Intern 97

Chapter 97

Maya noticed it the moment Damien stepped onto the deck-subtle, but there.

There was exhaustion in his eyes, a rawness edging his usually pristine appearance. His jaw bore the beginnings of a beard, his hair slightly longer, like he hadn't had the time-or will-to shave for days…

But somehow… it didn't make him look worn.

It made him look more dangerous.

More masculine.

More real.

The rest of the team began stepping forward to greet him and the man beside him. Polite nods, a few formal "Good morning, sirs," echoing through the quiet salt air.

Damien gave the group a curt nod in acknowledgment-but his eyes never left the one person standing just in front of him.

Maya.

She swallowed down the nerves clawing at her throat and stepped forward, keeping her voice

even.

“Good morning, Mr. Blackwood.”

Then, shifting her gaze to the man beside him, she added politely, “Good morning, sir.”

Ashcroft barely glanced at the others. His attention was already locked.

And then-his face lit up.

With a grin that stretched like they were old friends reunited, he stepped forward with easy confidence.

“Ahhh! There she is! Maya!”

Before she could blink, he swept her into a warm, effortless hug-turning her gently so that her back now faced Damien… and Ashcroft faced him directly.

The move wasn’t just friendly.

It was deliberate.

And Damien knew it.

His jaw clenched. His fist curled at his side.

If looks could kill, Ashcroft would’ve been ash.

Ashcroft, of course, knew exactly what he was doing.

The embrace wasn’t long-just a few seconds. But that was all it took.

Maya froze.

Her cheeks flushed crimson. The contact sent a jolt through her spine-not because it was

unwelcome, but because it was so unfamiliar.

No man had ever hugged her like that.

Not since her father.

Not since Jamie.

And definitely not someone like him.

Her arms hung useless at her sides. She didn't know whether to hug back-or sink straight through the teak floor.

Ashcroft chuckled over her shoulder, then smoothly pulled back-still holding her lightly by

the arms, like someone precious.

A muscle ticked in Damien's jaw. He didn't speak, but the warning was clear in the rigid line of his shoulders, the stillness of his body, the hard set of his mouth.

A slow, quiet fury rolled off him like heat from sun-baked metal.

One hand stayed clenched at his side, knuckles bone-white with restraint.

His sunglasses masked his eyes-

But Maya didn't need to see them.

She could feel his gaze burning into her skin.

Had the temperature just dropped?

Ashcroft, unbothered, gave her a once-over. "You look healthy. It suits you."

Maya blinked, still caught between confusion and embarrassment.

"I… thank you, sir, but I don't think we've…"

"Met?" Ashcroft finished for her, smirking like they shared an inside joke.

"Silly girl. Of course we did."

Then, as if suddenly remembering protocol, he extended a hand.

“Nicholas Ashcroft. But you can call me Nick.”

Maya blinked again, stunned. “You… you’re Mr. Ashcroft?”

“In the flesh,” he said, grinning like a fox who’d just slipped past the hounds.

She bowed instinctively, flustered.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t recognize… I should have-”

“Oh, stop that,” he waved her off, clearly amused. “No more of this sir. I feel like I should be collecting a pension. We’re practically family now.”

He leaned in, dropping his voice so only she could hear.

“Or Uncle Nick-if Damien keeps brooding like that.”

That earned a sharp inhale behind them.

Ashcroft’s grin only widened.

And he winked again.

Maya was still blushing furiously, mind struggling to catch up with what had just happened –

And then, of course, there was Harper.

Ever the irrepressible one, she practically bounced in place, voice rising like a fangirl at a

concert.

“Oh. My. God. This is insane! Welcome aboard, Mr. Blackwood, Mr. Ashcroft! I cannot believe you’re both here – I’m fangirling so hard right now, sorry!”