Intern 351

Chapter 351

She rested her head against his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall beneath her, each breath a quiet reassurance. His arms tightened around her just slightly-protective, possessive, grounding.

Damien's eyes lingered on her, tracing the curve of her rosy cheek, the soft remnants of their intimacy. It was beautiful. Peaceful.

In that fragile, perfect stillness, one truth blazed brighter than any fear or threat: he would move heaven and earth to protect her.

The night, with all its heat and passion, had become their fortress. And in its quiet aftermath, wrapped in him, she felt utterly, completely safe.

Then Damien's lips brushed the crown of her head, his voice a soft, almost mischievous whisper against her ear.

"I love you. Sleep well, love."

Maya's heavy lids fluttered, a sleepy smile tugging at her lips. "Mmm… I love you too."

Damien’s lips lingered for a moment longer against the crown of her head. Slowly, he eased his hand from her, careful not to disturb the peaceful rhythm of her breathing. Maya was finally lost in deep sleep, the faint rise and fall of her chest steady and serene.

He rose quietly, letting the warmth of the room linger around him. Reaching for his phone, he stepped out onto the balcony. The night air was cool, carrying the distant hush of the manor grounds.

He dialed a number, voice low and steady.

“It’s time,” he said, eyes scanning the shadows. “I want it done before sunrise.”

The wind whipped around him, sharp and insistent. Damien’s eyes swept the horizon, dark

and unreadable.

The war had officially begun.

The first light of dawn spilled through the curtains, soft and golden, brushing the room in warmth. Maya stirred, eyelashes fluttering open, immediately aware of the absence of the night’s shadows.

Her body ached pleasantly from the night before-every muscle reminded her of closeness, of heat, of Damien. But when she turned, he wasn’t beside her. Still, the warmth of his presence lingered, woven into the sheets, a quiet echo of him.

A soft creak of the floor drew her attention. Damien stepped into the room, shirt slightly rumpled, hair tousled, that familiar, dangerous glint in his dark eyes. For a heartbeat, the world outside ceased to exist; all she could see was him.

“Morning,” he murmured, voice husky and intimate, carrying the echo of the night they had shared.

“Morning,” she whispered, cheeks warming as the memory of him curled inside her.

He crossed the room slowly, deliberately, stopping at the edge of the bed. “Sleep well?”

“I… did,” she admitted softly. “Better than I have in a long time.”

A faint, knowing smile curved his lips. He leaned down, brushing a kiss across her forehead- a ghost of the tenderness he’d shown all night-and sat beside her. “Good. You’ll need your strength today.”

Maya tilted her head, curiosity and caution mingling. “Strength for what?”

His gaze darkened, serious now. “Mom wants to take you somewhere today.”

Her stomach fluttered, a mix of anticipation and anxiety. “Where?”

“The firing range,” he said, voice low, the hint of annoyance threading through it. “She insists you need to learn how to protect yourself… in case something happens. She thinks it’s important for you to know how to use a gun.”

Maya’s eyes widened. “Really?”

Damien exhaled, running a hand through his hair. “Why do you look so… excited? I don’t want you learning violence, love. I’m here, I’ll protect you. But… they insisted. All of them. Even your brother, actually. I’m literally outnumbered.”

Maya leaned closer, voice pleading, soft and earnest. “Damien, I want to learn… please. Let me do this, love.”

He pulled her into a quick, protective hug, letting her lean against him just long enough to feel the strength of him before pulling back. “Fine… but be careful, okay? Really careful. And if it gets too much, stop. Don’t force yourself.”

“I promise,” she whispered.

“Okay,” he said, voice softening. “I have a few client meetings at the company, but I’ll follow you there.”

“Okay,” Maya replied.

“You better get ready then,” Damien murmured, a soft smile brushing his lips.

“Let’s have breakfast together… everyone’s waiting.” He leaned a little closer, voice dropping to a playful whisper.

“Oh, and Lee is coming with you too-that’s my condition.”

Maya smiled, leaning up to press a quick kiss to his cheek.

“Okay, love!” she said softly.

“And… some of my personal security team will be with you,” Damien added, voice low, almost

teasing.

Maya paused mid-step, eyebrows raised. “Some? Like… how many is some?”

Damien avoided her gaze, scratching the back of his neck with that rare, almost boyish awkwardness. “Stop asking. Just… go.”

Maya huffed in playful exaggeration, but the corner of her mouth curved in a betraying smile.

“Hmm… fine.”

She rose, gathering the sheets loosely around herself as she crossed the room. A glimpse in the mirror caught her attention-her flushed cheeks, the softened glow in her eyes, the marks of a night that still warmed her skin. The memory of him curled through her like heat, impossible to hide, impossible to forget.

For all the danger waiting beyond these walls, for all the battles she knew were coming… she wasn’t afraid.

Because his family stood with her.

Because their friends were ready to fight beside them.

And above everything-because he was here.

Chapter 352

The bathroom door opened softly.

Steam drifted out first, curling into the cooler air of the bedroom, followed by Maya-wrapped in a plush robe, hair damp and loose around her shoulders. Her skin still glowed from the heat of the shower, her nerves soothed but not entirely quiet.

Damien stood near the window, phone pressed to his ear.

"…make sure it stays contained," he said, voice low, even.

Maya slowed instinctively, pausing just inside the room. She knew that tone now-the one stripped of warmth, honed down to precision. It wasn't cold. It was controlled.

Their eyes met.

The change in him was immediate. The edge in his expression softened, something private slipping back into place. He ended the call without ceremony, sliding the phone into his pocket as she turned toward the walk-in closet.

She was reaching into her suitcase when strong, familiar arms wrapped around her from

behind.

Warmth pressed into her back. His breath brushed the sensitive skin at her neck, sending a shiver through her-sharp and electric, a reaction she was already learning to recognize as uniquely Damien. Comfortable. Grounding. Safe.

“Mmm,” he murmured, voice low, almost indulgent. “I really love how you smell. It’s addicting.

She smiled, resting her hands over his arms, fingers curling into him. A soft laugh escaped

her.

“My body wash is probably cheaper than your coffee,” she teased. “See? Cheap stuff isn’t always bad.”

His quiet chuckle vibrated against her skin as he held her a second longer, unhurried-like the world could wait just a little more.

“I never said cheap was bad,” he murmured, brushing his lips along the curve of her shoulder. “It all depends on who’s using it.”

His arms tightened just enough to make her melt. “And you,” he murmured, low and commanding, “you make everything more valuable than anything money could ever buy.”

Maya chuckled, shaking her head, a teasing smile tugging at her lips. “Okay, Romeo… let me get dressed. I don’t want to keep your mom waiting. And… I’m starving. Breakfast sounds perfect.”

Her fingers lingered on his chest for just a heartbeat, and his grin curved-possessive, amused, undeniably Damien.

His dark gaze held hers, sharp yet fleetingly soft, a flicker of relief passing through the storm behind his eyes. He leaned in, brushing a deliberate, feather-light kiss against her temple, his hand settling warm and steady at her waist.

“Good idea,” he murmured, voice low, deliberate, laced with that unshakable heat that made her knees weak. “Otherwise… I might be tempted to have a very different kind of breakfast

first.”

A shiver ran through her. “A… different breakfast, hmm?” she whispered, half-laughing, half-breathless, already imagining exactly what he meant.

His lips curved into a dangerous, knowing smirk. “Exactly,” he murmured, each word dripping with heat. “We might just have to skip breakfast entirely… and probably lunch too.”

Maya’s fingers traced lightly along his chest, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Hmm… tempting,” she whispered, her voice low, breath catching. “But your mom already has plans for us today. And you, Mr. Blackwood, have an important client call… so your ‘craving’ will have to wait.”

Damien’s dark eyes flicked down to her, heat threading through his gaze, lips curving into a slow, dangerous smirk. “Ah… so my craving has to wait, huh?” His voice was low, deliberate, every word crafted to make her shiver. “Fine… I’ll behave… for now. But don’t think that excuses you from later, love.”

Maya's cheeks warmed, and she let out a soft, half-laughing shake of her head, fingers. brushing against his chest for just a heartbeat. "Dinner it is then…" she whispered, stepping back slightly, tugging at her robe.

Damien stepped closer, closing the small distance between them, his hand brushing lightly along her waist. "You know," he murmured, voice husky, "just looking at you like this… knowing what's behind that robe… it's very hard to behave."

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Heat curled low in her stomach at the closeness of him. She pressed a finger to his chest, teasing, almost daring. "Then maybe you should let me get dressed… or breakfast will be the last thing on our minds."

His grin darkened, possessive and slow. "Breakfast? That ended a long time ago in my mind, love."

Maya huffed a laugh, biting her lip as she leaned up to plant a quick, flustered kiss on his cheek. "Stop… let me go. Don't you know? Breakfast is the most important meal of the day- we cannot skip it."

Damien's hand lingered at her waist for just a heartbeat longer, eyes dark with desire and ownership, before he finally let her slip away.

Ten minutes later, Maya stepped out of the walk-in closet, every movement purposeful, yet effortlessly commanding. She wore a black fitted T-shirt that traced the lines of her figure, paired with black skinny jeans and sleek sneakers-practical, simple, and unexpectedly magnetic. Her hair was swept into a high ponytail, keeping it out of her face, while the lingering warmth of her shower left her skin glowing softly, cheeks flushed with a natural pink. No makeup, just a quiet radiance that seemed to fill the room.

Damien lounged in the leather chair by the balcony, one leg draped over the other, phone in hand as he scrolled through emails. The morning sun streamed in behind him, casting long, sharp shadows across his features, accentuating the hardness in his jaw and the intensity in his eyes. A soft shuffle of footsteps caught his attention. He looked up-and the instant his gaze met hers, that familiar predatory glint softened just enough to reveal approval, weighty and unspoken, holding her in a moment that felt suspended in time.

She hesitated at the doorway, shoulders slightly hunched. “Umm… do I… look okay?” she asked, voice quiet, edged with that familiar self-doubt. “I mean… I don’t really have anything special for… you know, the range… or… whatever.” Her fingers nervously fiddled with the hem

of her shirt.

Damien’s dark eyes swept over her slowly, a faint, knowing smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. He set his gaze firmly on her, voice low, calm, and utterly commanding. “Stop worrying, love. You look… perfect.”

Maya’s cheeks warmed, and she took a small step closer, fingers brushing lightly over her arm. “You really think so?”

Damien slipped his phone into his pocket, rising with deliberate slowness. Each step toward

her carried weight, unspoken ownership, grounding her in the moment. He stopped just a breath away, letting his gaze roam over her with a heat that made her shiver.

“I know so,” he murmured, voice dropping even lower. “You look… dangerously hot.”

A shiver slid down Maya's spine at the intensity in his voice. Damien leaned closer, his lips brushing near her ear as he murmured, "In fact… too hot for my liking. I'm going to need that place cleared of any men. I don't want the thought of anyone else… even noticing my wife."

She froze.

"Your wife… huh?" Maya echoed softly, eyes lifting to his, a faint curve to her lips as her breath caught somewhere between disbelief and something dangerously close to hope.

Damien didn't hesitate. His eyes locked onto hers, calm and absolute. "Yes, love. You are.

You will be."

Her heart thudded hard in her chest. "You're very sure of yourself, Mr. Blackwood," she said, voice light, but the tremor beneath it gave her away.

A slow smile curved his lips-confident, possessive, absolute. "Oh, I am." He leaned in just enough to make the words feel like a promise. "You're already Mrs. Blackwood to me."

A brief pause.

“And soon,” he added quietly, thumb brushing over her hand as if the promise already lived there, “you’ll be Mrs. Blackwood in every way that matters… officially.”

His gaze dipped briefly to her hand before lifting back to her eyes. “I’m still having your ring made,” he said softly.

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A slow, knowing smile curved his lips-sure, deliberate. “I won’t give you anything less than the promise you imagined… and the future I intend to give you.”

The air between them thickened, the weight of his certainty settling deep in her chest, warm

and undeniable.

“I’d love that,” she said softly, the warmth in her voice betraying just how much it meant to

her.

Damien exhaled slowly, the corner of his mouth lifting as if restraining himself took actual effort. He reached for her hand, fingers lacing with quiet possession.

“Come on, love.” he said, voice low and amused. “Let’s go have some breakfast.”

His thumb brushed her knuckles as he leaned in just enough for her to feel the heat of him.” I’ve been holding myself back since you stepped out of that shower,” he added softly. “And if we stay in this room one minute longer…”

His gaze darkened, promise heavy there.

“…we’re never making it downstairs.”

“Okay,” she said with a soft laugh, nodding as if agreeing to something far more dangerous.” Yes… let’s go before we really don’t.”

Damien gave a quiet, satisfied hum, squeezing her hand once before turning toward the door. They stepped into the hallway together, fingers still loosely entwined. The manor was already awake-soft footsteps in the distance, the muted clink of china, low voices drifting through the corridors. Reality eased back in, slow and unthreatening.

At the top of the stairs, Damien paused just long enough to glance down at her, thumb brushing her hand once more before letting go. A silent promise. Then, side by side, they

descended.

The morning sun poured through the manor’s wide windows, bathing the dining hall in warm, golden light. The rich aroma of fresh coffee and sizzling eggs wrapped around Maya like a comforting blanket.

The hall was alive with quiet movement-Charles and Eleanor seated at the head of the long table, Dominic and Dahlia beside them. Even Jaime was already there, happily demolishing a massive bowl of oats piled high with walnuts and fresh fruit, entirely absorbed in his

mission.

Alfred stood nearby, vigilant as ever, quietly orchestrating the room. He moved with practiced ease-refilling coffee cups before they were even half-empty, straightening napkins, adjusting serving dishes, and ensuring breakfast remained as seamless and warm as the sunlight streaming through the windows.

At the soft sound of approaching footsteps, his gaze lifted. Noticing the couple entering together, a gentle, knowing smile touched his features. With a subtle, respectful nod, he greeted them quietly.

“Good morning, Sir Damien. Ms. Maya.”

“Good morning,” Maya replied softly, a shy smile tugging at her lips.

Damien returned the greeting with a brief nod, a rare hint of ease in his voice. “Morning, Alfred.”

Their arrival caught everyone’s attention. The conversation around the table softened, then paused altogether. One by one, heads turned, greeting them with warm smiles and quiet

nods.

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Eleanor’s gaze softened the instant she saw them, a quiet, satisfied smile curving her lips. Charles lifted an amused brow, eyes sparkling with mischief, while Dahlia’s expression warmed with pride and affection. Dominic leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, letting out an approving hum as he studied them.

“Ah! The two lovebirds!” Charles exclaimed, clapping his hands together. “Come on, join us! Have a seat!”

Maya’s face brightened, and she offered a warm smile. “Good morning, everyone!”

Damien guided her toward a seat beside Jamie, across from Dahlia, and gently nudged the chair back so she could sit comfortably. His hand lingered behind her lower back for a fraction longer than necessary, a quiet, grounding presence.

“Thank you,” Maya murmured before turning to Jamie. “Hey, bud!”

“Hey, May! Good morning! Good morning, Damien!” Jamie’s energy was boundless, a bright spark at the table.

“Did you sleep well last night?” Maya asked, leaning slightly toward him.

“I did! The bed was so soft, and the hot milk Grandma Eleanor asked Mr. Alfred to bring to my room was delicious. I fell asleep almost immediately!”

Maya laughed softly. “Good to hear that.”

Eleanor’s gaze softened, voice gentle. “How about you, dear? Did you sleep well?”

Maya’s cheeks flushed a soft pink-of course she’d slept well after last night. She offered a gentle, warm smile and nodded. “Mm… yes, I did. Thank you.”

Charles leaned back slightly, a teasing glint in his eyes. “How about you, Damien? Did you sleep well last night?”

Damien cleared his throat, his dark eyes flicking toward Maya with a slow, knowing smirk. Oh… yeah,” he said, voice low and smooth. “I slept very well.”

Charles threw his head back, laughter rumbling through the dining hall. “Aha! Very well… very well!” He leaned toward Dominic, nudging him with a mischievous grin. “Did you hear that, son? That’s how a Blackwood man does it-we don’t waste a single second!”

Dominic smirked, eyes sparkling with amusement. “I wouldn’t doubt it for a second, Father! He is a Blackwood, after all-born to set the pace.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes, a soft laugh escaping her. “Oh, enough, you two! And if you’re such studs, how is it that you’re the only offspring in your generation? Same as Damien!”

Dahlia smirked, crossing her arms lightly. “Mmhhm… I agree! All that energy… and yet, somehow still delicate in the water.”

Jamie tilted his head, brows knitting in curiosity. “Delicate in the water…? You mean… they can’t swim?”

Maya’s eyes went wide, and she nudged him lightly with her elbow. “Jamie! Don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Jamie blinked, confused. “What did I do?”

Dahlia chuckled, her smirk softening into a warm, teasing smile. “Not exactly, dear. Just… sometimes even the strongest currents can be too much for a Blackwood.”

Damien, sitting beside Maya, let out a low, amused chuckle and cleared his throat. “Mother, I assure you… my swimmers are in peak form.” His dark eyes flicked to Maya, smoldering with mischief. “Only the strongest blood flows in this family-and I take pride in… performance.” He leaned slightly closer, voice dropping, just enough for Maya to feel it. “Let’s just say… endurance has never been a problem.”

Dahlia’s lips curved into a faint, knowing smile. “Performance isn’t the problem, son… making sure it counts toward the next generation, now that’s the trick.”

The table erupted in laughter, the women’s teasing cutting through the men’s mock indignation, leaving them momentarily flustered. Warmth and familiarity wrapped around the room, the gentle chaos of family banter filling the air like sunlight spilling across the table.

Jamie shrugged, a puzzled look crossing his face. “I don’t get it… but oh, May! This oats is amazing! It’s my second serving already! You’ve got to try it!”

“I can see that,” Maya teased, smiling. “Now slow down, bud. Chew your food, and make sure to take your medicine afterward, okay?”

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Jamie nodded eagerly, still grinning.

Eleanor’s voice chimed in warmly. “Alfred, bring out some fresh pancakes and scrambled eggs for Maya. And squeeze some fresh orange juice too-it’s a good source of vitamin C.”

“Right away, Madam,” Alfred replied, bowing slightly before slipping off to carry out her

orders.

Damien raised a brow, a hint of teasing in his tone. “Wait-only for her? Freshly squeezed orange juice sounds pretty good.”

“Oh, hush!” Eleanor said, a playful glint in her eyes. “You know where the kitchen is. In fact, I think you should be the one picking oranges for Maya.”

Charles chuckled. “You should see your grandmother’s garden this year-full of oranges!”

Dominic leaned toward Dahlia, softening. “That’s right. I picked some for your mom this morning, didn’t I, sweetheart?”

Dahlia rolled her eyes, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Oh, Dominic. You’re letting your son’s romance inspire you to act like a teenager again!”

That earned another burst of laughter, rippling around the table-warm, easy, and filling the

room with a cozy, lively energy.

Plates were passed, coffee poured, the quiet hum of morning life resuming around them. Yet beneath the normalcy lingered something unspoken-contentment, certainty, and the

unmistakable sense that the table was fuller now.

She had just reached for her coffee when her phone vibrated.

Harper.

Maya blinked, eyes widening. “That’s… early. Especially for her-she hates mornings.”

Damien glanced at the screen, then at his watch. “It’s 8 a.m. here… almost midnight there.”

Maya’s brow furrowed in understanding. “Ah… no wonder she’s awake,” she murmured, picking up the call and switching it to speaker.

“GOOD MORNING-or is it night? I can’t even tell anymore!” Harper’s voice came through, bright and unmistakably awake.

Maya laughed softly. “You’re still up?”

“Technically… I haven’t slept,” Harper said cheerfully. “Jet lag is relentless. Anyway-have you

heard?”

“Heard what?” Maya asked.

There was a brief pause on the line-Harper’s tone shifting, excitement edged with disbelief.

“Volkov’s assets in Eastern Europe were hit overnight. They had a massive shipment coming in last night, and out of nowhere… it went up in flames. Official reports are calling it an accident-some kind of engine malfunction. No one’s claiming responsibility yet, but-”

Damien’s hand stilled near his cup.

Before he could speak-

“They’re already pointing fingers.”

Ashcroft’s voice cut in smoothly as he entered the room.

All eyes turned.

He adjusted his cufflinks as he approached the table, movements precise, unhurried-like this was nothing more than a scheduled briefing. His expression gave nothing away.

“Two warehouses neutralized,” he continued evenly. “Accounts frozen within the hour. Communications disrupted.”

A beat.

“Viktor thinks it’s an inside job,” Ashcroft added, eyes flicking briefly to Damien. “Someone sabotaged him.”

On the other end of the line, Harper sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh… so it is real.”

Maya’s gaze flicked between Damien and Ashcroft, her pulse quietly quickening. “That happened… last night?”

Ashcroft met her eyes for a brief second, then shifted his attention back to Damien. “Before

sunrise.”

Damien lifted his cup, taking a slow, unhurried sip.

“It was overdue.”

Harper let out a low whistle. “Remind me never to piss you off.”

A corner of Ashcroft’s mouth twitched. “Sound advice.”

Damien smirked faintly. “Who says it was me?”

Maya turned to him, studying his face. “Was it?”

Ashcroft answered before Damien could. “Fingers are pointing at Marco Greco-and he isn’t denying it. He’s taking credit.”

Maya’s fingers curled lightly against the edge of the table. Not fear. Not quite.

Awareness.

The quiet realization that the war Damien had warned her about wasn’t approaching

anymore.

It had already begun.

“Oh, by the way, Maya,” Harper said, changing the subject as if nothing monumental had just been discussed, her tone lightening, “are Jamie’s medical papers all set for the transfer?”

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Before Maya could answer, Ashcroft spoke calmly. “That’s already taken care of.”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line.

“Oh-” Harper cleared her throat lightly. “Okay. Good then.” She recovered quickly, slipping back into her usual rhythm. “So you’ll be traveling with my mom. We’ll make it look like she’s returning with her usual antique shipments-nothing out of the ordinary. I believe she’s already spoken to Aunt Dahlia about it.”

Dahlia nodded once. “Yes. She’s coming by tonight so we can finalize the details.”

Harper scoffed softly. “Of course she is. That woman uses ‘planning’ as an excuse to gossip.

“Harper,” Dahlia warned, one brow lifting.

“I didn’t say a word, Aunt Dahlia!” Harper laughed. “I swear.”

Then her tone flipped instantly-bright, excited. “Oh! Maya-guess what?!”

Maya blinked. “What?”

“VXRSE is on a world tour,” Harper announced, practically bouncing through the speaker. “And they’ll be here next weekend!”

Maya’s eyes widened. “What?!”

“That’s right!” Harper squealed. “And I got us tickets-VIP, baby!”

“Who?!” Damien and Ashcroft asked at the same time-perfectly synchronized.

Maya barely had time to react before Jamie beat them to it.

“VXRSE,” he said confidently. “Pronounced Verse.” He straightened slightly, clearly pleased

with himself. “They’re a famous K-pop boy band. My sister is obsessed with them-especially that one member, Jin.”

He let out a dramatic little sigh, shaking his head. “Harper… I didn’t know you were one of

them.”

Harper gasped, utterly offended. “Excuse you. One of them? I have taste.”

Damien frowned faintly. “You’re telling me this is… music?”

Ashcroft, ever composed, added dryly, “I assume they’re not a security threat.”

Maya pressed her lips together, fighting a smile as Jamie nodded solemnly. “Only to hearts, apparently.” He shrugged, far too serious for his age. “Sorry, Damien-but I honestly believe if that Jin proposed to my sister, she’d accept in a heartbeat.”

“Jamie!” Maya hissed, mortified.

Damien’s arm slid instinctively behind Maya’s chair, possessiveness flickering sharp and unmistakable in his eyes. “Is that right?” he asked mildly.

“No! Of course not,” Maya rushed, turning to him. “Don’t listen to him.”

Harper snorted. “Yeah, I doubt that.”

She paused-then suddenly squealed.

“Because if anything,” she burst out, “Jin would propose to me! Ahhhh!”

Ashcroft’s expression darkened by several degrees. “In your dreams!”

Harper blinked. “Excuse you?”

He leveled her with a look that was all calm menace. “I said… in your dreams!”

Jamie’s eyes widened. “Wow.”

Maya bit her lip, shoulders shaking with barely-contained laughter.

Dominic leaned back, smirking. “Seems like someone just discovered what a real security threat looks like.”

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For a brief moment, the dining hall fell into an uneasy calm-one of those pauses that followed laughter when everyone was quietly registering what had just been said… and what

it revealed.

Ashcroft held his expression a fraction too long.

Then-

“Ehem.”

The sound was soft and controlled, cutting neatly through the room.

He straightened at once, rolling his shoulders back and tugging lightly at his coat sleeve, as though brushing off invisible dust-an unconscious reset. Whatever edge had slipped into his voice moments ago vanished behind practiced composure.

“Oh, come on, Uncle Dom,” Ashcroft said lightly, lips curving into a faint, dismissive smile.” Let’s not dramatize things.” He waved a hand, tone casual. “I’m simply pointing out there’s no reason for anyone to get overconfident.”

His gaze flicked briefly toward the phone, then away again.

“Whoever that K-pop singer is,” he continued, voice smooth, shaded with dry disdain, “some kid with a microphone, good lighting, and a very loud fanbase-he wouldn’t spare her a second glance.”

A pause.

“Hardly worth elevating to a threat.”

Damien didn’t miss the way Ashcroft’s jaw tightened before he took his seat.

Nor did Dahlia miss the way his fingers curled once… then relaxed.

Jamie, however, leaned forward, eyes bright. “So… you are threatened.”

Ashcroft shot him a look. “Eat your oats.”

Harper scoffed, an exaggerated eye roll practically audible through the speaker. “Oh? That’s cute. Please-like you’re the one deciding who shows up in my dreams.”

She let out a soft, mocking laugh. “And last I checked, dreams do come true. Also-hello? It’s 2026. Women make the first move now. It’s not all men anymore.”

A beat. Then, brightly unapologetic-

“Besides, I need to find a husband eventually. Might as well aim high.”

She pivoted instantly. “Right, Maya?”

Maya blinked. “I-what?”

Harper barreled on, clearly already lost in her own fantasy. “Can you imagine?” she sighed dreamily. “Someday, we go out on a double date-you with the Damien Blackwood…” Her voice climbed another octave. “And me with Jin?!”

She squealed. “Ahhhhh!”

Jamie frowned, tilting his head in genuine confusion. “But… how can she imagine it,” he asked thoughtfully, “if she already imagines herself with Jin?”

Heat rushed straight to Maya’s face.

“JAIME THOMPSON-!”

She scooped up a spoonful of oats and promptly stuffed it into her brother’s mouth.

“Eat.”

Jamie blinked, cheeks full, thoroughly silenced.

Too late.

The air beside her shifted.

Damien had gone still-too still. The faint amusement that had lingered at the corners of his mouth vanished, replaced by something colder. Sharper. His jaw tightened as his gaze drifted toward the phone lying on the table, eyes darkening with intent.

Without a word, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his phone.

One tap.

A call placed.

The line connected almost instantly.

“I need VIP tickets to the VXRSE concert in Japan next weekend,” Damien said, his voice low and even-so controlled it seemed to frost the air around them. “Front row. Full access.”

A pause.

“And I want everything you can find on the group. Backgrounds. Contracts. Schedules ” His eyes flicked briefly toward Maya before returning to nothing at all.

“Especially that one-Jin.”

Another beat.

“Also,” he added coolly, as if discussing a routine acquisition, “look into who owns their label And whether it’s… available.”

Silence slammed into the room.

Maya’s breath caught.

On the other end of the line, Harper didn’t even try to hide her reaction.

“…Uh oh.”

Dominic leaned back in his chair, a slow, satisfied chuckle escaping him.

“There it is.”

Maya stared at Damien, heart hammering violently against her ribs. The ease with which he’d moved-from quiet jealousy to decisive action-left her dizzy.

She swallowed hard, acutely aware of the shift in gravity beside her-of how quickly Damien Blackwood turned intent into reality.

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Eleanor, meanwhile, calmly lifted her teacup, took an unhurried sip, then set it back onto its saucer with a soft clink.

“Well,” she said pleasantly, “this is certainly turning into an interesting morning.”

Damien ended the call without another word.

The screen went dark as he slid the phone back into his coat pocket, movements unhurried- as if nothing of consequence had just been set in motion.

The room exhaled cautiously.

Maya forced herself to breathe.

She turned toward him, shoulders squaring despite the way her pulse raced.

“Damien… that was really unnecessary.”

His gaze shifted to her at once. Steady. Focused.

“I need to learn the competition,” he said evenly. “I don’t like losing, love.”

“It’s nothing,” she rushed on, softening her tone. “It was just… a fangirling moment, okay?” A small, nervous laugh slipped out.

She paused, searching his face for any sign of easing.

“Everyone’s had a crush,” she added gently. “An idol. Someone unattainable you admire from a distance.” She lifted her chin, trying to sound light. “You probably had a few growing up too.

The corner of Damien’s mouth twitched-just barely.

“Crushes,” he repeated slowly.

He leaned back in his chair, posture relaxed in a way that was anything but. His eyes never

left her face.

“I didn’t grow up with idols,” he said calmly. “I grew up with objectives.”

A beat.

“And anything that caught my attention,” he continued, voice low and deliberate,

“was either acquired… or removed.”

His thumb brushed once-possessive, grounding-against her shoulder.

“But for the record,” he added quietly, gaze softening just a fraction as it locked with hers, “I don’t share.”

Silence settled over the table again-thick, electric.

“Well,” Dominic muttered, clearly amused, “that answers that-”

“Ouch!”

He jolted as Dahlia delivered a sharp pinch to his thigh under the table.

One look from her shut him up instantly.

Then her expression softened as she turned back to Maya and Damien.

“You are very much your father’s son,” Dahlia said fondly.

She chuckled, eyes drifting somewhere far away. “I used to have a massive crush on Bruce Springsteen. Bought every album. Learned every lyric. Posters on my walls.” She shook her head, smiling at herself. “I was absolutely convinced he would be my future husband.”

Dominic scoffed immediately. Loudly.

Dahlia ignored him. “Then I learned he was touring Australia in March of 1985. So, naturally, I bought a ticket. Best seats I could get. I was ecstatic.”

She glanced sideways at Dominic. “Then your father found out.”

“And guess what he did?” she asked innocently.

Jamie leaned forward. “What?”

“This fool,” Dahlia continued, smiling sweetly, “bought the company sponsoring the tour, had the venue security ‘restructured, and somehow ended up with backstage access-just to make sure I didn’t get too close to my ‘future husband.”

Dominic smirked unapologetically.

“Like your son said. Blackwood men don’t share.” He shrugged. “Another man occupying

even a tiny space in your mind? Unacceptable.”

“Oh, please,” Dahlia scoffed. “Don’t get cocky.”

“He’s not even that good,” Dominic muttered.

Dahlia shot him a look. “What I’m saying is-it’s normal to admire someone. There’s no need

to go completely extra about it.”

Jamie blinked between them. “So… does that mean he’s not your crush anymore?”

Maya choked.

That earned a round of laughter.

Dahlia smiled calmly. “Actually… I still admire him. Not like before, of course. But I still listen to his music.”

Dominic stiffened.

“You what.”

She sipped her coffee serenely. “Some classics never age.”

Dominic leaned back, arms crossed, scowling. “I knew I should’ve bought the record label too.”

Jamie’s eyes widened. “Wow.”

Maya pressed her lips together, shoulders shaking as she tried not to laugh-very aware that Blackwood jealousy, once awakened, never truly slept.

Chapter 360

Damien exhaled slowly, nodding once.

“Hm. Good idea, Father.”

He was already reaching for his phone again.

Maya’s hand shot out.

Her fingers wrapped around his wrist, stopping him mid-motion.

“Stop.”

The single word was soft-but firm.

He looked down at her, surprised.

She lifted her chin, lips pressing into a small pout she didn't even try to hide. "Fine. I won't go

to the concert anymore, okay?" Her voice dipped, just enough. "Are you satisfied now?"

The silence that followed was immediate.

Then-

"Wait-what?!" Harper's voice burst through the speaker, sharp with disbelief.

Damien felt it at once.

Guilt

Instant. Unwelcome. Piercing.

“Maya…” he started, his voice lowering.

But she didn’t look at him.

She turned slightly toward the phone, lashes dropping, shoulders drawing in-small, composed, restrained. Not dramatic. Worse.

Maya may not have grown up with power or money, with the ability to shift markets or bend outcomes with a single call. She didn’t move chess pieces across continents.

But she knew how to play.

She’d learned early how to soften her voice just enough. How to pause at the right moment.

How to make disappointment look reasonable instead of loud.

It had worked on her father.

It worked on Jamie.

And watching Damien now-she suspected it might work on him too.

Worth a try.

“I’m sorry, Harper,” Maya said quietly. “I’ll have to pass.” A breath. “As you heard… this is just- too much. It’s getting out of hand.” She forced a small smile into her voice. “Just take lots of photos for me, okay?”

On the other end of the line, Harper gasped.

“But-Maya,” she protested, genuinely distressed. “You said this was on your bucket list too! You wanted to see them perform live-just once!” Her words tumbled over each other. “The timing is perfect. Jamie’s operation will be done by then. He’ll be in recovery-we can go-”

Maya stayed quiet.

Across the table, Dahlia lifted her teacup again, not to drink this time-just enough to mask the faint curve of her lips.

Eleanor noticed.

Her gaze drifted from Maya’s lowered lashes to Damien’s rigid posture, then to Dahlia.

A look passed between them.

Brief. Knowing.

The kind of look women shared when they recognized strategy-not manipulation, but balanc

Eleanor’s smile was small, contained, utterly pleased.

Dahlia’s eyes softened with quiet approval.

Neither woman said a word.

They didn’t need to.

They recognized it instantly-the familiar choreography of a well-worn dance.

One they themselves had mastered long ago, refined through years of quiet victories and perfectly timed vulnerability.

And judging by the unease that crept so quickly across Damien's face-so reminiscent of the same look their husbands once wore-Blackwood men, formidable in every arena but this-

they knew without question who was leading now.