Intern 361

Chapter 361

Something lingered in the air-not heavy, not sharp-just the quiet awareness that something fundamental had shifted. Not tension exactly. More like… consequence.

Maya wasn't upset in the way people expected. She understood jealousy. She even understood possessiveness-accepted it, in a way. Damien was who he was, and she had never doubted the depth of his feelings.

What unsettled her was something else entirely.

It was the implication that her loyalty needed managing.

That her heart required securing.

That if someone made a move, the problem would be them-not her.

As if her love were fragile.

As if her choice weren't already made.

So she pulled back, just a little-not to punish him, but to see. To find out whether he trusted her enough to let her stand on her own. Whether his instinct was to protect her… or to control the world around her because he didn't trust what she'd do in it.

It wasn't defiance.

It was a quiet test of trust-and she needed to know the answer.

Ashcroft was the first to break the silence.

He let out a short breath, fingers drumming once against the tabletop before his eyes flicked to the phone.

"See what you started?" he said, dry and pointed. "You're unbelievable."

A beat.

"Me?" Harper scoffed. "How is this suddenly my fault?"

Ashcroft gestured vaguely between Maya and Damien. "If you'd kept your celebrity fantasy to yourself, these two wouldn't be in a lover's quarrel."

“We’re not quarrelling.” Maya’s voice cut in gently.

She turned to Damien then, a soft smile curving her lips-carefully placed, almost practiced.

But the warmth wasn’t there. No spark. Just politeness.

“Right?” she asked quietly.

She didn’t wait for him to answer.

Her attention shifted back to the phone at once, voice smoothing over like calm water. “Don’t listen to him, Harper. It’s fine. We’re fine.”

The words landed easily.

The distance behind them did not.

“By the way… how are you? Any progress?”

The shift was immediate.

Harper's face lit up like a switch had been flipped. "Oh-yes! Actually, huge progress."

Maya straightened. "Really?"

"I already figured out what poison it is," Harper said proudly. "And I know exactly how to make the antidote. I'm just waiting on the remaining ingredients before I start synthesizing it. I sent people out to gather them-they should be back by sunrise."

Maya's breath caught. "That's… that's amazing news, Harper."

Even Ashcroft looked genuinely taken aback. "You identified the poison in less than twenty-four hours?"

Harper scoffed. "Please. I figured it out in under five."

A smug grin followed. "When I said give me twenty-four to forty-eight hours, that wasn't me being humble. That was me deciding to take my sweet time."

Maya laughed softly, relief loosening something tight in her chest.

Harper leaned closer to the camera. “Which is why my mom’s coming over tonight. We need to finalize the plan so you can come here before the weekend and Jamie can have his operation immediately.”

Maya went completely still.

“That soon?” she asked, though the question barely made it past her throat.

“I’m ready,” Jamie cut in at once, sitting up straighter. His voice was firm, determined-far more resolved than his age suggested. “I want to do it. The sooner it’s done, the sooner I

$25 Points recover.” He paused, then added quietly, “And the sooner I get to be a normal teenager again.”

The words landed hard.

Maya’s chest tightened. Her eyes stayed on Jamie, glossy now, though she refused to let the tears fall. She smiled anyway-soft, aching, proud and terrified all at once.

Around the table, the mood shifted.

Dahlia’s expression softened at once, maternal instinct rising to the surface. She reached across the table and covered Jamie’s hand with her own-warm, grounding, steady.

Eleanor drew in a quiet breath, lips pressing together as she met her husband's gaze. A single nod passed between them-wordless understanding, empathy for the boy, concern woven gently through years of shared instinct.

Chapter 362

Dominic leaned back in his chair, jaw tightening as emotion collided behind his composure. He said nothing-but the way his eyes lingered on Jamie spoke louder than any words ever could.

Even Ashcroft's usual sharpness dulled. He cleared his throat and looked away, suddenly very interested in the view beyond the window.

And Damien-

Damien hadn't moved.

But his attention had narrowed completely, focus locking onto Maya first… then Jamie. The guilt he'd been carrying earlier sharpened, twisting into something heavier as he watched her hold herself together.

He noticed everything.

The tremor she tried to hide, the way she smiled for her brother before herself. The silence she chose instead of asking for reassurance.

“Yes,” Harper confirmed. “Kenji already started converting one of the private wings into a proper recovery space. The surgery will be done there-and so will his recovery.”

She shrugged lightly. “It’s safer. A hospital wrapped in security draws attention. This way, everything stays contained.”

She paused, then softened her voice.

“Don’t worry, Maya. We’ll have the best of the best.” A hint of pride slipped in. “I’ve got the top heart surgeon in Japan on standby, along with the best nurses. They’ll work alongside Jamie’s medical team to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

Her smile widened, warm and certain.

“And we’ll make sure his aftercare is just as exceptional. He’ll be taken care of every step of the way.”

Maya swallowed, emotion pressing hard behind her ribs.

“Harper… I-thank you. So much.”

“Oh, stop,” Harper waved her off. “You’re my sister from another mother, remember? Which makes Jamie my brother too.”

Then she leaned in, lowering her voice conspiratorially.

“Actually… I’d totally trade Kenji for Jamie if you’re willing.”

Maya snorted despite herself.

Before Harper could elaborate-

A door opened somewhere off-screen.

Footsteps approached.

Then a man’s voice-smooth, teasing, unmistakably confident.

“You say that now,” he drawled, “but you’ll miss me so much you’ll die of depression.”

Harper rolled her eyes and groaned. “Speaking of the devil.”

A moment later, Kenji stepped into view, the camera adjusting as he approached. He offered a subtle, respectful bow.

“Good morning, Ms. Maya.”

His gaze shifted smoothly to the man seated beside her.

“Mr. Blackwood.”

Damien inclined his head in acknowledgment-brief, precise.

Kenji’s expression softened as his attention moved across the table. “Hey, Jamie.”

Then, with an easy smile, he addressed the rest of them. “Good morning, everyone.”

Eleanor smiled faintly, clearly pleased. “Such a polite young man.”

Ashcroft scoffed under his breath.

Kenji heard it.

Or perhaps he simply chose to.

The corner of his mouth lifted-subtle, almost innocent-though something unmistakably mischievous flickered behind his eyes as he angled himself toward the screen.

“What do you want?” Harper asked, already suspicious.

“Oh-Ane,” Kenji replied casually, as if the thought had only just crossed his mind. “Hiro woke up. He’s looking for you.”

Harper’s eyes widened instantly. “Really?!”

That did it.

Ashcroft’s expression darkened at once.

Kenji nodded, perfectly earnest. “Yes. In fact, he was calling your name even before he fully opened his eyes.” He paused, then added calmly, “They’re all starting to regain

consciousness. You should probably check on them.”

Harper gasped, hand flying to her chest. “Oh my-! I’m coming-!” She lurched forward, then

froze. “Oh-wait.”

She turned back to the screen, eyes landing on Maya. “Hey, Maya, I have to go check on them, okay? I gave them some herbal meds earlier-just to slow the poison down a bit.” She waved a hand briskly. “Sounds like it’s already kicking in, so I should make sure everything’s alright.”

Her tone softened as she added, “I’ll call you again tonight when my mom arrives so we can finalize the plan, okay?”

Chapter 363

Then, just as quickly, her brightness returned. “Talk to you later! Bye, everyone!”

The screen went dark.

Almost on cue, Alfred stepped into the dining hall, carrying a plate stacked with freshly cooked pancakes, steam still curling into the air. Beside him followed a lady from the staff, balancing a serving tray with fluffy scrambled eggs and glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice, their bright color catching the morning light.

Plates were set neatly across the table, cutlery clinking softly against porcelain as breakfast was served.

“Eat up, dear,” Dahlia said warmly, already reaching for her napkin. “We’ll be leaving soon.”

Conversation slowly resumed-small comments, passing remarks, the kind that tried to stitch normalcy back into the morning. Chairs shifted. Coffee was poured. The world, at least on the surface, moved forward.

Maya picked at her food. She managed half a pancake, a few bites of eggs, then lifted her glass of orange juice. She took a sip-and paused.

“This is really good,” she said, glancing toward Eleanor.

Eleanor’s lips curved with quiet pride. “From the south orchard. This year’s batch turned out especially sweet.”

“It shows.” Maya smiled, genuine this time. “Thank you.”

Dahlia watched her for a moment, then tilted her head, curiosity sparking.

“Tell me, Maya-have you ever held a gun before?”

Maya blinked. “No,” she answered honestly. “Never.”

“I figured,” Dahlia said lightly, already pushing her chair back. “Then come with me to the study, dear. I want to show you something.”

Maya nodded. “Okay.” She placed her napkin down and began to rise-

Under the table, Damien’s hand reached for hers. His fingers brushed her skin.

She paused… then gently slipped her hand away.

Maya glanced sideways at Damien, catching the faint tightening of his jaw-the tension still

there, unresolved, tracking her every movement.

She looked around the table. “Excuse me.”

She stood without looking back, following Dahlia toward the hall-leaving Damien seated behind, staring at the space where her hand had been.

Everyone noticed.

Eleanor lifted her teacup, took a thoughtful sip, then set it down with care. A soft chuckle escaped her.

“I really do adore her,” she said pleasantly. “My future granddaughter-in-law is just… perfect.”

She rose to her feet. “I’ll leave you men be.”

With that, Eleanor turned and followed the other two women down the hall.

The men remained at the table, each caught in stunned silence, trying to process what had

just happened.

Damien, though outwardly composed, felt the lingering weight of his earlier actions-and the knowledge that Maya’s gentle withdrawal had spoken louder than any rebuke.

Each man sat in the quiet aftermath, acutely aware of his own contribution to the delicate, shifting balance that had left the room just slightly off-kilter.

The war outside could wait.

Right now, something far more dangerous was unfolding quietly within these walls.

And Maya was still leading the dance.

Chapter 364

The dining room had gone unnaturally quiet.

Not the comfortable kind. Not the kind that came with familiarity. This silence lingered- heavy, reflective, unsettled.

Ashcroft broke first.

“That’s… screwy,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his jaw. His gaze stayed fixed on the table. “I mean- seriously. Is attending that concert really that important to her?”

The words hung there, careless and sharp.

Damien didn’t answer.

His jaw tightened instead, muscle locking as his hand clenched against his thigh. His posture remained composed, but inside, his thoughts spiraled-dark, unwanted, relentless.

Is she being petty?

Does she really want to see that guy?

How important is he to her?

Is she… hoping for something more with that so-called Jin?

The questions gnawed at him, each one worse than the last.

Before either man could speak again-

“My sister is not pigheaded.”

Jamie’s voice cut through the room.

Both Damien and Ashcroft looked up at him at the same time.

Jamie didn’t meet their eyes right away. He stared down at his bowl, shoulders rising and falling as he took a breath-slow, deliberate, like he was bracing himself.

“She’s always been like that,” he said quietly. “If she’s upset… or hurt… she won’t yell. She won’t throw a tantrum. She won’t even argue.”

He swallowed.

“She’ll just go quiet. Act like everything’s fine.” His fingers curled slightly. “But cold.”

He finally looked up then, eyes serious beyond his years.

“At first, you won’t notice it. But if you really know her… you feel it. She’s not confrontational. She waits. She stays that way until you figure out what you did wrong.”

His voice dropped, almost a murmur.

“And that’s scarier. I swear… I’d rather she yell at me. The cold treatment?” He shook his head. “It feels like it’s slowly killing you.”

A soft sound broke the tension.

A quiet chuckle.

All heads turned.

Dominic had leaned back in his chair. His eyes flicked around the table before settling warmly on Jamie.

“I understand exactly what you mean, son,” he said, nodding. “You just described your

mother.”

Jamie blinked. “Mom? How?”

Dominic smiled-nostalgic. “Oh, your mother is exactly the same.” He laughed softly. “Unlike my wife, Dahlia-she’s direct. She’ll tell me straight to my face when I’m wrong. She only gives me the silent treatment if I refuse to admit it.”

His smile widened.

“But Malia?” He shook his head. “She’s a whole different level.”

The room leaned in without realizing it.

“I still remember your parents’ very first real quarrel,” Dominic continued. “It happened after your father discovered her true identity. Insecurity hit him hard. No matter what Malia said, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d never be enough for her.”

Damien stiffened almost imperceptibly.

Dominic went on, unaware-or perhaps very aware.

“He started acting like her protector. Talking about fighting her family, keeping her hidden, not letting anyone separate them. He told her not to go home for Thanksgiving-said it was safer if she stayed at the dorm.”

Jamie frowned. “But… mom really wanted to go home?”

“She did,” Dominic confirmed. “She reassured him. Over and over. Told him she wouldn’t let

anyone force her. But Julian wouldn’t budge.”

He paused, letting the moment settle.

“So finally, Malia just said one sentence.”

Dominic smiled faintly.

“Okay. I won’t go home.”

Ashcroft frowned. “That’s it?”

“That was it,” Dominic said. “She smiled. She stayed. Everything seemed fine. Julian thought he’d won.” His voice darkened slightly. “But then came the cold.”

The room was silent.

“Days passed. Then weeks. Julian could feel something was wrong, but she wouldn’t say a word. She was polite. Kind. Present.” Dominic shook his head. “And completely distant.”

He exhaled through his nose.

“He was losing his mind. Pulling his hair out trying to figure out what he’d done. Dahlia wouldn’t help him either-loyal to her best friend to the end.”

Chapter 365

Jamie’s eyes widened. “How long did it last?”

“Three months,” Dominic said calmly. “Exactly three.”

Damien’s stomach sank.

“One day, Malia called him and said she wanted to talk. Julian thought-finally-it was over.” Dominic smiled ruefully. “Instead, she told him she wanted to break up.”

A beat.

“He begged. She didn’t budge. All she said was, ‘Until you understand what you did-and how you hurt me-I’m not taking you back.’”

Dominic leaned forward slightly.

“Then one night, alone in our dorm, he went through their old photos. Remembered how they started.” His eyes softened. “And suddenly… it clicked.”

Jamie held his breath.

“He ran to her. Dropped to his knees. Apologized-not for wanting to protect her, but for not trusting her. For not trusting them. For trying to control the world around her instead of believing in her choices.”

Dominic smiled.

“Malia just looked at him and said, ‘I’m glad you finally realized.”

He leaned back, satisfied.

“And that,” Dominic finished quietly, “was that.”

Jamie let out a low breath, disbelief flickering across his face.

“Wow,” he said quietly. “Dad really went through all that?” He shook his head. “Three months

that’s a long time.”

A beat.

“Guess I got off easy,” he added, a small, crooked smile tugging at his lips. “Mine only lasted two weeks with May.”

Dominic’s brows lifted slightly. Damien looked over.

Jamie leaned back in his chair, fingers lacing together as his gaze drifted somewhere far

away.

“I was being stubborn,” he admitted.. “We had an appointment one day, and I just… snapped. Gave her a hard time. Told her she was controlling. That she was forcing me to go without realizing how hard it was for me to sit there and listen to the doctor explain everything that was wrong with me.”

His jaw tightened.

“I even called her selfish.”

No one interrupted him.

“She didn’t argue,” Jamie continued. “She didn’t raise her voice. She just looked at me and said, ‘Okay, Jamie. We’ll stay home.”

He swallowed.

“And that was it. After that, she never forced me to go again. Never reminded me about my meds. Nothing.” He gave a humorless chuckle. “I thought I won.”

The smile faded.

“But then she started pulling away.” He frowned. “I was young. At first, I didn’t care. But after a while… it started feeling wrong. Uncomfortable. Like every day, I was losing a little more of my sister.”

His voice softened.

“Then one night, she came home really late. There was a storm. She had classes and worked overtime at the café, and the weather messed everything up.” He paused. “She didn’t get home until almost five in the morning.”

Damien shifted slightly in his seat.

“I fell asleep on the couch waiting for her,” Jamie said. “When she finally came in, she didn’t know I was awake. She just glanced at me and went straight to her room.”

He looked down.

“I got up and stood outside her door. Put my ear against it.” His throat tightened. “I heard her crying.”

The room seemed to hold its breath.

“I knocked. I wanted to comfort her.” His voice lowered, rougher now. “She just told me to go

back to sleep. So I did.”

Jamie’s fingers curled tightly together.

“When I woke up the next morning, her room was empty. She’d already left-but her journal was still there, on the bedside table. I… I know it was wrong… but I read it,” he admitted, swallowing hard.

No one judged him.

“She wrote about how exhausted she was. About the rude customers she dealt with that night. About nearly falling asleep at work.” His eyes burned. “She wrote about wanting to give up-but not being able to.”

Chapter 366

His voice cracked.

“She wrote about how much she loves me. How she’d do anything-no matter what-just to make me better again.”

He swallowed hard.

“And she wrote about that morning… how I gave her a hard time. How my words hurt her.” His jaw tightened. “She said hearing what was wrong with me hurt her three times more than it

hurt me. But what hurt the most-”

His breath faltered.

“-was that I didn’t see her sacrifices at all.”

Jamie sucked in a breath.

“That’s when it hit me. I wasn’t the victim.” He shook his head. “I was the selfish one. The

difficult one.”

He looked up, eyes shining.

“When she came home that night, I ran to her. Hugged her so tight I thought she might break.

I cried. I begged her to forgive me.”

He took a breath.

“I promised I’d go to every appointment. Take every pill. Listen to her-really listen.”

Jamie’s voice steadied, but his eyes still shone.

“She just smiled at me. A warm one.”

His lips curved faintly at the memory.

“She wiped my tears and told me she loved me-that everything she was doing was for me.”

He swallowed, emotion settling deep in his chest.

“And that was it. We were back to normal.”

A beat.

“Actually… better. Because I understood her more after that.”

Silence followed, thick with understanding.

Damien sat frozen in his chair. His stomach tightened. Every lesson, every memory, pressed down on him. He could no longer pretend this was someone else’s story.

And whether he liked it or not-he was already standing exactly where Julian once had.

Charles, who had remained quiet through it all, folded his hands loosely before him, eyes thoughtful as he watched the men around the table sit with what they’d just heard. Age had softened nothing about his presence-it had only refined it.

At last, he spoke.

“You know,” he said calmly, “men often think strength in love means standing in front of a woman-shield raised, sword drawn, ready to fight the world for her.”

His gaze moved, slow and deliberate, until it landed on Damien.

“There are moments when that’s true,” Charles continued. “Danger. War. Threats that cannot be reasoned with.”

A pause.

“But most of the time?” He shook his head faintly. “The greatest insult you can give a woman is not doubting her love for you-it’s doubting her judgment.”

The patriarch’s words settled heavily over the table.

Guilt followed-unspoken yet undeniable-settling into each man differently, shaped by his own memories, his own missteps, his own fears. No one was untouched by it.

For Damien, it landed like a hammer-sharp, inescapable. This wasn’t just a story. This was the warning. The one he couldn’t ignore.

Chapter 367

Silence lingered, thick and heavy, as understanding replaced every excuse.

Charles broke it with calm authority.

“A woman who chooses you,” he said, voice steady, “has already made her stand. When you try to manage her loyalty, you tell her-without meaning to-that you don’t trust her to protect the very thing she gave you freely.”

Damien felt the words settle deep. Heavy. Unavoidable.

“When I was young,” Charles continued, voice calm, unhurried, “I thought I understood

women.”

A faint breath of amusement escaped him.

“I was wrong.”

His eyes lifted, settling briefly in the direction Eleanor had gone, something softer passing through his expression.

“Your grandmother,” he said, “was never loud when she was angry. Never dramatic. She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t argue in circles.”

A pause.

“She simply… withdrew.”

Damien felt something tighten in his chest.

“When Eleanor went quiet,” Charles said, “it wasn’t because she wanted me to suffer. It was because she was deciding whether I was still worthy of standing beside her.”

He nodded once, acknowledging an old truth.

“It took me longer than I care to admit to realize that silence wasn’t punishment. It was restraint. It was her giving me space to either understand her… or lose her.”

His gaze shifted to Dominic.

“I saw it again with your father,” Charles went on. “Different woman. Different marriage. Different tempers.”

Dominic snorted softly. “Different chaos.”

A faint smile touched Charles's lips.

"Dahlia is fire," he said evenly. "She argues. She confronts. She demands answers immediately."

The smile faded.

"But even she has a limit," he continued quietly. "And when that limit is reached-" He paused.

"The silence comes."

Dominic nodded once. "That's the dangerous part. That's when I know I'm in real trouble- because that's when I realize I could lose her at any moment."

Ashcroft's brow lifted. "That bad?"

Charles shook his head. "Every relationship is different. Every woman expresses hurt in her own way. But the threshold…" His fingers tapped the table once. "That's universal."

He looked directly at Damien.

“Love isn’t possession. And protection born of fear is just another kind of control.”

His eyes softened.

“Trust,” he said quietly, “is not proven by how tightly you hold on. It’s proven by how confidently you let go-knowing she will return because she wants to, not because she was guarded into staying.”

He glanced briefly at Jamie before settling his gaze on Damien, holding his grandson’s eyes firmly.

“And when a woman goes quiet,” Charles added, “it’s rarely to punish you. It’s because she’s deciding whether the man beside her sees her as a partner… or a responsibility.”

A quiet settled over the table. The weight of his words sank into each man differently. Charles’s lips curved into a small, knowing smile. “When your grandmother called her future granddaughter-in-law perfect, I understood right away. Because she sees herself in her-and that’s exactly how she’s handled me all these years.” He let out a hearty laugh. “Still does. And somehow… here we are-still learning, still testing, still laughing through it all.”

He gently took his napkin, wiped his mouth, and set it down. Then he stood, placed a firm hand on Damien’s shoulder, and gave it a tight, reassuring squeeze.

“A woman goes quiet when she’s tired of explaining herself. When she feels unseen. When she starts wondering whether the man she loves hears her… or only hears his fear.”

Damien’s jaw tightened.

“You don’t win against that silence,” Charles said. “You don’t outwait it. And you certainly don’t dismiss it.”

A stillness settled over the table.

“You answer it-with accountability, son.”

Charles gave Damien’s shoulder a final, steady pat, then turned and walked away as if the matter were settled.

Chapter 368

“Come on, Jamie,” he said. “Let’s see if you’ve finally learned how to defend your queen.”

Jamie blinked, then stood, pushing his chair back. “I told you, Grandpa-you just don’t like losing.”

A faint huff of amusement escaped Charles as he walked away with him.

The silence that followed was heavier than before. Charles’s and Jamie’s footsteps echoed through the room as they walked away.

Damien sat motionless, every instinct screaming that Maya’s quiet withdrawal wasn’t anger.

It was evaluation.

And for the first time that morning, he understood-

This wasn’t about a concert.

This wasn’t about Jin.

This wasn’t about pride.

It was about whether he trusted her enough to let her stand where she had already chosen to

The silence didn’t last forever.

Ashcroft leaned back in his chair, exhaling through his nose as if trying to shake something loose.

“Women are complicated,” he said at last. “Commitment. Relationships. The rules change depending on the day, the mood, the tone you used three weeks ago.” He shook his head. “It’s like walking through a minefield blindfolded.”

Dominic let out a short huff of laughter.

“They are,” he agreed. Then he tilted his head slightly. “So are we.”

Ashcroft’s gaze flicked to Dominic, half amusement, half disbelief. “Uncle Dom… are you seriously saying we’re the problem now?”

Dominic shrugged. “I’m saying we don’t exactly make it easier.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “We hear fear and call it logic. We feel insecure and label it protection. And then we act surprised when it blows up in our faces.”

Damien remained silent, eyes fixed on the table, jaw tight.

Dominic’s voice grew more reflective. “We want certainty. Control. Guarantees.” He shook his head. “But love doesn’t work that way. Especially not with women who know their worth.”

Ashcroft scoffed lightly. “So… what? Just trust and hope for the best?”

“No,” Dominic said calmly. “Trust-and accept the risk. That’s the part no one warns you about. Love is choosing vulnerability every day, and not letting fear cage the person beside

you.”

Ashcroft went quiet.

Damien finally looked up.

Dominic met his gaze, steady and unreadable. “The irony,” he added quietly, “is the tighter you grip, the more you push her away. But when you loosen your hold…” He exhaled. “That’s usually when she stays.”

Dominic leaned back in his chair, fingers loosely laced on the table, eyes distant as he let the memory surface.

“That story your mother shared earlier?” His voice was low. “It wasn’t the full picture. The aftermath… that was worse.”

Ashcroft and Damien leaned in, sensing the weight behind his words.

“She broke up with me a week later,” Dominic admitted, a faint, rueful smile flickering across his face. “Said I was controlling, too possessive. I thought I was protecting what was mine. I didn’t see it then… I thought I was justified. If she couldn’t handle it… maybe we weren’t

meant to be."

He shook his head slowly, exhaling. "Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. I even dated someone else for a while."

A dry laugh escaped him. "That woman… the exact opposite of Dahlia. Submissive. Too submissive. And I hated it. I didn't want someone who followed blindly. I needed a partner, someone who would challenge me, call me out when I was wrong, stand with me when I was right. Someone who knew her worth."

Dominic's gaze sharpened, his voice steady. "And that's when I realized… your mother's strength is what drew me to her in the first place. I mistook her carefreeness for vulnerability. I was the one insecure-but pride made me see my insecurities as her weakness. Dahlia wasn't mad because of what I did. She was mad because my actions showed I didn't trust her judgment, her love, her commitment."

He paused, letting it sink in. "That same day, I went to find her. I asked for her forgiveness- and I asked her to marry me."

"Come on, Jamie," he said. "Let's see if you've finally learned how to defend your queen."

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Dominic met his gaze, steady and unreadable. “The irony,” he added quietly, “is the tighter you grip, the more you push her away. But when you loosen your hold…” He exhaled. “That’s usually when she stays.”

Dominic leaned back in his chair, fingers loosely laced on the table, eyes distant as he let the memory surface.

“That story your mother shared earlier?” His voice was low. “It wasn’t the full picture. The aftermath… that was worse.”

Ashcroft and Damien leaned in, sensing the weight behind his words.

“She broke up with me a week later,” Dominic admitted, a faint, rueful smile flickering across his face. “Said I was controlling, too possessive. I thought I was protecting what was mine. I didn’t see it then… I thought I was justified. If she couldn’t handle it… maybe we weren’t

meant to be.”

He shook his head slowly, exhaling. “Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. I even dated someone else for a while.”

A dry laugh escaped him. “That woman… the exact opposite of Dahlia. Submissive. Too submissive. And I hated it. I didn’t want someone who followed blindly. I needed a partner, someone who would challenge me, call me out when I was wrong, stand with me when I was right. Someone who knew her worth.”

Dominic’s gaze sharpened, his voice steady. “And that’s when I realized… your mother’s strength is what drew me to her in the first place. I mistook her carefreeness for vulnerability. I was the one insecure-but pride made me see my insecurities as her weakness. Dahlia wasn’t mad because of what I did. She was mad because my actions showed I didn’t trust her judgment, her love, her commitment.”

He paused, letting it sink in. “That same day, I went to find her. I asked for her forgiveness- and I asked her to marry me.”

Chapter 369

He shook his head, the memory bittersweet. “But I had been possessive, controlling, thinking I knew best. Even after we married, even after we had you, son… it wasn’t easy.”

His hands tightened slightly on the table. “Your mother is always traveling alone, attending events, meeting dozens of men who would try to get her attention. I didn’t like it. We argued. Often. Sometimes I thought we were on the verge of breaking everything we’d built.”

A faint, rueful smile tugged at his lips. “But I couldn’t imagine life without her. And then, finally, I saw it clearly.”

He leaned forward, voice dropping. “For years, every time she leaves she always gave me her location. Always called. Always came home. Always put our family first. Always.”

Dominic’s eyes met Damien’s, steady and unflinching. “And I finally understood. What’s the point of jealousy… when the woman you love already chose you? And still chooses you. Every single damn day.”

He exhaled slowly, letting the words settle. “That’s when I learned to see things differently. The insecurities faded. The uncertainty disappeared and I felt secure.”

Dominic locked eyes with Damien, his expression firm but calm.

“You still have a lot to learn,” he said. “Think of it like a business deal. The moment you sign that contract, you’re giving your commitment and loyalty to your partner. You trust that each side will act in the best interest of that partnership, right? You don’t hover over them, you don’t question every move- they’re trusted to do their part.”

He leaned back slightly, letting the analogy sink in. “Love is the same. When you choose each other as partners, you’ve made that commitment. You trust her decisions, her judgment, her loyalty. You support her, and she supports you. That’s how you honor what you’ve promised.

you can’t trust that… then the partnership, the love, won’t survive.”

If

He met Damien’s eyes, firm but guiding. “Fix it, son-but don’t do it because you feel obligated. Do it because you understand where you went wrong, and you want to make it right.”

Dominic turned his gaze to Ashcroft, his voice calm but pointed.

“Same goes for you, Nicholas. Be easy on Ms. Lin. Asserting your authority at every single chance isn’t the way to earn her respect… or her affection.”

Ashcroft’s eyes widened, a faint flush rising to his cheeks. He opened his mouth to argue,

then closed it again.

“What… what are you talking about, Uncle Dom?” he stammered.

He shifted awkwardly in his seat, muttering under his breath, clearly aware that he sounded less than convincing. “I’m not… not trying anything! Definitely not trying to earn her affection. She’s just… too annoying! Yeah… too annoying!”

Ashcroft's face went red, his usual composure crumbling as he glanced at Damien, who was trying-and failing-not to smirk.

"Too annoying," he muttered again under his breath, like saying it enough times might make it

true.

Damien leaned back, shaking his head. "You realize you sound like a lovesick teenager, right?

Ashcroft froze, eyes wide. "I-what?! No! You're delusional! You need help, man!"

Dominic's voice carried calm but teasing. "Ah… of course! The denial stage! That's exactly the first sign of a sickness called the love bug."

Ashcroft froze, mouth half-open, mind racing. Love bug? Me? No… impossible. He shook his head, trying to push the thought away.

But deep down, for the first time, he couldn't ignore the truth quietly poking through the armor of his ego.

Chapter 370

The table fell quiet again-but this time, it wasn't heavy with lectures or revelation.

It was… awkward.

Ashcroft sat stiffly, jaw set, eyes fixed somewhere between the table and the far wall, as if staring hard enough might erase the last few minutes from existence. The thought lingered anyway, unwelcome and persistent, tapping insistently at the back of his mind.

Across from him, Damien said nothing. He didn't need to. The knowing look on his face was

more than enough.

Dominic watched them both for a moment, then gave Ashcroft a faint, knowing smile.

"Just remember, kid-sometimes you're so wrapped up in your own ego, you don't even notice how you're pushing her away. And by the time you realize it, she's already out of reach.

He stood then, hands brushing lightly over the table, eyes steady on them.

"You two young men have a lot of reflecting to do," he said, voice calm but weighted with meaning. "You've spent your lives building empires with iron fists-but love…" He paused." Love isn't conquered with strength. It isn't won with control. It's earned every single day- through trust, through respect, through the courage to be vulnerable."

He let the words settle before continuing, his tone sharpening just enough to cut.

“You have remarkable women in your lives. Don’t treat them like obstacles to manage, or prizes to claim. Treat them like partners. Listen. Support. Believe in them-even when it scares you. Because the moment you stop trusting them-the moment you doubt their choices, their love, their loyalty-that’s the moment you risk losing everything that truly

matters.”

His gaze softened, just slightly.

“Love isn’t easy. It isn’t safe. It was never meant to be easy.” A faint breath left him. “But it’s worth every misstep, every fear, every fight. It won’t ever be perfect-but it’s those

imperfections that make it real.”

He straightened slowly, presence filling the space without raising his voice.

“Don’t wait until it’s too late to realize that.”

Dominic stepped back from the table, leaving Damien and Ashcroft frozen in their seats, the

weight of his words pressing down on them like a quiet storm.

The room stayed quiet long after Dominic stepped away.

Not the heavy, crushing kind this time-just an uncomfortable, lingering stillness, like neither of them quite knew where to put their hands or their thoughts.

Ashcroft stared at his plate, appetite long gone. He nudged his fork once, twice, without actually lifting it, as if the food had personally offended him.

Damien remained still, elbows on the table, fingers loosely clasped. His mind was elsewhere -replaying words he hadn't wanted to hear, but couldn't ignore.

Minutes passed.

Ashcroft exhaled sharply through his nose. "Well," he muttered, "that's one hell of a breakfast.

Damien huffed, the sound more tired than amused. "So what's your plan?"

Ashcroft shot him a look. "To have some fluffy pancakes, eggs, and coffee."

Damien leaned back slightly. “Funny.”

That earned a reluctant snort from Ashcroft. He rubbed a hand over his face, then let it drop to the table, shoulders tense.

“Do you ever feel like they’re all in on something we’re not?” he asked quietly. “Like they’ve unlocked some secret level of life and we’re still smashing buttons, hoping something works?”

Damien didn’t answer right away. “I think,” he said slowly, “they just made more mistakes than we have.”

Ashcroft scoffed. “Comforting.”

Another stretch of silence followed. This one different. Thinner. Less hostile.

Ashcroft shifted in his chair, jaw tightening. “He didn’t have to say it like that.”

Damien glanced at him. “Like what?”

“Like I’m some… emotional tyrant.” He paused, then added, quieter, “I don’t even like her.”

Damien’s eyebrow lifted. “You say that like repeating it might convince you.”

Ashcroft opened his mouth-then closed it. He leaned back, folding his arms defensively.