Intern 471

Chapter 471

His gaze stayed steady.

“I’d die for her if I had to,” he said, voice firm.

“We’ve known each other before you ever met her-we trained together, worked together… so yes, I

care about her.”

A beat.

“But that’s it.”

His gaze hardened slightly.

“There are lines we don’t cross.”

His voice remained steady as he kept his eyes locked on Ashcroft.

Ashcroft’s fist tightened. He slammed it onto the table and suddenly stood up.

“So what are you saying?” he snapped. “Given a chance, you’d cross that line if you could?”

Cruz shook his head.

He looked down for a moment, a faint, almost unreadable smile tugging at his lips, before lifting

his gaze again to meet Ashcroft’s burning eyes.

“Beyond being our boss, she’s like a sister to us too.”

A pause.

“Don’t let insecurity or jealousy derail the mission, Mr. Ashcroft. The sooner we get this done, the

better for all of us.”

Ashcroft’s jaw snapped tight.

“You fu-”

“That’s enough, Nick.”

Damien’s voice cut through the room like steel.

He stepped in front of him, blocking Ashcroft’s view of Cruz.

“Get yourself together,” he said firmly. “I need you focused for this.” He paused, holding Ashcroft’s gaze. “Do it for me.”

Ashcroft held his stare for a few seconds, saying nothing. Then he turned away and slammed both

hands on the table.

“Fuck… fuck… fuck!”

He straightened abruptly, exhaling hard, then looked back at Damien. Slowly, he raised a hand in

surrender.

“Okay. Fine,” he said through gritted teeth. “What do you want to do now?”

Damien gave a small nod and stepped closer, patting Ashcroft’s shoulder-then squeezing it

briefly, a quiet thanks more than anything.

“We’ll test the masks with a broader audience,” he said. “Walk around the company. See how

people react.”

Ashcroft adjusted his uniform, straightening it before rolling his shoulders back.

“Alright then,” he muttered. “Let’s do this.”

Damien shifted his attention to James.

James lifted his tablet, unlocking it as he prepared to brief them on the arrangements.

But before he could-

A vibration cut through the room.

Cruz pulled his phone from his pocket and glanced at the screen.

“Excuse me. I need to take this,” he said calmly.

Without waiting for a response, he turned and stepped out of the room.

Ashcroft scoffed. “Unbelievable. What a jerk.”

Silence lingered for a second-

Then Hudson spoke.

“For what it’s worth, Mr. Ashcroft… Cruz isn’t a threat to you.”

Ashcroft turned to him, brows drawing together, caught off guard.

“… What are you talking about?”

Hudson held his gaze.

“Cruz is already in a relationship.”

Ashcroft frowned. “So what? That doesn’t mean-”

“He’s with Mrs. Takahashi’s niece,” Hudson cut in calmly. “Anika. Ms. Harper’s cousin.”

Ashcroft stilled.

“…What?”

Hudson continued, voice steady.

“She’s pregnant. First trimester-and it’s a sensitive case.

A brief pause.

“He didn’t want to take this mission because of her condition. But Ms. Harper insisted. Said he was the closest match to your build.”

Another pause.

“She promised to look after Anika while he’s away.”

Ashcroft didn’t respond.

Hudson continued, his tone steady.

“He’s been on edge since we left. Worried about her.”

A brief pause.

“That was Anika calling just now. Today’s her prenatal check-up-the first one he’s had to miss.”

Ashcroft went still.

The tension in his shoulders shifted, his gaze dropping briefly before he looked away.

Just then, the door opened, and Cruz walked back in-unaware of the shift in the room.

“Apologies,” Cruz said as he stepped back in. “It was an important call.”

Ashcroft cleared his throat, the sound a little forced.

“…How is she?”

Cruz paused, caught off guard. “Excuse me?”

Ashcroft shifted slightly, clearly not used to asking.

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“Anika,” he said. “Your girlfriend. How did the check-up go?”

Cruz’s gaze flicked to Hudson, surprise flashing across his face.

Hudson didn’t deny it. “I told them.”

Then he looked down, suddenly finding the floor very interesting.

Cruz looked back at Ashcroft, still processing.

“…She’s okay,” he said after a moment.”The appointment’s later today. She just called to say Ms.

Harper’s on her way to pick her up.”

He hesitated briefly, his voice softening at the mention of her.

“She also told me that her cousin insisted she stay with her while I’m away, so they’ll be heading

back to the main house after.”

Ashcroft didn’t speak immediately.

He looked away briefly, jaw tightening like he was recalculating something in his head.

Then he scoffed under his breath.

“Of course she did…”

Monroe chimed in, “Aren’t you guys stationed overseas? Does that mean you live in Japan too?”

Hudson let out a small, genuine laugh. “We are-but we’re not prisoners either. We still get time to

go home, at least a week each month.”

A slight shrug.

“Unless something comes up that requires us to stay.”

Monroe glanced at Hudson, curiosity slipping through. “What about you? Are you in a relationship

too?”

Cruz answered before Hudson could.

“Of course he is, in fact, he’s married.” he said, almost dry. “He’s the base commander-but his com

mander is there too.”

A faint smirk tugged at Cruz’s lips.

“So he doesn’t exactly get away with much,” he added. “She’s not someone you’d want to mess

with.”

Monroe nodded, thinking for a second-then his eyes widened slightly, like something clicked.

“…Wait,” he said slowly. “You’re not Kaishō Rin’s husband… are you?”

Cruz didn’t even try to hide it.

“Bingo.”

Monroe froze.

"… What?!" His voice jumped. "You're married to her?!"

Hudson only gave a small, restrained smile.

"Three years," he said calmly. "Four in a few months."

Monroe stared at him, still trying to process it.

"You-your wife-you're married to Vice Admiral Rin? The first woman to make three-star rank

across any branch of the Japanese military?"

Hudson didn't look fazed.

"Last I checked, yeah," he said dryly. "We're still married."

Monroe blinked-then the reaction hit all at once.

“Wait, you’re serious?”

His expression shifted again, excitement creeping back in.

“Damn! You should’ve said that sooner-I mean… I…” He caught himself, then pushed on anyway. Do you think you could ask her to sign my book? I really admire her journey. I used to follow her

work until she went off the radar a few years ago. There were rumors she got married and moved

overseas, but I never thought-”

A sharp throat cleared from the side-cutting him off cleanly.

Damien spoke, voice cool and firm, “Your fanboy moment can wait. We have work to do.”

The words landed cleanly in the room, cutting through the last trace of excitement.

The shift was immediate-like someone had flipped a switch back to reality.

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A brief silence followed.

No one spoke.

Not because there was nothing to say-but because no one had expected that from Monroe of all

people.

No one laughed either-mostly because they were still processing it.

The head of security. Built like a wall. Usually unreadable.

And yet, he'd just turned into a full-blown fanboy.

Monroe straightened immediately, clearly embarrassed at getting carried away.

"Sorry, boss."

Damien gave a faint nod, accepting it without comment, then moved on.

He shifted his attention to James-

But James didn't move.

He was still staring ahead, tablet in hand, clearly somewhere else entirely.

After years of working with Monroe, even he looked like he was still trying to process what he'd just witnessed.

Ashcroft clicked his tongue and snapped his fingers right in front of his face.

"Hey-Horton," he said. "You having a heart attack or something?"

James blinked.

Once. Twice.

Then he shook himself out of it, straightening quickly.

“Right. Sorry. I-yes. Okay.”

He exhaled once, regaining composure, then lifted the tablet and tapped the screen a few times.

“A memo was sent out earlier this morning,” he began. “All departments were informed that the boss will be conducting his quarterly walkthrough today.”

He paused briefly, then turned his attention toward Hudson-still wearing Damien’s face.

“You don’t need to worry about being questioned,” James added. “Company protocol is very strict

during walkthroughs. Only the boss initiates interaction.”

A tap on the screen.

“Employees aren’t allowed to ask direct questions on the spot. Any concerns or reports have to be submitted through the internal system after the inspection.”

A small beat.

“So for the most part, this will be observational.”

He lowered the tablet slightly.

“We’ll move through selected departments as part of a routine inspection.”

Ashcroft frowned immediately.

“Wait a second,” he cut in. “Walk through the company?”

He turned toward Damien, incredulous.

“D-do you have any idea how massive your company is? Departments, divisions, whatever the hell

you call those corporate maze floors-”

He gestured vaguely.

“We’ll hit nightfall before we even make it to the second wing.”

James didn’t react, already tapping through something on his tablet.

“Not quite, Mr. Ashcroft.”

He turned the screen and placed it in front of Damien.

“Quarterly walkthroughs are conducted selectively. We don’t cover the entire company in one go.”

A brief pause.

“Departments are chosen based on performance metrics-either those exceeding expectations or

those flagged for review.”

He angled the tablet slightly for everyone to see.

“We’ve already prepared the list for this quarter.”

He paused, swiped the screen once, then continued-

“R&D, PMO, Operations, IT… and Security.”

James lifted his gaze slightly from the tablet.

“This is a make-or-break situation.”

He tapped the screen once, organizing his thoughts.

“These departments either have frequent direct interaction with the boss, or only limited familiarity without regular contact. The purpose of this walkthrough is to test both sides-recognition, response, and behavioral consistency under perceived authority.”

A brief pause.

“Security in particular is critical. Given their training and exposure, they are the least likely to be

deceived. Their reactions will heavily influence the overall assessment of this test.”

He lowered the tablet slightly.

“In short… their responses will determine whether the masks hold or fail.”

Damien gave a single nod.

“Let’s move.”

No one questioned it. The response was immediate-subtle nods, straightened posture, and silent

compliance.

Monroe moved first, naturally taking the lead as head of security, already positioning himself by the door before pushing it open.

The rest followed without hesitation-except for Ashcroft. He lingered a second longer behind.

He pulled out his phone and glanced at the screen-still nothing

His jaw tightened, irritation flickering across his face.

“That brat,” he muttered under his breath, slipping the device back into his pocket before rolling his shoulders and following after the others.

By the time they reached the elevator, everyone had already fallen into formation-positions instinctive, almost second nature.

Hudson stood at the front, wearing Damien Blackwood’s face, with James beside him, tablet in hand.

Behind them, Monroe and Cruz took their places.

And at the very back-

The real Damien and Ashcroft, hidden in plain sight under borrowed identities.

The elevator ride passed in silence. No one spoke; no one needed to.

Everyone knew their role.

As the elevator descended, the panel above the doors ticked down one floor at a time-the number five lighting briefly before fading, then shifting to four with a soft blink.

Then James spoke, his voice low and precise, cutting cleanly through it.

“First stop-R&D.”

A soft chime sounded as the elevator came to a stop, and the doors slid open.

Hudson stepped out first, carrying Damien Blackwood’s presence with effortless control.

And just like that, the next phase of the test began.

On the opposite side of the city, far from the controlled precision of Blackwood Enterprises, the

world moved at a slower, quieter breath.

Dahlia stood by the tall windows of Harrington Manor, gaze fixed on the stretch of greenery

beneath a pale blue sky.

Behind her, Kim approached quietly, her steps measured-careful, like even sound might disturb

the weight in the room.

“Madam, everything is ready.”

Dahlia gave a small nod.

Kim hesitated.

Her hands curled slightly at her sides before relaxing again, as if steadying herself. A faint crease

formed between her brows-concern she didn’t bother hiding fast enough.

“Madam…” she said more softly this time. “Are you sure about this?”

The question lingered in the air, heavier than the silence that followed it.

Dahlia didn’t answer immediately.

She inhaled slowly, then exhaled-measured, steady.

A faint tension tightened at the corners of her eyes before she let it go.

“No,” she admitted quietly.

Kim’s expression shifted instantly-subtle, but unmistakable. Her shoulders tensed slightly, and her lips parted as if she wanted to respond, then thought better of it.

Dahlia didn’t look back.

Her gaze remained fixed ahead, but her voice softened just a fraction.

“But I know one thing for certain… nothing stays hidden forever.”

A pause.

“I’d rather control how it comes to light than be caught unprepared when it does.”

Kim lowered her gaze.

Concern flickered across her face-but she didn’t argue. She understood enough not to.

Then-

A phone rang.

Kim answered it quickly, listened, then gave a small nod.

Her expression shifted slightly as she looked up.

“Madam… she’s ready.”

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Back at Blackwood Enterprises, the effect was immediate.

The moment Hudson appeared on the floor, the atmosphere inside R&D shifted almost instantly.

Conversations cut off mid-sentence.

The quiet tapping of keyboards gradually slowed as heads turned one after another toward the

elevator lobby.

Then recognition spread.

Employees straightened instinctively.

Some stood immediately.

Others lowered their heads respectfully the second they realized who had arrived.

“Mr. Blackwood…”

The greeting came quietly at first before echoing across nearby workstations in a ripple.

Hudson acknowledged none of it beyond a calm, unreadable glance across the department.

And somehow, that made the pressure even worse.

James stepped out beside him smoothly, tablet already in hand, posture composed and

professional as though this was just another ordinary walkthrough.

Behind them, Monroe and Cruz followed without a sound.

At the very back-

Damien and Ashcroft emerged last beneath borrowed faces, blending seamlessly into the

formation.

Ashcroft’s eyes swept across the department carefully.

Even he had to admit-

It was convincing.

Too convincing.

Not a single person questioned Hudson’s identity.

Not even for a second.

The silence inside R&D shifted only when movement came from deeper within the department.

An office door opened.

An older man stepped out.

Mid-fifties. Slightly round build with a well-fitted suit that strained just a little at the waist. A

salt-and-pepper beard carefully maintained. His expression adjusted the moment he saw the group, shifting instantly into something welcoming, almost rehearsed.

He approached with measured confidence, stopping at a respectful distance before bowing

slightly.

“Mr. Blackwood, sir,” he said with a practiced smile. “What a pleasant surprise. If we had known

you were coming, we would’ve made the proper arrangements.”

Hudson looked at him for a moment, taking him in without hurry.

The man held his posture, but there was a subtle tension in his shoulders now, as the silence

stretched just a little too long.

“Last I checked,” Hudson said evenly, “I own this company.”

A brief pause.

“I don’t need to notify anyone before I walk through it.’

The man’s smile tightened.

He gave a small, nervous laugh as if trying to smooth it over.

“Of course, sir. That’s not what I meant, I just-”

Hudson lifted a hand slightly. Not abrupt. Not forceful. Just enough to stop him.

The man fell silent immediately.

“I’m here for a walkthrough,” Hudson continued calmly. “Not to waste time on irrelevant

conversation.”

The shift in tone settled over the area like pressure.

The department head nodded quickly, the earlier confidence gone.

“Oh… of course,” he said, forcing a tighter smile as he tried to recover. “I-I apologize. Yes, sir. Of

course. Understood.”

The man who had stepped forward was Bill Franklin, Director of R&D. He managed the entire department’s operations, including project selection, budgeting, and hiring decisions. In most situations, he carried himself with the ease of someone used to authority within his own domain.

But that authority didn’t translate here.

Not under Damien Blackwood.

It showed in the smallest details now-the stiffness in his posture, the way his hands stayed loosely clasped in front of him, and the careful control of his breathing as he tried to maintain composure under scrutiny.

Bill cleared his throat once, stepping slightly aside as he gestured down the corridor.

“Um… okay,” he said quickly, his voice noticeably more careful than before. “This way, sir.”

Hudson didn’t answer immediately, just followed his gaze for a moment before taking a step

forward.

It was then that movement slipped quietly from the same office Bill had just come out of.

A younger woman stepped out.

She was dressed neatly, though slightly too polished for a casual R&D environment.

There were subtle signs of disarray-her hair not quite sitting in place as if it had been hastily fixed, a few strands out of alignment. Her blouse wasn’t fully smooth, slightly creased in a way that suggested she had just adjusted it quickly before stepping out. Even her lipstick, while still sharp, had a faint imperfection at the edge.

Nothing dramatic.

But enough to suggest she hadn’t simply been sitting at a desk.

She moved quickly, carefully composed, as if trying to leave without drawing attention.

She didn’t look up. She kept her gaze lowered, adjusting her pace just enough to blend into the background as she moved toward one of the cubicles.

But the timing wasn’t natural.

It was too calculated to be casual, too delayed to be incidental.

She wasn’t supposed to be seen.

Or at least-she was trying not to be.

Bill didn’t react much, but his posture stiffened noticeably, the smallest tension running through his shoulders before he forced it back under control-his expression a fraction too composed, like someone trying to keep a situation contained before it could be noticed.

The nearby employees didn’t react either. Outwardly, nothing changed, as if it was just another

routine occurrence in a place where nothing unusual ever needed to be acknowledged.

But the group that had just entered the floor noticed.

There was something off about it.

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Hudson’s gaze passed over her briefly.

No change in expression.

No acknowledgment.

But the moment she crossed his line of sight, her steps tightened almost imperceptibly-the kind

of reaction that only came from realizing she had been seen.

She kept walking.

Didn’t stop.

Didn’t look back.

The real Damien Blackwood stepped forward and leaned slightly toward Hudson, murmuring something only the group behind them could hear.

Hudson’s gaze didn’t move from the woman.

“Stop right there.”

The command landed cleanly.

Immediate.

The woman froze.

Her body tensed as if she had been physically pulled in place. Slowly, she turned-just enough to acknowledge them-but her head remained slightly lowered, avoiding direct eye contact.

Hudson studied her for a moment.

“You don’t look familiar,” he said evenly. “Are you a new hire?”

The woman opened her mouth slightly, hesitation catching her before she could answer.

But Bill stepped in first.

Too quickly.

“Yes, Mr. Blackwood,” he said, a fraction of nervousness slipping through his tone. “She’s one of

our new administrative assistants. Just started last week.”

Hudson’s eyes shifted to him briefly.

Then back to her.

“Is she mute?”

Bill blinked, caught off guard.

“I’m sorry, sir-what… what do you mean?”

Hudson’s expression didn’t change.

“I asked if she’s mute. Why are you answering for her?”

Silence followed immediately.

Bill went still, the confidence he had entered with earlier completely gone now.

“I-I just meant-”

“Come closer,” Hudson said, cutting him off.

The woman hesitated.

Her fingers curled slightly at her sides, uncertain.

Hudson’s gaze sharpened just a fraction.

“Are you deaf as well?”

That made her move.

Carefully, she stepped forward until she was standing within clearer view, then slowly lifted her

head.

Her expression was nervous, controlled, like someone trying not to misstep in real time.

But her eyes didn’t stay on Hudson.

They flickered past him.

Searching.

Until they landed on someone just off to the side.

Her voice came out uncertain, almost disbelieving.

“You… Mr. Ashcroft?”

A beat of silence followed.

The man standing beside Monroe didn’t answer immediately.

Not because he didn’t hear her.

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But because something about her face didn’t immediately connect.

Cruz-wearing Ashcroft’s identity-glanced subtly toward the real Ashcroft for confirmation.

A silent check passed between them.

Do we know her?

But the real Ashcroft didn’t react with recognition either.

Only a faint shift in his expression.

Confusion.

Then, almost imperceptibly, a small shake of his head.

No.

He didn’t know her.

Cruz registered it instantly.

His attention returned to the woman.

He tilted his head slightly, studying her again-calm, measured, deliberate-but still nothing

clicked.

“..Do I know you?” he asked at last.

Her expression faltered for a brief second.

Not dramatic-

Just a small shift around her eyes. The kind that came from embarrassment after realizing she

remembered someone far more clearly than they remembered her.

A faint awkwardness crept into her posture, but she forced herself to speak anyway.

“Oh… you probably don’t remember,” she said quietly, trying to steady her voice. “But we’ve met

before.”

Her fingers tightened lightly against her sleeve before she continued.

“At the Velvet Room… I work there part-time.”

A brief pause.

The moment the name left her mouth, something flickered across the real Ashcroft’s face behind the disguise.

Recognition.

Not of her specifically-

But of the place.

The woman didn’t flinch. Instead, she lifted her chin, her eyes locking onto his with a searing clarity

that refused to be dismissed.

The weight of the room’s silence no longer felt like a burden-it felt like a stage.

“I was one of the hostesses assigned to the VIP section,” she admitted with confidence.

Her voice didn’t waver. If anything, saying it out loud gave her a dangerous kind of importance. It

was the kind of confidence that came from believing proximity to a man like Nicholas Ashcroft-

even for a price-gave her a claim that no one else in the department had.

“You used to come there pretty often, Mr. Ashcroft,” she said softly.

She paused, her gaze sweeping over the silent department with a sudden, sharp arrogance. She

wasn’t looking at them like colleagues anymore; she was looking at them like audience members.

Her eyes returned to Cruz, gleaming with a dangerous level of self-assurance.

“I was assigned to your table a few times before, and we…” she let the words hang in the air, a

knowing smirk playing on her lips, “we shared more than just a few drinks. So, I thought you might

remember me.”

Ashcroft stayed silent behind the borrowed face.

But internally-

He was already cursing.

Not because the woman recognized him.

That part barely surprised him anymore.

It was the timing.

Of all places.

Of all moments.

A faint headache started forming behind his eyes as he resisted the urge to drag a hand down his face.

Because judging from the subtle shifts in expression around him-

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the e entre operation could crack wide open right there in the middle of the R&D floor.

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The silence that followed wasn’t normal.

It didn’t feel like confusion. It felt controlled. Measured.

Like everyone in that room had collectively decided, without a word, that this moment needed to

be contained before it could spiral further.

Cruz didn’t react immediately.

Years of training under pressure-reading rooms, controlling emotion, holding a role without

breaking character-kept his expression steady even as the situation tightened around him.

But internally, he had already adjusted.

This wasn’t something he could handle emotionally.

The only way through this was to stay in character.

To respond the way Nicholas Ashcroft would.

Like a man born with too much money, too much privilege, and far too little reason to care about

the people he paid for.

Arrogant. Detached.

The type of billionaire who treated encounters like transactions easily forgotten the moment they

ended.

Cruz exhaled quietly, then straightened.

His gaze swept over the woman from head to toe, studying her carefully.

Her posture had shifted slightly from before. The embarrassment was still there, visible in the

flush on her cheeks, but a dangerous kind of confidence had taken its place.

Unfortunately for her-Cruz knew exactly what kind of man Ashcroft was supposed to be. And this

was not a situation to handle gently.

Emotion had no place here.

Only control. Only power.

His expression cooled completely.

Then, slowly, a faint smirk appeared on his face. Sharp and mocking. The kind that made the difference in status painfully obvious without him needing to say it directly.

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“I’m sorry, miss,” he said smoothly, “but if what you’re saying is true, then that only tells me one thing.”

His eyes dragged over her once. Unhurried. Disrespectfully casual.

“I paid for your time.”

Silence settled around them. Cruz tilted his head slightly.

“And trust me,” he continued, almost amused now, “women in places like that tend to blur together after a while.”

The woman’s expression stiffened. But he didn’t stop.

“You were there to pour drinks, smile prettily, and keep VIP guests entertained.” A faint shrug

followed. “You did your job. I paid well. End of transaction.”

Every word landed colder than the last.

“Expecting me to remember you specifically is a little ambitious, don’t you think?”

A few nearby employees visibly went still. Even Bill looked uncomfortable now. But Cruz

maintained the same composed expression.

Effortless. Untouched.

“Do you know how many women throw themselves at men like me on a weekly basis?” he asked

casually. “If I remembered every face attached to a bottle service table, I’d need a personal

archive.”

A quiet scoff escaped him.

“And let’s be honest…” his gaze lowered slightly toward her again, openly dismissive now, “I don’t

exactly revisit paid experiences. Once is usually enough.”

The humiliation on her face became harder to hide.

But Cruz pressed harder anyway. Because that was what Nicholas Ashcroft would do.

Cruel. Arrogant.

A man so used to wealth and influence that other people’s dignity barely registered to him.

“I spend money for convenience,” he said calmly. “For privacy. Not emotional attachment.”

Then his eyes narrowed slightly.

“So I’m curious why you suddenly felt the need to announce this in front of an entire department.”

A beat passed. The smirk returned.

“Unless,” he said lightly, “you convinced yourself one paid night actually meant something.”

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His eyes stayed on her for a moment longer, then shifted slightly past her, as if she was no longer the focal point of importance.

“What I am curious about is…” he continued smoothly, his calm tone somehow making the insult

worse. “What exactly is someone like you doing here?”

His gaze swept over her once more before the corner of his mouth lifted faintly.

“No offense,” he said. A brief pause followed. “But you seem a little… out of place.”

The woman’s expression tightened almost immediately.

The confidence from earlier faded beneath the sting of humiliation, but she refused to lower her

head this time.

Because she remembered him. Far more clearly than he remembered her.

She'd been hustling at the Velvet Room part-time for two years, though it was a far cry from her usual circuit.

Most nights were spent in the grit of the city's basement clubs-places where the air was thick and

the "main job" was much less subtle.

A friend had finally thrown her a bone, pulling strings to get her onto the Velvet Room's rotation. It was supposed to be a step up-trading the crowded stages of the outskirts for the quiet, high-priced discretion of a VIP lounge.

Most nights were tolerable. Boring. Repetitive. Sometimes disgusting-but tolerable.

Older wealthy men filled places like that almost every night. Men who bragged about their marriages while surrounding themselves with younger women the moment they stepped into a private lounge.

They drank too much. Talked too loudly. Acted like money excused everything.

But they tipped well. And in that line of work, that was usually enough.

During her third week working there-she ended up assigned to Nicholas Ashcroft's table.

Everyone in the city knew who he was.

Young. Rich. Reckless.

The type of man who spent money without looking at the numbers and carried himself like

consequences simply didn't apply to him.

At first, she was just another hostess refilling drinks while he and his friends occupied the private lounge like they owned it.

But she noticed him immediately.

And from that moment on, she made it her goal to stay within his attention.

Every shift after that became calculated in subtle ways-lingering a little longer when refilling his

drinks, brushing past his seat with just enough “accidental” contact, timing her movements so she always ended up within his line of sight.

Nothing obvious. Nothing that could be called out. Just small, repeated moments of proximity she convinced herself might eventually turn into something more.

But memory didn’t care about effort.

It hit her in sharp, jagged flashes-dragging her back to the night when all of it finally seemed to pay off.

The moment she was alone in a room with the man she had quietly fixated on for weeks.

From the soft click of the private room door locking shut, to the rough pull of her blouse being undone, then the feeling of being pressed down on all fours onto that wide leather sofa, her body

bared to him while he claimed her from behind.

She could still feel the phantom pressure of his hands on her hips and hear the jagged catch in her

own breath as the ‘accidental’ touches of her shift finally transformed into something raw and

undeniable.

After that, he disappeared from her life just as quickly as he had entered it.

But she remembered every detail.

Not a single day had passed since that night that she hadn’t dreamed of their paths crossing again

-and of that night happening all over again.

So hearing him look at her now with complete indifference-

The same man whose silver-ringed fingers had once bruised her hips, whose hands had known the heat of her skin, now stood before her with them tucked casually into his pockets, as if none of it

had ever existed.

As if she had never mattered enough to leave even the faintest impression.

That realization hurt far more than she had ever expected.

Chapter 480

The silence after Cruz's words stretched uncomfortably across the entire floor.

Even the employees pretending not to pay attention had gone completely still now, their eyes lowered to their desks while listening to every second of the exchange unfolding behind them.

The woman's face had paled slightly.

But the humiliation burning in her eyes remained.

Cruz had expected her to back down after that.

Most people would have.

Especially after being publicly reduced to nothing more than a paid mistake in front of an entire

corporate floor.

But instead-

She laughed softly.

The sound caught several people off guard.

It wasn’t loud.

Wasn’t hysterical.

If anything, it sounded nervous.

Disbelieving.

Her eyes stayed fixed on him.

“You really don’t remember me,” she murmured.

Cruz didn’t answer.

Didn’t need to.

The woman swallowed once before speaking again, quieter this time.

“That night…” she said carefully, “you said something very different.”

A dangerous shift moved through the atmosphere instantly.

Cruz remained outwardly calm, but internally, every instinct sharpened.

This was getting worse.

Fast.

The woman seemed to realize it too late.

Because now that everyone was paying attention, backing down would only make her look foolish.

And foolish pride was one of the most dangerous things in situations like this.

“You were drunk,” she continued, forcing a small smile. “Your friends had already left the room

hours earlier.”

Ashcroft stayed completely still behind Cruz.

But internally-He already knew exactly where this was going.

And he hated it.

The woman’s gaze softened faintly, as if the memory itself had pulled her somewhere else entirely.

“You kept asking me to stay longer,” she said quietly.

A heavy silence dropped across the room.

One of the nearby employees accidentally knocked over a pen.

Cruz’s expression didn’t shift even slightly.

But Monroe subtly turned his face away, covering the lower half of his mouth with his hand as if adjusting his cuff.

Not because he was shocked.

Because he was trying very hard not to laugh at the absolute disaster unfolding in front of them.

Hudson looked ready to develop a migraine.

Meanwhile, the real Ashcroft was mentally debating homicide.

Because this-

This was exactly why he hated women from places like the Velvet Room remembering him

afterward.

The woman looked at Cruz again, her confidence slowly returning now that she had everyone's

attention.

"You even said you'd come back for me next time," she added softly.

That nearly broke Cruz.

He was one sentence away from dragging the real Ashcroft into the nearest elevator shaft.

Instead, he slowly tilted his head.

Then smiled.

Coldly.

“You’re misunderstanding something.” His tone remained flat.

The woman frowned slightly.

Cruz stepped forward once.

“And that misunderstanding,” he continued smoothly, “is believing men like me say those thing

because we mean them.”

The words landed like ice water.

The woman’s expression froze.

Cruz didn’t stop.

“If I told you to stay longer,” he said casually, “it was because I didn’t feel like finding another

distraction that night."

A few people visibly winced.

"But let's not confuse convenience with affection."

The last traces of color drained from her face.

"And coming back?" Cruz gave a faint scoff. "Please."

His gaze lowered briefly toward her before returning to her eyes.

"You said it yourself," he replied coolly. "I was drunk. Do I honestly look like the kind of man who

remembers every woman he's slept with?"

Then his expression darkened completely.

"Let's make something clear," he said, his voice turning colder. "I was a customer. You were providing a service. I paid for your time that night. That's how transactions work, isn't it?"

The woman’s face stiffened.

“You do what you have to do to make a living. That’s your life, and frankly, it’s none of my business,” he said smoothly. “It only becomes my business when you suddenly decide to blur professional boundaries and create misunderstandings.”

A faint scoff escaped him.

“You work in an industry built on selling attention, affection, and fantasy to wealthy men,” he continued calmly. “So what exactly made you think you’d be any different?”

His gaze sharpened slightly.

“Did you really convince yourself I’d develop feelings over a paid night?”

Another pause.

“Or is this what you do with all your clients after they leave?” he asked flatly. “Attach meaning to every transaction involving a man rich enough to impress you?”

Then came the final blow.

“Miss,” he said coldly, “don’t embarrass yourself any further.”

The silence that followed felt suffocating.

No one noticed the brief vibration from the tablet in James’ hand.

Not with the entire department focused on the tension unfolding in the middle of the floor.

Unbeknownst to everyone else, the real Damien-still standing behind Hudson’s borrowed identity

-had already quietly instructed James earlier to run a background check on the woman the

moment she was stopped.

And now-

The results had arrived.

James glanced at the screen once before stepping forward silently and handing the tablet over to

Hudson.

Hudson took it without a word.

His eyes scanned the screen once.

Then again.

A slow swipe of his thumb moved through several pages before he handed the tablet back to

James with the same calm indifference he had worn since arriving on the floor.

But when he finally spoke-

The atmosphere inside R&D tightened instantly.

“Brandy Martinez,” Hudson said evenly. “Twenty-seven years old.”

The woman visibly stiffened.

“Full-time entertainer at Annie’s Fannies. Part-time hostess at the Velvet Room.”

A few nearby employees immediately lowered their heads further.

No one dared make a sound.

The woman’s lips parted slightly, as if she wanted to argue.,

But before another word could leave her mouth, Hudson continued like he was simply reading

quarterly statistics.

“Highest educational attainment: Grade twelve.” Another pause. “No corporate backgro

secretarial experience. No administrative training.”

His gaze lifted slowly from the tablet information.

“And certainly no qualifications related to research and development support.”

By now, Bill Franklin was visibly sweating.

Hudson’s eyes finally settled on him.

Calm.

Cold.

Enough to make the older man look like he was seconds away from collapsing.

“Mr. Franklin,” Hudson said smoothly, “would you care to explain what exactly made Ms. Martinez

qualified to join Blackwood Enterprises?”

A brief pause followed.

“More specifically,” he continued, his voice somehow becoming even quieter, “what made her

qualified to become an administrative assistant within the R&D department?”