, that one’s actually not for-”

Ashcroft’s stare shifted to him-cold, sharp, unblinking.

The manager swallowed hard, sweat beading at his temple. “-f-for sale, but of course, yes! We’ll have it packed right away.” Then he quickly turned to the nearest staff, voice an octave higher than

usual. “Take that one down too and wrap it up. Quickly!”

Chapter 318

The young woman scrambled to comply, reaching for the ridiculous purple bear on the top shelf.

Ashcroft stood there in silence as they worked, jaw tight, expression unreadable.

What the hell are you doing, Nicholas?

He exhaled sharply, the corner of his mouth twitching with something between irritation and

surrender. She's going to drive me insane.

Not long after, Damien and Maya walked into the souvenir shop.

Maya stopped short, blinking in surprise. The shelves that once displayed rows of colorful magnets were completely bare.

"Excuse me," she asked the staff politely, "where are your magnets?"

The young attendant froze, glancing nervously toward the manager-then at Ashcroft, who stood near the counter with his hands in his pockets, sunglasses dangling from his fingers.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, ma'am," the staff stammered, bowing slightly. "We don't have any left. The next delivery won't arrive until tonight."

Damien's gaze swept the shop, then landed on the manager. "What's going on?"

Before the poor man could answer, Ashcroft's voice cut in smoothly, calm and composed.

“I bought them all.”

Damien raised an eyebrow. “Hmm.”

Ashcroft met his look without flinching. “What? I’m feeling generous. Thought I’d bring some back

for my men.”

Your men, Damien mused silently, eyes narrowing with faint amusement. The same men who

handle guns all day, who could kill a man with their bare hands… want fridge magnets?

He said nothing, only hummed in quiet disbelief.

Maya folded her arms, her lips curving with barely restrained laughter. “I’m assuming you got the huge purple teddy bear for them too?”

Ashcroft froze, caught mid-motion. His jaw flexed slightly before he cleared his throat. “Oh, that? That’s for my… uh… dog. Yes. For my dog.”

The corner of Damien's mouth twitched. Maya's eyes sparkled.

Ashcroft slipped his sunglasses on, as if that somehow restored his composure. Then he turned to the manager. "Send everything to the yacht."

The manager bowed quickly. "Y-yes, sir."

Ashcroft nodded once. "Good." He glanced briefly at Damien and Maya, then added coolly, "I'll go

ahead. I'll wait for you onboard."

And without waiting for a reply, he walked out-shoulders squared, stride confident, though the faintest flush of embarrassment lingered beneath the surface.

Behind him, Damien exhaled softly, lips curving into a smirk.

Maya shook her head, half amused, half endeared. "Dog, huh?"

Damien's smirk deepened. "He doesn't even own a damn dog."

Maya bit back a laugh, shaking her head. “Of course he doesn’t.”

Maya carefully selected a few souvenirs: a couple of T-shirts, a keychain, and a mug for Jaime, along with a paperweight etched with the resort’s name. For Ms. Janice, she picked a shirt, some local accessories, and a cute little rattan pouch. Not forgetting a few edible treats, she added nuts and chocolates to the collection, imagining how delighted they would be.

At the checkout, the crew efficiently packed the souvenirs, handling each item with care, and set

them aside to be sent directly to the yacht.

As expected, Damien tried to insist she take whatever she wanted, but Maya held firm. When he offered to pay instead, she politely declined. With a soft, amused sigh, he finally relented, letting her handle it herself-though that smirk of his lingered, equal parts entertained and quietly impressed by her resolve.

For Maya, the simple act of paying felt different now. There was a quiet satisfaction in it-a newfound sense of freedom she hadn’t felt in years. The money she had once scraped and saved day and night for Jaime’s operation, always feeling like it would never be enough, now sat as her safety net.

When her new compensation came through, the company’s medical insurance covered everything

Jaime needed-every test, every treatment. That crushing weight she had carried for so long had

finally lifted. And she knew, deep down, it was because of Damien-and Nicholas, too. They had

given her and Jaime a chance to breathe again.

Chapter 319

Her new salary was nearly ten times what she used to earn at the café, even with all the double shifts and overtime. Yet despite the abundance, Maya stayed careful, grounded. She didn't splurge or indulge-she simply chose a few things that she knew Jaime and Ms. Janice would truly use

and enjoy.

Practical. Thoughtful. Her kind of happy.

Once everything was settled, they made their way to the yacht, Damien walking beside her with the calm, protective presence he always carried.

With everything aboard, the yacht cast off, gliding smoothly away from the island. Sunlight danced across the water's surface, sparkling like scattered diamonds, and a gentle breeze carried the scent of salt, freedom, and something unspoken-possibility.

Maya leaned against the railing, letting the wind whip softly through her hair, watching the island shrink into the horizon. Each passing wave seemed to whisper reminders of the past few days, memories she couldn't, and wouldn't, forget.

In less than a week, her world had shifted in ways she hadn't thought possible. She had glimpsed Damien's other world-the darkness and danger that clung to it, the weight it carried-and seen him not just as a man of power, but as someone shaped by it, flawed and commanding in equal

measure.

She had reconnected with someone she thought she knew, only to discover that acquaintance had become an enemy. She had witnessed Beckett's despair-felt the chill of another's pain-but with it came a quiet relief, knowing he would never hurt anyone again. And then there was Harper… her best friend, who had been guarding secrets tied to the Takahashi family-truths that had shifted everything, tipping the scales further in their favor. On top of that, there was the hint of another unu sual story brewing-a love story waiting to unfold between her and Ashcroft.

Amid all the revelations-the enemies, the secrets, the quiet relief, and even the stirrings of something unexpected with Ashcroft-Maya realized just how much her world had shifted in such a short time. She had uncovered more about her mother than she had ever known, the truth of her own lineage revealing her as a Lockwood-a thread linking her to a world she was only beginning to comprehend. And above all, she had stepped fully into her own heart-becoming Damien's, officially, irrevocably.

This week had been filled with firsts-her first kiss, her first love, their first misunderstanding, the first time she'd given herself completely to someone. Her first taste of desire, of intimacy, of trust.

Every boundary she'd crossed, every fear she'd faced, had led her here-to this moment-leaning

against the railing, heart full, body alive, and mind racing with everything she had learned… and all

that still awaited her.

The island faded behind them, but the echoes of what had happened-the laughter, the tension,

the stolen touches, the whispered confessions-lingered in the salt-tinged air. For Maya, nothing

would ever feel quite the same again.

Chapter 320

The sea stretched endlessly ahead, calm and shimmering beneath the late-morning sun. The gentle hum of the yacht's engines was the only sound breaking the stillness, a rhythmic pulse against the soft hush of the waves. It didn't feel like they were leaving paradise-it felt like they were drifting between worlds, caught in that fragile space where time seemed to slow, and reality hadn't quite caught up yet.

Then she felt him.

Warmth wrapped around her from behind as Damien's arms slipped around her waist, pulling her

gently against him. The steady rhythm of his breathing brushed her ear, matching the sway of the

yacht beneath them. Maya let herself melt into the embrace, feeling the solid comfort of him-his presence, his strength, the quiet safety that always came with his touch.

He dipped his head, his breath warm against her skin before pressing a slow, unhurried kiss to her cheek. “Penny for your thoughts?” he murmured, voice low and velvety, barely louder than the

whisper of the wind.

Maya smiled faintly, her eyes on the horizon where sunlight kissed the sea. “Just… everything,” she said softly. “It feels like so much has changed-and it’s only been a week.”

His arms tightened slightly, his chin brushing her shoulder. “Change isn’t always bad,” he said.

“No,” she whispered, leaning into him. “Not when it feels like this.”

A quiet moment passed between them, filled only by the hum of the waves and the soft pull of the breeze. Then Damien’s tone shifted-still low, but threaded with dry amusement.

“By the way,” he murmured near her ear, “guess who’s at the bar looking like he just lost a

billion-dollar deal.”

Maya turned slightly, her lips curving. “Ashcroft?”

He smirked faintly. “Mmh. Sitting there with a drink he hasn’t touched, staring at the wall like it personally offended him.”

Maya’s laugh slipped out, light and warm. “Poor man,”

Damien hummed, gaze distant for a beat. “He’ll live. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

She tilted her head, curiosity flickering. “What do you think will happen next? You think they’ll end up together?”

He exhaled through his nose, tone thoughtful, a trace of self-awareness threading through his voice.

“He’s in denial,” Damien said, eyes on the horizon. “The kind that convinces you you’re fine until it’s too damn late. He needs to figure out what he’s really feeling before he loses his chance.”

He paused, jaw tightening faintly as the sunlight caught the sharp line of his profile. “Men like him… ‘His voice dropped, low and measured. “We don’t realize we care until the damage’s already done.

And by then, it’s a hell of a thing to fix.”

A beat of silence passed, the kind that carried more truth than either wanted to name. Then, quietly, he added, “Took me long enough to do the same. I almost lost my chance with you.”

His thumb brushed against the back of her hand-an absent, tender motion that steadied her pulse. When he spoke again, his tone had softened, stripped of irony. “If he’s smart, he’ll stop running from it. Before she decides she’s done waiting.”

Maya’s chest softened, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she tilted her head toward him. “Aren’t you going to talk to him about it?” she asked softly.

Damien’s gaze remained steady, calm but edged with knowing. “Nick’s still confused. He needs time to process his own emotions. The more he’s pushed, the more he’ll pull back. It’s better to let him figure it out for himself. When he’s ready… he’ll come to me.”

Maya hummed, her voice low, teasing, yet tender. “Hmm… well,” she murmured, a playful lift in her tone, “that will be… interesting.”

His lips curved into a slow, knowing smirk-the kind that always made her pulse stumble.” Interesting,” he echoed, his voice a quiet drawl, “is one way to put it.”

Maya laughed softly, the sound carried away by the wind as it tangled through her hair. The yacht sliced through the calm waves with effortless grace, each ripple a quiet reminder that the chaos

wasn’t over-just waiting beyond the horizon.

The sea stretched endlessly ahead, painted in gold and blue, and for a fleeting moment, everything

felt still, balanced-sun, salt, and the steady promise of whatever came next.

Their journey home was calm and uneventful-almost deceptively so after everything that had

unfolded.

Damien spent most of the time in his office with James, immersed in back-to-back virtual meetings that demanded his focus. Maya joined Dahlia for a leisurely afternoon tea on the deck, the two women sharing soft laughter and stories that wove the past into the present-tales of Malia's wild escapades, mischievous tales of Damien as a boy, and moments that painted the Blackwood family in colors Maya had never seen before. By the time the tea had gone cold, her

cheeks hurt from smiling.

Ashcroft, however, was a world apart. He'd made it clear he wanted to be alone, claiming a quiet corner of the bar with a bottle and a view of the horizon. He barely moved for most of the trip-just sat there, swirling amber liquid in his glass, lost somewhere far away.

The sea remained calm, sunlight rippling like molten gold across the surface. In less than two hours, the mainland appeared ahead, the dock rising out of the haze-a thin line between the freedom of the water and the weight of what waited on land.

Damien finally wrapped up his last call, issuing a few final instructions to James before stepping

out onto the deck. The tension in his shoulders eased as he joined Maya and Dahlia, letting the

warm, salty air wash over him for a moment.

As the yacht began its slow approach, its engines humming softly, the island retreat faded into the distance, replaced by the gleaming stretch of the mainland harbor. Crew members moved with

quiet efficiency, ropes flying, voices carrying over the soft lap of water against the hull.

Maya stood beside Damien at the railing, her hand loosely entwined with his. The wind caught her hair, brushing it across his arm. She felt his warmth, his steadiness, the quiet reassurance in the way his

thumb brushed against her knuckles. For one fleeting second, she wished they could turn back-that they could stay suspended in this fragile, perfect calm between sea and shore.

But the world was waiting.

Damien seemed to read the thought on her face. He turned to her, eyes softened by the fading