Intern 561

Chapter 561

Harper let out a dramatic sigh before raising her free hand in surrender.

“Fine. I promise I’ll behave.”

Alice held her gaze for another moment before finally giving a reluctant nod.

“See that you do, Harper.”

Satisfied, she rolled the window back up.

Kim then took her place in the front passenger seat, and moments later, the convoy slowly pulled away, the lead SUV followed closely by two identical vehicles as they passed through the gates.

Harper waited until the taillights disappeared beyond the front gates before turning back to Maya.

“Come on.” She nodded toward the far end of the parking area. “My car’s over there.”

“My

Curious, Maya followed alongside her.

A short walk later, they stopped in front of an Audi unlike any Maya had ever seen.

Its aggressive, low-slung body looked as though it belonged on a racetrack rather than a public road. The paint appeared black at first glance, but beneath the afternoon sunlight, a rich metallic purple shimmer emerged, giving the car a subtle yet unmistakably unique finish.

Every detail-from the gloss-black wheels and dark-tinted windows to the subtle purple accents woven throughout the exterior-felt unmistakably… Harper.

Maya slowed to a stop, her eyes fixed on the striking Audi.

"…That's your car?"

Harper grinned, twirling the key fob around one finger before gesturing proudly toward the vehicle.

"Yep. Cute, isn't it?"

With a press of a button, the headlights came to life in a crisp white glow, and the doors unlocked with a soft electronic chirp.

The interior was just as distinctive.

Premium black leather wrapped every surface, while deep violet stitching traced elegant patterns across the seats and dashboard. Carbon-fiber trim was tastefully accented with brushed purple aluminum, giving the cabin a sporty yet luxurious feel, Even the ambient lighting glowed with a soft violet hue.

Maya couldn't help smiling.

"It really does suit you."

Harper's grin widened.

"I know."

The two climbed into the car and buckled their seatbelts.

Harper pulled the door shut before pressing the start button. The engine responded with little more than a quiet purr as the customized Audi eased out of the aviation complex and onto the road.

Much like its New York counterpart, the complex had been built in isolation, well away from the city. For several minutes, they drove along quiet, sparsely traveled roads lined with stretches of greenery.

Before long, the outskirts gave way to the city Buildings rose higher, traffic grew denser, and Harper merged effortlessly into Tokyo's bustling afternoon traffic.

It was just after lunchtime on a typical Tuesday. Office workers returned from lunch, cafés remained lively with customers, and the city moved with its usual weekday rhythm.

Despite the steady traffic, everything remained remarkably orderly.

Drivers patiently waited their turn. Pedestrians stood quietly at crossings until the lights changed, even when no vehicles were approaching. There was no impatient honking, no one weaving recklessly between lanes, and no one shouting.

Maya found herself quietly admiring how disciplined everyone seemed.

Meanwhile, Harper had somehow transformed into an enthusiastic tour guide.

Every few blocks, she pointed out another famous building, historic district, or hidden local gem, occasionally sharing amusing stories or bits of history that Maya never would have known on her own.

Between Harper's enthusiastic commentary and the ever-changing cityscape outside, the drive proved far more enjoyable than Maya had expected.

After several minutes, however, Maya's attention gradually shifted from the scenery outside to the woman

beside her.

Harper was still smiling, still chatting, still every bit as cheerful and energetic as she always seemed.

Yet beneath that bright smile, Maya caught a glimpse of something most people would've never noticed.

A quiet sadness.

A quiet weariness lingering deep within her eyes.

It was subtle-so subtle that most people probably would've overlooked it entirely.

But Maya didn't.

She waited until Harper finished explaining another landmark before speaking.

"So… about what Nick said earlier."

Harper’s smile faltered almost imperceptibly before she clicked her tongue.

“Tsk… what about it?” She kept her eyes on the road. “You know that idiot.” A small scoff escaped her lips. “His mouth has always been faster than his brain.”

Maya smiled knowingly.

“Is that why you’ve been ignoring him?”

Chapter 562

For just a split second, Harper’s confidence wavered.

The question had caught her off guard, but she quickly regained her composure before answering as though it hadn’t affected her at all.

“Because it’s a complete waste of time,” Harper replied without hesitation.

“Would you believe he’s been sending me messages acting like a jealous boyfriend?” She let out a scoff.

“The other day, he said we needed to talk. Then yesterday, he practically blew up my phone with calls and all these weird text messages asking where I was, what I was doing, and who I was with.” She rolled her eyes. “Like, what the heck does he need to know for?”

She shook her head.

“And besides… talk about what? We had sex. So what? It’s not like it was our first time.” She snorted softly. “Why’s he suddenly acting like he’s obligated to take responsibility… or like there’s something more between us?”

Maya quietly studied Harper. Beneath the annoyance in her voice, she sensed something else.

“You know he likes you.”

Harper almost laughed.

“What?” She shot Maya an incredulous look before returning her attention to the road. “Are you serious? Liking someone isn’t the same as loving them.”

She shook her head.

“Come on, Maya. He’s a playboy. The whole world knows that.”

Her fingers tightened ever so slightly around the steering wheel.

“Nicholas Ashcroft is the kind of man who changes women as often as he changes his clothes. He thinks with what’s between his legs, not with his brain… and definitely not with his heart.”

She let out a quiet breath.

“I don’t believe someone like him could stay loyal to one person forever.”

After a brief pause, she spoke again, her voice softer.

“… And I’m not the type who settles for being someone’s bed warmer… or just another flavor of the month I’d be a fool to think i’d be any different.”

Her voice dropped to almost a whisper.

“I don’t want to get hurt.”

Maya looked at her for a long moment before smiling softly.

“People used to say the exact same thing about Damien.”

Harper didn’t respond.

“They said he wasn’t capable of loving anyone.”

A quiet laugh escaped Maya’s lips.

“And yet…” She shook her head. “Who would’ve thought someone like him would fall in love with me?”

Her gaze drifted toward the passing city outside.

“And who would’ve thought I’d fall in love with someone like him?”

Harper slowly exhaled.

“It’s different.”

Maya tilted her head.

“Different how?”

For several seconds, only the quiet hum of the Audi’s engine filled the space between them.

Finally, Harper spoke.

“Because Damien genuinely fell in love with you. I just… don’t think Nick is capable of loving someone.”

Maya reached over and gently rested a hand on Harper’s shoulder.

“You remember what you told me before?”

Harper glanced at her briefly.

“You told me that if I never gave Damien a chance, I’d never know what could happen.”

A small smile tugged at Maya’s lips.

“I think the same thing applies here.”

Harper remained quiet.

“I’ve seen things you haven’t.” Maya’s smile softened. “The way he looks for you whenever you walk away. The way he talks about you when you’re not around. The way his expression changes whenever someone mentions your name.”

She gave Harper’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“He may still be trying to figure out what he’s feeling… but I genuinely believe those feelings are real.”

Harper kept her eyes on the road.

“And what if you’re wrong?”

Maya smiled gently.

“Then you’ll have your answer.”

She paused.

“But if you never give him the chance to prove you wrong… you’ll spend the rest of your life wondering what might have been.”

Maya let the words linger for a moment before speaking again.

“Why do you think he insisted on coming on this trip?” she asked.

“It wasn’t for Damien. It wasn’t for me. It wasn’t for Jaime either.” She chuckled softly. “And it definitely wasn’t for whatever excuse he came up with.”

Her smile grew warmer.

“He came because of you.”

Harper let out a small, self-deprecating laugh.

“So… what? I’m supposed to believe my story is going to end the same way yours did?” She shook her head. “Don’t get your hopes up. Nicholas Ashcroft has a reputation for a reason.”

Maya’s voice softened.

“I’m not saying you should fall in love with him tomorrow. I’m just saying… don’t close the door before he even has the chance to knock.”

Maya paused before continuing.

“You can deny it all you want, but I know you’re feeling something.”

Her expression turned gentle.

“I think you’re still trying to figure out your own feelings… just like Nick is trying to figure out his.”

“The difference is that instead of facing them, you’re running away because you hate complications, But avoiding your feelings won’t make them disappear, Harper. It’ only hurt you more.”

Harper met Maya’s eyes.

For the first time since the conversation began, every emotion she had been trying so hard to hide was reflected in her eyes-uncertainty, fear, and vulnerability.

Maya simply gave her a reassuring smile.

“For someone who’s always giving everyone else relationship advice, you’re terrible at following your own. Maybe it’s time you practiced what you preach.”

Harper couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’re right… I should.”

She turned her attention back to the road, her smile slowly fading as Maya’s words lingered in her mind.

For the first time, she had no comeback. The thoughtful look in her eyes suggested that Maya’s words had Teached a part of her she had spent a long time trying to ignore.

The remainder of the drive passed quietly.

Neither of them brought up Nick again.

Instead, the conversation gradually shifted to lighter topics, allowing the tense atmosphere inside the car to slowly fade.

Not long after, Harper guided the Audi through the towering iron gates of the Takahashi Estate.

Unlike Blackwood Manor, the Takahashi family's residence embraced a distinctly Japanese aesthetic. Traditional architecture blended seamlessly with modern design, creating a perfect balance between timeless elegance and cutting-edge innovation-a reflection of the family itself.

The convoy that had arrived ahead of them was already parked outside.

Harper pulled in behind the last SUV before switching off the engine.

"We're here."

The two stepped out of the car and made their way toward the entrance.

Standing at the front door was Mr. Takahashi, with another elderly gentleman quietly standing beside him.

By then, everyone from the SUVS had already gotten out. Mr. Takahashi greeted his wife with a warm embrace before exchanging pleasantries with Dahlia.

Harper and Maya walked over and took their place behind the others.

The moment Mr. Takahashi's eyes landed on Jaime, he froze.

The welcoming smile on his face slowly faded.

“Dad?” Harper called out, immediately noticing the sudden change in his expression.

When he still didn’t respond, she followed his line of sight toward Jaime before looking back at him in confusion.

”

..Dad? What’s wrong?”

Chapter 563

Jaime instinctively took a small step back.

Unsure of what he’d done wrong and suddenly feeling intimidated, he quietly moved a little closer to Maya. Almost instinctively, Maya slipped an arm around his shoulders and gently drew him closer to her side.

Alice gently placed a hand on her husband’s arm “Anata… dōshita no?” (Dear… what’s wrong?)

Her gentle voice snapped Mr. Takahashi out of his daze.

He blinked twice before letting out a small, apologetic smile.

“Please forgive me.” He bowed his head slightly. “That was incredibly impolite of me. It’s just… I had the strangest feeling I’d seen you somewhere before.”

Straightening, he met Jaime’s eyes.

“You must be Jaime.”

Jaime hesitated for a moment before giving a small nod. “Y-Yes, sir. I’m Jaime.”

Mr. Takahashi walked down the front steps until he stood before him, then placed both hands warmly on Jaime’s shoulders.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Jaime. Welcome. I hope you’ll think of this place as your home for as long as you’re here.”

Feeling some of the tension leave his shoulders, Jaime offered a shy smile. “Thank you, sir.”

Mr. Takahashi chuckled and waved a dismissive hand.

“Now, now… none of this ‘sir’. Uncle Ken sounds much better, don’t you think?”

Jaime smiled and nodded. “Yes… Uncle Ken.”

Mr. Takahashi’s grin widened before he turned his attention to Maya.

“And this must be Maya.”

Maya smiled warmly before giving a respectful bow.

“Good afternoon, Uncle Ken. Thank you for having us.”

Without hesitation, Mr. Takahashi stepped toward Maya and returned her greeting with a deep bow– noticeably lower than the one she had given him.

In Japan, the depth of a bow carried meaning. The lower the bow, the greater the respect being shown.

A ripple of shock spread through those who understood the significance of the gesture. As the head of the Takahashi family, Mr. Takahashi was someone others bowed deeply to not the other way around. Yet here he was, lowering himself before a young woman he had only just met.

Maya, however, had no idea what his bow implied.

She stared at him in stunned silence before glancing around at everyone else. Their wide eyes and astonished expressions only deepened her confusion.

Finally, her gaze landed on Harper, silently asking what on earth had just happened.

Harper merely shrugged as if to say, Don't ask me.

Mr. Takahashi straightened before gently taking Maya's hands in his own.

"I've been wanting to thank you."

Maya blinked in surprise.

"Because of you, Harper finally decided to come home." His eyes softened as he glanced at his daughter before looking back at Maya. "For years, she kept postponing the day she would take her place as the future head of our family. I never wanted to pressure her into accepting that responsibility, so all I could

was wait.”

A faint chuckle escaped him.

“It seems you gave her the courage she needed to take that step.”

He smiled, relief evident in his expression.

“Now I can finally start thinking about retirement.”

The last remark drew a few amused smiles, but Maya couldn’t bring herself to laugh.

Instead, guilt quietly settled in her chest.

She understood exactly what kind of responsibility/Mr. Takahashi was talking about. Becoming the next head of the Takahashi family wasn’t simply accepting a title-it meant Harper would have to sacrifice a great deal of her own freedom.

And because of her…

Harper had stepped into that future sooner than she ever intended.

Almost as if she had read Maya's thoughts, Harper let out an exaggerated sigh

"Hey!"

Everyone turned toward her.

"I know that look." She pointed an accusing finger at Maya. "Don't even think about blaming yourself."

Maya opened her mouth, but Harper cut her off before she could speak.

"You didn't force me to do anything." Harper crossed her arms. "This was always going to happen eventually. You just gave me a reason to stop running from it."

Her expression softened into a small smile.

"If anything, you did me a favor."

Mr. Takahashi leaned in conspiratorially toward Maya and lowered his voice.

“Since you’ve already worked one miracle,” he whispered, “I hope you can help my daughter find a husband too.”

“Dad!” Harper exclaimed, her face instantly turning red.

Mr. Takahashi ignored her completely.

“What?” he said with a shrug. “You’re not getting any younger. Your mother and I would like to hold our grandchildren while we’re still healthy enough to chase them around.”

He folded his arms with exaggerated seriousness.

“You’d better find someone to marry soon, or I’ll find one for you myself.”

Before Harper could protest, Kenji cut in with a mischievous grin.

“Actually, Dad… there already is someone. Harper’s just too stubborn to admit it.”

Harper shot him a murderous glare.

Mr. Takahashi immediately turned to his son, his eyes lighting up with interest.

“Really? Tell me more.”

“Kenji…” Harper warned through gritted teeth. “Shut your mouth before I cut your tongue off.”

Completely unfazed, Kenji simply stuck his tongue out at her like an immature little brother.

Harper gasped in disbelief.

Laughter immediately erupted around them.

Even Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi couldn’t help but laugh at their children’s antics.

Once the laughter settled, Mr. Takahashi clapped his hands together.

“Come, come. Let’s head inside.” He smiled warmly at Maya and Jaime. “Harper will show you to your rooms and give you a tour of the estate. Please make yourselves at home. As long as you’re here, this house is your house.”

With that, everyone made their way inside together.

The Takahashi Estate was even more impressive on the inside than it appeared from the outside.

Rather than a single mansion, it resembled a self-contained compound. Elegant buildings were connected by covered walkways that wound through meticulously landscaped gardens, koi ponds, stone paths, and tranquil courtyards. It felt less like a private residence and more like a small village hidden behind towering walls.

Harper had already arranged accommodations for everyone before their arrival.

Chapter 564

Jaime's medical team were assigned one of the estate's larger guest houses, a fully furnished Tive-bedroom residence equipped with everything they would need during their stay.

Lee and Max were given a smaller two bedroom guest house nearby.

Harper had originally intended for Nick to stay there as well, but Mr. Takahashi firmly overruled her. According to him, honored guests belonged in the main house. Anything less would be discourteous.

Harper argued for nearly twenty minutes before reluctantly conceding defeat.

As a result, Maya, Damien, Jaime, Dahlia, and-much to Harper's annoyance-Nick were all assigned

rooms inside the manor.

Mr. Takahashi raised another objection when Harper announced that Maya and Damien would be sharing

a room.

"They aren't married yet," he reminded her.

Harper simply rolled her eyes.

"Dad, they're practically husband and wife already. It's not the Edo period anymore."

Although he was clearly reluctant, Mr. Takahashi eventually relented after both of his children-and even his wife-sided against him.

Nick, however, was shown no such mercy.

Harper deliberately assigned Nick the room at the very end of the hallway, as far away from everyone e as possible.

When her father questioned the arrangement, Harper simply flashed him an innocent smile and insiste was “the quietest room in the house.”

Her father appeared convinced.

Kenji and Anko, on the other hand, saw right through her.

Having witnessed Harper’s interactions with Nick on the island firsthand, Anko knew exactly what that innocent smile meant. Years of serving by Harper’s side had taught him to recognize it instantly.

Once everyone had settled into their rooms, Harper and Kenji led them to the opposite wing of the esta

It had been temporarily transformed into a private medical facility for Jaime’s surgery.

The entire wing rivaled a private hospital. Advanced medical equipment filled the spacious operating room, while an adjoining recovery suite had been furnished with every comfort imaginable. It felt less lik a hospital room and more like a presidential suite.

Jaime’s operation would take place there, and he would remain in recovery until his doctors determined he was well enough to be discharged. Only then would he move into the bedroom that had already been prepared for him inside the main manor.

After the tour concluded, everyone retired to their rooms to unpack, shower, and change before dinner.

That evening, an elaborate spread of authentic Japanese cuisine awaited them beneath the estate's open-air pavilion.

The long wooden dining table overlooked one of the estate's tranquil gardens, where the soft sound of flowing water blended with the warm glow of lanterns as dusk settled over the grounds.

During dinner, Maya finally learned the name of the older gentleman who had stood beside Mr. Takahashi to welcome them earlier that day.

His name was Akio.

For more than three decades, he had served as Mr. Takahashi's closest confidant and most trusted right-hand man.

The meal stretched pleasantly into the evening. They were also joined by the specialists Harper had personally selected from the Takahashi family's private medical network.

Over the coming days, they would work alongside Jaime's medical team, assisting during the surgery and supporting his recovery afterward.

Among them was Dr. Hiroshi Nakamura, one of Japan's most renowned cardiothoracic surgeons. Together, he and Dr. Anderson would lead Jaime's surgery, while Dr. Brown-who had overseen Jaime's treatment from the very beginning-would supervise his recovery afterward

As the rest of the group enjoyed getting to know one another over dinner, the three doctors occasionally drifted into quiet discussions, reviewing the surgical plan and ensuring every detail had been accounted for.

Maya had lost count of how many times she had thanked Harper, her family, and Dahlia since arriving at the estate.

Every single time, they gave her the same answer.

"We're family now," they would say. "And family does everything for family."

Those simple words filled her heart with a warmth she hadn't expected. Looking around the lively table, surrounded by laughter, conversation, and people who had gone to extraordinary lengths to help Jaime, she felt the weight pressing on her chest begin to ease.

For the first time since Jaime's diagnosis, she allowed herself to truly believe that everything would be okay.

Deep in her heart, she knew that Jaime's surgery would be a success.

By the time dessert had been cleared away and tea was served, it was nearly eight o'clock. The evening lingered pleasantly over warm cups of tea before the gathering gradually began to disperse.

Dr. Nakamura and his team excused themselves first. Shortly afterward, Dr. Anderson, Dr. Brown, and the rest of Jaime's medical team also called it a night.

With Jaime's transplant scheduled for the following day, they wanted to get a full night's rest before the long hours that awaited them.

Before leaving, Dr. Anderson reminded Jaime one last time not to eat or drink anything after midnight and to get a good night's sleep before the surgery.

One by one, they wished everyone a good night before heading to their respective accommodations.

Ken eventually excused himself as well.

"There are a few matters I need to take care of in my office," he said before wishing everyone a pleasant evening and taking his leave.

As the rest rose from their seats, preparing to head inside, Dahlia felt the gentle vibration of her phone.

She glanced at the screen before turning toward Alice.

The two women exchanged a brief, knowing look. Alice gave a subtle nod, and a small smile spread across Dahlia's face.

"It looks like my friend has arrived," Dahlia announced. "I'll go out and meet her."

She then looked toward Kim.

Kim understood immediately and stepped forward without needing to be asked.

Alice turned to Hana. "Hana, accompany them and help escort our guest inside."

Hana bowed her head before following Dahlia and Kim away from the pavilion.

Harper watched them leave, curiosity immediately getting the better of her.

"Mom," she whispered, leaning closer to Alice, "do you know who Aunt Dahlia's friend is?"

"Yes, I do," Alice replied calmly.

Harper wrapped both hands around her mother's arm. "Who is it?"

Alice smiled without looking at her. "Curiosity is charming… until it becomes nosiness."

Harper released her arm and rolled her eyes.

"Such a party pooper," she muttered.

Alice turned her head slightly, "Did you say something?"

Harper straightened at once. "Nope. Nothing at all."

A few minutes later, the sound of approaching footsteps drew everyone's attention toward the garden path.

Hana and Kim appeared first.

Dahlia followed closely behind them, walking beside an elderly woman dressed in an elegant, perfectly tailored ensernble. Her silver-gray hair was swept neatly away from her face, highlighting features that remained striking despite the passing years.

Age had softened her beauty, but it had not diminished it.

There was a quiet grace in the way she carried herself, along with an unmistakable air of refinement that commanded attention without demanding it.

As they reached the pavilion, Dahlia stepped slightly to the side and gestured toward the woman beside her.

“Everyone,” she said warmly, “I’d like you to meet my good friend, Cecilia.”

Alice stepped forward first, offering Cecilia a warm welcome. Kenji and Harper followed, greeting her just as politely.

Cecilia acknowledged them with a graceful nod, forcing a courteous smile despite the storm raging inside

her.

Every ounce of Cecilia’s composure was spent maintaining her calm expression, yet her gaze kept drifting back to Maya and Jaime.

Harper’s curious eyes swept over the elegant older woman, trying to place where she might have seen hap before.

Smiling, Dahiia stepped forward.

“And these are the two wonderful additions to our family I told you about.” Dahlia smiled warmly as she gestured toward the siblings. “This is my future daughter-in-law, Maya.. and our godson, Jaime

Maya’s cheeks flushed with a faint blush at Dahlia’s introduction. She stepped forward and offered Cecilia

a warm, polite smile.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

Beside her, Jaime beamed, his usual bright grin lighting up his face.

“Hello, ma’am! Good evening!”

Cecilia parted her lips, intending to return the greeting.

But no words came.

Her gaze remained fixed on Maya and Jaime.

She fought desperately to maintain the elegant composure she had carried her entire life, but the dam behind her eyes threatened to break with every passing second.

Chapter 565

Tears shimmered in Cecilia's eyes.

Looking into Maya's eyes felt like looking into her daughter's all over again.

Once, those eyes had been filled with hope, love, and dreams for the future. But the last time Cecilia had looked into them, they had been clouded with heartbreak, disappointment, and pain.

Even so, they still held the quiet conviction of a daughter who had chosen to stand by the man she loved, even if it meant turning her back on the family she had known all her life.

They were the last eyes Cecilia had seen before Malia walked away.

Now, more than twenty years later, those very same eyes were looking back at her.

In an instant, every emotion she had carried with her for more than two decades came rusting to the surface.

Her fingers tightened around the handle of her purse.

She wanted to say something. She wanted to tell them who she was, to apologize for not being part of their lives-for missing their birth, their first steps, their first words, and every precious moment that had shaped them into the remarkable young people standing before her now.

More than anything, she wanted to wrap Maya and Jaime in her arms, foolishly hoping a single embrace could somehow make up for all the years she had lost.

But she couldn't.

Dahlia's words echoed in her mind.

'They had already endured more than anyone their age ever should and were only just beginning to find a place where they truly belonged, slowly healing from the wounds life had dealt them."'

She couldn't allow her own emotions to shatter the fragile peace they had finally found.

While Cecilia struggled to hold herself together, Maya couldn't shake the feeling that there was something unusual about the way the woman standing before them was looking at them.

There was unmistakable sadness in the woman's eyes, but beneath it lay something even deeper-an aching longing and a heartbreak so profound that it made Maya's chest tighten for reasons she couldn't explain.

Something deep inside her told her that there was something strangely familiar about the woman standing before her.

Yet no matter how hard she searched her memory, she couldn't remember ever meeting her before.

Dahlia immediately noticed the way Cecilia was struggling to keep her emotions in check. Before she could lose herself completely, she stepped forward with a warm smile.

"Cecilia just arrived after a very long flight," Dahlia explained. "She insisted on coming here first before

getting any rest. I suppose the journey has taken more out of her than she'd like to admit."

As she spoke, she met Alice's eyes, silently asking her to help steer the conversation away.

The reminder snapped Cecilia back to feality.

She blinked several times before letting out a soft, embarrassed laugh and shaking her head.

“Right… I’m terribly sorry.” She offered thern an apologetic strile. “Please forgive me. My old body isn’t quite what it used to be, and that long flight has certainly taken its toll.”

Taking a quiet breath, she stepped forward and gently took Maya’s hand between both of hers.

“It truly is a pleasure to finally meet you, Maya.”

She then turned to Jaime, her smile growing even warmer.

“And you too, young man. I’ve heard so many wonderful things about both of you. When Dahlia told me you would be here, I was so excited that I could hardly wait to meet you.”

Maya offered her a warm smile.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Cecilia chuckled softly and gently patted the back of Maya’s hand.

“Oh, dear…” she said fondly. “There’s no need to be so formal with me.” She glanced between Maya and Jaime before smiling warmly. “If you don’t mind… would you call me Grandma instead?”

Maya and Jaime instinctively looked toward Dahlia, silently seeking reassurance.

Dahlia simply smiled and gave them a gentle nod.

Maya looked back at Cecilia and smiled.

“Okay… Grandma.”

The words had barely left her lips before Jaime’s eyes lit up.

“Wow! From zero grandmas to two grandmas!” He turned excitedly to Maya. “May, we have two grandmas now! Grandma Eleanor and now Grandma Cecilia! That’s awesome!”

Cecilia’s lips trembled.

She smiled through the tears threatening to spill from her eyes, but neither Dahlia nor Alice missed the way she fought to keep her emotions under control once again.

Sensing the moment was becoming too overwhelming, Alice clapped her hands together with a gentle smile.

“Why don’t we continue this in the garden gazebo?” she suggested. “It’s much more private there. After such a long journey, I think a nice cup of tea would be nice.”

She then turned to her children.

“Harper, would you show Maya and Jaime the gazebo? And Kenji, please have them prepare some gyokuro Tea and a selection of wagashi”

The four nodded in agreement.

“Come on,” Harper said with a smile as she gently linked her arm with Maya’s. “You’ll love the view from the gazebo.”

As Maya, Jaime, Harper, and Kenji walked ahead together, Cecilia stood frozen, watching them until they disappeared from sight.

The moment they were gone, the strength she had been desperately clinging to gave way.

A sob escaped her lips.

Her knees buckled beneath her, but Dahlia and Alice were quick to catch her before she could collapse to the ground.

“Oh… my grandchildren…” Cecilia cried, clutching tightly to Dahlia’s arm as tears streamed uncontrollably down her cheeks.

Her voice trembled so violently that she could barely form the words.

“Her eyes… Maya’s eyes…” She shook her head through her tears. “They look exactly like my Malia’s…

Then, as though suddenly remembering something far more important than her own emotions, panic flashed across her face.

“My grandson…” she said anxiously. “His surgery is tomorrow, isn’t it? Is everything ready? The hospital… the doctors… the donor organ… Is everything in place? Do we need to prepare anything else?”

Before she could spiral any further, Alice gently rested a reassuring hand on her arm.

“Lady Cecilia,” she said softly, “everything has already been arranged. The medical team is ready, the facility is fully prepared, and the donor organ has been secured. There is nothing left to worry about.”

She offered Cecilia a comforting smile.

“All that’s left now… is to pray for a successful surgery.”

Taking a shaky breath, Cecilia slowly straightened herself. She held tightly onto Dahlia’s and Alice’s hands, her pleading eyes moving between the two women.

“Please…” she whispered. “Please make sure my grandson will be okay. If there’s anything else you need.. anything at all… don’t hesitate to ask.”

Dahlia gently squeezed her hand.

“Don’t worry,” she said softly. “Everything is already in place. Now, all we can do is trust the doctors and pray that Jaime’s surgery goes well.”

The silence between them said everything that their hearts could not.

The three women simply looked at one another, understanding passing between them without the need for words.

At that moment, their frames, their status, and everything that set them apart no longer mattered

They were simply mothers.

Mothers who understood that there was no greater joy than seeing their children smile… and no greater pain than watching them suffer.

It was a truth that transcended blood, wealth, and even time itself.

Chapter 566

It took Cecilia some time to compose herself. Neither Dahlia nor Alice uttered a single word, quietly remaining by her side until she finally regained her composure. Only then did the three women make their way to the garden gazebo, where the others were waiting.

The evening breeze carried the gentle fragrance of blooming flowers as they approached. Under the warm glow of the lanterns, everyone was already comfortably seated, chatting as though the emotional moment from earlier had never happened.

Shortly after they settled in, the household staff arrived with trays of freshly brewed gyokuro and an assortment of delicate wagashi. The fragrant aroma of the tea mingled with the crisp night air, creating an atmosphere of quiet warmth,

The conversation remained pleasantly light, mostly led by Jaime's endless curiosity. He eagerly asked about the sprawling estate, the shimmering koi pond, and even the towering centuries-old trees that seemed to have witnessed generations of the Takahashi family.

"So… those trees are actually older than some countries?" Jaime asked in amazement.

Kenji chuckled. "Some of them have stood here for well over three hundred years."

“No way…”

Jaime craned his neck toward the ancient branches, his eyes sparkling with childlike wonder.

“They’ve literally been standing there since before Canada even existed.”

His innocent amazement earned warm laughter from everyone around the table.

Even Cecilia found herself smiling.

Watching Jaime laugh so freely stirred something bittersweet deep within her.

She couldn’t help wondering how many moments like this she had unknowingly missed over the years. The questions she could have answered. The birthdays she could have celebrated. The ordinary afternoons she would have treasured simply because they had been spent together.

For the first time in over twenty years, she was finally sitting across from the grandchildren whose existence she had only learned of a few days ago.

Yet to Maya and Jaime, she was nothing more than one of Dahlia’s close friends.

Once the conversation had settled into an easy rhythm, Alice quietly exchanged a knowing glance with Dahlia before placing her teacup onto its saucer.

“Tomorrow will be a busy day,” she said with a gentle smile as she rose to her feet. “I’d like to make sure everything is ready before we all call it a night. Harper, Kenji… would you mind giving me a hand?”

“Of course, Mom,” Kenji replied without hesitation.

Harper shot her brother a sideways glance before muttering under her breath, just loud enough for those nearby to hear.

Kion 30

Kenji merely smiled, long accustomed to his sister’s teasing.

Alice sighed, shaking her head with amused exasperation.

“Harper, perhaps you should learn a thing or two from your brother about obedience.”

Harper rolled her eyes dramatically.

“Fine, fine…” She pushed herself to her feet before flashing Maya a bright smile. “I guess I’ll see you all later!”

She then turned to Cecilia.

“It was really nice meeting you, Grandma Cecilia. Have a safe drive home.”

“Thank you, dear,” Cecilia replied warmly.

Harper gave Maya’s shoulder a gentle squeeze before following Alice, while Kenji offered everyone a respectful bow before quietly excusing himself as well.

Before long, only Dahlia, Cecilia, Maya, and Jaime remained in the softly illuminated gazebo.

A brief silence settled over them.

Cecilia hesitated, uncertain whether she had the right to ask. Yet the quiet longing in her heart eventually overcame her restraint.

Offering them a warm smile, she said softly, “So… Maya, Jaime… would you mind telling me a little more about yourselves?”

As always, Jaime happily did most of the talking.

He shared amusing stories from his childhood, reminiscing about the happy days he and Maya had spent with their parents before excitedly talking about his love for books and technology. He then launched into an exaggerated account of Maya constantly reminding him to take his medication, eat his vegetables, get enough sleep, and stop staring at a screen for hours.

Every so often, Maya would interrupt with an embarrassed correction, insisting he was exaggerating, only for Jaime to protest that he was “just telling the truth.”

“I swear she repeats the same things so often she’s become a broken record,” he groaned dramatically.

Then his playful expression softened. Looking at Maya with sincere eyes, he smiled.

“But I know she only does it because she wants what’s best for me.”

He puffed out his chest proudly before wrapping an arm around Maya’s shoulders.

“I have the best sister in the whole world!”

Maya could only shake her head with a helpless smile, though the warmth in her eyes betrayed just how much his words meant to her.

Their playful banter filled the gazebo with soft laughter.

What had begun as a few simple questions soon blossomed into one story after another.

Cecilia asked about their studies, the friends they had made, and the dreams they hoped to pursue in the future. Maya answered with quiet grace, while Jaime's boundless enthusiasm effortlessly carried the conversation from one topic to the next.

Cecilia listened intently, treasuring every word as though trying to make up for two decades in a single evening

Without anyone realizing it, the conversation gradually drifted elsewhere.

"… What about your parents?" Cecilia asked softly.

The cheerful smiles slowly faded, and for the first time that evening, both Maya and Jaime fell silent.

Maya lowered her gaze to the teacup in her hands before lifting her eyes once more.

“They passed away the day after my eighteenth birthday… Jaime was only eight.”

Maya didn’t hesitate. Enough time had passed that she could speak of it without breaking, though the sadness in her voice had never truly disappeared. She spoke of the accident that had taken both of their parents in an instant, of suddenly becoming the only family Jaime had left, and of learning far too young what it meant to survive instead of simply living.

Her voice remained calm and steady.

Time had softened the sharpest edges of her grief, but it had never erased them.

She spoke of working while finishing school, of protecting Jaime as best she could, and of the countless hardships they had quietly endured together.

She never complained.

She never sought sympathy.

She simply told the truth.

Somehow, that quiet acceptance pierced Cecilia’s heart far more deeply than tears ever could.

Every word tightened around her heart.

She should have been there.

She should have known.

It was another reminder of the life she should have shared with them.

Instead, she was hearing about the hardest years of their lives as nothing more than a stranger.

These were not memories she should have been hearing for the first time.

They were memories she should have been a part of.

Beneath the calm smile she struggled to maintam, sorrow, regret, quilt, and quiet anger churned Telentlessly within her.

She was angry at fate but even more so at herself.

She should have fought harder for her daughter She should have stood beside her instead of allowing circumstances to pull them apart. She should have searched sooner, questioned more, and refused to accept that there was nothing she could do

How many of Maya and Jaime's hardships could have been spared if she had made different choices?

She would never know.

That uncertainty was a burden she would carry for the rest of her life.

Chapter 567

Cecilia knew she could never reclaim the years she had lost, nor undo the choices that had led them here. The past could not be rewritten, but perhaps the future did not have to be defined by the same mistakes.

She had missed the chance to be the mother her daughter had needed, a regret she would carry for the rest of her life. But as she looked at Maya and Jaime, she realized fate had given her something she had never expected-a second chance.

In that quiet moment, Cecilia made herself a silent promise. Whatever time she had left, she would spend it loving Maya and Jaime with everything she had, even if it meant standing against Tobias, even if it meant making the very same choice her daughter once had.

This time, she would choose them.

She would choose the only pieces of her daughter that still remained in this world.

While Cecilia quietly reflected on the past and silently planned for the future, the man who would soon become an inseparable part of Maya and Jaime's lives was already drawing closer with every passing mile.

High above the clouds, inside the private cabin, Damien and Hudson began exchanging identities as the rest of the team prepared for the next phase of the plan.

Nick had taken a quick shower, washing away the lingering scent of alcohol before changing into a fresh set of clothes. By the time he stepped out, he looked as composed and polished as ever, betraying nothing of the turmoil that still lingered beneath the surface.

Meanwhile, James quietly reviewed the itinerary while coordinating the next steps of the operation, making certain every detail was proceeding according to plan. At the same time, Monroe remained in constant contact with the Blackwood security teams in both New York and Taiwan, monitoring developments and ensuring everything was in place for their arrival.

A few minutes later, Damien stepped out of the private cabin, now dressed in Blackwood's Elite security uniform.

Hudson emerged shortly after, impeccably dressed in a tailored suit and tie.

Taking their seats, Damien and Hudson waited as Cruz carried the black case to the table. Hudson pressed his thumb against the glass lock before tracing the familiar six-point pattern. Soft beeps sounded, followed by a quiet click as the lock disengaged.

Lifting the lid, he removed the two glass containers and placed them side by side on the

table. Inside rested Damien's and Hudson's masks.

Hudson reached for Damien's mask while Damien picked up Hudson's.

As they fitted the masks over their faces, Ashcroft watched in silence, his gaze lingering on the flawless transformation.

"Looks like only you two needed the masks after all."

He clicked his tongue, a faint snicker escaping him.

"Harper made four of them. Seems like the other two are going to waste." He shrugged. "Not that I'm complaining. Those things freak me the hell out."

Now wearing Hudson's face, Damien made one final adjustment to the mask as it molded flawlessly to his features.

"Nothing goes to waste."

Ashcroft frowned. “What do you mean? Obviously, I don’t need to wear one. I’m getting off this plane as myself.”

Damien simply shook his head.

“Maybe not today,” he said. “But I’m sure they’ll come in handy one day.”

Just then, the cabin speakers chimed softly before the captain’s calm, professional voice

filled the cabin.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve begun our initial descent into Singapore. We’ll be landing in approximately twenty minutes. At this time, please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts. Our cabin crew will be securing the cabin for landing. Thank you.”

The announcement marked the end of their preparations. Each of them exchanged a brief glance before returning to their seats, ready for the next phase of the operation.

Ashcroft’s expression remained unchanged. Leaning back in his seat, he turned his gaze toward Damien.

“It’s showtime.”

Back at the gazebo, the little family reunion carried on, the conversation gradually shifting to lighter, more cheerful topics. Laughter came more easily, and before any of them realized it, time had quietly slipped away.

Only when Jaime let out a long, unmistakable yawn did Maya instinctively reach for her phone to check the time.

Tapping the screen awake, she blinked in surprise. “Oh no.” She let out a small laugh. “It’s almost midnight.”

Just as Jaime reached for another piece of wagashi, Maya lightly tapped the back of his hand.

“Aww… why?” Jaime asked, looking at her with an exaggerated pout.

Her expression grew gentle as she effortlessly slipped back into her familiar role as the responsible older sister.

“That’s enough snacks for tonight,” she said with a knowing smile. “Dr. Anderson said no more food or drinks after midnight. You have to fast before your surgery, remember?”

She smiled gently.

“You have a big day tomorrow. Why don’t you head upstairs, wash up, and get ready for bed? You’ll need all the rest you can get.”

Jaime scratched the back of his neck sheepishly before straightening up and snapping a playful salute.

“Yes, ma’am.”

His exaggerated display of obedience earned another round of laughter from everyone.

Then, to everyone’s surprise, Jaime suddenly rose to his feet and walked over to Cecilia.

Without the slightest hesitation, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her in a warm hug.

“Goodnight, Grandma Cecilia,” he said brightly. “Have a safe drive home!”

Caught completely off guard, Cecilia froze for the briefest moment. Her eyes instantly welled with tears as she felt the warmth of her grandson’s embrace.

Almost instinctively, she returned the hug, her arms tightening around him as though afraid he might vanish the moment she let go. For that brief moment, she wished she never had to

let him go.

But she knew she couldn't.

Not wanting her emotions to betray her, Cecilia reluctantly loosened her embrace as Jaime gently pulled away.

"Thank you, dear," she said softly, her voice thick with emotion. "You're such a sweet young

man."

Jaime flashed her his usual sunny grin before making his way over to Dahlia.

"Goodnight, Aunt Dahlia! Sleep well!"

After another quick hug, Jaime turned toward the estate, ready to call it a night.

Just as he was about to leave the gazebo, hurried footsteps echoed along the stone pathway.

"Sorry for interrupting!"

Harper appeared moments later, slightly out of breath, a tablet clutched tightly against her

chest.

She offered everyone an apologetic smile before looking directly at Maya, her excitement impossible to hide.

“Maya…” she said, lifting the tablet toward her.

“Their plane just landed in Singapore.”

Chapter 568

The conversation carried on for a while longer, drifting effortlessly from one lighthearted topic to another. Laughter came easily, and before anyone realized it, time had quietly slipped away.

It wasn’t until Dahlia happened to check the time that any of them realized it was already a quarter past midnight.

Reluctantly, the little gathering finally came to an end.

Harper, Maya, and Jaime bid Cecilia goodnight before making their way back toward the estate. As Cecilia prepared to leave, Dahlia offered to walk her to the front entrance.

The two women walked side by side beneath the soft glow of the garden lanterns. The only sounds accompanying them were the gentle rustling of leaves and the distant trickle of the koi pond.

For a long while, silence stretched comfortably between them until Cecilia finally gathered the courage to speak.

Drawing in a trembling breath, she quietly said, “They both remind me so much of their mother.”

At the mention of Malia, Dahlia’s lips curved into an unconscious smile.

“I know,” she said softly. “I see Malia in them every day.”

Cecilia hummed softly before letting out a quiet sigh.

“Maya looks so much like her.” Her eyes grew distant with nostalgia. “Even the way love looks on her.” A bittersweet smile touched her lips. “I remember seeing that exact same look on Malia’s face whenever she talked about Julian.”

The memory tightened something deep inside her chest.

There had been a time when Malia would excitedly tell her and Tobias everything about Julian–the little things that made her smile, the dreams they shared, the future she imagined with the man she loved.

Cecilia had always listened with a smile.

Tobias had not.

Time and again, he had dismissed those innocent conversations with the same cold certainty.

“Julian will never be good enough for you.”

“You’re just wasting your time.”

“Forget him. He’s not one of us.”

“I will never allow it.”

Little by little, the joy in Malia’s eyes had faded, replaced by disappointment and quiet heartbreak.

A painful lump rose in Cecilia's throat. She swallowed against it, fighting back the tears that threatened to spill.

She had watched that light slowly fade from her daughter's eyes once before, and she had done nothing to stop it until it was replaced by disappointment, pain, and quiet resentment.

Never again.

She would never allow that same light to fade from her granddaughter's eyes.

Pushing those painful memories aside, Cecilia let out a slow breath before a small smile returned to her lips.

"And Jaime…" She shook her head with quiet amusement. "I can't deny that I see Tobias in him. He's so expressive. Whatever he's thinking, it comes straight out of his mouth"

Dahlia smiled knowingly.

"He certainly is," she said with a soft laugh.

Cecilia let out a soft chuckle. Then another thought crossed her mind.

Her smile slowly faded as she hesitated for a moment.

“And his love for technology… She glanced at Dahlia. “I’m assuming he inherited that from his father?”

Dahlia nodded with a smile.

“He did. Julian was just as passionate about technology, and Jaime definitely inherited that curiosity from

him.”

A fond smile spread across her face.

“He’s incredibly smart and surprisingly mature for his age. He never hesitates to speak his mind, and I must admit, Eleanor and I are constantly amazed by how he manages to keep Charles and Dominic on

their toes.”

She chuckled, clearly growing more animated as she spoke.

“Everyone at home absolutely adores the two of them. They’re kind, thoughtful, polite, and incredibly considerate. It didn’t take long for Maya and Jaime to capture everyone’s hearts.”

Cecilia listened quietly, a genuine smile resting on her lips. Hearing how deeply Maya and Jaime were loved, and how their kindness had won the hearts of everyone around them, filed her with pride.

At the same time, she couldn’t deny the quiet envy stirring in her heart.

Not because she resented Dahlia or the Blackwoods, but because they had been there to witness the moments she had lost forever.

It was the natural consequence of the choices she had made. She had no one to blame but herself.

She should have been the one telling those stories, not listening to someone else tell them.

Yet strangely, Cecilia found herself unable to feel bitter.

If anything, she was grateful.

Grateful that when she and Tobias had failed them, someone else had stepped forward to love her grandchildren as family.

The two women eventually reached the estate's front gates, where Cecilia's waiting vehicle sat quietly beneath the glow of the lanterns.

The moment they stepped outside the estate gates, the chauffeur waiting beside the parked vehicle immediately straightened. Seeing Cecilla approach, he stepped forward and opened the rear door for her.

Just before getting in, Cecilia stopped.

Turning back, she reached out and gently took both of Dahlia's hands into hers, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Dahlia…" Her voice trembled with emotion. "Thank you. Truly… thank you."

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The tears she had been holding back finally spilled over, slipping quietly down her cheeks.

"Thank you for loving Maya and Jaime as your own, and for giving me the chance to meet them." Her lips quivered into a grateful smile. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

Dahlia smiled and gave Cecilia's hands a reassuring squeeze.

“You don’t owe me anything, Lady Cecilia. I simply did what any mother should.”

Her smile softened.

“Malia is no longer here to protect her children, so until they no longer need me… I’ll gladly do it in her place.”

Cecília pressed her lips together, struggling to keep her composure.

Dahlia continued gently, “None of this has ever been about bloodlines… or family names… or centuries of tradition.”

“It’s about two young people who never asked to be born into the circumstances they inherited.” “They deserve to live freely. They deserve to love without carrying the burdens of our generation.

“If we truly love them…” Dahlia smiled warmly. “…then it’s our responsibility to make sure they inherit a better future than the one we did.”

Cecilia stared at Dahlia for several long moments. In her tear–filled eyes, there was no pride, no denial, and no attempt to justify the past. Only sincerity, deep remorse, and the quiet resolve of someone determined not to make the same mistake twice.

Finally… Cecilia nodded.

“I know.”

There was no hesitation left in her voice.

Only quiet conviction.

The words lingered between them for a few moments before Cecilia lowered her gaze. She seemed to

wrestle with herself, as though debating whether she had the right to ask for anything more

After a long pause, she drew in a shaky breath.

“I… I want to be there tomorrow.”

Chapter 569

Dahlia doesn’t answer immédiately.

She quietly considered Cecilia’s request, weighing every possibility in her mind.

She thought it through–not because she didn't trust Cecilia, but because tomorrow was delicate. Jaime' surgery, Maya's emotions, Damien's arrival… one mistake could expose everything.

Sensing Dahlia's hesitation, Cecilia hurriedly spoke again.

"I promise I won't reveal anything. I won't do anything that would make Maya or Jaime suspicious." Her voice quivered as she struggled to hold back her emotions.

"I just… I just want to be there while my grandson undergoes surgery. Even if I can't stand beside him as his grandmother… at least let me stay nearby."

Dahlia understood.

Cecilia wasn't asking to be acknowledged.

She simply wanted the chance to stay close to her grandchildren, quietly offering them her love and support–even if they never truly knew who she was.

A gentle smile touched Dahlia's lips.

"Of course," she said softly. "I think Jaime would be very happy to have you there."

Relief washed over Cecilia's face.

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, silently mouthing a heartfelt thank you.

Giving Dahlia's hands one final grateful squeeze, she slipped into the waiting vehicle.

As the car slowly disappeared beyond the estate gates, Dahlia remained where she was, watching until the taillights vanished into the night.

Alice had intended to come out and see Cecilia off as well. But the moment she stepped outside and saw Dahlia and Cecilia walking slowly through the garden, deep in conversation, she quietly stayed back, deciding not to interrupt.

Only after Cecilia's car had disappeared into the night did Alice finally walk over to Dahlia's side.

"How did it go?"

A faint smile tugged at Dahlia's lips.

"Better than I ever hoped."

After a brief pause, her smile deepened ever so slightly.

‘I’m certain she’s made her choice… and she’s on our side now.”

While emotions ran high more than three thousand miles away, another carefully orchestrated plan was

already unfolding in Singapore.

The Gulfstream taxied away from the main runways before coming to a smooth stop at the private aviation apron, far from the bustle of Changi Airport’s commercial terminals.

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Waiting nearby was another sleek business jet, its engines powered down as a small team of ground. personnel completed the final preparations for departure. Fuel trucks and baggage carts stood nearby while mechanics performed one last inspection beneath the bright floodlights.

Once the cabin door opened, Ashcroft stepped onto the stairs first, followed by Max and Damien, who was still wearing Hudson’s face.

Meanwhile, Monroe, James, Cruz, and the real Hudson remained aboard the Gulfstream, waiting until the transfer was complete before continuing with the next phase of the operation.

Before the three men had even reached the bottom of the stairs, arman was already making his way toward them with long, purposeful strides.

He appeared to be in his late thirties, dressed in a charcoal button–down shirt with the sleeves neatly rolled to his forearms and dark slacks that blended seamlessly with the rest of the airport personnel. A discreet earpiece rested behind one ear, while his composed demeanor and sharp, observant eyes immediately set him apart from the ordinary ground crew.

Stopping a respectful distance away, the man offered a slight bow.

“Good evening, gentlemen. My name is Leo. Ms. Lin asked me to oversee your transfer and ensure everything proceeds smoothly.”

Ashcroft regarded him silently, his sharp gaze sweeping over the man from head to toe. Then he asked, ” What’s the code?”

Without the slightest hesitation, Leo answered,

“Harper is amazing.”

Ashcroft continued studying the man for another moment.

Leo maintained a professional expression, but the faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips and the amused sparkle in his eyes didn't escape Ashcroft's notice.

Sensing Ashcroft's scrutiny, Leo quickly suppressed the smile, wondering if he had somehow offended the intimidating man standing before him.

Composing himself almost immediately, Leo straightened his expression and continued as though nothing had happened.

"Welcome to Singapore, Mr. Ashcroft," he said calmly. "Everything is ready, and Immigration has already been notified. If you'll follow me, we'll have you airborne again as soon as possible."

Instead of acknowledging the greeting, Ashcroft asked,

"What's your relationship with Harper?"

The unexpected question visibly caught Leo off guard.

Sir?

harper is amazing.

Your relationship with Harper," Ashcroft repeated, his tone turning even colder.

Leo blinked twice before hastily composing himself. Keeping his tone respectful and professional, he replied,

"Ms. Lin is my employer, sir. I was tasked with overseeing your transfer. I'm simply following her orders, Ashcroft."

Damien resisted the urge to strangle Nicholas on the spot. Swallowing his exasperation, he slipped back into character, cleared his throat, and spoke with the same calm professionalism the real Hudson would have.

"Mr. Ashcroft, we need to keep moving."

His tone remained flat, but the reminder was clear enough. They had a schedule to keep, and this was hardly the time for an interrogation.

Leo had clearly been amused by Harper's rather unconventional choice of verification code and nothing more. There was no point intimidating the poor man over an innocent smile.

After a brief moment, Ashcroft finally relented and gave a curt nod.

“Fine. Lead the way.”

Leo gave another respectful bow before turning to lead them across the tarmac.

Waiting a short distance away were two uniformed officers–one from the Immigration & Checkpoints Authority and the other from Singapore Customs.

As they approached, Leo spoke quietly.

“Ms. Lin has already taken care of everything. Your arrival clearance has been completed. The officers only need to verify your identities before your onward departure.”

The two officers greeted them with polite bows.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” the ICA officer said courteously. “We’ll just need to verify your travel documents before your onward flight.”

Ashcroft, Max, and Damien each handed over their passports without objection.

The officers efficiently verified their identities against the flight manifest before scanning their travel documents one final time.

Barely three minutes later, the ICA officer returned the passports with a courteous nod.

“Everything is in order, gentlemen. You’re cleared to proceed. Have a pleasant flight.”

With the formalities complete, Leo once again took the lead, guiding them toward the waiting business jet.

They had barely taken a dozen steps when Damien felt it.

Someone was watching him.

His eyes shifted ever so slightly toward a nearby baggage cart where one of the ground crew had completely stopped what he was doing.

The man’s eyes remained fixed on him.

Damien’s footsteps slowed almost imperceptibly as a flicker of unease crossed his mind.

Did he notice something?

Was there a flaw in the mask?

Even Max caught the lingering stare, subtly tensing beside him.

Then, without warning, the worker suddenly broke into a broad grin.

“Hudson!”

Chapter 570

“Hudson!”

The name rang across the tarmac, drowning out the roar of engines and the bustle of the ground cre one frozen instant, time itself seemed to stand still.

Before Damien could react, the man was already hurrying toward him.

“Haven’t seen you in years!”

He reached out and pulled Damien into a firm handshake.

Damien returned it naturally, forcing himself to remain composed.

“It’s been a while.”

The worker beamed.

Damien had no idea who the cheerful man standing before him was, much less what sort of relationst he shared with the real Hudson.

One wrong answer could unravel everything.

Fortunately, years of negotiating with world leaders, politicians, and business executives had taught hir one invaluable lesson–when you didn’t know the answer, let the other person do the talking.

Offering an easy smile, Damien asked the safest question he could think of.

“How’ve you been?”

“Ah! Couldn’t be better.” The man grinned. “The family’s all settled now, and we absolutely love it here.”

He chuckled.

“What about you? I honestly didn’t expect to see you on another overseas assignment.”

Damien smiled faintly, careful to keep his answer as vague as possible.

“Temporary assignment. High–profile.”

The worker nodded knowingly before glancing toward the sleek Gulfstream parked nearby as the refueling crew worked around it.

“I can see that. High–profile indeed.” He jerked his chin toward the Gulfstream before leaning in conspiratorially. “Not everyone gets the chance to set foot aboard Mr. Blackwood’s private jet–let alone fly with him.”

His gaze then shifted to the equally impressive business jet waiting a short distance away.

“And now you’re escorting Mr. Ashcroft too.” He let out a low whistle before grinning. “No wonder they assigned you to fly this beauty.”

He laughed.

“Well, it’s good seeing you again, old friend.“.

Damien inclined his head.

“Likewise.”

The worker gave him one last friendly pat on the shoulder before heading back to his duties.

Beside him, Max let out a small chuckle.

“For a second there…”

Damien exhaled through his nose.

“So did I.”

They had only taken a few more steps when a voice suddenly called out behind them.

“Wait!”

All three men instinctively stopped.

Damien and Ashcroft exchanged a brief glance before Damien slowly turned around.

Inside the parked Gulfstream, Monroe, James, Cruz, and the real Hudson had been watching the exchange through the cabin windows from the very beginning. The moment they saw the worker call Damien back and jog toward him, the atmosphere inside the cabin instantly grew tense.

Monroe's instincts immediately kicked in.

"His cover's been compromised."

Without another word, he rose from his seat and started toward the cabin door, prepared to step in the moment the situation spiraled out of control.

Hudson quickly reached out and stopped him.

"Don't. Not yet," he said calmly. "Let's wait and see."

Monroe hesitated, his eyes never leaving Damien through the window, but he ultimately remained where

he was.

Meanwhile, the worker stopped directly in front of Damien and studied his face for several long moments. His eyes gradually narrowed before a siight frown settled across his features.

“Your voice sounds different.”

Damien’s hand subtly cienched at his side as a dozen explanations flashed through his mind in an instant Just as he was about to come up with an excuse, the worker suddenly reached into his pocket and pulled out a smail packet of throat lozenges, holding it out with a sympathetic smile.

“Take these,” he said. “The weather’s been all over the place lately. Half the guys here have been losing their voices.”

Damien stared at the packet for a brief moment before accepting it.

“…Thank you.”

The worker laughed and gave him another friendly pat on the shoulder.

“No problem. Have a safe flight.”

Only after the worker finally walked away did Ashcroft let out the breath he’d been holding.

“…That nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Inside the Gulfstream, the tense atmosphere finally eased as everyone silently breathed a collective sig

of relief.

Damien glanced down at the packet of throat lozenges in his hand before giving his head a small shake. Of all the ways he had imagined his cover being tested, this certainly hadn’t been one of them.

“Let’s go.”

Without another word, the three men followed Leo toward the waiting aircraft, where the next stage of their journey awaited.

Leo boarded with them to conduct one final handover before departure. Once inside the privacy of the cabin, he turned toward Damien and began briefing him on the preparations that had already been made.

“The aircraft has been fully fueled and inspected. Under normal conditions, you’ll have more than enough range to reach Tokyo without stopping.”

He continued in the same calm, professional tone.

“The aircraft is also connected to our flight monitoring network, allowing Ms. Lin to monitor your progress throughout the journey. Should weather, mechanical issues, or any unforeseen circumstances require you to divert, two of our private aviation facilities are available along your route.”

“One is in the northern Philippines. The other is just outside Osaka. Their coordinates, approach frequencies, and access codes have already been uploaded to the aircraft’s navigation system and are also included in the flight binder inside the cockpit.”

“Both facilities have already been notified and are standing by. You are authorized to land at either location for refueling, maintenance, or temporary refuge should the need arise.”

Damien acknowledged him with a single nod.

With nothing more to add, Leo sifered one final respectful bow and stepped off the aircraft.

Ashcroft and Max settled into the passenger cabin while Damien remained near the cockpit as the cabin door was secured behind them.

Rather than departing immediately, they remained on standby, watching through the windows as the Gulfstream slowly taxied away from the apron.

The aircraft rolled toward the runway before accelerating into the night sky, its navigation lights gradually fading into the darkness until they disappeared from view.

Only then did Damien remove the tactical vest he had been wearing over Hudson's uniform. Setting it aside, he stepped into the cockpit and settled into the captain's seat.

His hands moved effortlessly across the familiar controls as he completed the remaining pre–flight procedures. After receiving departure clearance from the control tower, he released the brakes and guided the business jet onto the taxiway before lining it up with the runway

Advancing the throttles smoothly, Damien felt the aircraft surge beneath him as the engines roared to full

power.

The business jet gathered speed before its nose lifted gracefully into the night sky.

Singapore gradually disappeared beneath them as the aircraft climbed toward cruising altitude, carrying them one step closer to the final phase of Harper's carefully orchestrated plan.