**Intern 201**

Chapter 201

Fully escape. But he knew the truth-there was no

shielding, no escape from what waited in the shadows.

He spoke, voice low and taut with controlled fury. “That son of a bitch knew something about Beckett… and now Maya… she’s not supposed to see this. Not yet. Not until she’s ready… not until I’m certain she can handle it.”

His fists clenched at his sides, knuckles whitening. The thought of her seeing even a sliver of the darkness he usually shielded her from sent a cold spike through his chest.

And then it hit him-something unfamiliar, unwelcome. Fear.

Fear that Maya might run. Fear that the glimpses she’d caught of his world, of the enemies circling him, would push her away. Fear that no matter how much he wanted to protect her, he couldn’t shield her from everything. That she might be caught in the crossfire of a life she hadn’t asked for, a life he couldn’t deny.

He swallowed hard, jaw tight. He had never been powerless before. But now… the thought of/ osing her, of failing her… it gnawed at him, sharper than any enemy’s blade.

Ashcroft’s voice was low but steady. “Damien… she’s going to find out sooner or later. Maybe it’s better if you two-”

“Yes!” Damien snapped, eyes flashing. “But not like this.”

His fists clenched, nails biting into his palms. The fire ignited by Ethan’s insolence now mingled with something deeper-raw, molten need to protect Maya at all costs.

She’s mine. She will be safe. And if anyone-anything-dares threaten that… they’ll pay for it.

He exhaled sharply, eyes dark and unwavering. The storm inside him was still there, but now it had a focus. And that focus was her.

His chest heaved again. “I need to find her… I need to talk to her.”

He spun toward the door, already moving-but Ashcroft’s hand shot out, gripping his shoulder to stop him.

In an instant, Damien turned and lashed out, a punch flying toward Ashcroft with lethal precision. “Let go of me!”

Ashcroft’s reflexes kicked in-he twisted just in time, the blow missing him by a hair. His eyes narrowed, calm but edged with warning.

Ashcroft didn't retaliate. He simply stood his ground, voice cool but firm. "Damien. You go to her like this and you'll scare the hell out of her."

Damien's chest rose and fell, breath ragged, eyes still burning with fury-but something in Ashcroft's voice broke through the haze.

"She doesn't need your anger," Ashcroft said quietly. "She needs you. The man she trusts. Not the one who wants to tear the world apart."

For a moment, Damien didn't move. His jaw clenched, muscles twitching with the urge to fight-but slowly, the tension in his shoulders eased just a fraction.

He dragged in a breath, forcing it deep into his lungs. "I can't lose her," he muttered, words raw and stripped of all his usual control.

Ashcroft's expression softened-just barely. "You won't," he said quietly. "But she needs space right now-to think, to breathe. And you do too. You need to calm down before you go to her."

Damien's jaw tightened, clearly hating every word-but unable to deny the truth in them. His fists slowly unclenched at his sides, the sharp edges of his anger dulling into something heavy and aching.

A long, tense silence stretched between them.

Finally, his shoulders dropped a fraction. “I don’t want to scare her,” he muttered, voice rough.

Ashcroft gave a small nod. “Then breathe. Regroup. And when you go to her… do it as the man she loves-not the man who wants blood.”

Damien exhaled shakily, dragging a hand over his face, battling the storm still raging beneath his skin. “I’m scared this will be the reason she runs away from me,” he admitted, voice rough and stripped of all armor. His eyes burned with something stark and raw. “I can’t afford to lose her, Nick. I can’t.”

Ashcroft’s gaze softened, a rare flicker of genuine concern slipping through his usual composure. He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “You won’t,” he said firmly. “Not if you face her with the truth. She’s stronger than you think, Damien… but she needs you to be honest with her. All of you.”

Damien swallowed hard, the fear still clawing at his chest-but beneath it, a steely resolve began to form.

## Chapter 202

The air in the dining hall felt impossibly dense, each second stretching longer than the last. Damien’s muscles remained coiled, his fists clenched, as if the slightest wrong move could ignite the storm he carried inside.

Then a soft voice cut through the thick tension.

“You won’t.”

Damien’s head snapped up.

Maya stood in the doorway, Harper beside her. Her eyes were still a little red, cheeks flushed from the wind and the walk along the beach-but the way she looked at him, soft, steady, and certain, stole the breath from his lungs.

“Maya…” His voice came out rough, barely more than a whisper.

She took a small step into the room, gaze locked on his. “Can we talk?”

Damien nodded-immediately, instinctively.

Her eyes drifted to the others, resolve hardening in her expression. “All of us,” she added.

A brief silence followed. Ashcroft’s brows lifted in surprise, then he gave a respectful nod. James and Lee exchanged a quick glance, straightening as if bracing for what was coming.

Harper stepped forward, gently squeezing Maya’s shoulder before moving to stand beside Ashcroft.

Damien didn't take his eyes off her. His expression softened, but beneath it was something guarded, painfully raw-as though he wasn't sure whether to step forward or fall to his knees.

His chest tightened, every heartbeat echoing with the fear of losing her, of failing her, of letting the shadows of his world seep into hers.

"Of course… let's go to my room. It's more private," he said quietly, the words carrying both reassurance and restraint.

Maya nodded. Damien stepped forward, leading the way. Each step felt weighted, time stretching unnaturally. The world outside-the others, the staff, even Ashcroft and Harper- seemed to fade into a distant blur.

When he reached her, he paused, searching her eyes. "Maya… I'm-"

She offered a gentle, reassuring smile. "I'll listen."

Claim She reached for his hand, intertwining her fingers with his. The warmth of her touch anchored him, steadying the storm inside, if only for a moment. Together, they walked out of the dining hall, the tension lingering, the weight of unspoken truths pressing silently between them.

The walk to his room felt like a lifetime. Neither of them spoke; the silence was heavy, charged with unspoken words, lingering questions, and the weight of everything they were about to confront.

Maya's hand in his felt steady, warm, grounding, yet it also reminded him of what was at stake.

The moment they reached his door, Damien's fingers hovered over the knob, pausing just a second too long. A thousand thoughts raced through his mind: the secrets, the darkness, the truths he had kept buried.

He drew in a slow breath, the scent of her close enough to make his chest tighten, his gaze searching hers for trust and resolve.

Damien's throat tightened. "Maya… what if-what if the truth…" His voice faltered, thick with unspoken weight, "…scares you?" he whispered.

Maya's eyes held his without waver. "I'm ready," she said simply. "I need to understand you… a ll of you. I won't run. I promise."

That was all he needed. With a final squeeze of her hand, Damien turned the knob, stepping aside to let her enter first.

Maya stepped inside, Damien close at her side. The others followed silently, James bringing up the rear. As he crossed the threshold, he gently closed the door behind them. The crisp click of the lock echoed, and the soft hum of the outside world seemed to vanish completely.

Inside, the air felt heavier, charged with raw emotion, as if the room itself held its breath- waiting for a conversation that could change everything.

Everyone found their space. Ashcroft and Harper settled on the couch, calm but alert. James and Lee stood behind them, eyes scanning.

Maya went straight to the floor-to-ceiling window, gazing at the horizon. Damien hovered just behind her, the tension radiating from him palpable.

No one spoke. The room held only the quiet hum of anticipation.

“Maya…” he murmured, low and vulnerable.

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She turned slowly, meeting his eyes. “Do you remember that night,” she began softly, “when I told you I just need you to be honest with me?” She paused, letting the words sink in. “Even if the truth… is ugly.”

Damien’s chest tightened. He swallowed hard, jaw clenching as he tried to steady the storm inside. He stepped closer, the space between them charged with unspoken tension.

“I do,” he said, voice low, deliberate, “and I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

His eyes bore into hers, fierce yet vulnerable. “But you need to understand… once I start, there’s no turning back. You’ll see the other side of the world I live in, the choices I’ve made… the darkness I’ve carried. And there’s no undoing it.”

Maya met his gaze steadily. “I’m ready, Damien. I don’t want half-truths. I want all of you-the good, the bad… everything.”

A long pause stretched between them. Damien’s shoulders tensed, then slowly relaxed, the weight of his secret pressing heavily. Yet, for the first time, he felt the fragile hope of trust bridging the gap between them.

He nodded slowly. “Okay… what do you want to know?”

Maya’s voice was calm but firm. “What really happened to Dr. Beckett? Is he… dead?”

Damien’s jaw tightened, his eyes darkening as the memory resurfaced. “No… he’s not dead. But he’s worse than dead.”

Maya’s breath caught, a shiver running down her spine. Her hands gripped the backrest of the armchair as she struggled to process his words. “Worse than… dead?” she whispered. “How… how is that even possible?”

Her eyes locked on his, searching for answers, needing him to bridge the gap between fear and understanding.

Damien inhaled sharply, eyes dark and unflinching. “He took you, scared you, hurt you… held you captive for twelve hours. So I did the same-but for every hour he made you suffer, it became days for him. Twelve days of torture, each one worse than the last. I also told James to send men to his home-to burn it. I wanted everything he had gone. Nothing left to return to. On the twelfth day… we released

him. Sent him to the place he should have gone in the first place… before his ego swallowed his brain and he did what he did."

—

Maya's brow furrowed as she pieced it together. "I… I remember him saying something about

being reassigned to a humanitarian mission. The hospital director told him he'd offended someone, and 'they' wanted him gone before sunrise. He even claimed he paid someone to take his flight using his identity… and he insisted that 'they' meant you."

Damien's jaw tightened. He spoke slowly, deliberate, edged with quiet fury. "He wasn't wrong. I was the one behind the 'transfer."

Maya's eyes widened. "Why?"

His gaze snapped to hers. "Because he was a threat to you. After I dropped you off at the hospital… after what Jaime said that day, I had James check on him. He's not a good man. Manipulative. Dangerous. He's done terrible things-to women, nurses, patients, even their families. I couldn't risk him being near you."

Maya exhaled, a mixture of relief and lingering tension washing over her. She nodded slowly, the knowledge that he'd acted to protect her settling in her chest. "I… I get it. You did what you did to protect me." Her gaze sharpened slightly. "Where is he now?"

Damien’s gaze flicked to James, who gave a subtle nod of understanding. He retrieved his tablet, unlocking it with a few swift motions before handing it to Maya.

Maya’s fingers trembled slightly as she took it. The screen illuminated a single image.

A man lay on the ground outside a dilapidated house-one arm gone, one leg missing, the remaining limbs thin and frail as if made of paper. A long scar ran across his face, slicing through his remaining eye, leaving him with a hollow, haunted expression.

Maya looked up, voice barely above a whisper. “What… is this?”

Damien’s tone was cold, unflinching. “That’s Beckett.”

Maya’s eyes widened in shock. She stared at the screen again, blinking repeatedly, struggling to reconcile the man she knew with the broken figure before her. He was almost unrecognizable.

Maya’s breath hitched. She swallowed hard, unable to look away, the weight of what Damien had done settling like a stone in her chest.

Ashcroft stood and sauntered over, leaning slightly to glance at the tablet. His voice cut through the tension with an unsettling casualness. “Oh, I’ll take credit for that,” he said, a sly smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Maya's eyes widened. "What do you mean?" she whispered, horrified.

Ashcroft's smirk widened, his tone chillingly matter-of-fact. "Damien wanted to… extract his own brand of justice," Ashcroft said casually. "But the guy's too noisy-it annoyed the hell out

of me. So I had his tongue removed, and instructed my men to take one piece of anything he has each day. One eye, one arm, one leg, one kidney… you get the picture."

Maya's breath caught, and the tablet slipped, clattering to the floor. The image seared itself into her mind.

Harper scooped it up quickly, eyes widening. "Oh… shit!" she exclaimed, then turned to Ashcroft, grinning. "I thought you were just a pretty face. Didn't think you had it in you. You did well."

Everyone froze. Nobody anticipated that the jolly, playful, purple-haired girl-usually all laughter and teasing-would see this horrifying image and show not a flicker of fear, only pur e pride.

Maya was the first to voice what everyone else was thinking. "Harper!" she gasped. "How… how can you be so.. so casual about this?"

Harper shrugged, flashing a mischievous grin at Maya. "What?! Oh, come on! It's a work of art! That piece of shit deserved it!" She then turned to Damien, giving him a cheeky thumbs-up. "Nice one, boss!"

A flicker of surprise passed through Damien's eyes at Harper's boldness. He leaned back slightly, tilting his head. "You… really have no filter, do you?"

“Nope!” Harper replied, tossing the tablet back to James and settling into her seat.

Maya looked at Damien, searching for something-anything-that could make sense of the chaos. Her breath hitched again, torn between fear, awe, and the gnawing realization of just how deep this world-and his devotion-ran.

Then the truth became clear in her mind: he had delivered the justice in her name.

Chapter 204

The room was heavy with silence, the kind that presses against your chest and makes every breath feel calculated.

Maya sat on the armchair in front of her, fingers trembling slightly, mind racing to reconcile the calm, protective Damien she knew with the ruthless force that had dismantled Beckett.

Damien stayed near the window, back to her, staring out at the horizon. The tension in his shoulders hadn’t eased-if anything, it had coiled tighter, like a spring ready to snap.

“You… you didn’t hesitate,” Maya finally whispered, voice barely audible, a mix of awe and fear. “All of it… the way you…”

She trailed off, unsure how to give voice to the storm of emotions inside her.

Damien’s gaze remained locked on the horizon, jaw tight, eyes flickering with something raw -fear.

Not fear of his enemies… but of losing her.

For one brief, unguarded moment, the man beneath the shadows slipped through-aching, exposed.

“I became who I am because I never let anyone cross my lines,” he said, voice low and razor-sharp.

“The moment I show mercy, my enemies see it as weakness. And weakness doesn’t survive in this world… especially not the one I was born into.”

He exhaled heavily, the sound rough-almost like surrender.

“I did what I had to,” he continued quietly.

“For you… to make sure you were safe. To make sure he could never even think about hurting you again. In that moment, nothing else mattered.”

James cleared his throat, tone measured but firm, and stepped forward, offering the tablet to

Maya.

She hesitated, momentarily afraid it might be another disturbing image-but slowly, she took

This time, the screen showed Beckett's hospital badge, clean and pristine. Beneath it were lines of text-reports, formal statements, a detailed outline of his misconduct and predatory

behavior.

James took a steady breath.

"The report was extensive, Ms. Maya. Prescriptions handed out without logging. Private' consultations' after hours-sex-for-drugs trades. Family members of terminal patients coerced for faster referrals. Staff bribed with favors. Records falsified or conveniently misplaced."

His expression hardened.

"He used his position for power… and abused it every chance he got. There's also a list of women who didn't report him. Most were threatened. A few… coerced into silence."

Maya's stomach twisted. Her fingers curled into her palms as a wave of anger and disbelief washed over her.

“Oh my God…” she whispered.

James continued, voice steady but edged with resolve.

“I was the one who personally arranged his transfer. What Mr. Blackwood wanted was simple -to send him far away. His destination was Burundi, East Africa. A medical rotation in a remote, underserved region. No tech. No escape routes. No easy way back. That was it.”

He paused, eyes narrowing.

“But his ego got in the way. He couldn’t accept that someone was powerful enough to knock him off his pedestal. He thought he was untouchable. And because of that… he treated you as unfinished business. He was used to getting what he wanted and wouldn’t stop until he did. He paid someone to take the flight-made it look like he was gone-then stayed behind and started planning his next move. Planning how he was going to get to you.”

Harper’s eyes darkened, jaw tightening.

“What a dirty bastard,” she snapped.

“That son of a bitch. He’s an animal. He deserved it-and more.”

Ashcroft leaned back on the couch, a faint, unsettling smirk tugging at his lips. His voice was calm, almost casual, but each word carried lethal precision.

“He got exactly what he deserved. Even if he hadn’t targeted you directly, it was only a matter of time. He was warned… knew the cost… and chose to ignore it. So he paid.”

Silence hung over the room like a guillotine.

Then Damien’s voice cut through-low, lethal, unyielding.

“No one crosses me… and walks away, Maya. Hurt the people I care about-my family, my friends… especially you-and I will make them wish they had never drawn breath. That’s who I am. I will burn everything, crush everything, leave nothing standing… just to keep you safe.”

Chapter 205

Harper leaned back slightly, tone lighter now, though her eyes still gleamed with dark amusement.

“You’ll get used to it. Or… you’ll just learn to stop being shocked every time.”

Maya’s eyes swept over the room, taking in each person-Harper, Ashcroft, James, Lee.

A realization hit her like a punch to the chest: everyone here was strong, unflinching, and willing to do whatever it took to protect her.

All for her.

Because she mattered to Damien, she mattered to them too.

Her gaze lingered on Harper. Behind that sunny, teasing personality lay a steel core-the courage to fight, the ability to switch instantly between worlds if the situation demanded it. Sweet, kind, and caring one moment; ruthless, precise, and dangerous the next.

A chill ran down Maya's spine as understanding settled in: weakness was surrender.

In this world-no matter whose it was-darkness was everywhere. Bad people lurked in every corner, waiting to exploit the naive, the careless, the unprepared.

But here, in Damien's orbit, the rules were different. Darkness existed, yes-but so did power, control, and the ability to survive it.

The people around her weren't just survivors-they were predators in their own right, capable of wielding that darkness as deftly as they needed.

For the first time, Maya felt it deep in her bones: she wasn't just stepping into Damien's world

she was beginning to understand it.

She swallowed hard, feeling a strange mixture of fear and strength spreading through her

chest.

She looked down at the tablet, then slowly lifted her gaze back to James.

With a quiet breath, she handed it back.

“Thank you, James,” she murmured.

“I don’t need to see more. I understand.”

James gave a respectful nod.

“Of course, Ms. Maya.”

Claire

Damien froze. For a long, tense second, he simply stared at her, waiting for something to break-an outburst, a plea, tears, anger… even the sound of her footsteps as she ran.

But none of it came

Her words-“I understand”-hit harder than anything he was prepared for. He had expected fear, braced for rejection… not acceptance. Not understanding.

Something inside his chest tightened-sharp, raw, almost painful. A slow breath slipped out of him, as though he’d been holding it the entire time.

Then, quietly, she turned back to him.

Her voice was soft-but unwavering.

“Damien… can you tell me what really happened that day? How did you know I was taken? And how did you find me?”

Damien’s eyes darkened, shadows flickering across his face. He took a slow breath, grounding himself before speaking.

“I had James hand-deliver a document to Trina,” he said, voice low, controlled, every word deliberate.

“When he noticed you weren’t there, he asked if you’d called in sick. Trina said no… and Harper had been trying to reach you all morning. But you weren’t answering her calls or messages.”

His jaw tightened, fists clenching at his sides, eyes darkening.

“I had a bad feeling. I told James to check your apartment. He insisted on going himself- and took Monroe with him. When they arrived, Jamie said you’d already left for work, and alarm set in. Then your neighbor showed up-Janice, I believe. She saw you get into a vehicle with a man. You looked uncomfortable, tense. At first, he seemed familiar… until she realized it was the doctor you’ve been avoiding. That’s when Jamie’s worry escalated. He had to find you. He wouldn’t wait. And neither would I. James tried to calm him… but we knew, the moment we heard it was Beckett, you were in danger. Every second counted.”

Damien’s eyes darkened, sharp and unyielding.

“Monroe pulled the footage. That’s when we saw he’d been there since the night before. He followed you from the coffee shop where you worked, all the way to your apartment. Parked across the street, he stayed in his vehicle all night, waiting. Watching. Until the next morning -the moment he thought was perfect.”

Maya’s hands tightened in her lap, pulse quickening. A chill ran down her spine as fragments of memory surfaced-how something had felt off that night, the prickle at the back of her neck, the shadow just out of sight.

“L… I knew something was wrong,” she whispered, voice trembling. “But… I didn’t see him. I couldn’t see him…”

Damien’s expression hardened.

“I had resources deployed. Every camera, every street, every property he owns. Then one location stood out-a lake house. Secluded. Outside the city. There was a high possibility… that’s where he took you.”

He continued, voice low and steady.

“James and Monroe headed there first, as soon as the address was confirmed. Then James sent it to me and I went. Right away.”

His eyes flickered briefly to Ashcroft, then returned to her.

“I knew this had to be handled on my terms-my law. So on the way there, I called Ashcroft. We arrived, confirmed you were inside… and waited. He had his men surround the area. We stayed outside until dark-until the moment was right.”

His jaw clenched.

“Then we heard you scream.”

He paused, the silence sharp and suffocating.

“Without hesitation… I went in. And that’s when I saw you.”

He stopped, fist tightening until his knuckles whitened. Voice cold, almost inhuman:

“You were crumpled on the floor near the couch, unconscious. Your blouse torn open… your skirt pushed up, your thigh exposed. Your skin looked cold.”

He drew in a slow, ragged breath.

“Blood thundered in my ears. I wanted to kill him right there-but that would’ve been too easy. He needed to feel my wrath.”

“I wanted to carry you straight to the hospital,” he went on, voice still edged with restrained fury, “but it was too risky. Too many eyes. Too many questions.”

His gaze hardened, black as storm clouds, and the air seemed to tighten around him.

“So James and Monroe took you in. Ashcroft and I went underground to deal with Beckett, while his men stayed behind and wiped the entire area clean-making sure every trace of us being there was gone, especially any trace of you.

He paused, eyes dark as he stared at the horizon. In the next breath, his voice came low, deliberate… dripping with poison.

“In my world, the rules aren’t written-they’re enforced. I decide who lives, who dies… and how it ends. Anyone who crosses me, anyone who threatens what’s mine… pays the price.”

In that stillness, his presence alone promised ruin to anyone foolish enough to defy him.

Chapter 206

The words lingered in the air, thick and immovable, like smoke that refused to clear. Maya’s chest rose and fell in uneven breaths, her body frozen in the chair, her mind torn between everything she already knew and everything she had just learned.

He had shown her pieces of this world-his control, his silence, his shadows-but this….

This was the truth. His truth. A part of it, because she knew there was still more to learn, more to understand.

And it was darker than she ever imagined.

While Maya tried to absorb it all, Damien stood at the edge-exposed in a way he had never allowed himself to be. He was giving her his truth, and so far she hadn't run. Not yet. But that didn't mean she wouldn't once she discovered how deep his world went.

The room remained heavy and silent, every breath weighted, everyone else simply observing.

Except Harper.

Her voice sliced through the tension.

"I knew it!"

Every head snapped in her direction.

She blinked at the sudden attention, then grinned-broad and unrepentant, like she had just uncovered treasure.

"I knew it! That 'Welfare Check' excuse was pure bullshit. Ha! I told you, Maya! The boss has had a thing for you since the day you stepped foot in that place. And you didn't believe me!" The air felt lighter, as if everyone had released a breath they hadn't realized they were holding. Harper, never one to let silence last too long, clapped her hands once and leaned forward.

"I must say… that was a smooth story! Love it. Love the plot twist!"

Her eyes gleamed with mischief as she swiveled toward Damien.

“Hey, boss! If I may… I believe Mr. Horton deserves a raise. He was a damn good actor-so calm, so nonchalant. He sold it!”

She lowered her voice, dropping into a pitch-perfect imitation of James:

“Keep trying her phone. If she comes in, or calls back, inform me immediately. I’ll let security know to flag her ID the second she badges in, or tries to enter the building. No need to escalate until we’re sure.””

She threw her head back dramatically, then jabbed a finger in James’s direction. “And then-you went straight to the big boss to report! Bah! That’s a good one!” Laughter bubbled from her chest, the kind that broke tension without asking permission.

Maya’s cheeks burned, heat creeping up her skin before she could stop it. Harper’s words replayed in her head-the boss has had a thing for you since day one-and her body betrayed her, flushing red under the weight of all those eyes.

Maya’s blushing didn’t escape Harper’s sharp eyes. She pointed with a victorious grin.

“What did I tell you? That’s not just a welfare check-that’s a full-blown code red with a side of ‘Where’s my girl?’ energy. And I was right! Ha! Okay… now pay up!”

Maya blinked, still flustered.

“What are you talking about?”

Harper paused, her mouth falling open in exaggerated regret.

“Oh, darn! I should’ve made a bet with you back then!” She snapped her fingers dramatically. ”

But hey-doesn’t matter. I was still right. You were in full denial, kept going ‘That’s not true,

that’s not true,’ over and over. So annoying.” She rolled her eyes for emphasis.

Then, as if suddenly remembering, she gasped.

“Oh! Did you tell the boss what my buddy Jamie said that day?”

Maya’s eyes widened, silently pleading with her to shut up, but of course Harper barreled on.

“What? You didn’t? Oh, Maya… why are you so shy?”

Harper turned back to Damien, her grin widening.

“By the way, boss-my buddy Jamie likes you too. He even told Maya not to hold herself back. So there you go! You’ve got the brother’s approval. Not that you were even thinking about it-obviously your attention was already glued to my girl here-but hey… still good to have in your back pocket.”

Chapter 207

Maya’s face flamed.

“Harper-” she hissed under her breath, mortified.

Damien didn’t turn. He stood where he was, facing the window, gaze fixed on the horizon as if nothing in the room could pull him away. Silent. Unshaken. But then-just barely-the corner of his mouth curved. A faint smile, quiet and fleeting, before he cleared his throat.

“Jamie said that, hm?” His voice was low, deliberate. “Interesting.”

Maya’s heart skipped, warmth flooding her cheeks all over again.

Harper slapped her thighs and leaned back with a dramatic sigh before rubbing her stomach like she hadn’t eaten in days.

“So… you owe me lunch. Come on, pay up! I’m starving! Didn’t even get to enjoy breakfast this morning… because of, well, you know. Let’s continue this over food, okay?”

Her eyes flicked playfully between Maya and Damien as she exaggerated the stomach rub.

Maya pressed her lips together, shaking her head, though the blush hadn’t quite faded from her cheeks. The tension had shifted, lightened-like everyone had quietly exhaled without realizing it.

Then it struck her-sharp and sudden, like a light snapping on in her mind. Maya hesitated, her brows drawing together.

“Speaking of… how did Ethan even know about Beckett? What’s the connection? Because it feels like… he knows too much about you.”

Damien inhaled sharply, the sound rough, almost a growl caught in his chest. He turned from the horizon at last, crossing the room with deliberate steps. Lowering himself into the seat across from her, he looked composed on the surface, but the storm in his eyes betrayed him.

His jaw tightened. He leaned forward, forearms braced on his knees, gaze locked on Maya. For a long moment, he said nothing-just studied her, as though testing whether she was ready to carry the weight of what he might reveal.

The silence pressed in, heavy, until he finally dragged a hand over his mouth, exhaling through his nose. A small shake of his head-reluctance, resistance.

Ashcroft broke first. He let out a breath, leaning back, his jaw ticking before he said low and

steady,

“It’s inevitable. She deserves the truth, D.”

Their eyes met. The exchange was wordless but heavy, the kind of silent communication forged only through years of trust. Like two generals deciding whether to march their soldiers into battle.

At last, Damien gave the faintest nod. He shifted, voice firm but edged with caution.

“Ethan is just a pawn. He was sent by the enemy. He’s not a stranger to you, and they knew he could get close-easily. He was told only what he needed to know to play his part well.” Maya blinked, her chest tightening. Not a stranger. The words dug into her like claws.

Her throat went dry.

“Wait-” her voice cracked, and she shook her head, searching his eyes as if he might take it back. “Why me?”

Damien’s gaze held hers, unflinching, but his silence was confirmation enough.

When he finally spoke, the words were low, carved from stone.

“Because they see you as my weakness. And targeting you means hitting me where it hurts the most.”

Maya’s breath caught, her chest tightening. Weakness. The word twisted inside her, cutting deep-yet the way he said it wasn’t dismissive, wasn’t demeaning. It was stripped bare, raw. An admission of something he never gave freely.

Her lips parted, but no words came. Part of her wanted to recoil from the weight of it, and another part ached at the fierce truth in his eyes-that to him, she wasn’t just someone passing through. She was his weakness… and she was everything. And his enemies knew that too.

Maya swallowed hard, fingers tightening into her lap.

“The… enemies you mentioned,” she began, her voice tentative, almost fragile. “Who are they? Are they all connected to Ethan? Is this some kind of business feud gone wrong… or is it… bigger than that?”

Her eyes flicked nervously between Damien and Ashcroft, seeking some kind of anchor in their calm, unshakable presence.

“I need to understand… everything. If they want to use me to hurt you, I can’t just… sit here not knowing.”

Damien’s jaw flexed, his eyes darkening as he leaned back slightly, letting the silence stretch before he answered.

“It’s bigger. Ethan is just-a tool. The people behind him… they’re patient, calculating, and ruthless. They’ve been watching, waiting for any opening. You became a target because of me, because of my blood, my position, my history. They know your value… and they know my weakness.”

Maya’s throat went dry, her fingers tightening in her lap.

“Why… why do they want to hurt you? And what do you mean that I became their target because of your blood, your position and your history?”

Damien pressed his lips together, as if weighing how much to reveal. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and deliberate.

“Have you heard of the Five Families?”

Maya furrowed her brows, nodding gently.

“I’ve heard of them… but I don’t really know much.”

His jaw tightened, eyes dark as they locked on hers.

“There are five families,” he said slowly, each word measured. “The Blackwoods… the Ashcrofts… the Volkovs… the Morettis… and the Takahashis.”

He let his gaze sweep the room, steady and unflinching.

“These families… they control more than most people realize. They shape the narrative-this city, this country… much of the world, actually.”

He paused, letting the weight of the words settle.

“The Blackwoods-my family. We run the clean front: tech, defense, real estate. The Ashcrofts operate in plain sight too-medical establishments, research, equipment-but in the shadows, they control intelligence, weapons, enforcement. They answer only to those they choose.”

His eyes flicked to Maya.

“The Morettis-Italian. Powerful, well-connected, and legitimate. They focus on global investments and politics.”

He leaned back slightly.

“The Takahashis-Japanese. They operate with precision and control, focusing on cyber

intelligence, corporate strategy, and information networks. Clean on the surface… but lethal if crossed.”

Finally, his voice dropped lower, a low dangerous cadence threading through each word.

“And the Volkovs-Russian. Arms smuggling, dark finance, drugs, human trafficking, Eastern European corruption. Ruthless. Dangerous.”

His eyes darkened, gaze piercing hers.

“They are the enemies. Every move they make… it’s aimed at me. At anyone I care about. At everything I protect.”

The room seemed to hold its breath along with her. Outside, the horizon stretched wide, indifferent, while inside, Maya was stepping further into his world, into his truth-into everything that had been hidden, and everything that was about to be revealed.

Chapter 208

Maya’s breath caught in her throat. The way Damien said it-they are the enemies-wasn’t just

a statement. It was a verdict. A sentence. His voice had been so dark, so absolute, it felt like the temperature in the room dropped with the words.

She swallowed hard, her fingers twisting in her lap. “Enemies…” The word came out almost like a whisper, unsteady. “But why? Why you?”

Damien leaned back in his chair, shoulders rigid, as if the weight of the world pressed against his spine. His eyes locked on her, sharp and unreadable. “Because I carry too much power in my bloodline. The Blackwoods, the Morettis, and with Ashcroft at my side-three families out of five. To them, I am a threat that cannot be ignored.”

Maya’s stomach tightened, fear and disbelief warring inside her. She shook her head slowly, trying to piece it all together. “So… because of who you are, because of what you represent… they would rather destroy you than risk losing their grip?”

His lips pressed into a thin line. “They want to control me-and that is impossible.”

Darkness flashed in his eyes, his jaw locking hard. He leaned forward, his voice edged with steel. “They’ve already tried and failed. So now, they don’t just want to destroy me, Maya. They want to shatter everything I hold close-my business, my alliances… my life.”

He paused, gaze searing into hers, dropping lower, rougher. “And now… that includes you.”

Her heart stopped. The words cut deeper than any blade. “Me?”

Damien's eyes softened for the briefest moment, though his jaw remained hard. "They see you as my weakness. They'll come for you-because that's the only way they can hurt me. Which is why I can't afford cracks in my armor. Not with you. Not with us." His voice dropped, edged with warning. "And Miller? He was just the beginning. He was sent to… put it simply…. test the waters."

Silence stretched between them, heavy and suffocating. Maya's chest ached, not from fear, but from the way his words carried both warning and devotion. She wanted to say something, to reassure him, to promise she wasn't fragile. But the truth was… this world terrified her.

Still, beneath that fear, something else stirred-something fiercer. She looked at him, really looked at him, the darkness carved into his face, the storm behind his eyes. If he was standing against something so ruthless, so dangerous, could she really walk away? Or would she choose to stand at his side, no matter the cost?

Maya felt a fire ignite inside her, burning brighter than fear. It cut her to know they wanted to



use her to wound him-but instead of breaking, she found herself hardening, gathering courage she never thought she had.

For the first time, she wanted to demand answers, to pull every shadowed truth into the light. Her voice was steadier than she expected. "You said you carry too much power in your bloodline. Blackwood is a given… but what about the Morettis? How are you connected to them?"

Damien's gaze softened, though his voice carried a quiet gravity. "The Morettis are my mother's bloodline. She wasn't just their daughter-she was their legacy, the sole heir to everything they built. And because I am her only child…" His jaw tightened slightly, eyes holding hers. "That makes me the one to inherit it. The only one who can carry their power forward."

Maya's chest tightened, her throat prickling with unspoken emotion. The way he spoke of his mother-it wasn't just lineage, it was love, pride, and loss woven into every syllable. She could see the flicker of pain he tried so hard to bury, and her heart ached for him. For the little boy who grew up carrying not just a name, but an entire legacy on his shoulders.

Born into a world he never chose, forced to carry the weight of two bloodlines, he had no room to be ordinary, no freedom to simply live. Every shadow around him, every wall of armor he wore, was carved from that burden. And for the first time, Maya began to see the full picture-the reasons behind the whys, the shadows, the darkness. He wasn't chasing power. He was surviving it.

Chapter 209

Her lips parted before she could stop herself, the question pressing against her chest. Earlier… you said they tried to control you, but failed. What did you mean by that, Damien?"

Damien's jaw tightened. His gaze drifted past Maya, settling on Ashcroft. Their eyes met and held for a long, silent second, heavy with unspoken history-guilt, pain, anger all flickering behind their steady fronts. There was a hesitation there, a glimpse of something usually buried deep, and even in their controlled postures, the tension of tightly coiled unease was unmistakable.

Maya's eyes flicked from Damien to Ashcroft, noticing the tension coiling between them. Even James and Lee's faces betrayed unease-something unspoken, heavy.

Her chest tightened, a pang of guilt stabbing at her. She whispered, careful and hesitant," Wha… what's wrong? L… I'm sorry… I shouldn't have…"

Damien cut her off, his voice calm but edged with steel. “No… it’s okay. You need to know. I promised you honesty-no matter how ugly it gets. That’s all you asked for, and I promised I’d give it. You deserve nothing less.”

Damien held Maya’s gaze, dark and steady, yet heavy with a storm beneath the surface. His hesitation wasn’t from unwillingness-it was fear. Fear that the truth he had buried for years, the burden that had forced him to build walls so high and unyielding, might finally push her away.

The memory of the girl he had once been promised to-the one meant to unite powerful families through an alliance, the one whose absence had left scars he still carried-haunted the edges of his mind.

And yet… here she was. Maya. The woman who had quietly, impossibly, broken through every barrier he’d ever built. For the first time, he wasn’t protecting just himself-he was exposing the fragile pieces of his past, the vulnerabilities he had never shown anyone. All he could do was hope that the walls she’d shattered could hold long enough for her to stay.

He cleared his throat before speaking, his voice low, measured.

“It started with a civil relationship between our families. In fact, the children of the families all grew up together-except for the Takahashi daughter, since they lived overseas. The Volkovs, however, were hungry for power. They wanted to infiltrate North America, so they relocated here. But because we held the greater power, they had no choice but to follow the rules.”

“So… me, Nick, and their daughter, Cassandra, grew up together. The three of us were close-

good friends. As the years passed, the Volkovs kept their heads low, aware that we held the upper hand in this region. Everything remained civil… until one day, they proposed an alliance. They wanted their daughter to marry into one of the families, hoping to consolidate power and strengthen their position."

He paused, letting the weight of the words hang in the air.

Maya blinked, her voice catching as she asked, "They wanted you to marry their daughter?"

Damien's jaw tightened, his gaze dropping to the floor for a brief moment. When he finally looked back at Maya, his eyes were shadowed with something raw-regret, restraint, and a twinge of anger.

"Yes," he admitted quietly, voice barely above a whisper. "They wanted me to marry

Cassandra… to bind the families together. It was never about love. Never about choice. Just power. Alliance. Control."

He leaned back slightly, running a hand through his hair, the motion tense. "At that time, I didn't care about love or emotions. I was raised to be the heir-I knew the power I carried, the responsibilities that came with it. That's all that mattered. When they told me about the proposed alliance, all I thought about was the peace between the families and maintaining the balance."

"But with Cassandra… it's different. She was vocal about her feelings for me, but I had always

seen her as a sister. I believed it wouldn't change anything between us, that our relationship was fine as it was. So, I agreed."

"But over time… she changed. Cassandra became more demanding, more attached. She wanted more-more of my time, my attention, my affection. And I couldn't give that. I had agreed to the alliance for power, for control, for the peace between our families. I never intended to love her as anything more than a sister. I promised her protection, loyalty, and family… but never anything beyond that."

"From the beginning, I was clear. And she knew that too… but she held onto hope-hope that something would change, that I would somehow learn to love her romantically. She tried so hard, becoming the perfect fiancée. I… I tried too, thinking maybe I could force something, try to love her the way she wanted. But I couldn't. No matter what I did, I just didn't feel it. I never reciprocated her feelings."

"Over time, it broke her. She sank into depression, seeking escape in alcohol, drowning herself in bars night after night, desperate for my attention. But nothing worked. Her attempts to draw me in… they only pushed me further away. Her neediness, her insistence… it became a burden, a problem I couldn't solve. Until eventually… she was lost. Completely consumed by it, spiraling into a darkness she couldn't climb out of."

He fell silent, letting the words hang in the air like smoke. The room was still. Every ear, every eye, tuned to him, waiting, absorbing.

Maya's hands clutched her lap, heart hammering. Even Ashcroft, James, and Lee remained unusually quiet, their expressions tight, attentive, the weight of Damien's confession pressing down on everyone.

Maya swallowed, her throat dry. "And… she…?" she asked carefully, her voice almost a whisper, afraid to break the fragile tension.

“I couldn’t tolerate her childish antics anymore,” Damien said, his voice tight, edged with a controlled fury. “I told her I was breaking off the engagement. That was the last thread… the one that broke her completely. She spiraled-drugs, drinking, reckless behavior, one night stands with anyone, anytime, for months. Even her father begged me to reconsider, to push through with the engagement.”

He paused, eyes darkening, voice dropping to a whisper. “But my decision was final.”

He exhaled slowly, the weight of it pressing through his words. “No matter what I do… I can’t force myself to love her. My mind tells me one thing, but my heart-” his gaze flickered, raw and unguarded- “my heart says otherwise.”

Chapter 210

The silence linerged in the room, heavy and suffocating, as Damien let his words settle. Maya’s chest ached, the weight of his confession pressing on her heart, each revelation a cut she couldn’t ignore.

Damien continued, his voice low, tinged with both sorrow and restraint. “Eventually, her father left, taking her back to Russia, hoping that distance would give her a chance to heal. For a while… it seemed to work. Life grew quiet, almost peaceful. We even heard she had recovered, that she was doing better. Until… seven years ago.”

He stopped, exhaling sharply, letting the weight of the next words settle in the room. Every eye followed him, the tension thick, the silence almost painful.

“She came back,” he continued, voice low, almost grim. “Worse than before.”

He paused, a flicker of memory darkening his eyes, the weight of that night pressing down on

him.

“One night, she was so drunk… she kept calling and texting, demanding I come get her.” Damien’s voice tightened, jaw clenched, as though reliving it. “I was in the middle of a critical meeting. I didn’t respond. I told James to call her father, to have someone go get her.”

Maya’s fingers clenched in her lap. She swallowed, unable to tear her eyes away from him, sensing the weight of his words.

He paused, eyes darkening, fists tightening against the armrest of his chair. “A few hours later, I received a call from Viktor-Cassandra’s father. He told me she’d had an accident… ended up in the hospital. Apparently, when she saw the man he sent to get her, she flew into a rage. She got into her car and drove off.”

Maya’s breath hitched. She instinctively leaned forward, as if moving closer could somehow change what he was saying.

Damien’s gaze dropped to the floor, voice quieter now. “They tried to chase her, but that only made it worse. Her body… overloaded with alcohol and drugs. She was completely wasted. And the adrenaline from being pursued-it pushed her over the edge.”

A shiver ran down Maya’s spine. Her hands gripped her knees, nails digging into her palms.

He drew in a sharp breath, as if forcing himself to keep going. “That night…. she crossed into the wrong lane and collided head-on with another vehicle. The couple inside… they didn’t.

survive.”

Maya’s eyes widened, a strangled gasp catching in her throat. She pressed her hand to her mouth, heart hammering painfully in her chest.

His hand curled into a fist on his lap. “Her family spared no effort to make it look like a tragic accident, erasing any trace of her involvement.”

Guilt flickered across his face before he continued, voice tight. “I felt responsible. Maybe if I had gone to her that night… maybe those innocent lives could have been spared. What if they had children? What would happen to them?”

He shook his head, fists tightening. “I tried. I tried to find out who the couple was… but every lead was erased. All I ever got was… ‘Woman, early forties. Man, mid-forties. Jane and John Doe.’ Everything else… wiped clean.”

Maya’s shoulders slumped, a trembling exhale escaping her lips. “Oh… my God…” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

A painful memory surged-her parents’ accident. It was almost the same: a head-on collision, no witnesses, lives ended instantly. The police had called it an accident, saying their car had swerved into the other lane. No one else had seen it.

But until now, the memory haunted her. She knew her father was a careful, responsible driver, and the weather that night had been calm. How could they have swerved? She had just turned eighteen, and her life had changed in an instant. Her focus had been on surviving-for herself and Jaime-not on uncovering the truth behind the accident. Young and naive, she had believed what the cops told her.

The room seemed to close in around them, the weight of the truth pressing down like a gathering storm.