Intern 591

Chapter 591

By the time they reached the residential wing, they found Max and Lee coming toward them with Anko.

The three stopped when they saw the group approaching.

Harper looked between them. “What are you three doing here?”

Anko gave her a respectful bow. “Bosu–san. I accompanied them so they could bring Mr. Blackwood’s and Mr. Ashcroft’s belongings to their rooms.”

Max turned toward Nicholas. “Boss, I already put your things in your room. Including the p-”

Nicholas’s eyes immediately widened, and he gave Max a sharp look that clearly said shut up.

Max caught it just in time.

“…including your power bank,” he finished quickly.

Damien knew exactly what Max had almost said, but wisely kept his mouth shut. Maya seemed to have an idea too, and the brief look she exchanged with Damien confirmed they were both thinking the same thing.

Harper noticed the strange exchange between Nicholas and Max, but after a moment, simply brushed it off as another one of their weird boss–assistant things.

Nicholas stared at Max for a second, relief flickering across his face along with clear approval of his assistant's quick thinking.

"Thanks. Now go clean yourself up too. You're useless to me if you get sick."

"Yes, Boss."

With that, Anko led Max and Lee down the corridor, leaving the four of them behind.

Harper watched them disappear before turning back to the others.

"I guess I should give you a quick tour while we're here." She gestured down the hallway as they continued walking.

"This is the main residential wing. My parents' suite is on the other side, and this section is mostly ours."

She pointed toward one of the doors as they passed. “That’s my brother’s room, and the one beside it is Jaime’s.” Then she gestured toward the opposite side of the hallway. “Mine is over here.”

Harper stopped in front of Maya’s room and gestured toward the door. “And this is Maya’s room, which makes it your room too.” She glanced at Damien. “Unless you want your own, of course. That can be arranged.”

“No, this is perfect,” Damien replied without hesitation.

Maya’s cheeks immediately warmed, earning a knowing look from Harper that made her narrow her eyes in warning.

Harper wisely kept whatever comment she was about to make to herself and turned toward Nicholas Tristead.

“As for you, your room is at the end of the hall on the right.”

Nicholas looked down the long corridor, then slowly turned back toward her. “Why am I assigned all the way at the end of the hall?”

Maya glanced in that direction as well, while Damien seemed more amused by Nicholas’s apparent offense than sympathetic.

“Oh, please,” Harper said. “Nobody asked you to come.”

“I came for y-”

Nicholas stopped himself.

The abrupt hesitation caught Harper’s attention, and even Damien’s brow lifted slightly.

“Jaime,” Nicholas corrected quickly. “I came for Jaime.”

There was a brief silence before Damien glanced away, the faintest hint of amusement appearing on his face.

Harper noticed that too.

She looked from Damien to Nicholas suspiciously, but whatever Nicholas had almost said, she wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction of asking.

“Then stop complaining.”

Nicholas stared at her for a moment before stepping closer, and Harper instinctively straightened. After the realization she'd had only minutes earlier, his sudden proximity affected her far more than she wanted

it to.

Nick seemed to notice, and the faint smirk that appeared on his face made Harper immediately frown,

"Whatever you're thinking, stop."

"I didn't say anything."

"You don't have to. Your face is irritating enough."

Rather than argue, Nicholas simply let out a short laugh.

"What's funny?" Harper demanded.

Nicholas shrugged. "Nothing."

“You laughed.”

“I coughed.”

Maya pressed her lips together, already recognizing where this was going, while Damien simply watched the exchange with growing amusement.

“That was not a cough,” Harper insisted.

“Maybe the typhoon damaged my lungs.”

Harper’s eyes narrowed, and she opened her mouth to fire back, but Damien cut in before she could.

“Are you two finished?”

They both turned toward him. Damien looked between them, thoroughly unimpressed.

wo have a weird idea of foreplay.”

s brows shot up. “What foreplay?!”

n simply shook his head, apparently deciding it wasn’t worth explaining.

however, looked between Harper and Nicholas for a moment before speaking.

u two need to talk. Properly.”

efore either of them could protest, she tugged gently on Damien’s hand. “Come on.”

Damien nodded and followed her into the room. A second later, the door closed behind them, leaving Harper and Nicholas standing alone in the hallway.

For a moment, neither moved.

Harper blinked at the closed door before quickly recovering.

“Well…” She cleared her throat and pointed toward the end of the corridor. “You know where your room is. You’re on your own. Bye!”

She turned to make her escape, but barely managed a step before Nicholas caught her hand and started pulling her with him down the hallway.

Harper stumbled after him in surprise.

“What are you doing?!”

Nicholas didn’t answer.

Harper tried to pull her hand free, but his grip remained firm as he continued toward his room.

“Are you out of your mind? Let go of me!”

Still nothing.

By the time they reached the door at the end of the hall, Harper was thoroughly irritated.

“This is your room!” she sna

Nick opened the d

Click.

Harper ban

ratulations, you found it. Now let go-”

before closing and locking it behind them.

Nicholas pulled her toward him, then

backed her against the wall. He stopped close enough that his face was only inches from hers.

She stared up at him, her heart suddenly pounding.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Chapter 592

Nicholas ignored her question and moved closer, his gaze locked on hers as Harper’s irritation turned to

anger.

She shoved against his chest with both hands, but Nicholas barely moved.

“Why are you ignoring my messages?” he asked, his voice low.

“Because I have nothing to say to you!”

“Then tell me this. Why were you with Hiro the other night?”

Harper’s eyes widened. “What?!”

“Where were you, and what were the two of you doing?” His expression hardened. “Don’t lie to me.”

Harper closed her eyes and took a deep breath. There was no point arguing. He wasn’t going to let it go until she answered.

She slowly exhaled, then opened her eyes and met his gaze with a serious look.

“We paid the people behind the poisoning a visit.”

Nicholas frowned, immediately understanding what she meant. “That’s it?”

“Yes, that’s it!” Harper snapped. “And what is it to you anyway? You asked, I answered. Now get off me!”

Nicholas said nothing. He simply stared at her, his jaw tightening as though he were fighting with himself.

Then, without warning, he leaned closer and captured her lips in a sudden, rough kiss.

Harper froze for a split second before pressing both hands against his chest, trying to push him away. Nicholas remained firmly in place, refusing to be moved.

But as the initial shock faded, the feelings she had only just begun admitting to herself started overpowering every argument in her head. Her resistance weakened, and instead of pushing him away, her fingers slowly curled into his shirt.

Then Harper kissed him back.

That was all the encouragement Nicholas seemed to need.

The roughness of his kiss gradually faded, becoming slower and gentler without losing its intensity. His hold on her loosened as his hand moved around her waist, drawing her closer.

Her fingers tightened around his shirt as she returned the kiss with growing urgency.

A soft sound escaped her between their lips as everything she had tried so hard to deny became impossib le to ignore.

The kiss deepened, no longer fueled by frustration or jealousy, but by something warmer and more passionate that neither could pretend wasn't there.

Finally, tre broke the kiss, his lips trälling from hers to the side of her neck.

Her eyes drifted closed as she tilted her head, giving him more room and simply allowing herself to enjoy the closeness.

Then he moved closer to her ear.

"I want you," he whispered.

Harper's eyes opened as those three words brought reality crashing back.

She slowly pressed her hands against his chest and pushed him away. This time, Nicholas immediately stopped and lifted his head to look at her.

“What’s wrong?”

The desire in her expression had disappeared, replaced by something far more conflicted.

“I never agreed to your rules,” she said quietly. “And I can’t. I already told you, I’m faithful.”

Nicholas held her gaze. “Then be faithful to me.”

“No! I can’t!” She shook her head. “Don’t you get it? I have obligations. Even if it isn’t Hiro, eventually it’ll be someone else. I can’t just keep messing around with you when I know there’s no-”

“Shh.” Nicholas cut her off. “Who said anything about that?”

Harper frowned. “You did! At the cave. Your rules, your stupid arrangement where you decided I was supposed to be available whenever you wanted me-”

“Why do you think I wanted us to talk?”

“I don’t know!” Harper threw her hands up. “Because I left the island and now you’re chasing me down over some ridiculous arrangement you invented that I never even agreed to!”

Nicholas exhaled slowly.

Instead of arguing, he stepped away from her and walked toward the luggage Max had arranged near the

side of the room.

Harper watched him suspiciously as he opened one of the bags and pulled out a large, tightly compressed package wrapped in clear plastic.

He carried it to the bed and dropped it onto the mattress.

“Here.”

Harper’s brows pulled together. “What’s that?”

“Open it.”

Still suspicious, Harper approached the bed. She found the valve on the vacuum–sealed bag and opened

it.

Air rushed inside.

The package slowly expanded, and Harper watched in confusion as the contents began taking shape.

Then she recognized the color.

Purple.

Her eyes widened as the enormous teddy bear gradually returned to its full size.

It was the same ridiculous purple teddy bear she had seen at–the souvenir shop on the island.

The one she had wanted.

The one she had asked Maya to get for her.

Harper stared at it.

Before she could say anything, she heard him moving behind her. When she turned around, he was already holding out another bag.

“Here.”

Harper looked from him to the bag before slowly taking it and opening it. She was surprised to see it was filled with all the souvenir magnets she had wanted from the shop.

Her expression changed as she looked back up at him.

“What are you…?”

“I heard you talking to Maya.” His voice was quieter now. “So I went there first and bought all of it for you.”

Harper looked down at the bag in her hands, then at the enormous purple bear sitting on the bed.

“Do you really think I’d do that for just anyone?”

For once, Harper had nothing to say.

She stood there holding the bag of magnets, staring at Nicholas as though she were trying to figure out what any of this was supposed to mean.

Nicholas took a step toward her, but before he could get any closer, Harper raised a hand.

“Stop.”

He immediately halted, keeping the distance between them.

Harper swallowed, then looked him directly in the eyes. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

He frowned. “Isn’t it obvious? Do I really have to spell it out?”

“Yes!” Harper snapped. “Because I don’t know when you’re serious anymore! So stop messing with me.”

m not-”

he women you use to scratch an itch, Nicholas, and I’m not the type to sit back and watch

ind.” Her voice sharpened. “You don’t get to mess with my life or emotions just because

flavor of the month!”

“So just tell me the truth!” she demanded. “What exactly do you want from me?!”

Nicholas’s Jaw tightened as his hands curled into fists, every word cutting deeper as the reality of what his own actions had made Harper believe about him finally hit.

Something inside him snapped, and he turned abruptly, driving his fist into the wall.

Harper flinched, her eyes widening as the bag of magnets slipped from her hand.

Before she even realized what she was doing, she had already rushed to his side.

“ARE YOU FUCKING CRAZY?!”

Chapter 593

Nicholas stood there breathing heavily, his fist still pressed against the wall.

“Fuck!” he growled, slamming his fist against it again.

“Fuck!” Another strike.

“Fuck!”

Before he could do it again, Harper grabbed his arm with both hands and used all her strength to pull it away from the wall.

“Stop! What the hell are you doing?!”

Harper’s worry was impossible to hide. She was visibly rattled.

“Are you out of your mind? Why would you do that?” she asked frantically.

“Damn right I’m out of my mind!” Nicholas snapped. “I’ve been losing my fucking mind because of

you!”

Harper stared at him, completely thrown by the accusation. “What are you talking about?!”

Nicholas held her gaze, his chest still heaving. “You want the truth? Fine! I’ll give you the truth!” His voice rose as everything he had been holding back finally broke free.

“I fucking like you, Harper Lin!”

Harper froze.

Nicholas took a breath, but now that the words were finally out, there seemed to be no stopping

them.

“I don’t even fucking know what this is, but I know I like you! I want to see you. I want to hear your voice. I want to be near you all the fucking time!”

He paused and dragged a hand over his face, clearly frustrated by his own inability to make sense of everything he was feeling.

He had never had to explain himself like this before, but now that he had started, there was no taking any of it back.

“And you want to know what’s really driving me fucking crazy?” His frustration spilled out with every word. “I get pissed every time I hear about you and that guy Hiro, or whenever I see you being too damn nice to another man.”

A humorless chuckle escaped him as he shook his head, almost as if he couldn't believe the words coming out of his own mouth.

Nose sleep because of you, Harper. I think about you when I don't fucking want to think about you. You get under my skin, you piss me off, and somehow…" He let out another quiet laugh, this one almost defeated

"I still fucking want more of you."

Harper could only stare at him, suddenly feeling as though her throat had gone completely dry.

Her mind struggled to catch up with what she had just heard, the words replaying over and over in her head.

Of all the things she had expected him to say, an actual confession had never been one of them. She had demanded the truth, but now that he had finally given it to her, she had no idea what to do

with it.

Nicholas Ashcroft was actually standing in front of her, admitting that he liked her.

Everyone around her had been telling her to give whatever was happening between them a chance. Even her mother had told her to stop running from it and figure out what she really wanted.

But this wasn't just any man.

This was Nicholas Ashcroft.

His reputation preceded him, and Harper knew exactly what kind of life he had lived. She couldn't afford to become another name on his long list of women, and more importantly, she couldn't afford to gamble her heart on the wrong person again.

Harper took a breath, gathering her thoughts before finally finding the courage to speak.

"Why?"

Nicholas blinked. "Why?"

"Yes. Why?"

"After everything I just fucking said, that's all you have for me? Why?"

“Yes!” Harper shot back. “Because I need to understand why. Is it because you found out who I

really am? Is this some kind of business thing to you now? Our families together, more connections, power, influence? Some kind of strategic advantage?”

Nicholas stared at her incredulously.

dedes Reinction?

“Seriously? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” He gestured between them. “You were already in my bed when I still thought you were Damien’s employee!”

Harper immediately frowned. “We both know that was the alcohol making decisions for us.”

Nicholas scoffed. “And we both know neither of us was drunk enough not to know what was happening!”

“That doesn’t mean-

“And just so you know, I don’t care how drunk I am. I would never touch one of Damien’s employees.” His expression turned serious. “That’s always been a rule between us. His employees are off-limits to me, and mine are off-limits to him.”

Harper was left speechless.

As much as she hated to admit it, what he said was true. The first time something happened between them, she wasn’t Harper Takahashi to him. She was simply Harper Lin, one of Damien’s employees, while he had been Nicholas Ashcroft all along.

Nick gave her a pointed look.

“So believe me, finding out you weren’t actually his employee only made things a hell of a lot more complicated.”

Nick waited for her to say something, but the silence stretched between them.

For a man who had spent most of his life getting whatever he wanted with little effort, standing there after spilling everything he had been trying to deny made him feel like a complete idiot.

He had never put himself out there like this before. Never given a woman enough power over him to make rejection actually matter.

And Harper's silence felt exactly like that.

Rejection.

Whatever he felt for her clearly wasn't something she shared.

Nicholas gave a bitter shake of his head. "Forget it."

Harper blinked, finally snapping out of her thoughts. "What?"

He looked at her once, then turned away. Without another word, he pulled off his shirt and started toward the bathroom.

"I said forget it." His voice had lost its earlier anger, replaced by something colder. "I was stupid to think there was actually something here. I get it. You don't have to rub it in."

Harper's brows pulled together, but before she could respond, Nicholas stopped.

His eyes landed on the bag of magnets she had dropped earlier.

He bent down and picked it up, then walked back to the bed and placed it beside the enormous

purple teddy bear.

“These are yours. I got them for you.” He straightened without looking at her. “Keep them if you

want. Get rid of them. I don’t care.”

Nicholas turned toward the bathroom again.

“I’m taking a shower.”

He had almost reached the door when Harper’s voice stopped him.

“I like you too.”

Nicholas froze, then immediately spun around.

“What did you just say?”

Harper swallowed. “I said, I like you too.”

For several seconds, complete silence filled the room. Nicholas seemed almost stunned, as if his brain needed a moment to process the fact that he hadn’t imagined those words.

Then he crossed the distance between them in several hurried steps, wrapped his arms around

Harper, and captured her lips again.

This time, there was no resistance.

Harper willingly wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back, no longer fighting the

feelings she had been trying to deny.

Chapter 594

The kiss felt different this time.

There were no reservations behind it. No frustration, no argument either of them was trying to win, and no pretending it meant nothing.

Nicholas's arms tightened around her waist, pulling her closer, while Harper's remained wrapped around his neck, drawing him just as close.

Neither of them was fighting what was happening between them anymore.

Instead, they were finally allowing themselves to show just how much they wanted each

other.

Nicholas slowly broke away, but he didn't move far. A faint, almost disbelieving smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Say it again."

Harper frowned, confused for a moment before realizing exactly what he meant. Her cheeks immediately heated. "I already said it."

"I know." His smile widened slightly, clearly enjoying her sudden discomfort. "But I want to hear it again."

Harper rolled her eyes and turned her face away, suddenly too embarrassed to face him. It was ridiculous how flustered she felt now that the words were actually out, and the way Nicholas was looking at her certainly wasn't helping.

“Don’t push your luck,” she muttered, gently pressing against his chest to create some distance between them.

She barely managed a step before Nicholas caught her around the waist and pulled her right

back.

Harper inhaled sharply as she found herself pressed against his bare chest. She had almost forgotten that he had taken his shirt off earlier, and being this close made it impossible not to notice the warmth of his skin beneath her hands.

Her cheeks grew even hotter.

Nicholas noticed.

Of course he did.

He leaned closer, his voice dropping into a low, suggestive murmur.

“That night in the cave, I remember you telling me I was a damn good fuck.”

Harper's breath caught.

He lowered his mouth near her ear, brushing a teasing kiss against it before whispering, "Why don't we do it again, hmm? Third time's a charm, after all."

Her face turned an even deeper shade of red. For a moment, she could only stand there, completely flustered by the shameless suggestion.

Then something shifted.

If Nicholas wanted to tease her, two could play that game.

She gathered her courage and leaned closer, bringing her lips dangerously close to his without actually kissing him. She slowly moved past the corner of his mouth, along his cheek, until she reached his ear.

"You are indeed a damn good fuck…" she whispered.

Nicholas went perfectly still.

Harper paused deliberately before adding, "But you smell like a musty old rug, which completely kills the mood. So maybe next time."

She immediately straightened and burst out laughing.

Nicholas remained frozen for a second, apparently trying to process what had just happened, which gave Harper the perfect opportunity to slip out of his arms.

“You better take a shower first. We need to go back and check on Jaime.” Her usual bubbly attitude had already returned as she walked toward the bed. “As for me…”

She picked up the enormous purple teddy bear along with the bag of magnets.

“I’m taking these to my room.”

Harper headed toward the door with her new treasures, but as she passed Nicholas, he caught her arm and pulled her back just enough to plant a quick kiss on her lips.

When he released her, a satisfied smile had returned to his face.

“You said next time, Harper. Remember that.” His smile widened. “And this time, you better not disappear on me. I fully intend to collect.”

Harper laughed, genuinely amused. “Sure!”

She continued toward the door as Nicholas finally headed for the bathroom.

“Harper!”

She stopped and turned around. “What now?”

“You got one thing wrong.”

Her brows pulled together. “What’s that?”

“Back at the cave, I told you what I wanted.” His expression remained calm and confident.” But the rules? Those were yours.”

Harper went still, caught completely off guard by the realization.

“I made my claim that night, perhaps because deep down, I already knew I wanted you. I just didn’t understand it yet.” He paused. “But you were the one who turned it into an arrangement. Friends with benefits, no strings attached, our little secret, three months.”

Harper fell silent.

“Those were your rules, Harper. Not mine.”

Harper took a deep breath, letting his words settle before a small but genuine smile appeared on her face.

“Because I was scared. So I guess somewhere along the way, I convinced myself those were your rules instead of mine. It made it easier for me to blame you… and gave me a reason to stay away.”

Nicholas’s expression softened. “And now?”

She thought about it for a moment. Nicholas Ashcroft had just stood in front of her and admitted everything he had been trying to deny, making himself vulnerable in a way she never expected from him.

Maybe it was time she found the courage to do the same.

guess…”

“She adjusted the enormous purple teddy bear in her arms. “I’m officially ending that agreement, and I’m making my claim too.”

Nicholas looked confused. “What claim?”

“Congratulations, Mr. Nicholas Ashcroft. You’ve officially been promoted to boyfriend with benefits.” She lifted the teddy bear slightly, along with the bag of magnets, as though proudly

displaying the perks that came with her decision.

A slow smile spread across Nicholas’s face.

Harper gave the giant bear another little lift. “And apparently, the benefits are pretty good.”

That earned a genuine, hearty laugh from Nicholas, the sound making Harper laugh along

with him.

She pointed toward the bathroom. “Now go take a shower before mold starts growing on you.”

She then turned toward the door. “Lunch is ready, so head downstairs when you’re done.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Nicholas replied before finally heading into the bathroom.

Harper opened the door and stepped into the hallway, closing it behind her. Her cheeks were still warm, the happy little thrill from everything that had just happened refusing to fade.

She buried her face against the enormous purple teddy bear in her arms.

“Ahhh!” she squealed softly, unable to contain the giddy feeling bubbling inside her.

Still smiling, Harper started toward her room with an extra bounce in her steps. As if on cue, just as she passed Maya’s room, the door suddenly opened.

Harper stopped short.

Maya stood in the doorway, equally startled to find Harper right outside.

“Harper?”

“Maya!”

They spoke at the same time.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then Maya's attention shifted from Harper's suspiciously happy face to the

impossible-to-miss, all-too-familiar enormous purple teddy bear in her arms, before drifting

down the hallway in the direction Harper had just come from.

She slowly crossed her arms over her chest, one brow arching as a knowing, mischievous smile spread across her face.

"Interesting…" she drawled. "Should I ask, or do I need popcorn first?"

Chapter 595

Harper's cheeks immediately heated under Maya's knowing smile.

"Shhh!" She suddenly grabbed Maya's hand and pulled her into the hallway. "Keep your voice down! Close the door. Hurry!"

Maya barely had time to react before reaching back and pulling the door shut behind her.

“Where’s Damien?” Harper whispered frantically, glancing nervously at the closed door. “Is he still inside? Wait, where are you going anyway?”

Maya gave her a suspicious look. “He’s in the shower. I was just going to check Jaime’s room and tidy up a little, just in case he didn’t get a chance to clean up earlier.”

Then she paused, her eyes narrowing.

“Wait a minute. Forget about me.” Maya pointed at the enormous purple teddy bear. “I’m assuming you two finally had a talk?”

Harper’s face turned red all over again.

“Shhh!” she hissed before tugging on Maya’s hand and dragging her down the hallway. “Come with me!”

“Wait! I need to check on-

“You can check Jaime’s room later.” Harper shoved the bag of magnets into Maya’s hands. Here, help me with this. Just come with me!”

Maya followed as Harper pulled her toward her room, one arm struggling with the enormous teddy bear while the other remained firmly around Maya’s wrist.

The more flustered Harper became, the more delighted Maya looked.

The moment they were inside, Harper kicked the door shut behind them and released Maya's wrist. She carried the enormous teddy bear across the room and settled it on the lounge

chair.

When she turned around, Maya was already holding out the bag of magnets Harper had shoved at her earlier.

Harper took it from her and placed it on the vanity table.

Maya crossed her arms over her chest, amusement written all over her face.

"Okay," she said. "Talk."

Instead of immediately starting her story, Harper suddenly threw herself at Maya and wrapped her arms tightly around her.

Maya stumbled from the unexpected hug before laughing and hugging her back.

“You seem really happy.”

“I am!” Harper pulled back, unable to contain the smile on her face. “He told me he likes me, Maya! He really, truly likes me!”

Maya’s smile widened.

“Maya!” Harper grabbed her arms excitedly. “I have a boyfriend now!”

Maya laughed at her excitement before taking both of Harper’s hands in hers.

“I’m genuinely happy for you,” she said warmly. “For both of you.”

“Thank you!”

Harper hugged her again, and Maya laughed as she returned it.

After a moment, Maya pulled back. “So what happens now?”

Harper blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean with Hiro. What happens to your arrangement with him? How are you going to tell him about Nicholas?”

Harper’s excitement settled. She sighed, walked over to the bed, and sat down.

“Oh, that.” She waved a hand dismissively. “Hiro won’t mind.”

Maya frowned and followed, sitting beside her. “What do you mean he won’t mind?”

“Well…” Harper shifted toward her. “You know… Hiro and I have been best friends since we were kids. The idea of actually marrying each other has always felt weird.”

“I guess, it is indeed weird.”

“Very.” Harper grimaced. “He’s practically family. Trying to imagine him as my husband is just …” She shuddered. “No.”

Maya laughed, but Harper suddenly leaned closer, lowering her voice as though someone might overhear them through the walls.

“Besides, the truth is… Hiro has a girlfriend.”

Maya’s eyes widened. “What?!”

Harper nodded eagerly. “Uh-huh. That idiot is in love.”

“No way.”

“Way. They’ve been together for almost two years.”

“Two years?!”

“Her name is Emi. She’s local. Her family has nothing to do with ours-no powerful

Chas

connections, no organizations, none of it. They’re just normal middle-class people. She helps run their small ramen restaurant downtown.”

“And nobody knows?”

“Very few people.” Harper sighed. “They’ve kept the relationship secret because… well, you can probably guess why.”

Maya’s expression slowly changed as she understood.

“Hiro’s family.”

“Exactly.”

Maya considered that for a moment. “But now that you’re with Nick, doesn’t that solve the problem? Hiro can be with his girlfriend openly instead.”

Harper shook her head. “I wish it were that simple. His father might never accept her. Uncle Akio is extremely traditional when it comes to family, loyalty, and marriage.”

Maya frowned at the name.

“Uncle Akio…”

Then recognition suddenly crossed her face. “Wait. You mean that older gentleman who’s always with your father?”

Harper nodded. “Yup. Uncle Akio is Hiro’s father.”

“Oh.”

Maya fell quiet for a moment before another thought occurred to her.

Then why don’t you change the rules?” she asked. “You’re taking over now, right? I’m

that gives you the authority to change some things.”

“It does.” Harper leaned back on her hands. “But it’s not that simple. Every decision has consequences, and most of those rules exist because they’ve worked for generations. I can’t change one just because it suddenly inconveniences someone I care about.”

Maya listened quietly.

“If I make an exception for Hiro, then I have to be prepared to make that same exception for everyone else. And once we start allowing complete outsiders in, we risk exposing people who were never supposed to know this world even exists.”

“But Nicholas is technically an outsider too.”

“Not in the same way.” Harper shook her head. “Remember what Aunt Dahlia said? It doesn’t necessarily have to be Hiro, but it still has to be someone within the circle.”

Maya nodded slowly.

“In plain words, someone with equal or greater power. Someone who already understands this world, knows the risks, and has enough power to protect themselves if things go wrong.” Harper shrugged. “Nicholas qualifies.”

A hint of sadness crossed Maya’s face.

“So Hiro’s girlfriend is basically like me before I met Damien.”

“Not quite.” Harper turned toward her. “Maybe in terms of innocence about this side of the world. But not identity.”

Maya frowned.

“You were always a Lockwood, Maya. Even before you knew it yourself. Whether you crossed paths with Damien or not, that blood was still yours. Your world might have looked completely different back then, but underneath it all, you were already connected to this one.”

Harper paused.

“Hiro’s girlfriend isn’t. She really is an outsider. No blood connection, no family history, no protection, no understanding of what she’d be stepping into. Bringing her in doesn’t just create a risk for us. It puts her at risk too.”

Maya slowly nodded as the distinction became clearer.

So what are they supposed to do?”

Harper sighed. “Is the problem.”

e a plan?”

Harper’s lips slowly curved.

“I do.”

Maya immediately perked up. “You do?”

“Kind of.”

Maya narrowed her eyes. “Harper.”

“What?” Harper laughed. “I said kind of! It’s just-”

Before she could continue, a sudden knock at the door cut her off, instantly silencing them

both.

Chapter 596

Harper and Maya exchanged a quick glance as another knock sounded at the door.

“Coming!” Harper called before getting up from the bed and heading over to answer it.

The moment Harper pulled the door open, she paused, surprised to find Damien standing outside with Nicholas beside him.

Both men looked considerably better than they had earlier, the shower and fresh clothes restoring some semblance of their usual polished appearance. Still, neither could completely hide the exhaustion lingering beneath the surface.

Harper blinked. “Uh… hi? Come in!”

She stepped aside to let them in before turning toward Maya. “Your boyfriend is here.”

Maya stood from the bed, but before she could respond, Nicholas immediately moved to Harper’s side and casually slipped an arm around her shoulders.

“And your boyfriend too,” he added.

Harper’s cheeks immediately heated again.

Maya burst out laughing while Damien simply shook his head, clearly amused by the two of

them.

“So, you two finally figured it out, huh? Congratulations!”

Nicholas answered before Harper could, looking far too pleased with himself. “Thank you! What can I say? She couldn’t resist my charm.”

Harper immediately smacked his arm and pulled away. “What?! Maybe you couldn’t resist mine!”

Maya laughed while Damien watched them fall effortlessly back into their usual bickering. Except this time, there was something different beneath it. Neither was trying to hide the affection anymore.

Nicholas wandered farther into the room, glancing around before helping himself to a seat on Harper’s bed. He bounced slightly against the mattress, pressing both palms against it as though testing its firmness.

“Hmm. Nice and firm.” A wicked grin appeared on his face. “I can think of a few ways we could put this thing to good use.”

He arched a brow at Harper and winked.

Her face instantly turned scarlet.

She marched over and slapped a hand over his mouth. “Do you seriously have no filter?!”

Nicholas laughed against her palm before grabbing her wrist. With one quick tug, he pulled her off balance, and Harper landed sideways on his lap.

“What?” he said innocently. “We’re all adults here. Sex is perfectly normal between couples.” He glanced toward Damien. “Right, D?”

Damien’s attention shifted to Maya, and a knowing smirk slowly appeared on his face.

“Of course.”

Maya’s cheeks immediately flushed.

Nicholas turned triumphantly back to Harper. “See?”

Harper rolled her eyes and tried to get off his lap, but Nicholas kept an arm securely around

her waist.

“Anyway, what were you two doing up here?” He glanced between Maya and Harper. “I thought we were supposed to have lunch.”

Then he leaned closer to Harper, lowering his voice just enough to make the implication

obvious.

“Unless you had something else in mind. I’m open to options.”

Harper’s face heated all over again. “Jeez! Is sex the only thing you think about? What’s next, you’re going to suggest an orgy?”

She pushed herself off his lap, but Nicholas still held her wrist. The moment she stood, his playful expression softened.

“No. I only want you.”

Harper paused, caught off guard by how easily he said it.

Damien leaned closer to Maya. “Please tell me we’re not this cringe.”

and shook her head. “No. I don’t think so.”

at chose to ignore the comment. “So?” He looked between the two lovely ladies up to?”

“Nothing. We were just talking about Hiro.”

The change in Nicholas was immediate.

“What about him?”

Harper and Maya exchanged a look.

Harper sighed. “Maya was asking about Hiro. Specifically, how this-” She gestured between herself and Nicholas. “-affects our arrangement and how I’m supposed to tell him.”

Nicholas barely hesitated. “Easy. Tell him you have a boyfriend now and he can fuck off.”

Harper opened her mouth, but Maya beat her to it.

“That’s not the problem.”

Damien frowned. “What problem?”

Harper and Maya exchanged another glance before Maya shrugged.

“Maybe they’ll have an opinion that could help.”

Harper hesitated for a moment before nodding, then briefly explained the situation.

“Hiro’s been secretly dating someone for almost two years. Her name is Emi, and she’s completely unaware of what he really does. No family connections, no ties to any organization, nothing. Just an ordinary person living a simple life.”

Nicholas’s brows lifted, but he didn’t interrupt, waiting for Harper to continue.

“Uncle Akio would almost certainly oppose the relationship. And of course, I can’t just make an exception for Hiro either. If I change the rules for him, I have to be prepared to change

them for everyone.” She sighed. “I want to help him, but I’m torn between friendship and duty.

“That’s simple,” Nicholas said confidently.

Harper stared at him. “Of course you think it’s simple.”

“It is.” Nicholas leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. “Hiro needs to tell her the truth.”

Harper’s expression immediately turned serious. “You know that’s not possible.”

“I didn’t say he should tell her everything. Just enough for her to understand what she’s actually choosing.” He straightened and casually shrugged.

“Right now, everyone is deciding for her. Hiro assumes she needs protecting. His father assumes she doesn’t belong. You’re worried about whether she can handle this world. But has anyone actually bothered asking the woman herself?”

Harper fell silent, considering his words before finally giving a small nod. “You have a point.”

Nick continued. “Tell her the truth, give her a choice, and then find out whether she can actually be trusted. Not some ridiculous test designed for her to fail. Give her time. Let her understand the risks. See whether she can keep what she learns to herself.”

“And if she can?” Harper asked.

“Then maybe being born ‘normal’ shouldn’t automatically make her unworthy.”

Harper considered his answer for a moment before throwing out another question. “And what if she can’t?”

Nicholas’s expression hardened.

“Then you have a different problem. Because once someone knows too much, you can’t exactly pretend they never learned it.”

He stood from the bed and walked toward Harper, stopping in front of her.

“And you already know what happens if it comes to that. It’s one of the ugly realities of this world.”

He placed his hands gently on Harper’s arms.

“But remember, this is Hiro’s decision to make, not yours. He knows the risks, and he knows what could happen if he brings her into this world.”

Nicholas paused briefly before continuing.

“If she accepts the truth and proves she can be trusted, then give her a chance. But if she becomes a threat to everyone you’re responsible for protecting, then you already know what has to be done.”

Harper held his gaze, the weight of his words settling over her.

Nicholas leaned closer and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead before giving her arms a

assuring squeeze.

ing in charge means you won't always get to make the choice that makes you happy, arper. Sometimes you'll have to make the one that keeps everyone else safe."

Chapter 597

What Nicholas said made perfect sense, even if the reality behind it wasn't easy to accept.

Just as Harper had said earlier, every decision came with consequences, and protecting people

sometimes meant making difficult choices.

Damien understood that better than anyone.

He had made those choices himself-crossed lines, broken rules, and accepted the consequences

of choosing Maya above everything else.

Perhaps that was simply the price of loving someone. It was just that, in their world, love came with complications most people would never have to face.

Silence settled over the room before Maya suddenly remembered their conversation before the interruption.

“Wait.” She turned to Harper. “Earlier, you said you had a plan. What exactly were you planning to do?”

Harper immediately perked up. “Well… it’s not as deep as his.” She pointed at Nicholas.

“But I was thinking I could convince Hiro to talk to Dad about it. Then I’ll get Mom on our side, because Dad listens to Mom, and Mom usually supports me, so she’ll most likely agree.”

She paused, then suddenly became animated, using her hands to map out her plan in the air like a coach explaining a complicated play.

“And if Dad agrees, he can help convince his dad because his dad listens to my dad, then boom!” She clapped her hands together. “Everybody’s happy! Problem solved!”

With a proud grin, she swept both hands outward, presenting her supposedly flawless plan.

“You know. A little chain of persuasion.”

Maya stared at Harper for a moment, trying to make sense of the ridiculous chain she had just laid out. Somewhere along the way, it had all become Dad, Mom, my dad, his dad, and Dad all over

again.

Nicholas looked equally confused, while Harper stood there looking incredibly pleased with herself, as though she had just presented the most brilliant solution to an impossible problem.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Damien suddenly said.

“What?” Harper’s head snapped toward him, her brows pulling together. “Why?”

“Because then you might get his obedience, but not his acceptance,” Damien answered, his voice

calm but firm.

“he accepts her because your father tells him to, he’s doing it out of loyalty and obligation. Hirg needs his father to accept her because he understands his son’s choice-not because someone

above him ordered him to."

Nicholas let out a low whistle. "Bingo."

Harper immediately shot him a sharp side-eye, while Maya simply nodded at Damien/in

agreement.

Harper remained quiet for a moment, reluctantly realizing Damien was right.

"Bummer." She sighed. "So much for my brilliant plan."

Nicholas chuckled. "It was terrible, babe."

Harper glared at him. "Babe your ass!"

Nicholas laughed and slipped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her against his side.

Harper rolled her eyes but didn't pull away. "So much for having a supportive boyfriend," she

murmured.

“Hey, I am supportive,” Nicholas protested lightly. His tone turned more serious. “Besides, there’s no point trying to solve everything before you’ve even talked to him. Find out what his plans are, then go from there.”

Harper slowly turned her head toward him, a teasing smile tugging at her lips.

“Hmm. Who would’ve thought you could actually be mature and sensible when you wanted to be?”

Nicholas frowned. “I’m not sure whether I should take that as a compliment or be offended.”

Maya laughed before glancing at the time..

“We should probably head downstairs. We still need to eat, and I want to get back to Jaime.”

The mention of her brother immediately shifted the mood in the room.

“Yes!” Nicholas immediately agreed. “I’m with you on that one, sis. I’m starving.”

Damien nodded. “That’s actually why we came looking for you.”

The four of them finally left Harper’s room and headed downstairs together.

When they reached the dining hall, they found Kenji already seated at the table, happily helping himself to lunch.

Harper stopped and stared at him. “You’re such a pig! You couldn’t even wait for us?”

Kenji looked up, his mouth still full. He quickly chewed before answering.

“I wasn’t planning to eat without you,” he defended himself. “But then I smelled the food and got.

hungry.”

“That’s your excuse?”

Kenji shrugged and took another bite.

The others made their way toward the table, but as they did, Kenji’s attention dropped to Harper

and Nicholas's joined hands.

His chewing slowed as one brow gradually lifted, a teasing smirk tugging at the corner of his/

mouth.

"Soooo…" His eyes traveled between the two of them. "I guess he's officially my future

brother-in-law now?"

Harper immediately let go of Nicholas's hand, her cheeks turning pink as though they'd been caught doing something far more scandalous.

"Don't be ridiculous! This is new, and it's not like… we just…" Harper stumbled over her words, suddenly unable to finish whatever excuse she was trying to make.

Before she could recover, Nicholas approached Kenji and extended his hand with an almost ridiculously serious expression.

"We haven't been formally introduced." A confident smile appeared on his face. "Nicholas Ashcroft. Your sister's boyfriend."

Kenji glanced at the offered hand before looking up at him.

Nicholas's smile widened.

"And, most likely, your future brother-in-law too."

"Nicholas Ashcroft!" Harper exclaimed behind him.

Kenji burst out laughing before accepting his hand. "Kenji Takahashi. The brother who gets to decide whether you survive long enough to become one."

Nicholas's brows rose, an impressed grin spreading across his face. He tightened his grip slightly as they shook hands.

"Oh, I like you already."

A genuine laugh escaped him as Kenji grinned back.

"Great," Harper muttered, looking between the two men. "There are two of you now."

Neither seemed remotely bothered. If anything, their matching grins only widened.

“Wipe those stupid grins off your faces! It’s annoying!” Harper snapped before turning toward Maya and Damien, looking utterly defeated. “Let’s eat. Just sit wherever you want.”

Maya

d as everyone took their seats, Nicholas naturally claiming the chair beside Harper

action remained casual as they ate, occasionally interrupted by Kenji and Nicholas

getting on Harper’s nerves.

ed first and eventually excused himself, leaving the four of them at the table.

continued eating, the conversation shifted to the progress of their plan.

eived an update from James,” Damien mentioned. “Everything there is normal.”

ya looked relieved. “No problems?”

Nothing they can't handle. They confirmed someone has been keeping an eye on them, Monroe has everything under control."

Harper nodded. "Volkov took the bait, and he's already panicking. He still wants eyes on you because he's scared, but his attention is divided now." She took another bite. "That buys us enough

time for now."

"That's good," Maya said. "At least that's one less thing to worry about."

Harper nodded as she continued eating.

Halfway through another bite, Harper suddenly stopped, her eyes narrowing as they shifted toward

Nicholas.

He noticed immediately. "What?"

She lowered her fork to the plate.

“By the w

en further. “Who the hell is Brandy?”

Chapter 598

Nicholas froze with his fork halfway to his mouth as Maya and Damien exchanged a quick glance but remained noticeably silent.

He cleared his throat, his eyes shifting toward Damien as though hoping for rescue.

Damien, however, simply ignored him and calmly continued eating, making it painfully obvious that he had no intention of getting involved. Maya, on the other hand, remained equally quiet, clearly having made the same decision.

Harper’s patience began to wear thin as her fingers drummed against the table.

“Sooo?” she prompted, looking pointedly at Nicholas.

Nicholas finally looked at her, but for once, no clever response came out of his mouth.

He hesitated.

Whatever

him and Harper was still painfully new, and the last thing he wanted was to ruin

When

nothing, Harper turned toward Maya and Damien, who suddenly seemed their food.

back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest.

“She narrowed her eyes at Nicholas./Did you swallow your tongue?”

ced. “Harper… I…”

t an impatient sigh and turned away from him, clearly done waiting for an answer.

er eyes settled on her instead. “Do you know something?”

leased a quiet sigh. She glanced at Damien, then Nicholas, before finally looking at Harper.

dy was Bill Franklin’s secretary.”

per frowned. “Bill Franklin? The director of the R&D department?”

Was,” Damien corrected.

That immediately caught Harper’s attention. Her posture shifted as she leaned forward, her eyes widening with sudden interest.

“Wait. Was? You mean he got fired?” She looked between them. “Why? And what does that have to do with Brandy?”

Whatever suspicion she’d

“Okay. I’m listening

is time, Nic

way to genuine curiosity.

“Brandy used to work as a hostess at the Velvet Room.” He paused, clearly uncomfortable with what came next. “Years ago, T..

Harper’s eyes narrowed.

Then realization hit.

“Wait a minute.” She held up a hand. “Let me guess. Once upon a time, you were one of her clients and ended up sleeping with her.”

Nicholas reluctantly nodded before immediately defending himself.

“But I don’t even remember her. Back then, I didn’t exactly make a habit of learning anything about the women I paid to spend the night with.”

Harper stared at him for a moment before another question occurred to her.

“Then how the hell did she end up at Blackwood Enterprises? And how did she become Bill Franklin’s secretary?”

Damien answered this time.

“Franklin was one of her clients too. She used that relationship to get herself into the company because she believed working at Blackwood Enterprises would eventually give her another chance to see Nick.”

Harper’s eyes widened.

“What?!”

Nicholas knew there was no point hiding anything. Harper would eventually learn the truth, and he wanted her to hear it from him.

So he told her what had happened that day.

Harper listened, occasionally asking questions until she understood the entire situation.

When Nicholas finished, she stared at him for several seconds.

“So…” Harper began slowly. “If I’m understanding this correctly, she had a one-night stand with you-”

“I paid for her services,” Nicholas immediately corrected.

Harper rolled her eyes. “Same difference,”

“It is absolutely not the same thing.”

“Fine! You were once her client. Happy?”

“Much better.”

Harper rolled her eyes again.

“Anyway, you slept with her once, she couldn’t get over it and apparently spent years thinking there could be something more between you. Meanwhile, that dirty old man Franklin became her sugar daddy and got her a job as his secretary.”

Nicholas remained silent, letting her continue.

~Then you guys happened to visit that department to test the masks, she saw you, assumed you’d

recognize her, and decided this was finally her chance to get the man of her dreams.”

Harper paused, processing the absurdity of it all.

“So she exposed Franklin, Damien fired both of them, and then she made a scene, confessed that she had feelings for you, and even offered to be your mistress as long as you kept her around?”

Nicholas nodded.

“Pretty much.” He leaned closer, his expression immediately turning earnest. “But believe me, I have nothing to do with her. I didn’t even remember who she was, Harper. And I made it very clear that I wanted her to stay away from me.”

Harper remained quiet, processing everything she had learned.

“But I’m worried,” Maya suddenly said.

Harper’s attention immediately snapped toward her.

“Worried about what?”

Maya hesitated.

“About Brandy.”

The table grew quiet again.

“Bill Franklin lost everything because of her,” Maya continued. “His position, his career, his reputation, his wife… everything. Damien even forced him out of the country.”

She glanced at Damien before looking back at Harper.

“He knows he can’t do anything to Damien or Nick. But Brandy?” Maya slowly shook her head. “I don’t know. I just have a feeling he won’t simply let what she did to him go.”

Harper thought about it for a moment before slowly nodding.

“You have a point. If Bill-”

“Who cares?” Nicholas cut in.

Harper turned toward him.

“It’s not like she’s innocent either,” he continued bluntly. “She outright admitted that she intentionally used Franklin to get into Blackwood Enterprises. Whatever happened between those two is between them.”

Maya frowned. “I know. What she did was wrong, I get that. But it all started because fell in love with someone she shouldn’t have, and because of that, she could end up hurt-or worse, dead.” She hesitated. “If there’s something we can do to help…”

“She’s right,” Harper interrupted, this time looking directly at Nicholas. “She fucked up big time! But she did what she did because of her obsession with you. Whether you wanted any part of it or not, you’re still the

reason she went that far.”

“So?” Nicholas shot back. “She should’ve understood what our arrangement was from the beginning. That was her fucking job, for Christ’s sake. Whatever feelings she developed afterward weren’t part of her job, and they definitely weren’t part of the service I paid for.”

His irritation became more apparent as he continued.

“And whatever fucked-up decisions she made years later because she couldn’t let it go are sure as hell not my responsibility. If she comes after me or anyone I care about directly, I’ll handle it. But she chose to use Franklin, and now she has to deal with whatever consequences come from that.”

Harper opened her mouth, but Nicholas continued before she could respond.

“Think about it. The woman is already obsessed with me. If I step in now and protect her from Franklin, what do you think she’s going to believe?” He shook his head. “She won’t see it as me fixing a problem. She’ll see it as proof that I care about her.”

That gave Harper pause.

Nicholas leaned back in his chair.

“And I’m not giving her another reason to believe there could ever be something between us.”

Chapter 599

Nicholas’s words left both women quiet for a moment.

Maya was the first to understand his point.

As much as she worried about what could happen to Brandy, Nicholas personally stepping in could easily make the situation worse. A woman who had held onto one meaningless night for years could interpret even the smallest act of concern as something it wasn’t.

Harper seemed to arrive at the same conclusion.

Still, that didn’t mean they should simply ignore the possibility that her life could be in danger.

“Okay,” Harper finally said. “You have a point.”

Nicholas’s brow lifted, clearly not expecting her to concede so easily.

“But Maya has a point too,” Harper quickly added.

Nicholas sighed. “Of course there’s a but.”

“Shut up. I’m being serious.”

That wiped some of the amusement from his face.

Harper glanced at Maya, who gave a small nod before speaking.

“I agree with you. If Brandy is really as obsessed with you as she seems, she could misunderstand your intentions,” Maya said.

“Exactly,” Nicholas said.

“Maya’s right about Franklin.” Harper’s expression turned serious. “If there’s even a chance he might come after her, we shouldn’t just ignore it. But nobody said you have to help her.”

Nicholas frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You stay away from her. Completely.” Harper shrugged.

Nicholas opened his mouth, but Harper immediately held up a hand.

“I’m not saying we protect her, babysit her, or suddenly make her our responsibility. I’m saying we find out where Franklin is and whether he’s actually planning something.”

Maya nodded. “We just need to find out if there’s actually something to worry about.”

She turned toward Damien. “Find out where Franklin is, what he’s doing, and whether he’s made any move toward Brandy. If there’s nothing there, fine. We leave it alone.”

“And if there is?” Nicholas asked.

Maya glanced at Harper and Damien before looking back at him.

Then we’ll have someone interfere,” she answered.

She paused, her expression turning serious.

“Once. Only once.”

The unexpected answer silenced the table. Even Damien looked surprised.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Falling in love isn’t wrong,” Maya explained. “We can’t control when it happens or who we fall for. Brandy falling in love with Nick isn’t a crime. But what she chose to do because of those feelings was wrong.”

She paused.

“There’s a difference between saving someone from the consequences of their own choices and knowingly letting them walk into a grave we could’ve seen coming. If Franklin really is planning to hurt or kill her and we know about it, then we help her survive it.”

Maya looked between them.

“Because after that, any normal person would know to be careful. What she chooses to do afterward is on her.”

Damien studied her. “And what if we’re already too late?”

Maya fell quiet for a moment.

“Then that’s the price she paid for what she did.” Her voice was calm but firm. “And we’re not going to use our power to interfere with the normal pursuit of justice.”

Pride flickered in Damien’s eyes as he looked at Maya.

“I fully support this.”

Nicholas let out a defeated sigh and leaned back in his chair.

“Fine. We’ll go with that. As long as whatever we do can’t be traced back to any of us-especially me.” His expression turned serious. “I don’t want to give her even the slightest reason to think I had anything to do with helping her. The last thing I need is for her to twist it into another sign that I secretly care about her.”

Harper scoffed. “Well, maybe you should’ve learned how to keep it in your pants instead of sleeping your way through half the female population, Then you wouldn’t have women obsessing over you years later.”

“That was a long time ago!” Nicholas protested. “In fact, I probably have blue balls by now. The last time! got any was with you, back in the ca-”

Harper’s eyes widened.

She immediately snatched an apple from the table and hurled it at him.

Nicholas barely managed to catch it before it smacked him in the face.

“Shut your mouth!” Harper snapped, her cheeks turning bright red. “You truly have no shame! Ugh!”

Nicholas grinned shamelessly as Harper rolled her eyes.

She took a deep breath, visibly composing herself, before suddenly planting both hands on the table.

“Great!” Harper declared. “Now that that’s settled…”

A bright smile spread across her face before she raised one hand toward Maya, waiting for a high five.

“You are truly a queen through and through! Compassionate, reasonable, but you still know when to draw the damn line.” She wiggled her raised hand impatiently. “Come on! Give it to me!”

Maya couldn’t help but smile. She reached up and lightly slapped her palm against Harper’s before shaking her head in amusement.

We should get going,” she said, glancing at the time. “It’s already been at least two hours since they took Jaime in. I want to see if there’s been any update.”

The lightness immediately faded from her expression at the thought of her brother.

Damien was the first to rise from his chair, with Maya following beside him. Harper and Nicholas stood shortly after, and together, the four of them left the dining hall and made their way back toward the opposite wing of the estate.

They were halfway there when a man’s voice suddenly called out from behind them.

“Maya, wait!”

All four of them stopped.

Damien’s expression immediately darkened. His head/snapped toward the direction of the voice, his narrowed eyes searching for its source.

What man was calling after Maya?

Maya turned as well, only to see Hiro hurrying toward them with an unusually bright smile.

He stopped directly in front of Maya and bowed respectfully.

“Maya, this is for you.”

He held out a neatly wrapped box.

Damien’s eyes dropped to it, his jaw tightening.

Maya, completely oblivious to the storm brewing beside her, accepted it with a puzzled smile.

“What’s this?”

“The widows of the brothers we recently lost heard about what happened last night,” Hiro explained. “They worked together to make this for you. They stayed up most of the night and only finished it a little while ago. It’s their way of showing their gratitude for what you did.”

Maya’s expression immediately softened and she carefully opened the box.

Inside w

crafted fabric charm pouch, intricately embroidered with delicate

What Exactly Happened Last Night?

finished with a braided cord. It was simple, but the amount of care that had gone into making

mistakable.

lifted it from the box, her fingers brushing over the delicate stitching.

beautiful,” she murmured, visibly touched by the gesture.

smiled. “They hoped you would like it.”

over it. Please tell them thank you for me.”

will.”

Maya was about to close the box when Damien’s deep voice suddenly came from beside her, low and unmistakably unhappy.

“What exactly happened last night?”

Chapter 600

Maya blinked, having been so focused on admiring the gift that she hadn’t properly heard Damien’s question.

“Hmm? What was that?”

She looked up at him and immediately noticed the unmistakable displeasure on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“I said, what exactly happened last night?” Damien repeated, his deep voice low and cold.

It wasn’t until Maya glanced down at the gift in her hands that she realized exactly what he was asking about.

“Oh…”

Damien’s eyes narrowed at her reaction. Whatever had happened last night, Maya clearly knew what the mam was referring to, and judging by the sheepish look slowly appearing on her face, it was something she had neglected to tell him.

“It’s not what you’re thinking,” Maya said.

“I haven’t told you what I’m thinking,” Damien replied coldly.

“No, but I know that face.” She gave him a small smile, hoping to ease the sudden tension. “It really wasn’t a big deal.”

Harper, on the other hand, had gone unusually quiet. She knew exactly what had happened last night, and more importantly, she knew Damien well enough to know he wasn’t going to be happy when he found out.

The gears in her head were already turning as she tried to think of the best way to explain everything without making the situation sound worse than it was.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Nicholas leaned closer to her.

“Uh–oh. He’s not happy.”

“No shit!” Harper snapped.

Nicholas’s gaze then shifted toward Hiro. “Who’s that guy anyway?”

Before Harper could answer him, she noticed Hiro’s brows rise at Maya’s attempt to dismiss what had happened. He opened his mouth, clearly about to correct her.

Harper’s eyes widened.

“Ah! Hiro!” she suddenly exclaimed with an awkward laugh, cutting him off before he could get a single word out. “What the hell? You come running over here calling for Maya without even greeting everyone else? What are we, ghosts?”

Hiro blinked, clearly caught off guard by the sudden accusation.

He rubbed the back of his neck, looking slightly embarrassed. “Right. Sorry.”

He turned toward Damien and bowed respectfully before extending his hand.

“I’m Hiro. It’s nice to finally meet you, Damien.”

Damien stared at the offered hand for a moment.

So this was Hiro.

At least that answered one question. The man clearly wasn’t a threat as far as Maya was concerned.

Damien finally accepted his hand and gave it a firm shake. Unfortunately, knowing who Hiro was did absolutely nothing to improve his mood. He was still waiting for an explanation from Maya.

As Damien and Hiro released each other’s hands, Nicholas stepped forward and offered his own.

“Nicholas Ashcroft.”

Hiro accepted it, but before he could respond, Nicholas added with a shameless grin,

“Harper’s boyfriend.”

Hiro’s eyebrows shot up. He clearly hadn’t seen that coming, but the surprise quickly gave way to amused understanding.

His gaze immediately shifted toward Harper, whose cheeks had already begun turning pink.

A slow, knowing smile spread across Hiro’s face before he looked back at Nicholas.

“Hiro,” he introduced himself.

He paused deliberately, his smile turning almost smug.

“Nice to meet you… Harper’s boyfriend.”

Harper’s blush deepened, and she immediately reached over and pinched Hiro hard on the arm.

“Shut up!”

“Ouch!” Hiro quickly released Nicholas’s hand and rubbed the spot she had pinched. “What was that for?”

Harper rolled her eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic! I barely even put any effort into it.”

Hiro laughed and shook his head.

“Anyway, I only came to find Maya to deliver the gift. I should get going. Part of the eastern border was damaged by the flooding, and I still need to check the situation over there.”

He took a step back, but before leaving, he turned toward Maya once more and bowed deeply, the gesture noticeably more respectful than before.

“Thank you again, Maya.”

Maya gave him a small nod. “Take care.”

Hiro straightened and quickly headed off in the direction he had come from.

The moment Hiro was out of earshot, Damien turned his attention back to Maya.

“Care to explain what happened last night?”

Maya and Harper exchanged a quick glance. Harper looked noticeably nervous, something Damien’s observant eyes immediately picked up on, but he chose not to call her out.

Maya took a deep breath before turning to him

“I saw Harper sneaking out last night, so I followed her.”

Nicholas’s head immediately snapped toward Harper.

“What were you doing sneaking out?”

Harper shot him an irritated look. “Shh! Don’t start. This isn’t about you.”

Damien ignored their exchange, his eyes remaining on Maya.

“And?”

“The next thing I knew, I was underground. I hadn’t even realized where I was going until I was already there,” Maya explained. “I was about to turn back when Harper appeared. Turns out, she already knew I was following her.”

She paused.

“Then I insisted on knowing what she was doing down there.”

Something in Damien’s expression shifted, as though he was beginning to put the pieces together.

“And what exactly was she doing there?”

Maya met his eyes.

“Delivering justice.”

Damien’s expression changed instantly. His gaze snapped toward Harper.

“What?!”

Maya immediately reached for his arm.

“Don’t blame her. I wanted to see it. I insisted.”

“But, Maya-”

“No buts, Damien.” Her voice was firm. “It was my decision. Whether you like it or not, I’m part of this world now. And the only way I’m ever going to understand everything is if you stop shielding me from it.”

Damien said nothing. His jaw clenched, but Maya could see the argument sitting behind his eyes.

Her expression softened.

“know you want to protest me. But the day I accepted you, I accepted your world too. Keeping the ugly parts of it hidden from me will do more harm than goud.” She held his gaze. “I want to understand everything. I want to learn.”

For several seconds, Damien ‘simply stared at her.

Maya closed her eyes briefly and drew in a slow breath, calming the emotions rising inside her. When she looked at him again, the intensity in Damien’s gaze remained, but the frustration had faded, replaced by something far more concerned.

“Were you scared?”

Maya shook her head, a small smile touching her lips.

“No.”

Damien remained silent, his eyes searching hers for several long seconds.

Then, without warning, he pulled her into his arms and held her tightly against his chest.

Maya immediately wrapped her arms around him in return.

“I know you’re worried,” she murmured. “But I can handle it. I need you to trust me.”

Damien didn’t answer right away. Instead, his arms tightened around her, holding her even closer as though the simple reassurance wasn’t quite enough to ease whatever fear had taken hold of him.

After a long moment, Damien finally pulled back just enough to look into her eyes.

“Okay,” he said quietly.

For several seconds, neither of them moved. Then his brows slowly pulled together as his gaze shifted toward Harper before returning to Maya.

“Now, I’m genuinely curious what exactly my wife did last night to make those widows