Intern 431

Chapter 431

Maya swatted his chest, her palm flattening briefly against the warm, solid plane of him before she pushed him back a step. “You’re unbelievable. Truly.”

She shook her head, fighting a smile. “But aside from your… stamina… we actually need sleep too,

you know?”

She drew in a slow breath, the teasing edge in her expression fading as reality settled back in.

“Hudson and Cruz will be at your office early,” she reminded him gently. “And I’m staying home with

Jaime. I need to pack. Make sure everything’s ready.”

Her fingers tightened slightly in the fabric of his shirt.

“We have a long trip ahead of us.”

Damien’s smirk didn’t fade, but his gaze sharpened. “Monroe and James can accommodate them. My priorities have shifted.”

He took her hand and lifted her knuckles to his lips, pressing a lingering kiss.

“But you’re right,” he added, his voice lowering. “If we’re walking into battle for Jaime’s future, I

don’t intend to exhaust my strongest ally.”

His hands found her waist and drew her back into him, the teasing edge gone.

He turned her in his arms and wrapped himself around her from behind, his body warm and solid at her back – anchoring her without force.

His chin brushed her shoulder as he leaned down, his breath warm against the curve of her neck, steady and grounding.

“Let me help you wash up,” he murmured, his arms tightening around her waist. “We’ll be quick. I

promise.”

Maya let out a soft, shaky breath, her resistance finally dissolving under the weight of his care. She leaned back into him, closing her eyes as she let his strength steady her.

“You’re impossible, Damien,” she whispered.

“I’m efficient,” he corrected softly, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

His hands stayed at her waist as he guided her toward the bathroom, his touch firm but unhurried.

“Then we’ll both go check on him,” he added, his voice low and grounding. “Come on, love. He needs to see we’re okay again.”

A faint pause.

“I’d rather not stay on his bad side.”

Maya’s brows lifted, a tired but amused glint in her eyes. She turned slightly in his arms to look up

at him. “Since when are you worried about being on someone’s bad side?”

Damien leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead, his expression turning

mock-serious.

“Didn’t you see how he grilled Ashcroft earlier? That kid threw him under the bus multiple times

without blinking.”

He let out a low, dry chuckle as he led her into the bathroom. “Your brother has a terrifyingly sharp

eye for detail, love. If he thinks I’m not treating you right, I’m fairly certain he has a plan to make me disappear before sunrise.”

Maya laughed, bright and genuine, the sound finally cutting through the weight of the morning. “He

does care about me. And he’s like you-he doesn’t miss a thing.”

[“Exactly,” Damien murmured, his gaze darkening as he lingered on her. He leaned closer, his voice

dropping into a low, rough rumble. “As much as I want to keep you all to myself tonight… I’ll have to hand you over-temporarily-to my future brother-in-law.”

Maya laughed, the sound light and genuine. Good one, she thought, shaking her head.

“But first….” His fingers brushed the shower handle, and the water hissed to life against the tile.

He shot her a wicked, confident glance, that familiar spark lighting his dark eyes.

“Do you have any idea how impossible it is to stay focused… with you looking this damn tempting in my shirt?”

Maya’s breath hitched, a nervous laugh escaping her.

Slowly, he traced the buttons of the oversized shirt she was wearing-his shirt-unfastening them one by one. “We’d better take that quick shower… before I decide I’m not feeling quite so ‘efficient after all.”

The rest of the shower was mercifully uneventful.

Damien, to his credit, kept his promise. It was, indeed, a quick shower-nothing more than warm

water, quiet touches, and light conversation.

Steam curled around them as he rinsed the last of the soap from her shoulders, his hands steady, unhurried.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Maya said softly over the sound of the water.

“Tell me what?” he asked.

“My professor sent over all the materials I’ll need for my final exam.” A small smile touched her lips. “He also confirmed that the virtual setup has been approved for the rest of the semester. I just need to complete the online coursework and pass the assessments. The final exam is in three months, so I have plenty of time to prepare.”

Damien’s brows lifted slightly. “Good.”

“You really can move mountains, Mr. Blackwood,” she teased lightly, though the gratitude in her

voice was unmistakable.

He leaned in, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Anything for you, Ms. Thompson,” he murmured back, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head before reaching past her to turn off the shower.

The water stilled, steam lingering in the air.

Maya turned to face him, her teasing expression softening into something more sincere.

“But really… thank you,” she said. “Switching me to virtual was thoughtful. I didn’t realize how much

pressure it was taking off until now.”

He reached for a towel and wrapped it around her shoulders, drawing her closer.

“After everything with that piece of shit Beckett and Ethan Miller – and now Volkov sticking his filthy nose into our business – this was one way to ensure your safety,” he said simply.

He held her gaze, sincerity settling into his features.

“More than anything,” he said quietly, “I didn’t want you choosing between your future and Jaime’s.

You shouldn’t have to.”

Her fingers curled into the towel at his chest. Hearing those names again stirred memories she didn't often let herself sit with – moments of fear, of uncertainty, of everything that could have

gone wrong.

They were ugly memories.

But they were also the ones that had pulled them toward each other when everything else was falling apart.

Chapter 432

Maya lingered in the steam-filled bathroom, lost in a soft, almost hypnotic trance.

Damien noticed the silence stretching between them. Concern laced his voice as he broke through her thoughts. "What's wrong, love?"

She shook her head, a gentle smile touching her lips. "Oh… it's nothing."

He stepped closer, worry etched in the line of his jaw. "Are you sure?"

Maya nodded. "Mm-hmm."

For a moment, Damien let it be, though his gaze lingered on her, searching. In quiet doubt, he didn't push further.

They stepped out of the shower as the last of the steam drifted away, cooler air brushing against their damp skin and pulling them gently back to reality.

As they dried themselves, Maya lingered, her fingers twisting the edge of her towel. She hesitated

for a moment, then spoke softly, almost as if testing the words.

"Um… I… I was thinking," she began, her voice gentle, "I could take the online courses while Jaime's

resting. Maybe do some reading… keep up with everything."

"That's a good idea, love," Damien said, brushing a stray damp strand from her shoulder. "I'll

probably need to step away for a few hours a day for work anyway, so that'll keep you busy.

Although… I doubt Harper will ever let you have a dull moment.'

Maya let out a soft exhale, a chuckle escaping her lips despite herself.

“Yeah… you’re right. I just thought it would be convenient.” She hesitated, a shy pause lingering before she added, “Um… love? I was just wondering if it’s okay if I bring the laptop with me.” Her gaze lifted to his, a small, hopeful smile playing at her lips.

Damien blinked at her, genuinely caught off guard.

“Are you asking me for permission?” he asked, genuinely baffled.

A faint blush crept up her neck. “Yes, Because… well…”

“Because what?” His tone wasn’t sharp – just intent, expectant.

“The laptop I’m using is company-issued,” she admitted, eyes dropping briefly. “I don’t want to assume. I don’t want to overstep or–”

His hand came up, warm and firm, cupping her jaw and gently stilling the spiral of words.

“No, no… stop asking,” he said, a faint crease forming between his brows. “You don’t answer to me.

You don’t answer to anyone. If it’s mine, it’s yours. That’s how this works.”

His thumb traced along her jaw, steady and certain, his eyes softening as he held her gaze.

“You never need to ask permission, okay?” His voice was low, steady, a warm firmness threaded with tenderness. “Do whatever you want… love, whatever makes your life yours.”

He let his hand linger against her cheek, letting the pause stretch between them.

Then, softer but no less certain, he added, “You will not put your life on hold for anyone anymore. Not even me. Do you understand?”

The words weren’t a command.

They were a promise.

Her expression softened, but her gaze stayed steady.

“I… I understand what you mean,” she said quietly, “but I don’t regret the decisions I made before. I

did what I believed was right. What needed to be done at the time.”

She lifted her hand, placing it over his, then let her palm slide to his jaw, holding him the way he

held her.

“I paused my life to extend Jaime’s,” she continued. “And if I had to do it all over again… I would.”

He didn’t interrupt. Didn’t argue.

So she went on.

“I told you before – I don’t have influence or power to offer you. Just my loyalty. My love.” Her thumb brushed lightly against his cheek. “I’m not with you just to receive, Damien. I’m here to give too. To share the happiness, the setbacks, the problems, the worries… the weight of it all.”

Her voice steadied.

“And if one day choosing you costs me something…” she added softly, “that will still be my choice.

You don’t get to decide that for me.”

Chapter 433

Damien's gaze darkened, hardening in a way that made the air between them tighten. His hand stayed at her jaw, firm, grounding, yet his eyes held that dangerous glint she knew too well.

"The last person who chose me…" His voice dropped low, almost a growl, "ended up dead."

Her breath hitched, heart pounding. She knew who he meant-Cassandra. The one whose death

haunted Damien, the one whose loss had cast long, dark shadows over his life.

Her death had become his curse, a chain that kept his own happiness just out of reach and kept

him squarely under Viktor Volkov's watchful eye-the very reason Volkov never let him be.

And yet, he didn't let go. He leaned closer, letting the warning hang between them, heavy and real.

"I'm not saying this to scare you, love," he murmured, softer now, the sharp edge of his warning

melting into the warmth she knew so well. "I'm saying it because you need to understand what it

means… choosing me isn't just about love or loyalty. It's about surviving the storm I carry. You can

step into my world, but you can't pretend it's safe."

The shadow of her death still clung to him, a storm he carried in silence, a storm that made every

choice with him dangerous.

Maya's lips quirked, almost defiantly. "Too bad… because I'm already in it."

Damien's eyes darkened, a flicker of conflict crossing his features-part fear, part desire. For a

moment, the weight of what he carried, the storm she'd chosen to step into, pressed against him.

He drew a slow breath, jaw tightening, before finally meeting her gaze again.

"You're such a foolish girl," he murmured finally, his voice low, firm, threaded with the same

intensity that always made her chest tighten. "What have I done to deserve someone like you?"

He didn’t wait for her answer. His hands found her waist, drawing her close. Her chest pressed

against his, and the steady warmth of him anchored her in a way the world outside never could.

His forehead rested lightly against hers, eyes dark and unreadable. “I love you… so much, Maya,” he

murmured, low and rough. “I just… I want to protect you. To keep you safe.”

“I… I know,” Maya whispered, letting her hands settle over his chest. “I love you too, Damien. And I still choose you. I don’t care about the storm. I’ll face it with you.”

For a long moment, he simply held her, letting the weight of her words sink in. Then, softer now, he leaned down, pressing a careful, lingering kiss to her temple. “You’re reckless,” he murmured, a note of admiration-and warning-threaded through his tone.

Maya’s fingers traced the line of his jaw, memorizing the warmth, the tension, the raw edges of him. “Then let me be reckless with you, Damien.”

A faint, almost imperceptible smile tugged at his lips. “You really don’t know what you’re signing up for, do you?”

She pressed closer, forehead against his. “I do. And I don’t care.”

His hands tightened around her, firm yet careful, holding her as if she were both fragile and unbreakable. “Then… we’ll be reckless,” he murmured, voice low and steady, “together… no matter what comes.”

They stepped out of the bathroom, the lingering scent of soap and warm steam clinging to their skin.

Damien’s hand brushed lightly against hers as they walked down the hallway, their fingers grazing occasionally-a quiet echo of the intimacy they’d just shared.

Halfway down the hall, they ran into Dahlia and Dominic, heading the opposite way toward their bedroom.

“Ah! Here they are! Looks like you two finally made up,” Dominic said with a teasing tilt of his head, eyes flicking between them.

Maya’s cheeks flushed, heat rising to her ears. She tried to deflect, forcing a smile. “Uh… hi. Um…

how’s Aunt Alice?”

Dahlia noticed her embarrassment and gave Dominic a playful pinch. “Ouch! Why did you pinch me, darling?”

Chapter 434

Dahlia shook her head at her husband's childish act, then turned back to Maya. "Don't mind him,

sweetheart. Alice left about an hour ago, same with Nicholas."

Maya felt a pang of guilt. "Oh… I'm sorry. We weren't there to-"

Dahlia quickly placed a hand on the side of Maya's arm, gentle and grounding. "Don't worry about it. Nothing to apologize for. Everything's sorted. We'll go over some final details tomorrow, but

honestly, it's all set."

Dominic nodded in agreement, offering a small smile. "Nothing to worry about. Just relax,

everything is taken care of."

Maya let out a small, relieved breath. "Thank you, Uncle Dominic, Aunt Dahlia."

"Ah, silly girl! No need to thank us!" Dominic said with a chuckle. "Just in case you haven't received

the memo, we're family now!"

Damien gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Anyway," Dominic added, "where are you two headed?"

"We're going to check on Jaime," Damien said. "Maya wants to sleep with him tonight."

"Oh, I… I just want to spend more time with him before his surgery," Maya said softly.

"Ah! We just dropped him off in his room," Dominic continued. "Took a lot of effort to convince the

old man to let him go."

Dahlia raised an eyebrow. "I believe you're just jealous, darling."

"Jealous of what?" Dominic asked.

"Of your father getting to spend more time with Jaime than you," Dahlia said with a playful smirk.

“Of course not!” Dominic protested, then paused. “He is so obsessed with chess….” He looked at

Dahlia. “Darling, why don’t you help me think of a plan to keep him entertained besides playing

chess?”

“Don’t drag me into it,” Dahlia said, laughing lightly. “Besides, you’re the one who gifted him that chessboard, remember? Now, enough of that. Let’s not keep these two any longer.”

“Right, right!” Dominic agreed.

“We’re heading to bed,” Dahlia added. “Don’t stay up too late either, okay?”

They nodded, and a few steps down the hall, Dahlia stopped. “I hope you learned a good lesson today, son.”

With that, they continued into their room, and the door closed behind them.

Damien and Maya resumed their walk down the hallway, arriving at Jaime’s door. Damien raised a hand and knocked lightly.

“Come in,” came Jaime’s voice from inside.

Maya pushed the door open, and they stepped inside. Jaime sat cross-legged on the bed, laptop balanced on his knees, fingers flying over the keys. His brow was furrowed, eyes intense,

completely absorbed in what he was doing.

When he noticed them, his expression shifted instantly-first surprise, then a guarded brightness. He quickly minimized the window, as if hiding something he didn’t want them to see, forcing a grin that felt a touch too practiced.

“Oh! You’re here!” he said, a little too quickly.

Chapter 435

Jaime shifted slightly on the bed, adjusting the laptop on his knees as if it had suddenly become

uncomfortable.

“Hey, bud. What are you working on?” Maya asked lightly, stepping further into the room.

“Nothing,” he said too fast. Then he cleared his throat. “Just… coding practice. Nothing important. Keeps my brain sharp.”

Damien’s eyes flicked briefly to the closed laptop screen, then back to Jaime. He didn’t comment.

Maya moved closer, reaching out to mess his hair in a messy, familiar scrub. “You should be

resting.”

“I am resting,” Jaime replied, ducking away from her hand with a grin. “This is rest for me.”

But his fingers curled tighter over the lid of the laptop. Protective. Maya’s hand lingered in the air

for a second, her fingers still curved from the gesture, before she slowly pulled back.

Damien noticed, but he chose to stay silent.

Jaime glanced between them. “So… what are you two doing here? Did you need something?” His grin was just a little too rehearsed.

Maya exchanged a quick, sober glance with Damien, then looked back at Jaime. She let the silence hang for a moment, her shoulders dropping as she let out a weary breath.

“I was actually wondering if… it’s okay if I sleep here tonight.”

Jaime blinked. “Here?” he repeated, sitting up straighter. “Why?”

The question came out sharper than he intended. Damien’s gaze sharpened almost imperceptibly.

He said nothing, but his attention locked onto Jaime. He remained near the door, arms loosely

folded, expression unreadable.

Maya paused, caught off guard. “What do you mean… why?” She let out a small laugh. “Because

you’re my brother?” She exhaled softly. “I just… wanted to spend more time with you before the

surgery.”

Jaime cleared his throat and let out a laugh that felt forced. “No, I mean-” He ran a hand through his hair. “You and Damien just… fixed things, right?” His eyes flicked toward Damien, then back to her. “Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know… enjoying that?”

Maya frowned slightly. “Enjoying what?”

Jaime’s grin returned-too wide. “Come on, May. Don’t make me spell it out.” He wiggled his brows. “You’ve got very important work to do.”

She stared at him. “What work?”

Jaime leaned back against the headboard, clearly enjoying her confusion. “The work of making me

an uncle, obviously.”

Maya’s cheeks flamed instantly. “Jaime!”

Damien’s lips twitched. Jaime pressed on, animated now-though a faint edge remained beneath

the humor. “Actually, forget one. Go for twins. No-triplets.” He pointed at Maya like he’d just had a

revelation. “Imagine that. Three at once. Maximum productivity.”

Damien let out a low chuckle, pushing off the wall. “Triplets? You’re trying to bankrupt me already?”

Jaime shrugged dramatically. “Hey, go big or go home.”

Maya covered her face with both hands. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

Damien stepped closer, slipping an arm around her waist, amusement flickering in his eyes. “For the record,” he said smoothly, one brow lifting, “I don’t mind, especially the production process. The more, the merrier.”

Jaime grinned instantly. “See? That’s the spirit.” He flicked his gaze to Maya. “Better take advantage while the engine’s still running smoothly. Maintenance matters. Otherwise…” He made a dramatic face. “Performance might decline.”

He winked at her, his grin widening with teasing mischief.

“JAIME!” Maya’s jaw dropped.

She grabbed the nearest pillow and swatted him. “You are impossible.”

Laughter filled the room-warm, easy, familiar. But as the noise settled, Damien’s gaze drifted to the closed laptop. Jaime’s hand had instinctively rested over it. Protective. Possessive. And for just a second, Damien wondered why.

He pressed a gentle kiss to the top of Maya’s head. “I’ll leave you two alone. I’ll text you before I head out in the morning-I won’t wake you. You need the rest.”

Chapter 436

She hesitated, then added, quieter, “And don’t sneak out without having something to eat.”

A small huff of amusement escaped him. “You worry too much.”

“Someone has to,” she murmured.

Jaime made a dramatic gagging sound. “Wow. I’m right here, you know.”

Maya shot him a look. “Go to sleep.”

Damien’s gaze drifted one last time to the laptop beneath Jaime’s hand. Still guarded. Still angled away.

He didn’t comment; he simply brushed his thumb lightly against Maya’s side before letting his arm fall away. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

When he looked at Jaime this time, it wasn’t playful. It was assessing.

Damien moved toward the door, pulling it closed with quiet care.

The soft click echoed down the hallway. By the time the latch settled, his smile had faded.

He looked thoughtful. Jaime had always been transparent, but that reaction hadn’t been. It had been measured.

Damien resumed walking, unhurried. Calm on the surface, but his mind was no longer on playful

banter.

Jaime might look fragile, but there was nothing delicate about his mind-and Damien couldn’t

shake the feeling he was hiding something.

Inside the bedroom, Maya shifted slowly onto her side of the bed, smoothing the sheets. Her body felt deliciously heavy, humming with the memory of the evening-two full rounds of Damien’s unres trained eagerness.

Her cheeks warmed. He had been intense tonight. Not rushed. Not careless. Just… hungry. Like distance had sharpened something inside him. Every touch, every heated whisper had reminded

her how much he had missed her. His hands had roamed with intent, claiming her with a

possessiveness that made her pulse race.

She pressed her lips together, suppressing a smile.

Wild, yes. But more than that-intentional.

As if he'd needed to reassure himself she was still there, in every intimate, breath-stealing way, he

reminded her-that she was his.

She pulled the blanket over herself, her muscles aching in the best possible way. She set her phone on the side table and switched off the lamp.

"You're weird, you know that?" she mumbled sleepily.

Jaime gave a soft huff of amusement. "Takes one to know one."

She didn't answer. With a gentle exhale, she turned onto her side. Sleep tugged at her quickly, and

this time, she let it.

Jaime waited. One minute. Two. Three.

Only when he was certain she was asleep did his posture change. The grin disappeared. Then the

ease. Then the lightness in his shoulders. Carefully, he slid his hand off the lid of the laptop.

He lifted it open. The screen glowed to life, casting cold light across his face. The mischievous

glint was gone, replaced by pure intent. He glanced at her phone on the bedside table. Slowly, he slid out of bed and circled around. He watched his sister for a moment, determination tightening in his eyes, before picking up the device with careful hands.

Back at his side of the bed, he opened the drawer and retrieved a cable. He connected her phone

to his laptop, glancing once more at Maya. They had always respected each other's boundaries.

Holding her phone felt wrong-intrusive. A flicker of guilt pricked him, but he whispered softly, his

voice a ghost in the dark, "I'm sorry, May… but I have to protect you too."

His fingers began to move across the keys, quiet and precise, each tap controlled, the room filled

with the faint rhythm of his secret vigilance.

Outside Jaime's room, the hallway stretched dim and silent. Damien's steps echoed softly against the floor, slower than usual. The walk back to his own room felt longer than it should-longer

because the person he wanted beside him tonight wasn't there.

By the time he reached his door, his hand lingered on the knob, reluctant to step into the quiet

emptiness. The memory of her warmth, her boldness, still clung to him, sharp and insistent.

He finally entered, closing the door behind him with a soft click. He paused at the edge of the bed, letting his gaze linger over the rumpled sheets.

The heat they had shared still clung to the room, tangible in every corner, in every scent. The memory of Maya's boldness, the way she had pressed against him, still made his pulse tighten.

He smoothed a hand over the blanket, his mind replaying the moments they had claimed each other-every heated whisper, every urgent press of lips. The memory left a faint, lingering ache in his chest, a low hunger simmering just beneath the surface.

Tracing the rumpled fabric as if searching for her heat, he finally turned toward the balcony. He slid the door open, letting the cool night air drift over him to temper the quiet hum of the city below.

From his pocket, he drew his phone and dialed. One ring.

“Sir,” Monroe’s voice answered, clipped and precise.

“Make sure their arrival doesn’t raise any suspicions,” Damien said, voice calm but edged with command.

“Understood, sir. Everything is in place,” Monroe replied.

“Good,” Damien murmured, ending the call.

The screen dimmed. Silence lingered for a heartbeat-then lit again with an incoming call. Private number.

Damien’s jaw tightened. He let it ring once… twice… before answering.

“What do you want?” His voice was ice.

A low, mocking chuckle came through the line. “Well, well… Damien Blackwood. It’s been a while.”

Damien’s jaw tightened, his voice low and clipped. “I don’t have time for pleasantries. Get to the point.”

The laughter lingered, low and mocking. “Is that how you greet your father-in-law?”

Damien’s lips curved into a faint, cold smirk. “Father-in-law? Don’t flatter yourself. You were never- and will never be-my father-in-law.”

The humor drained from the line. “I could’ve been… if only you’d been man enough to commit, instead of dragging my daughter along.”

Damien’s grip on the phone tightened, his knuckles bleaching white. He drew a slow, controlled breath, his jaw locking as the voice slithered through the line like ice against his skin.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Damien said, his voice lethal and quiet. “What do you want, Viktor Volkov?”

The air throbbed with tension, thick enough to be felt through the line. The calm Damien projected barely masked the storm beneath, each second sharpening his focus, every heartbeat screaming

how much was at stake.

Chapter 437

A low chuckle slid through the phone.

“There he is…” Volkov murmured. “The cold Damien Blackwood. I was beginning to think you’d gone soft.”

Damien didn’t answer immediately. He watched a car’s headlights move like a slow pulse through

the street.

“If you called to reminisce,” he said evenly, “you’re wasting my time.”

Another chuckle. Amused. Testing.

“I see nothing’s changed. Still allergic to small talk.”

Then-

“I’m sure you’ve heard about my recent… misfortune,” Volkov continued, tone almost conversational. “And I’m assuming you had nothing to do with it.”

Damien’s jaw flexed once.

His voice turned razor-thin. “Are you asking… or are you accusing?”

A faint hum. “You tell me.”

“I have nothing to tell,” Damien replied calmly. “You make enemies wherever you go. It could be anyone.”

A soft exhale through the line. Not laughter this time.

“Are you one of them?”

The wind brushed against Damien’s shirt, cool and steady. His grip on the phone tightened just slightly.

“We stay out of each other’s lanes,” Damien’s tone didn’t waver. “That was the agreement. You do you I do me.”

“I hope so,” Volkov murmured. “I truly do. But you see… something has been bothering me.”

“That’s not my problem.”

The faintest scrape of glass against wood came through the line, as if Volkov had set down a

drink.

“Oh, I don’t know…” Volkov’s voice dipped, silk over steel. “Not long ago, I acquired an

entertainment agency. You’ve probably heard of it. Orion.”

Damien said nothing.

“However,” Volkov continued casually, “one of my artists has gone missing,” A soft chuckle. “Young

man. Promising future.”

A pause.

“What was his name again…”

Another pause – deliberate now.

“Ah. Miller. Ethan Miller.”

The name hung there.

“Does that ring a bell?”

Damien’s jaw tightened. His silence was controlled.

“You think I keep up with entertainment gossip?” he said flatly.

A soft laugh.

“Oh, I know you don’t.”

The air seemed to tighten.

“But here’s the interesting part…”

A measured inhale.

“His last assignment before he disappeared… Volkov said softly, “was with your company.”

A low, sinister chuckle left Damien’s throat.

“Hmm…” he murmured. “You mean the arrogant piece of shit? That’s your so-called artist?”

Volkov burst into laughter. Genuine this time.

“Hahaha. I won’t deny it. He is, indeed, an arrogant piece of shit.

Damien leaned against the balcony railing, his gaze fixed on the stretch of darkness beyond, as if

the night itself were beneath his notice.

“I see.” His tone was thoughtful. Detached. “If I recall correctly, it didn’t work out. We terminated the contract.” A pause. “Sent him home before the shoot even ended.”

His voice cooled further.

“Where he went after that is none of my concern.”

A beat.

Volkov’s voice lowered. Testing.

“I wouldn’t happen to find his corpse buried somewhere on your… pretty island, would I?”

Damien laughed.

Not loudly.

Not warmly.

Darkly.

“You should know better, Viktor.” His voice dropped half a degree. “I don’t keep trash.” A pause. Especially not on my property.”

Silence.

Heavy now.

Then Damien’s tone shifted – not louder, not harsher.

Just sharper.

“Now I’m curious.”

A soft scrape of his shoe against the stone floor.

“Why would you assume that?” he asked mildly. “Are you suggesting you intentionally sent Ethan Miller my way?”

The words slowed.

“Because you couldn’t stay in your lane?”

For the first time, Volkov didn’t answer immediately.

A faint chill crept along his spine. That voice- calm, precise, lethal – didn’t belong to a man defending himself.

It belonged to a man dissecting.

Volkov’s original intention had been simple: provoke, observe, extract. Use the missing artist as bait and wait for a reaction – a shift in tone, a fracture in composure- anything to confirm the theory forming in his mind. That the recent “misfortune” he’d suffered had not been random at all.

Chapter 438

Instead, it felt like Damien was the one laying bait.

Silence stretched, enough for Damien to see if Volkov would twitch-or betray even the slightest

crack.

Then Volkov laughed again, lighter this time.

“You give yourself too much credit. It was a coincidence.”

“Was it?” Damien asked softly.

No accusation.

No denial.

Just interest.

The kind that made men reconsider their answers.

“I didn’t even know he existed until one of my men mentioned it,” Volkov said lightly. “No need to

read too much into it.”

A pause stretched between them, thick and tense.

“Hmm… I see,” Damien murmured, faint amusement brushing his tone. “I’m beginning to think you’re a little too invested in this… odd new acquisition of yours.”

Volkov let out a dry chuckle.

“Ah. Merely a strategic purchase. The previous owner was an old acquaintance struggling to keep the business afloat. I saw an opportunity and took it.” A faint pause. “Another channel to clean money is always good for business, isn’t it?”

Damien didn’t respond.

He didn’t need to.

The silence itself made it clear he wasn’t buying a word.

Just as he was about to dismiss the conversation as predictable, Volkov spoke again.

This time-

It caught his attention.

“I also heard,” Volkov continued smoothly, “that a recent intern at your company has been receiving ….a little extra attention from you”

A beat.

“Is that true?”

The temperature seemed to drop.

Damien’s voice, when he spoke, was low. Controlled. Lethal.

“How is that your business?”

“I’m merely curious,” Volkov replied, silk over steel. “Besides… I’m certain you haven’t forgotten our deal. Am I right?”

Damien shifted slightly against the railing, gaze fixed on the darkness beyond.

“If that’s the case,” he said softly, each word deliberate, “then I don’t suppose I need to remind you of an old saying… do I?”

“What saying?” Volkov asked, irritation barely masked.

Damien didn’t hesitate.

“Curiosity kills the cat.” He said it flatly – no humor, no warmth.

The quiet weight of inevitability pressed in as his thumb traced the edge of the phone. He allowed

himself a faint smirk, slow and controlled.

On the other end of the line, a sharp crack split the silence – the unmistakable sound of a fist striking wood.

Volkov’s voice came back strained, a notch higher than before.

“Is that a threat?”

Damien exhaled softly, a ghost of amusement brushing his tone.

“Relax, Viktor. Don’t get worked up.” Damien let the words hang, slow and controlled. “At your age, you might trigger a heart attack.”

A colder pause followed, measured, almost savoring the effect.

A flicker of unease crossed the other line-barely perceptible. Damien allowed himself a faint, satisfied smile, just enough to confirm he’d landed it

“That would be such a disappointing way to go.”

On the other end, Volkov’s breathing shifted-heavier, sharper, controlled but strained.

“I’m simply offering friendly advice.” His tone turned smoother. “After all… it appears someone is

trying very hard to cripple you.”

The words landed slowly.

“You-” Volkov’s voice sharpened. “What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything,” Damien replied evenly. “I’m suggesting you conduct proper

housekeeping.”

A calculated pause. He let the silence stretch, just enough to see if Volkov would twitch-or betray even the slightest crack.

“Word on the street?” Damien’s lips curved into a faint, knowing smirk. “It isn’t internal… and Greco’s name keeps popping up.”

The silence that followed was different now.

Thick. Heavy.

Damien’s voice stayed smooth, effortless.

“Try not to go soft,” he said, almost teasing. “It’s never pleasant… sleeping with one eye open,

Viktor.”

A faint, low chuckle slipped past him-sharp, confident, almost predatory. “If there’s nothing else, I

have an early day tomorrow. Unlike you… I have a legitimate empire to run.”

Chapter 439

He disconnected without another word.

The faint smirk faded.

Shadows swallowed the last trace of amusement. Moonlight carved his features into something colder-his eyes dark and bottomless.

Over 4,500 miles away, Volkov sat rigid at his massive mahogany desk, sunlight cutting sharp lines across his office.

The phone remained pressed to his ear, knuckles white. Every word Damien had said replayed in

his mind, curling like smoke he couldn’t shake.

That infuriating calm. That precise, lethal teasing.

It made his chest tighten.

He slammed the phone down. It shattered across the polished floor.

Sunlight caught the sharp angles of his face, highlighting the flush of rage.

Volkov rose, pacing, fists clenching.

That smirk. That tone.

It wasn’t just control.

It was possession.

Every word measured. Every pause designed to probe. To intimidate.

He exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his hair, trying to shake it off. He’s a cold bastard.

Always has been.

Yet beneath the irritation, something else stirred-

Unease.

Curiosity kills the cat.

The words echoed, heavy with inevitability. He wanted to dismiss it as theatrics-but doubt coiled low in his gut.

Damien hadn't used threats. He hadn't needed to

He had used precision.

His mind raced.

Was he overthinking this?

Had Damien's composure been so convincing that it was warping his judgment?

Was he focusing too much on Blackwood… and missing the real threat entirely?

What if it truly was a coincidence?

What if this was paranoia creeping in?

His jaw tightened.

Or worse-

What if his instincts were right, and Damien had orchestrated everything… just to see how far he

could push him?

A sharp knock cut through his thoughts.

“WHAT?!” Volkov barked.

The door opened, and Igor, his right-hand man, stepped in.

“Boss,” Igor said, measured.

“Speak,” Volkov demanded, voice tight.

“Roman just called,” Igor reported, his voice thick with a Russian accent.

“Besides the old lady returning, there’s still no unusual movement at Ms. Thompson’s residence.”

He stepped further into the room.

“They can’t get close to Blackwood Manor or his company. Security’s tight. But from where they’re positioned, it looks like additional guards were added the same day our shipment was hit.”

A brief pause.

“Other than that, nothing out of place. Damien leaves in the morning. Stays in his office most of the day”

Igor’s tone lowered slightly.

“And when he moves he goes straight back to the manor.”

Volkov’s fist clenched, the desk creaking beneath the pressure.

“It looks like he’s being careful,” Igor added “Either he expects to be targeted or he’s preparing for retaliation.”

Volkov’s jaw hardened.

Of course, he is.

The board shifted in his mind, pieces sliding into place.

Before striking outward, he would clean his own house.

Thoroughly.

“Take our best men,” Volkov ordered, voice cold and final. “Bring Marco Greco to me. I want him in

the basement before sundown.”

“Yes, boss.”

Volkov’s eyes narrowed as the harsh morning light cut across his face.

Damien Blackwood, what the fuck are you up to?

Chapter 440

The basement smelled of iron and wet stone.

Marco Greco smiled, and the taste was rust.

The copper crust on his lip snapped when they’d dragged him down the stairs, fresh red leaking

over a jawline gone grey and hard.

He was lashed to a metal chair-wrists bound, ankles locked, one eye already clouding into a

purple knot.

He didn’t look like a victim. He looked like a man critiquing the service.

Across from him, Viktor Volkov sat, watching the show.

The single overhead light cut a sharp cone between them, the rest of the room swallowed in

shadow.

“You’re tougher than I expected,” Volkov said. His voice was mild, almost bored.

Marco rolled his jaw. It clicked, a dull spike of pain. He grinned anyway, his eyes fixed on the man

who shared half his blood and all of his father’s fortune.

“Thought you’d be louder,” Marco shot back. “For a man who just got embarrassed.”

Viktor leaned into the light, his shadow stretching long against the concrete. “Embarrassment is

for mistakes, Marco. Treason is a business decision. I simply didn’t think yours would be so cheap.

Marco spat a glob of thick, rusted red onto the floor. “Not cheap. Just overdue. I’ve been playing second chair to a ghost’s favorite son my entire life. I just finally decided to get paid for my work

and take what’s mine.”

Viktor laughed, a sharp, genuine sound that echoed off the damp concrete like he’d just heard a

punchline.

“That’s bold! Quite impressive!” Viktor leaned forward, the light finally catching the predatory edge in his eyes.

“You’re a stray, a half-blood mistake who doesn’t even carry the name. You’re the help that forgot its place. Tell me does the help really think it gets to sit at the table, or are you just happy to beg for the scraps I drop?”

Marco’s smirk didn’t just fade-it died.

His jaw tightened so hard the bone looked ready to snap, and his breath hitched in a sharp, jagged hiss. He strained against the zip-ties until the plastic bit deep into his wrists, drawing fresh blood. His face flushed a dark, angry purple, and the eye that wasn’t swollen shut flared with hatred.

“The name is a leash, Viktor. A brand for cattle,” Marco spat, his voice trembling with a rage he couldn’t quite mask. “I’m the only part of this family with actual grit in his veins. You’re just a brand

name on a hollow box. I was bleeding for this family while you were being fitted for silk. I’m the one who built the throne you’re sitting on-name or no name.”

Viktor didn’t stop laughing. He leaned even closer, his voice dropping to a jagged whisper.

“Such passion! But grit doesn’t make a king, Marco. Legacy does. You speak of building a throne,

yet you forget who truly held the keys. If you were the architect you claim to be, you wouldn’t be

bound to a chair while I stand over you.”

Viktor straightened up, his eyes turning cold and dismissive. “The tragedy of your life is that you

mistake effort for worthiness. In this family, worth is decided by the blood that is recognized, not

the blood that is spilled in the shadows. You are a ghost in our history books, and ghosts don’t get

to wear crowns."

Viktor's laughter died down, his face smoothing into a mask of cold curiosity. "Enough with this

nonsense. Tell me, how did you do it?"

Marco's grin widened. There it was. Pride. He lifted his chin slightly.

"You really think I'd hand that over?" he asked. "Took planning. Timing. Nerve."

Volkov's expression didn't change. "Nerve," he echoed softly. "Yes. You do seem… bold."

Marco huffed a quiet laugh, wincing through the pain. "Maybe I just got tired of watching you pretend you're untouchable."

Volkov leaned back slightly. "Untouchable," he repeated. "And yet, here you are."

That earned him a flash of irritation in Marco's good eye. A faint hum escaped Volkov as he stood

slowly, unhurried. The scrape of his shoes against the concrete echoed through the vault.