Intern 501

Chapter 501

The city lights blurred past the window as Damien sat silently in the back seat.

James glanced at his phone before looking into the rearview mirror.

“The store just confirmed your order is ready for pickup, Sir.”

Damien nodded.

“Good.”

His gaze remained fixed on the passing streets.

“Head to the appointment first.”

James nodded and said nothing further.

Twenty minutes later, the vehicle turned onto a quiet street tucked away from the city’s main shopping

district.

At first glance, the building looked unremarkable.

No flashy displays.

No advertisements.

No crowds.

Most people walking past would never guess what was hidden behind its doors.

The establishment didn’t operate like a traditional jewelry store.

There were no business hours.

No public showroom.

No walk–in customers.

Every visit required an appointment months in advance, and even then, approval was far from guaranteed.

The firm's clientele consisted almost exclusively of royalty, heads of state, old–money families, and the

occasional billionaire seeking something the rest of the world couldn't obtain.

If a stone existed, they could find it.

If it didn't exist on the market, they knew who owned it.

And if the owner refused to sell, they knew how to start the conversation.

The moment Damien stepped out of the vehicle, a distinguished–looking man waiting near the entrance immediately approached.

"Mr. Blackwood."

His smile was polite but respectful.

“We’ve been expecting you.”

Damien nodded.

“Has it arrived?”

The man’s smile widened slightly.

“It arrived this afternoon, Sir.”

Without another word, he escorted Damien inside and toward one of the private viewing suites reserved

for the firm’s highest–tier clients.

Inside the private viewing suite, the manager guided Damien to a seating area before approaching a secured wall safe hidden behind a framed painting.

After entering a code, he carefully retrieved a small black case.

Only then did he slip on a pair of white gloves.

The gesture alone spoke volumes.

Objects of this value weren't handled casually.

Returning to the table, the manager gently placed the case down and opened it.

For a brief moment, the room seemed to fall silent.

Resting against the black velvet interior was a breathtaking pink diamond.

The stone caught the light instantly, scattering flashes of rose–colored brilliance across the room.

"An 11.2–carat Fancy Vivid Pink Diamond from one of the final Argyle collections before the mine's closure,

'the manager said.

His voice carried a trace of pride.

“In the entire world, there will never be another one exactly like it.”

Damien studied the stone without speaking.

“The acquisition alone took considerable effort,” the manager continued. “The owner initially refused every

offer made.”

A faint smile crossed his face.

“Until your offer arrived.”

The manager rotated the display, allowing Damien to examine the stone from every angle before

continuing.

“As requested, the stone has already been prepared for mounting.”

Damien’s gaze lingered on the diamond.

It was undeniably beautiful. Rare. Valuable. One of a kind.

Yet none of those things were what truly mattered to him.

The diamond itself was merely a symbol.

What mattered was the woman it was meant for.

His thoughts drifted back to Isla Aurelia.

After they had shared their first night together, Maya had fallen asleep peacefully beside him, completely

unaware that he remained awake.

For a long time, Damien had simply watched her.

The moonlight spilling through the windows softened her features, and for once, the worries she carried

so often seemed absent.

She looked peaceful.

Happy.

It was a sight he found himself wanting to protect for the rest of his life.

And for perhaps the first time, the future no longer felt like an abstract concept.

It had a face.

A smile.

A name.

Maya.

Quietly, so as not to wake her, Damien slipped from the bed and stepped onto the balcony.

By the time the sun rose, the order had already been placed.

Damien already knew what Maya's answer would be.

She had given it to him in the form of a sketch, a promise, and a future she had chosen to share with him.

The ring was never about changing her answer.

It was about honoring it.

About being ready when the time finally came.

After days of negotiations and a substantial premium paid to expedite the acquisition, the diamond had finally arrived.

The final acquisition cost exceeded sixty–eight million dollars, but Damien hadn't hesitated for a second.

Now, the last piece needed to bring Maya's sketch to life sat before him.

Damien hummed softly in satisfaction.

Without looking away from the diamond, he extended a hand, and James immediately understood.

Stepping forward, he placed a black velvet box into Damien’s palm.

Damien set it beside the display case and flipped it open.

Inside rested six carefully selected gemstones.

Each one rare.

Each one chosen for a reason.

The manager’s eyes widened as he examined the gemstones resting inside the box.

He recognized every one of them immediately.

Even after decades in the industry, it was a collection rarely seen in one place.

“These are extraordinary stones, Mr. Blackwood.”

His gaze moved slowly from one gemstone to the next.

“I’m surprised you were able to acquire them all.”

Damien’s gaze remained on the gemstones.

“Some have been in my collection for years.”

His tone was casual, as though he were discussing ordinary items rather than gemstones worth millions.

“The others were acquired through private sales and auctions.”

The manager nodded slowly.

That explained it.

Several of the stones before him were pieces collectors spent decades searching for. I

Acquiring even one was difficult.

Acquiring all of them was another matter entirely.

Damien leaned in, his gaze tracing the edges of the gemstones he had personally curated.

Each one was a physical manifestation of a promise he had made to himself long before he had made it

to her.

A Burmese Ruby–among the rarest in existence–represented love. Not the fleeting spark of desire, but a bond willing to bleed and endure.

Beside it sat a Kashmir Sapphire, a deep, hypnotic blue that was nearly impossible to acquire. It stood for

loyalty unshakable and steadfast through every storm.

Next was à Colombian Emerald, vivid and clear. It signified trust, the quiet foundation upon which every

lasting relationship was built.

A Padparadscha Sapphire followed, its unique blend of pink and orange a beacon for hope–a reminder

that even after the deepest darkness, there was always another sunrise.

Resting near it was an Alexandrite, a legendary stone that shifted color with the light. It embodied resilience

the ability to adapt, survive, and emerge stronger no matter the circumstances.

Finally, the Paraiba Tourmaline, with an electric blue glow that seemed almost otherworldly, represented d

evolution. It was his daily, conscious promise to choose her, again and again, for the rest of his life.

Damien's eyes then moved to the centerpiece, the 11.2–carat Argyle Pink Diamond.

It was more than a stone.

It was the embodiment of Maya herself–rare, captivating, and utterly singular.

For a long moment, the room remained silent.

These weren't merely rare gemstones gathered for their value or prestige.

Each stone had been chosen with purpose.

Each carried meaning.

Together, they would become a one–of–a–kind creation that collectors would spend fortunes trying to

acquire.

Yet its true value had nothing to do with money.

In the end, it would become something far rarer than wealth.

Something irreplaceable.

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And yet, despite their rarity and value, the collection was still incomplete.

One final stone remained.

Unlike the others, its worth could never be measured in carats, rarity, or money.

Not because of what it was.

But because of who it belonged to.

Damien reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

The movement immediately drew the manager's attention away from the gemstones spread across the

table.

As Damien withdrew a small velvet pouch from his jacket, the manager's eyes lit with anticipation.

He could only assume another rare gemstone was about to join the collection.

But the anticipation faded almost instantly, replaced by genuine curiosity as Damien emptied the contents

into his palm.

The manager studied the stone carefully.

Just a modest diamond.

Barely over a carat.

Its cut was old–fashioned, and decades of wear had softened much of its brilliance.

In terms of rarity and market value, it couldn’t begin to compare to the gemstones already resting on the

table.

Yet Damien’s gaze lingered on it longer than any of the others

A faint crease appeared between the manager’s brows.

After decades in the industry, he knew value when he saw it, and compared to the collection before him,

this diamond should have been the least remarkable piece in the room.

Damien seemed to read the unspoken question.

“This one is different.”

Damien looked down at the stone Jamie had entrusted to him earlier that morning.

It held no record–breaking carat weight, no Fancy Vivid classification, and no multimillion–dollar auction

history.

Yet as Damien stared at it, the room seemed to fade away.

This stone represented a different kind of legacy

It was the first diamond their father had ever purchased with his own money for the woman he loved.

The diamond he had intended to set into the ring he would use to propose to Malia.

But he never gave it to her.

Not because he loved her any less, but because of his own pride.

After learning the truth about who she was and the world she had left behind for him, he had convinced

himself it wasn't enough.

Not because Malia had ever cared about wealth, status, or luxury.

She didn't.

She had willingly turned her back on all of it for him.

But he wanted to give her something worthy of the sacrifices she had made.

So he kept the diamond.

Not as a reminder of what he lacked, but as motivation to become the man he believed she deserved.

Years later, he passed it on to Jamie, intending for it to one day be given to the woman Jamie chose to spend his life with.

But after overhearing his conversation with Dahlia that morning, Jamie had made a different choice.

He had placed the diamond in Damien's hand and insisted it belonged in Maya's ring.

Because if anyone deserved to carry that piece of their father's story forward, it was Maya.

Damien's thumb brushed lightly over the worn edges of the stone before he placed it beside the Argyle pink diamond.

For decades, it had remained unfinished.

Now, it would finally become part of the ring it had always been meant for.

“I want it cleaned and restored,” Damien said quietly, his gaze never leaving the diamond.

“Bring back its brilliance.”

A brief pause followed before his expression hardened.

“But do not alter it.”

The manager nodded.

“No recutting. No reshaping. No modifications.”

“Any scratches, marks, or imperfections it carries stay exactly where they are.”

That finally caught the manager’s attention..

Most clients who walked through these doors demanded perfection. They wanted flaws erased, edges

sharpened, and brilliance maximized.

Damien was asking for the exact opposite.

He wanted preservation.

His eyes lingered on the diamond resting beside the others.

“This stone is irreplaceable,” Damien said. “No amount of money can buy another one.”

Silence settled over the room.

The manager’s gaze shifted from the modest diamond to the extraordinary collection spread across the

table.

Together, the gemstones were worth a fortune, yet it was this simple stone that Damien handled with the

greatest care.

For the first time, the manager understood.

This was the most valuable piece in the room.

“I understand, Mr. Blackwood.”

Damien gave a small nod.

“Good,” he said. “Handle it accordingly.”

His gaze shifted to the manager.

“And the design?”

“Of course, Sir.”

The manager immediately crossed the room and approached the secured cabinet built into the wall. After entering a code, he retrieved a leather portfolio before returning to the table.

Opening it carefully, he slid the contents toward Damien.

At the center was Maya’s original sketch.

Surrounding it were refined renderings prepared by the firm’s designers, preserving every detail of the original concept while incorporating the final selection of gemstones.

Damien’s gaze settled on the drawings spread before him.

At its heart, the design remained unmistakably Maya’s.

The flowing band curved into an elegant infinity symbol before separating into two sculpted hands reaching toward one another. Their fingers met at the center, supporting the setting where the Argyle pink

diamond would rest.

Even as a drawing, the ring was breathtaking.

The band itself was lined with countless diamonds, their placement carefully mapped across the design

to ensure the finished piece would catch the light from every angle.

Surrounding the centerpiece, the six rare gemstones had been woven seamlessly into the ring, their colors

and brilliance accenting the design without overwhelming it.

It was elegant.

Damien studied the sketch for a long moment.

His gaze eventually settled on the space where the two hands joined beneath the main setting.

A perfect place for their father’s diamond.

Not visible at first glance.

Not intended to compete with the Argyle pink diamond or the other rare gemstones.

Yet positioned at the very point where everything came together.

A quiet foundation hidden beneath the centerpiece.

A small piece of the man who had loved her first.

And soon, it would become part of a ring from the man who intended to love her for the rest of his life.

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Damien’s gaze remained on the sketch

He pointed to the space beneath the primary setting, where the two hands joined.

“The final diamond goes here.”

The manager stepped closer and followed where Damien was pointing, nodding in understanding.

“Of course, Mr. Blackwood.”

Retrieving a pen from his pocket, the manager made a brief notation on the design packet.

“Is there anything else you would like modified, Mr. Blackwood?”

Damien looked at the drawing one final time.

“No.”

His answer came without hesitation.

The manager gave a small nod before carefully closing the portfolio.

“I’ll ensure the additional specifications are communicated immediately, Sir.”

With the final instruction recorded, the manager carefully closed the velvet presentation case containing

the gemstones.

The Argyle pink diamond was secured separately, along with the heirloom diamond and the finalized

design packet.

Only after everything had been properly accounted for did he return the items to the vault.

A few moments later, the manager returned his attention to Damien.

Inclining his head respectfully, he waited for further instructions.

“I’ll be out of the country for the next week,” Damien said as he rose from his seat. “t want the piece completed by the time I return.”

The manager nodded immediately.

“Certainly, Mr. Blackwood.”

“Whatever resources are required, use them,” Damien continued. “Cost is not a consideration.”

A faint smile crossed the manager’s face.

“Understood, Sir. Rest assured, every necessary resource will be made available. The piece will be handled personally by Monsieur Laurent himself.”

The name carried weight.

Laurent was widely regarded as one of the most respected high–jewelry craftsmen in the world.

For more than three decades, his creations had found their way into royal collections, museums, and the

private vaults of some of the wealthiest families on earth.

Collectors waited years for the opportunity to commission a piece bearing his signature.

Many never received one.

In recent years, Laurent had become increasingly selective with his work, accepting only a handful of

commissions annually and personally crafting even fewer.

Most projects were entrusted to his team.

Very few ever reached his own workbench.

This would be one of them.

“Good,” Damien said. “Notify my assistant the moment it’s finished.”

“I’ll see to it personally, Sir.”

As he made his way toward the door, Damien glanced at James.

“Take care of the rest.”

“Understood, Sir.”

The manager offered a respectful bow. Damien acknowledged it with a slight nod before exiting the private suite without another word.

Meanwhile, James remained behind to settle the purchase of the Argyle pink diamond and the substantial

fees that came with securing such a rare gemstone.

The moment the doors closed behind him, Damien’s thoughts shifted to the next item on his list.

It was something James could have arranged with a single phone call.

Yet Damien intended to handle it personally.

Stepping out onto the quiet street, Damien's driver noticed him immediately and started to step out of the

vehicle.

A subtle gesture from Damien stopped him.

Understanding the silent instruction, the driver remained inside the car parked at the curb, wisely giving

him space.

Damien pulled his phone out of his pocket.

His thumb moved automatically to the first contact pinned at the top of his favorites list.

A second later, the call began to ring.

The call rang once.

Twice.

Three times.

Four.

By the fifth ring, a faint crease had appeared between his brows. He was already considering hanging up and calling the manor's landline when the line finally connected.

“Hello?” Maya's voice came through, slightly breathless.

Damien frowned.

“Why are you out of breath?”

A muffled sound came from the other end, followed by what sounded suspiciously like something hitting

the floor.

“I was looking for my phone,” Maya admitted. “I could hear it ringing, but I couldn’t remember where I’d put

it.”

“Where was it?”

A brief pause.

“...under a pile of clothes.”

“Of course it was.”

“Hey!”

The indignation in her voice was immediate.

A reluctant smile tugged at the corner of Damien’s mouth.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Packing.”

“Why?”

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

“What do you mean, why? We’re leaving tomorrow before sunrise.”

“I know,” Damien said. “I meant why are you packing yourself? Ask one of the staff to do it.”

Maya sounded genuinely baffled by the suggestion.

“Because it’s just packing, Damien. It’s not like I’m moving houses. Besides, it would probably take longer to explain what I want packed than to do it myself.”

His brows drew together.

“That defeats the purpose of having staff.”

A laugh escaped her.

“No, it doesn’t. It just means don’t need someone following me around every time I want to put clothes in

a suitcase.”

Damien remained unconvinced.

To him, delegating simple tasks was the logical solution. To Maya, doing them herself was simply normal.

Some habits, it seemed, were harder to break than others.

“Anyway, I’m almost done,” Maya said, clearly deciding the discussion had run its course. “I just need to finish packing a few things.”

A faint zip sounded through the phone as she closed another suitcase.

“Are you on your way home?”

“Not yet.”

Damien glanced toward the waiting vehicle.

“I need to stop somewhere first.”

“Oh.”

A brief silence followed.

Under normal circumstances, the conversation would have ended there.

Instead, he found himself remembering an article he had come across several nights earlier.

Technically, it had started with a search related to relationship communication.

Unfortunately, one article had led to another.

Then another.

Before he knew it, he had somehow spent nearly an hour reading advice from self–proclaimed relationship

experts with titles such as How to Be a Better Boyfriend, Ten Small Gestures Women Appreciate, and How

to Make Her Feel Loved Without Grand Gestures.

He still wasn't entirely sure how that had happened. The experience had been deeply humiliating.

The article itself had been ridiculous.

Most of the advice had been common sense.

After their last misunderstanding, he had made a conscious effort to pay closer attention to the small things Maya seemed to value–things that often escaped his notice.

Yet one recurring theme had appeared often enough to become impossible to ignore.

Pay attention.

Show interest.

Be thoughtful.

Offer help without being asked.

Ask if she needed anything.

The question lingered on the tip of his tongue for several seconds before he finally said it.

“Do you need anything while I’m out?”

Silence.

Long enough that Damien pulled the phone away from his ear to make sure the call hadn’t disconnected.

“Maya?”

“…Did you just ask if I needed something?”

Damien was silent for a moment.

“Why do you sound surprised?”

Maya hesitated.

“Because you’re Damien.”

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For perhaps the first time in his life, he found himself at a complete loss for words.

On the other end of the line, Maya remained equally silent.

Then, to Damien’s growing irritation, she laughed.

Not loudly.

Just enough to make it clear she found the situation far more amusing than she should have.

“What?”

Maya tried to suppress her laughter.

“Nothing.”

Damien frowned.

“Maya…”

Another laugh escaped her. This time, much louder and completely unrestrained.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry.”

His expression darkened slightly.

“I asked a simple question.”

“Exactly!” Maya said before quickly covering her mouth. “I mean… it just caught me off guard a little.”

The amusement gradually faded from her voice.

After their last misunderstanding, she knew Damien had been making an effort.

An effort that clearly did not come naturally to him.

Now she felt slightly guilty for bursting that bubble.

Clearing her throat, she shifted on the couch.

“Okay. I’m serious now.”

Damien remained silent.

“So…” Maya tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “About your question.”

“Forget it.”

“No, no. Wait a second, Mister.” Maya sat up immediately. “You can’t take it back now.”

“Can’t I?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I already have an answer.”

That finally seemed to catch his attention.

“Oh?”

A smile spread across Maya’s face as she settled back against the couch.

“Yes. I do want something.”

A brief pause followed.

“But only on one condition.”

“What condition?”

“You have to get it yourself.”

Damien frowned.

“I just said I would.”

“No.” Maya shook her head even though he couldn’t see it. “I mean actually get it yourself.”

A faint crease appeared between his brows.

Maya grinned.

“You know… walk into the store. Stand in line. Order it yourself.”

“That’s your condition?”

“Yes.”

Damien glanced toward the waiting vehicle parked at the curb.

“That’s easy.”

“Good.” Maya sounded entirely too pleased with herself. “Then I want a slice of peean Cheesecake and an

iced white chocolate mocha with oat milk, an extra shot of espresso, and light ice.”

A brief pause followed.

“Oh! And one less pump of white chocolate.”

Damien was silent.

“What?” Maya asked. “Do you need me to repeat that? Actually, wait. I can just text it to you.”

“No need. I got it.”

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“You’ve clearly spent time thinking about this.”

“Well, yes,” Maya said unapologetically. “I’ve been craving cheesecake all week.”

“You could have asked for one.”

“I know.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because I didn’t need one.”

Damien pinched the bridge of his nose.

“That logic makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Maya argued. “Craving it means I want it. It doesn’t mean I need it. You asked if I needed something.”

A beat passed.

“Now I think I need it.”

“No. It doesn’t.”

Maya laughed.

Then she added, “There’s a little café called Bean & Barrel about ten minutes from the manor. They make it

properly.”

“Bean & Barrel,” Damien repeated.

“Mm–hmm. Just tell them exactly what I ordered. They’ll know what to do.”

This time, Damien allowed himself a small smile.

“Anything else, love?”

“Mmmm…” Maya pretended to think about it. “Nope. That’s all.”

A second later, she gasped.

“Oh! I do want one more thing.”

“What?”

“Evidence.”

Damien frowned.

“Evidence of what?”

“That you actually got it yourself.”

A reluctant chuckle escaped him.

“You don’t trust me?”

“trust you,” Maya said immediately. “I just don’t trust you not to send someone else.”

Damien shook his head.

“Fine. You’ll get your evidence.”

“Yay!”

The excitement in her voice made his smile deepen.

“Thank you, love.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Now you better get going,” Maya added. “Dinner will be served soon.”

“I’ll see you shortly.”

“Drive safe.”

A brief silence settled between them.

Then Damien said quietly,

“I love you.”

The response came without hesitation.

“I love you too.”

A moment later, the line disconnected.

Damien lowered the phone from his ear just as someone cleared their throat behind him.

“Excuse me, Sir.”

Turning, Damien found James standing a few feet away.

Judging by the look on his face, he had been there long enough to hear far more of the conversation than

Damien would have preferred.

“What are you standing there for?”

James straightened immediately.

“The arrangements have been finalized, Sir.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

Without waiting for an answer, Damien started toward the vehicle.

“Let’s go.”

“Of course, Sir.”

James fell into step beside him.

By the time they reached the curb, the driver had already stepped out and opened the rear door.

Damien entered the vehicle while James slid into the front passenger seat.

A moment later, the vehicle pulled away from the curb and merged smoothly into traffic.

Several seconds passed before James spoke.

“I’ve already informed the manager that we’ll be stopping by shortly, Sir.”

Damien looked up from his phone.

“Let them know I’m going in myself.”

“Understood.”

Pulling out his phone, James quickly sent another message.

Almost immediately, he felt a twinge of sympathy for the store manager.

Earlier that day, Damien had already placed the order online with explicit instructions that everything be prepared for collection that evening.

Naturally, James had assumed he would be the one handling the pickup.

That was how such things usually worked.

He would arrive, collect the order, verify everything was correct, and return to the vehicle.

Simple. Efficient. Routine.

At no point had it occurred to James that his boss intended to enter the store personally.

Under normal circumstances, any establishment receiving advance notice of Damien Blackwood's arrival would immediately begin preparing a private area and limiting unnecessary access to ensure his privacy.

For most managers, such preparations were standard procedure.

Unfortunately for this particular store, the latest instruction would require a complete change of plans.

If Damien intended to enter the store himself, every detail would need to be perfect before he arrived.

And with less than thirty minutes remaining, James could only hope the manager was capable of making the necessary adjustments in time.

His gaze briefly shifted toward the back seat.

Damien appeared to be in an unusually good mood.

James had worked for him long enough to know such occasions were rare.

It would be deeply unfortunate for everyone involved if that mood were ruined by something preventable.

James glanced at his phone.

Then a thought occurred to him.

If everything somehow went catastrophically wrong, he could always send Maya a message and ask her

to call.

Experience had proven that she possessed a remarkable ability to improve Damien’s mood.

In fact, it had become effective often enough that James found the possibility oddly reassuring.

Surely his backup plan would work.

Hopefully, it wouldn’t be necessary.

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Almost half an hour later they arrived at the mall.

The vehicle came to a stop outside one of the world’s most recognizable technology retailers.

Its iconic logo glowed above the entrance.

Floor–to–ceiling glass panels revealed a bright minimalist interior filled with display tables, smartphones,

tablets, laptops, and accessories arranged with almost obsessive precision.

Several employees were already waiting near the entrance.

And judging by the strained smile on the store manager's face, James's last–minute message had been

received.

The moment the vehicle came to a stop, the store manager straightened instinctively.

Her smile remained firmly in place.

Years of retail experience had taught her how to appear calm under pressure.

Unfortunately, Damien Blackwood tested the limits of that skill.

Earlier that afternoon, she had received notice that a special order placed by Mr. Blackwood would be

collected that evening.

Naturally, the store had prioritized the request.

The items had been prepared, inspected, and verified long before the scheduled pickup time.

Later, confirmation arrived that everything was ready.

Following standard procedure, she notified James that the order was prepared for collection and received

confirmation that someone would be arriving later that evening to pick it up.

That should have been the end of it.

Approximately half an hour ago, another message arrived informing her that they were on their way.

Nothing unusual there.

Then, before she had even put her phone away, a second message appeared on her screen.

Mr. Blackwood would be collecting the order personally.

That had been twenty–seven minutes ago.

The update had nearly given her a heart attack.

Since then, the order had been checked no fewer than four times.

Display tables had been wiped down twice.

Every device involved in the pickup had been inspected, verified, and inspected again.

Meanwhile, several team members who had been counting down the minutes until the end of their shift

had suddenly discovered a renewed enthusiasm for their jobs.

Uniforms had been straightened.

Hair had been fixed.

A few of the younger employees had even disappeared into the restroom and returned looking noticeably more polished than before.

No one wanted to make a poor impression.

After all, it wasn’t every day that Damien Blackwood walked into your store.

The richest man in the city.

One of the wealthiest men in the world.

The man whose company owned the very mall they were standing in.

Even the manager had to admit she was curious.

Because despite all the stories, interviews, magazine covers, and endless online speculation, very few

people ever saw Damien Blackwood up close.

And almost no one had ever seen him walk into a store and shop for himself.

James exited the vehicle first and pulled open the rear passenger door.

As soon as Damien stepped out, the store manager moved forward.

“Good evening, Mr. Blackwood.”

She offered a respectful bow.

“Welcome. It’s a pleasure to have you with us this evening.”

Her smile was polished and professional.

“Your order is prepared and ready for collection. If there is anything else you require during your visit, my

team and I will be happy to assist.”

Damien acknowledged the greeting with a slight nod.

The manager maintained her smile.

“We have also prepared a private area for you should you prefer a more discreet experience, Mr. Blackwood.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Damien’s gaze remained fixed on the store entrance.

For the briefest moment, the manager froze.

“Of course, Mr. Blackwood.”

Recovering quickly, she stepped aside.

Damien headed toward the entrance without another word.

The manager watched him go, momentarily caught off guard.

Despite all the advance preparations, their VVIP guest appeared to have every intention of entering the

store like an ordinary customer.

Beside her, James released a quiet breath of relief.

So far, everything was proceeding smoothly.

Lowering his voice, he offered the manager a polite smile.

“My apologies for the short notice.”

“Not at all, Mr. Horton,” the manager replied immediately. “It’s an honor to welcome Mr. Blackwood to our

store.”

James nodded.

“Mr. Blackwood has decided he’d like to look around personally this evening.”

The manager’s professional smile never wavered.

“Of course.”

Together, they followed Damien into the store.

The nearest employee nearly jumped out of his skin the moment Damien crossed the threshold.

Another hurriedly began straightening a display that had already been straightened twice.

The manager pretended not to notice.

“Mr. Blackwood,” she began smoothly, “if you prefer, you’re welcome to wait in our private consultation

area while I have your order brought over for inspection.”

“No, thank you.”

Damien’s attention had already shifted toward a nearby display.

“I’d like to look around.”

“Of course, Sir.”

For the next several minutes, Damien moved through the store at an unhurried pace.

The manager remained nearby while a senior sales associate followed at a respectful distance, ready to

answer any questions.

“What about this one?”

Damien stopped in front of a display showcasing a pair of wireless earbuds.

The associate glanced at the product.

“One of our most popular models, Sir. This particular version was released less than a year ago.”

“Would they stay in place while someone is walking around all day?”

The associate blinked.

“Yes, Sir. They’re specifically designed for everyday use and movement.”

“Good.”

Damien studied the display for another moment.

“I’ll take two.”

The associate quickly made a note.

As they continued through the store, Damien’s attention shifted to another display nearby.

This one featured a premium set of over–ear wireless headphones available in several colors.

“What about these?”

The associate immediately launched into an explanation.

By the time he finished, Damien had already made his decision.

“One in black.”

His gaze moved across the display before settling on a second color.

“And one in starlight.”

The associate paused briefly before nodding.

“Certainly, Sir.”

Another note was added to the rapidly growing order list.

A few feet behind them, James remained silent.

Internally, however, his concern deepened.

Wireless earbuds and over–ear headphones served largely the same purpose.

Under normal circumstances, Damien would have selected one or the other.

Not both.

And certainly not in different colors.

To Damien, electronics generally came in two acceptable options.

Chapter 506

Meanwhile, Damien had already moved on.

His attention settled on a nearby display featuring smart watches.

“What’s the difference between these models?”

The associate immediately stepped forward.

For the next several minutes, he carefully explained the available options.

Damien listened intently, giving the sales associate his full attention as though he were presenting a multi–billion–dollar proposal rather than explaining consumer electronics.

Battery life.

Durability.

Health tracking.

Compatibility with other devices.

By the end of the explanation, he pointed to two of the newest models.

“I’ll take those as well.”

The associate’s smile became noticeably brighter.

“Certainly, Sir.”

Then, as he had undoubtedly been trained to do, he added, “Would you also be interested in additional bands? Many of our customers enjoy having different options to match different occasions.”

Damien’s gaze shifted toward the display.

The standard bands arranged on the shelves failed to hold his interest for more than a second. Most were simple silicone, fabric, or rubber designs intended for everyday use.

Then his attention settled on a separate display positioned behind glass.

Unlike the others, these bands were showcased individually beneath focused lighting. Crafted from premium leather with meticulous stitching and polished hardware, they had clearly been designed for a more discerning clientele.

Several had been created in collaboration with one of the world’s most prestigious luxury fashion houses.

The difference in craftsmanship was immediately obvious.

“How many colors are available?”

The associate promptly listed the options.

By the time he finished, Damien had already made his decision.

“I’ll take one of each.”

For a brief moment, the associate looked caught off guard before his professional training reasserted itself.

“Of course, Sir.”

Another note was added to the rapidly growing order list.

A few feet away, James stared at the display.

Some of the premium bands cost more than the device they were designed to accompany.

The purchase made absolutely no sense.

Then again, neither did buying multiple pairs of headphones that performed essentially the same function.

At this point, James was beginning to suspect that logic had quietly left the building several purchases ago.

James thought that would be it, but the moment he looked back, Damien was already several displays away and had stopped again.

“What does this do?”

The associate followed his gaze toward a set of small tracking devices.

“Those are item trackers, Sir. They can be attached to keys, bags, luggage, or other personal belongings and located through a mobile device.”

Damien considered that for a moment.

“Useful. I’ll take those. Give me ten sets.”

The associate blinked, momentarily caught off guard. “Ten, Sir?”

Damien turned his head slightly, his expression remaining perfectly neutral–which only made the

associate’s sudden tension more obvious.

“Is there a problem?”

The associate’s professional composure fractured for a split second, his eyes widening as he registered

the cold, authoritative weight of Damien’s gaze.

He straightened instantly, swallowing hard.

“Ah–no, of course not, Sir. I’ll get them ready for you immediately.”

The shopping list didn’t stop with the tracker tags.

After the trackers came the additional charging accessories.

Then portable power banks.

Then several protective cases.

At one point, Damien spent nearly five minutes comparing different tablet folios.

James stared.

His boss had negotiated multi–billion–dollar acquisitions faster than this.

Yet somehow he was now carefully evaluating tablet case options.

All for Maya.

The realization was both amusing and slightly alarming, especially since the spree showed no signs of

stopping.

Only Maya possessed the ability to make Damien Blackwood spend time shopping for things he would normally purchase in less than thirty seconds.

By now, the manager had discreetly summoned a second associate to help keep track of the expanding

order.

Several employees stole curious glances toward the growing collection of items being assembled near

the counter.

The pile seemed to increase every time they looked away.

The original order had only consisted of a laptop, a tablet, and a few essentials–reasonable, practical, and

efficient.

That situation had deteriorated rapidly.

James glanced toward the crowded pickup area, then back at Damien, who was now examining a high–end stylus with the intensity of a man studying a blueprint.

A faint sense of dread settled over him.

Not because of the cost.

The total could easily reach six figures and Damien wouldn’t even register it–to him, it was chump

change.

No.

What concerned him was the fact that his boss appeared to be discovering new things Maya might like

every few minutes.

It was a problem with no obvious upper limit.

James realized he had to intervene. If he didn’t, his boss was going to end up buying the entire store.

While the sheer volume and cost were irrelevant to Damien, he knew Maya.

This was way, way overboard–excessive by any standard.

“He didn’t need another misunderstanding between the couple, and he certainly didn’t need a repeat of the

company–wide chaos that followed one of their spats.

If Damien ended up in a sour mood, he would be the one paying the price.

He stepped forward, closing the distance to his boss, and lowered his voice to a discreet, urgent whisper.

“Excuse me, Sir.”

Damien didn’t look up from the tablet folio he was inspecting. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“I’m sorry, Sir, I just wanted to remind you of the time. It’s… um.. it’s almost 8:00 PM.”

Damien didn’t even look up. “And?”

James didn’t hesitate. “The Bean & Barrel closes at 8:30 PM. Given the traffic this time of evening, we

should probably be heading out now to ensure you arrive on time.”

Damien immediately snapped his head toward him, his expression sharpening into one of pure irritation.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier! Call them and tell them to wait–also, settle everything here. Make it fast!”

He shoved the tablet folio he’d been holding into James’s chest. “Take this, too.”

Then, without another word, Damien strode toward the exit.

James remained standing in the aisle, a leather tablet folio still clutched against his chest.

For several seconds, he simply stared at his boss’s rapidly retreating figure.

What exactly had just happened?

More importantly…

How had this somehow become his fault?

Chapter 507

“Mr. Horton?”

The hesitant voice pulled James from his thoughts.

Turning, he found the store manager standing nearby.

She glanced toward the entrance where Damien had disappeared moments earlier.

“Has Mr. Blackwood left?”

James closed his eyes briefly.

“Yes”

Before she could say anything else, he handed her the leather folio Damien had practically thrown at him.

“Please add this to the order and have everything packed as quickly as possible.”

The manager accepted it immediately.

“Of course, Mr. Horton.”

“There’s a bit of a time constraint.”

Understanding immediately dawned on her.

“I’ll personally oversee it.”

“Thank you.”

With that, the manager hurried toward the counter where several associates were already organizing the

steadily growing mountain of purchases.

James watched her go before pulling out his phone and dialing the number listed on Bean & Barrel's website.

The call connected after only two rings.

"Thank you for calling Bean & Barrel. How may I help you?"

"Good evening," James said smoothly. "My name is James Horton. I was hoping to speak with the manager on duty regarding a small favor."

Several minutes later, after a brief explanation and a considerable amount of polite persuasion, James ended the call.

The café would remain open a little longer.

Just in case.

A sense of relief settled over him.

One potential disaster had been successfully avoided.

“Now he only needed to survive whatever happened next.

Less than ten minutes later, James emerged from the store.

Behind him, the manager and several associates followed, each carrying multiple shopping bags.

The original order alone had required considerable packaging.

By this point, what the final order had become bore very little resemblance to the original pickup.

Bag after bag was carefully transported toward the waiting vehicle.

The driver popped the trunk open and immediately stepped out to help with the loading.

For the next several minutes, the associates worked alongside him, carefully loading the purchases into

the vehicle.

By the time they finished, the trunk was nearly full.

Inside the vehicle, Damien observed the loading process through the tinted window.

Once the final bag had been secured, he lowered the rear passenger window.

“Everything accounted for?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir.”

James nodded.

“I personally verified the order before payment was finalized. Every item has been accounted for.”

Satisfied, Damien gave a slight nod.

Only then did his attention shift toward the manager.

“Thank you. I am pleased with your store’s service.”

The manager blinked, looking genuinely surprised for a brief moment before her professional smile quickly

returned.

“It was our pleasure, Mr. Blackwood.” She inclined her head respectfully. “Thank you for your business. We

hope to welcome you again soon.”

Damien acknowledged the sentiment with a slight nod before shifting his gaze toward James.

“Let’s go.”

“Of course, Sir.”

James offered the manager a final nod of thanks before turning toward the front passenger door. As he did, Damien pressed the window switch and the glass began sliding upward.

Once everyone was settled inside the vehicle, Damien looked toward James.

“Did you inform the café?”

“Yes, Sir,” James replied. “They’ve agreed to remain open a little longer and will wait for your arrival.”

“Good.”

Damien shifted his attention to the driver.

“Bean & Barrel.”

The driver nodded immediately.

“Yes, Sir.”

With that, the vehicle pulled away from the curb and merged smoothly into the evening traffic.

The manager remained standing outside, her gaze following the receding taillights of the vehicle.

Several associates gathered nearby.

For a few seconds, nobody spoke.

Then one of the younger employees finally broke the silence.

“Did Mr. Blackwood just buy half the store?”

The manager glanced toward the now–empty curb.

After a brief pause, she answered honestly.

“It certainly felt that way.”

Less than half an hour later, the vehicle slowed to a stop in front of a modest café tucked away along a

quiet side street.

Unlike the brightly lit coffee chains scattered throughout the city, this place was easy to miss if you

weren’t specifically looking for it.

The building looked more like a renovated house than a commercial establishment. Warm lights glowed through the windows, and a simple wooden sign mounted beside the entrance read:

Bean & Barrel

A smaller sign hanging from the door displayed a single word.

Fortunately, traffic had been lighter than expected.

They had arrived with five minutes to spare before the café’s official closing time.

“This is the café Ms. Maya mentioned, Sir,” James said from the front passenger seat.

Damien looked out the window.

From the outside, there was nothing particularly remarkable about the place.

“It wasn’t luxurious.

It wasn’t exclusive.

There was no elaborate branding or grand entrance designed to impress wealthy customers.

James stepped out and opened the rear passenger door.

Damien exited the vehicle and headed toward the entrance.

The moment they stepped inside, the rich aroma of freshly ground coffee beans and freshly baked

pastries greeted them.

The atmosphere was warm and inviting.

Soft music played quietly through hidden speakers.

A handful of customers remained scattered throughout the café, some chatting quietly while others sat

alone with books or laptops.

Near one wall stood a small bookshelf filled with novels, magazines, and well–worn paperbacks that

appeared to be available for customers to borrow.

The furniture didn’t match perfectly.

Neither did the décor.

Yet somehow everything worked together.

The entire space felt comfortable.

Personal.

As though someone had taken part of their home and turned it into a café.

Near the counter, a teenage boy waited patiently to place his order.

Aside from him and a few customers lingering over their drinks, the café was nearly empty.

James glanced toward the line.

“Why don’t you have a seat first, Sir? I’ll place the order and bring everything over. What did Ms. Maya want

again?”

“No. I’ll do it.”

James blinked.

For a moment, he wondered if he had misheard.

Damien Blackwood waiting in line and placing his own order was not something James had ever

expected to witness.

“Sir?”

Damien turned his head slightly and fixed him with a look.

“I said I’ll do it.”

A brief pause followed.

“Perhaps you should have your ears checked.”

James immediately straightened.

“My apologies, Sir.”

Damien had already taken several steps toward the counter when he suddenly stopped and looked back.

Recognizing the look, James immediately stepped closer.

“What is it, Sir?” he asked in a lowered voice.

“Take a video.”

James blinked.

“Excuse me, Sir?”

“Maya wants evidence that I’m doing it myself.”

Understanding immediately dawned on James.

That explained it.

“Of course, Sir.”

If anyone had told James this morning that his day would end with filming his boss standing in line to satisfy Maya’s request for evidence, he would have assumed they had finally lost their minds.

Pulling out his phone, James opened the camera application and began recording.

Completely unaware of who had just joined the line behind him, the teenager remained focused on studying the menu board overhead while Damien Blackwood–the multi–billionaire whose signature could

move markets and whose companies employed tens of thousands of people–waited patiently for his

turn.

Somehow, the sight seemed completely out of place.

Chapter 508

The line moved faster than expected.

Less than a minute later, the teenager collected his drink, thanked the cashier, and stepped aside.

That left Damien standing at the front of the line.

Behind him, James kept his phone raised, faithfully documenting the event for what was perhaps the most

unusual evidence request of his professional career.

“Good evening. Welcome to Bean & Barrel.” The young barista smiled politely. “What can I get started for

you tonight?”

Damien answered immediately.

“I’d like an iced white chocolate mocha made with oat milk, an extra shot of espresso, light ice, and one

less pump of white chocolate. Also, one slice of pecan cheesecake.”

The barista’s fingers moved quickly across the register.

Then she looked up.

“That’s… surprisingly specific.”

Damien’s expression remained unchanged.

“Is that a problem?”

“Oh, no.”

She immediately shook her head, a genuine smile appearing on her face.

“Not at all. It’s just a very specific order. Most people need a moment to think about customizations like that.”

Her eyes briefly drifted toward his suit before returning to his face.

“And if I’m being honest, most men who come in dressed like you usually order black coffee and call it a day.”

She gestured lightly toward the menu board.

“Most people don’t even remember half the options available. We usually spend more time explaining customizations than actually taking the order.”

Her smile widened slightly.

“You sounded like you’ve ordered it a hundred times.”

“It’s not for me.”

The answer came without hesitation.

“Ah.”

Understanding immediately appeared on her face.

“That makes a lot more sense.

After entering the order, she glanced up again.

“May I have your name for the order?”

“Damien.”

The young woman nodded, wrote the name neatly on the side of a cup, and set it beside the espresso

machine.

“Perfect. I’ll have that ready for you shortly.”

With that, she turned and began preparing the drink while Damien stepped aside to wait.

Several feet away, James continued recording.

The fact that Damien had memorized the order wasn’t nearly as surprising as the reason he had

memorized it.

After all, if Maya somehow decided tomorrow that she wanted a coffee plantation, James had a feeling

his boss would begin looking for one before lunch.

At this point, James wasn’t even sure that was an exaggeration.

Earlier that evening, he had watched Damien purchase enough electronics and accessories to stock a

small retail store. The only thing preventing him from buying more had been the closing time of the café.

Several minutes later, the drink was ready.

“Iced white chocolate mocha for Damien.”

The barista placed the drink on the counter and slid it toward him with a smile.

After thanking her, Damien reached for the drink while the young woman turned toward the dessert display to retrieve the cheesecake.

A faint look of confusion crossed her face.

She scanned the display once, then again, as though expecting the missing dessert to suddenly reappear. After checking the lower shelf, she straightened and turned back toward Damien with an apologetic expression.

“I’m terribly sorry, Sir,” she said. “It appears we’ve sold the last slice of pecan cheesecake.”

Damien frowned slightly.

“The last slice?”

The young woman nodded.

“Yes, Sir. It must have been purchased shortly before you arrived. We still have chocolate cake, carrot

cake, and lemon loaf available if you’d like a recommendation.”

“No.”

The response came immediately.

“I want the pecan cheesecake.”

The barista blinked, momentarily caught off guard by the firmness in his tone.

“I understand, Sir, but unfortunately we’re completely out.”

“Can another one be made?”

The question took her by surprise.

“I’m sorry?”

“The cheesecake.” Damien’s expression remained perfectly serious. “Can another one be made?”

Several feet away, James felt a familiar sense of dread settle over him.

He knew that look.

Damien Blackwood was the type of man who believed that if something was possible, then it was merely a matter of finding the right solution. Obstacles were simply problems waiting to be solved.

The only question was how much effort or money it would take to make it happen.

The young woman offered an apologetic smile.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Sir. We bake everything fresh in the morning and only prepare enough for

the day.”

She glanced toward the clock on the wall before looking back at him.

“You actually caught us at the very end of the day. The kitchen has already been closed for the night.”

“Then reopen it,” Damien said matter–of–factly, as though he were proposing the most reasonable solution

in the world.

The barista stared at him.

For a moment, she genuinely wasn’t sure whether he was joking.

He wasn’t.

“I’ll buy the whole thing,” Damien said. “And I’m willing to compensate whoever is inconvenienced.”

The young woman looked increasingly overwhelmed.

In all her time working at Bean & Barrel, nobody had ever requested that the kitchen reopen after closing

“Sir, I really don’t think we can do that.”

A trace of irritation flickered across Damien’s features.

If he had spent less time at the electronics store, he would have arrived sooner. The last slice would likely

still be there.

More importantly, he had promised Maya.

The situation irritated him far more than it should have.

Under normal circumstances, a sold–out dessert would hardly qualify as a problem. There were countless bakeries throughout the city and an endless number of alternatives available.

This wasn’t about the cheesecake.

It was about the fact that Maya had specifically asked for it.

She rarely requested anything from him, yet she had gone out of her way to mention this particular

cheesecake and had admitted she'd been craving it for an entire week.

And now, after promising to get it for her, he was in danger of returning empty–handed.

The thought alone made abandoning the mission unacceptable.

"Anyone inconvenienced will be compensated accordingly," he said calmly. "Whatever it costs."

The young woman hesitated, clearly unsure how to handle the situation.

Before she could formulate a response, a warm chuckle drifted from somewhere behind the counter.

"Well, that's certainly not a request we hear every day."

Chapter 509

Both Damien and the barista turned toward the voice.

An older man emerged from a doorway behind the counter. His hair was mostly gray, and he wore a neatly

pressed button–down shirt tucked into a pair of dark slacks.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about his appearance, yet the easy smile on his face made him

seem immediately approachable.

The barista visibly relaxed when she saw him.

“Mr. Lawson.”

“I heard enough to know what’s going on,” the older man said with an amused chuckle before turning his

attention toward Damien.

“You must be Mr. Blackwood.”

Damien raised an eyebrow slightly.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t believe we’ve been introduced.”

The older man chuckled.

“No, we haven’t.”

His eyes drifted briefly toward James before returning to Damien.

“But we did receive a rather persuasive phone call not long ago asking us to remain open a little later than

usual.”

He paused thoughtfully.

“Let me see if I remember correctly.” His brow furrowed in exaggerated concentration. “Ah, yes. Something about a devil awakening and innocent bystanders being caught in the aftermath.”

Damien slowly turned his head toward James.

If looks could kill, James would have died on the spot.

Several feet away, James suddenly found the floor remarkably interesting.

A knowing smile tugged at the older man's lips.

"And you must be Mr. Horton. The gentleman responsible for all the excitement tonight."

James let out an awkward laugh and scratched the back of his head.

"Ah… good evening, Sir."

The older man nodded before shifting his attention toward the dessert display, his gaze settling on the empty space where the pecan cheesecake had once been.

"You must really like our pecan cheesecake."

“No,” Damien replied immediately. “I’ve never tried it.”

The answer clearly wasn’t what the older man had expected.

“Then why all the determination?”

A brief silence followed.

“It’s for my wife.”

Understanding immediately appeared on the older man’s face.

“Ah.”

The single syllable carried entirely too much meaning.

“That explains everything.”

Damien frowned slightly.

“Explains what?”

Mr. Lawson shook his head, an amused chuckle escaping him.

“Have you ever heard the saying happy wife, happy life?”

Damien remained silent.

For some reason, that silence told Mr. Lawson more than any answer could have.

The older man smiled knowingly.

“In my experience, the only men willing to go to these lengths over a dessert are either hopelessly in love or desperately apologizing for something.”

A laugh slipped out of James before he could stop it. The sound was brief, but it was enough.

Damien’s head turned sharply in his direction, causing James to immediately press his lips together and

straighten as though nothing had happened.

Mr. Lawson’s gaze moved between them, taking in the entire exchange.

His smile widened.

“Judging by that reaction, I’d say I’m not far off.”

James wisely kept his mouth shut.

The older man let out another warm chuckle before turning toward the barista.

“Go ahead and finish closing up for the night, Emily. I’ll take care of things here.”

“Yes, Mr. Lawson.”

Only then did he turn back to Damierrand gesture toward the back of the café.

“Come with me for a moment, young man.”

Curiosity flickered briefly across Damien's features before he followed the older man through a staff–only

door and into the kitchen.

The space beyond was modest but spotless. Stainless steel counters lined the walls, and the lingering

aroma of baked goods still hung in the air.

As they walked, Mr. Lawson spoke casually.

"My wife and I have been running this place for nearly twenty years. I handle most of the pastries and cakes, but the cheesecakes are all hers. Every cheesecake recipe we sell came from her."

There was unmistakable pride in his voice.

A few moments later, they stopped in front of a large freezer. Mr. Lawson opened it and smiled.

"Well, looks like your luck hasn't run out after all."

Inside sat an untouched pecan cheesecake.

“My wife baked an extra one this morning for us. We were planning to take it home after closing, but I have

a feeling she won’t mind sharing with a man who tried to reopen an entire kitchen just to keep a promise

to his wife.”

For a moment, Damien simply stared at the cheesecake.

After everything that had happened that evening, the solution had been sitting here the entire time.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely.

Mr. Lawson smiled.

“Don’t mention it. Truth be told, seeing someone go to this much trouble for one of my wife’s cheesecakes

is flattering.”

His expression softened slightly.

“She spent years perfecting that recipe. If she knew a man was willing to reopen a kitchen just to get a slice, she’d probably be talking about it for weeks.”

The older man reached for the cheesecake before pausing.

“Would you mind grabbing a knife and a couple of containers from that shelf?”

Under normal circumstances, Damien Blackwood was not accustomed to taking instructions.

This time, however, he found he didn’t mind.

A moment later, he returned with the knife and two containers before handing them over.

“I only need one slice,” Damien said. “You’ve already been generous enough.”

Mr. Lawson merely chuckled as he carefully cut two generous slices and placed them into separate

containers.

When he finished, he secured both lids before returning the cheesecake to the freezer.

Then he handed both containers to Damien.

“Give the other one to your grandfather.“

Damien blinked.

“You know my grandfather?”

Mr. Lawson laughed.

“Know him? Charles Blackwood used to come here all the time.”

The older man shook his head fondly.

“Usually right before closing.”

A look of amusement crossed his face.

“He’d tell his wife he was going for an evening walk, then somehow end up here ordering pecan

cheesecake.”

Damien stared at him.

Mr. Lawson pointed toward the container in Damien’s hand.

“That cheesecake has been his favorite for years.”

Another laugh escaped him.

“One evening, he didn’t realize his wife had followed him.”

The older man grinned.

“She caught him halfway through a slice.”

For a moment, he looked genuinely nostalgic.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a grown man look so guilty.”

He chuckled.

“It’s been a while since he’s stopped by. Take that slice to him for me.”

Then, after a brief pause, he added,

“But if he gets in trouble with your grandmother again, let’s agree that this was entirely your idea.”

The older man’s eyes twinkled with amusement.

“Consider it the price of my generosity. The least you can do is help me stay out of trouble.”

Clairo

Chapter 510

With the two containers secured in hand, Damien followed Mr. Lawson back into the main café.

By now, the last remaining customers had already left. The front door had been locked, and the OPEN sign

had been switched off.

Near the counter, Emily was mopping the floor while James awkwardly helped stack a few chairs onto

nearby tables.

Mr. Lawson chuckled.

“Looks like everyone has been put to work.”

James immediately set down the chair in his hands.

“I figured helping was better than just standing around and watching.”

The older man’s eyes twinkled with amusement.

“Well, thank you, young man. We appreciate the help.”

James smiled awkwardly and scratched the back of his head.

“Least I can do to make up for the rather persuasive phone call earlier.”

That earned a laugh from Mr. Lawson.

Still smiling, he walked behind the counter and pulled out a large paper bag from beneath it.

“Here,” he said as he opened it. “Let’s pack those properly. It’ll be easier to carry.”

Damien handed over the containers without objection.

The older man carefully arranged them inside the bag before securing them in place. He then grabbed a

cardboard drink carrier and placed the coffee inside as well.

“There.”

He gave the bag a satisfied nod.

“Much better. No spilled coffee and no crushed cheesecake.”

Damien reached for the bag and accepted it. Then he reached for his wallet, pulled out a card, and handed

it to the older man.

Mr. Lawson looked at the card.

“What’s that for?”

Damien blinked.

“For the cheesecake.”

The older man laughed and shook his head.

“The cheesecake I gave you wasn’t on display, which means it wasn’t for sale or part of today’s inventory.

So don’t worry about it.

Damien was about to protest when Mr. Lawson cut him off.

“But-”

“No buts about it, young man.” He pointed a finger at him. “Take that card away before I take the

cheesecake away too.”

Damien didn’t argue any further and did as he was told.

A genuine smile appeared on Damien’s face.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely.

“Of course.” Mr. Lawson smiled warmly. “Now go on. Cheesecake is best enjoyed cold, and I have a feeling

there’s someone very special at home who’s been waiting for that slice.”

Damien nodded in understanding.

“Thank you again, and I’d also like to apologize for the trouble.”

Mr. Lawson waved a hand dismissively.

“Think nothing of it.”

Then a mischievous smile appeared on his face.

“Though next time, bring your wife with you.”

Emily nodded enthusiastically.

“That’s right, Mr. Blackwood. That way she’ll actually get to enjoy the cheesecake while it’s fresh. Besides, Mr. Horton mentioned she used to be a barista too. No wonder your order earlier was so specific.”

She grinned.

“Maybe she can teach me a thing or two.”

For a moment, Damien considered the suggestion before giving a small nod.

“I’ll ask her.”

The older man smiled approvingly.

“Good. We’d be happy to have the two of you.”

“And we’d love the opportunity to meet your wife as well,” Damien said.

Mr. Lawson’s smile widened.

“Oh, I’m sure she’d love that.”

With the paper bag secured in hand, Damien glanced around the café one final time.

“The mismatched furniture.

The well–worn bookshelf.

The warm lighting.

The lingering scent of coffee and baked goods.

For reasons he couldn’t quite explain, the small neighborhood café felt a little warmer than it had when he

first walked in.

Then again, perhaps it wasn’t the café.

Perhaps it was the people.

Not wanting to keep them any longer, Damien exchanged a final word of thanks before heading for the exit.

Emily and Mr. Lawson walked them to the door and even stepped outside to see them off.

After one last round of farewells, Damien climbed into the vehicle.

As it pulled away from the curb, he glanced out the window.

Emily and Mr. Lawson were still standing outside the café.

Both raised a hand in farewell, genuine smiles on their faces as they watched the vehicle disappear into the night.

By the time the vehicle entered the estate grounds, it was well past nine o'clock.

The lights inside the main residence were still on.

Damien glanced out the window before lowering his gaze to the paper bag resting beside him.

It was well past dinner time.

He had promised Maya he would be home in time for dinner.

Instead, he had lost track of time at the electronics store and spent far longer at the café than he had anticipated.

He could only hope Maya wasn't upset about it.

When the vehicle finally came to a stop in front of the manor, Damien gave a brief instruction.

"Bring everything in."

"Yes, Sir."

James responded immediately before stepping out and opening the rear passenger door.

Damien exited the vehicle with the paper bag in hand and headed toward the residence while James

made his way to the trunk. The driver joined him, and together they began unloading the shopping bags

and boxes.

As he stepped into the manor's foyer, he was greeted by the usual evening quiet. However, he noticed the lights in the dining hall were still on, and the sound of conversation drifted from within.

Damien headed in that direction.

As he stepped into the room, he found Maya seated at the table alongside Charles, Eleanor, and Dominic,

each with a cup of tea in front of them.

Nick was there as well.

The conversation gradually died down as they noticed his arrival.

It was Nick who spotted him first, having chosen a seat that faced the entrance.

“Oh, finally. The man of the hour has arrived.” He glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. “What happened to seven o’clock? Don’t tell me you were working overtime.”

“None of your business,” Damien replied.

Ignoring him entirely, he continued toward Maya.

She rose from her seat the moment he approached.

“Hey.”

Damien leaned down and pressed a kiss against her cheek.

“Have you eaten?” Maya asked. “I can have something warmed up for you.”

“No need. They’ll take care of it.”

His gaze shifted toward Alfred, who stood quietly nearby.

Understanding immediately, Alfred inclined his head.

“Of course, Sir.”

With that, Alfred excused himself and headed toward the kitchen.

“As promised.” Damien lifted the paper bag slightly. “Here you go.”

Maya’s eyes widened, and a genuine smile immediately appeared on her face.

“You really got them?”

“Of course I did.”

Damien leaned down, pressed a kiss against her forehead, and whispered near her ear.

“And I have evidence.”

That earned a laugh from Maya.

“Evidence?”

“You specifically requested proof,” he reminded her.

The amusement in her eyes deepened.

“I did, didn’t I?”

“You did.” Damien nodded toward the table. “Come on. Sit down and enjoy it. Although I’m not entirely

convinced you should be drinking coffee this late.

Maya accepted the bag from him and chuckled.

“Don’t worry. I’m used to it. Caffeine doesn’t affect me the way it affects most people.”

For some reason, the sight of her smiling over something as simple as coffee and cheesecake made the entine evening feel worthwhile.