Intern 581

Chapter 581

Cecilia walked over and gently rested a hand against Jaime's cheek.

"How are you feeling?"

"Starving," Jaime complained, dragging out the word with all the misery of a child who hadn't been fed in days instead of just a few hours.

Cecilia's eyes softened with sympathy, though a quiet laugh still escaped her at the miserable look on his face.

"I know, sweetheart. But you'll have to endure it a little longer. You can eat once the doctors say it's safe."

Jaime sighed dramatically. "That feels like forever."

Then he suddenly straightened in his chair.

"Wait a second! How are they supposed to operate on me when I'm starving? I need energy. What if I'm too weak because none of you fed me?"

Harper looked at him from across the table, completely unimpressed.

“That’s not how it works, genius. You’re fasting so you don’t throw up while you’re under anesthesia and choke on it.”

Jaime stared at her.

“Well… that sounds unnecessarily terrifying.”

“You asked,” Harper replied with a shrug.

Dahlia gave Jaime a reassuring smile. “You’ll be on an IV before the surgery, sweetheart. They’ll give you fluids and whatever else the doctors need to give you while you can’t eat or drink. You’re not going in there weak and dehydrated.”

Jaime considered that for a moment.

“So technically… I’ll be eating through a tube?”

Harper snorted. “If calling it that makes you feel better, sure.”

Kenji laughed. “Don’t worry, Jaime. Once you’re fully recovered, I’ll take you to one of the best restaurants in Tokyo and treat you to proper wagyu. Forget the bacon-you can eat all the meat you want.”

Jaime’s expression immediately brightened. “Seriously?”

Kenji nodded with a smile.

“Yes!” Jaime exclaimed. “I saw it on TV! They said it practically melts in your mouth like butter.” His excitement lasted all of two seconds before his face fell. “Oh, man… I need to stop thinking about food. I’m just making myself even hungrier.”

He slumped back into his chair with an exaggerated pout, earning another round of laughter from everyone at the table.

For a few precious minutes, the heaviness surrounding the morning lifted once again.

Cecilia joined them at the table, and breakfast continued with a little more conversation and considerably more complaining from Jaime about the food he wasn’t allowed to touch.

It was Harper who eventually glanced toward the empty seat at the table.

“Mom, where’s Dad, by the way?”

Alice looked up from her tea. “He’s still in his study.”

Kenji paused mid-bite. “Still? I thought Dad cleared his schedule before everyone arrived.”

“So did I.” Alice gave a small shrug. “But apparently something came up. He went into his study last night and hasn’t come out since.”

“All night?”

“Mmhmm.” Alice took another sip of her tea, seemingly unconcerned. “He said it was important, so I didn’t ask questions. You know your father. Once he gets buried in something, there’s no getting him out until he’s finished.”

Harper’s brows lifted with interest. “Now you’ve got me curious.”

Before anyone could speculate further, approaching footsteps sounded from outside the dining hall.

Harper glanced toward the doorway.

“Speaking of the devil…”

“Good morning to you too, my daughter.”

Ken’s dry voice reached them before he fully entered the room.

Harper flashed him an innocent smile.

“Morning, Dad!”

Ken merely shook his head as he walked in.

His gaze swept across the table before settling on Cecilia.

There was the briefest pause, but whatever recognition or surprise he felt disappeared behind a polite smile almost immediately.

“Ah, you must be Cecilia-Dahlia’s dear friend.”

Cecilia played along just as easily, returning his greeting with a gracious smile. “Good morning. And thank you for allowing me into your home.”

Ken waved a dismissive hand as though the thanks were completely unnecessary.

“Please, there’s no need to thank us. Any friend of the family is a friend of ours. You’re always welcome in our home.”

With another cordial smile, Ken moved toward his usual seat at the table as one of the staff brought him a fresh cup of tea.

For the next several minutes, he said very little.

Then, after taking a slow sip, he set his cup down and looked toward Maya.

“Maya, there’s something I’d like to ask you. If you’re not comfortable talking about it, I’ll understand.”

Maya looked at him curiously.

“Sure. What is it?”

Ken hesitated, his expression turning more serious as he considered how best to approach the subject. It wasn’t something he wanted to bring up so casually, especially today, but he needed to ask.

“It’s about your parents’ accident.”

The change in Maya was subtle but immediate, her fingers stilling around her cup.

A few seats away, Cecilia’s hand tightened against her thigh beneath the table. This was about her daughter, and every instinct in her demanded that she listen.

Still, she carefully kept her expression neutral, appearing no more curious than anyone else

at the table.

“What about it, Uncle Ken?” Maya asked, her voice noticeably lower.

Ken kept his tone casual, careful not to reveal too much of what was on his mind.

“Was the other driver ever charged?”

Maya shook her head.

“No. The police investigated everything. They said there wasn’t enough evidence to hold the other driver criminally responsible.” She paused. “From what I remember, they ruled it an accident. No one was charged.”

Ken gave a slow nod. He had already expected that answer, but hearing it directly from Maya only confirmed what he already suspected.

The subtle reaction was enough to catch Harper's attention.

"What is it, Dad?"

Ken glanced at her innocently. "What?"

"Ah, no. Don't give me that." Harper narrowed her eyes at him. "Why are you suddenly asking about this?"

Ken calmly reached for his tea. "I was just curious."

That answer only made Harper more suspicious.

"Why don't I believe you?"

Chapter 582

Ken ignored his daughter and casually took another sip of his tea. But when he lowered the cup, he noticed that everyone around the table was now looking at him, clearly waiting for an explanation.

He let out a quiet sigh and settled on an answer-something reasonable enough to satisfy their curiosity while planting just enough doubt in their minds.

For now, that would have to do.

“Fatal collisions don’t always result in criminal charges. Sometimes an accident really is just an accident,” he began, his expression turning thoughtful. “But when people lose their lives, there should still be a thorough investigation into exactly what happened and why.”

“There was,” Maya said quietly. “At least, that’s what we were told.”

Jaime, who had been listening silently, finally spoke.

“May had just turned eighteen when it happened, and I was only eight.” His expression grew more serious.

His words drew everyone’s attention toward him. Jaime had never been one to hold back what was on his mind, especially when it came to something he believed needed to be said.

“Everything happened so fast. May suddenly had to deal with losing our parents, taking care of me,

and figuring out how we were going to survive-all at the same time."

Jaime turned toward his sister, looking apologetic but just as determined.

"I remember some people from the insurance company helping May with paperwork and stuff, but other than that…" He paused. "We were pretty much on our own."

Cecilia's heart clenched hearing those words directly from her grandson. She could only imagine what the two of them had endured at such a young age.

Every instinct in her wanted to pull them into her arms and tell them, Grandma is here now. But she forced herself to remain composed.

Dahlia, seated beside her, noticed. Beneath the table, she quietly rested a hand over hers, helping steady the emotions threatening to spill over.

Across the table, Kenji had grown unusually thoughtful. While everyone else absorbed Jaime's words, he seemed to be turning them over in his head, considering the situation from every angle.

"Or maybe the investigators really did everything they were supposed to do, and there was simply nothing more to find."

Jaime turned toward him, some of the determination on his face beginning to fade.

Kenji let the thought hang for a moment before adding,

“But… there’s also the possibility that they saw an eighteen-year-old girl who was grieving, overwhelmed, and suddenly responsible for her little brother, and knew she wasn’t in any position to question their conclusions. It would’ve been easy to close the case, file the paperwork, and move on.”

His words seemed to reignite Jaime’s determination, while Harper found herself staring at her brother for a second.

“Whoa. The nerd actually has a point.”

Kenji gave his sister an annoyed look.

“No, seriously!” She looked genuinely impressed. “I thought that brain of yours was filled with nothing but computers and geeky stuff.”

Harper reached over and gave her brother an approving pat on the back.

“Maybe you missed your calling. You should’ve been a detective.”

Kenji shot her a look. “You know, you could’ve stopped at ‘you have a point.”

“I could!” Harper grinned. “But I didn’t.”

Then she leaned closer to Maya and lowered her voice, as though Kenji-or anyone else at the table-couldn’t possibly hear her.

“This knucklehead has a point. It’s probably worth looking into.”

“I’m right here, Harper.”

Harper looked at him and casually replied, “I know.”

Kenji stared at her for a second before leaning slightly toward Jaime.

“You’re lucky your sister loves you.”

“I know,” Jaime said without hesitation, looking at Maya with unmistakable pride.

And perhaps that was why his next question wasn’t so easy to ask.

Of everyone at the table, Jaime knew better than anyone what their parents' accident had

done to his sister. He knew about the nightmares, the sleepless nights she had tried so hard to hide from him, and how deeply the loss had affected her. He knew that what he was about to suggest could reopen wounds she had fought hard to heal.

Still, the more he thought about everything they had just discussed, the harder it became to simply let it go.

"May, when I recover… why don't we look into it again?"

Maya went still. "Jaime… I don't think we should-"

"I mean it."

His voice remained calm.

"It's been seven years. We've already learned to live with the loss, and looking into what happened isn't going to change that."

He held Maya's gaze, wanting her to understand where he was coming from.

“But a lot has changed since then. We’re not alone anymore, May. Now we have people who can actually help us find the answers we couldn’t get back then.”

For a moment, Maya said nothing.

The accident had been part of their lives for so long that she had eventually learned to accept the explanation they had been given.

An accident.

A terrible, senseless accident.

What good would reopening those wounds accomplish?

And yet, Jaime had a point. Seven years had passed, and they were no longer the frightened kids left to figure everything out on their own. Maybe looking back wouldn’t change what they had lost, but perhaps it could give them a sense of closure they never realized they needed.

Before Maya could answer, Dahlia spoke.

“I believe your brother has a point.”

Everyone turned their attention toward her. Dahlia’s expression was gentle but serious.

“You don’t have to decide anything now, especially not today,” she said. “But once Jaime has recovered, perhaps it’s worth taking another look. If the original investigation was thorough and there truly was nothing more to it, then at least you’ll have that certainty.”

Beside her, Cecilia could no longer remain completely silent. Seeing an opportunity to speak without revealing the deeper reason behind her interest, she finally allowed herself to join the

conversation.

“And if there was something they missed,” she added sincerely, “then you deserve to know that too.”

We all deserve to know.

The thought remained unspoken.

Because if there was more to the accident that had taken Malia’s life, Cecilia needed the truth just as desperately as they did.

Chapter 583

Maya looked between them before her gaze finally settled on Jaime.

“Okay,” she said with a small nod. “Once you recover, we’ll look into it.”

Jaime’s face immediately brightened. “Really?”

“After you recover,” Maya quickly reminded him. “Right now, the only thing you need to worry about is getting through your surgery.”

“I will.” Jaime grinned confidently. “Then we’ll figure out the rest. Promise?”

Maya returned his smile and nodded. “Promise.”

Before the conversation could continue, approaching footsteps drew everyone’s attention toward the entrance of the dining hall. Hannah appeared at the doorway accompanied by two familiar women dressed in medical scrubs.

Nurse Emily and Nurse Sophia.

The moment Maya saw them, she knew exactly what their presence meant, and her chest tightened at the

realization.

“Good morning,” Emily greeted warmly before looking toward Jaime. “I’m afraid we’ve come to steal our patient.”

Jaime leaned back in his chair and eyed the two nurses suspiciously. “Why do I suddenly feel like I’m in

trouble?”

Sophia laughed. “Because we’ve come to take you with us.”

“For food?”

“Nice try,” Sophia replied, quickly shutting down whatever hope he had.

Jaime sighed dramatically. “Worth a shot.”

His mischievous attempt earned a few chuckles around the table, briefly easing the tension that had settled over everyone.

But the reason the nurses were there couldn't be ignored for long.

Emily stepped closer. "We're going to start your pre-op preparations. There are still a few things we need to do before the surgery."

Jaime rubbed his stomach with a miserable pout.

"Sorry, buddy. I tried."

He gave his stomach one last pat before pushing his chair back. "All right. Guess it's time to go get myself a new heart. Let's get this over with so I can eat!"

Harper stared at him in amusement. "Wow. Now I know you're no good when you're hungry. All you've

thought about this morning is food."

Alice laughed. "Your brother was exactly the same at Jaime's age. I could barely keep enough food in the house."

"So was Damien," Dahlia chimed in: "At that age, I sometimes wondered if that boy had a bottomless stomach."

“See?” Jaime gestured toward the two women as though they had just proven his case. “It’s not me. It’s a guy thing.”

Harper snorted. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“I’d rather eat,” Jaime said as he finally stood. “Come on. The sooner I get my new heart, the sooner somebody can feed me.”

That earned another round of laughter from the table as everyone began rising from their seats, ready to accompany Jaime to the private medical wing.

As Maya stood, she instinctively reached toward her back pocket for her phone, only to find it empty. She frowned for a second before remembering that Jaime had borrowed it the night before.

“Jaime, you still have my phone, don’t you?”

“Oh, yeah.” Jaime nodded. “It’s in my room.”

“All right. I’ll get it.”

Maya had barely taken a step when panic flashed across Jaime's face.

He had spent almost the entire night rewriting his program and had only managed to finish shortly before coming downstairs that morning. When he left his room, it was still being installed on Maya's phone.

There was no way he could let her go upstairs and see it.

"No!"

Maya stopped and looked at him strangely. "No?"

"I mean… no, no. I'll get it." Jaime quickly stepped forward. "I forgot something upstairs too."

Maya's brows pulled together. "What did you forget?"

"Something."

"What something?"

Jaime hesitated. “Just… something.”

Harper looked between them and snorted. “That doesn’t sound suspicious at all.”

“It’s not suspicious,” Jaime protested, although the speed of his answer only made him sound more guilty.

Maya crossed her arms. “Jaime-”

Before she could stop him, Jaime hurried out of the dining ha!! and disappeared toward the stairs.

Maya stared after him for a moment before shaking her head. “What is wrong with that kid?”

Harper shrugged. “Looks like hunger really does a number on him.”

A few minutes later, Jaime returned with Maya’s phone in his hand.

“See? Quick.” He walked straight toward his sister and handed it to her.

Maya took the phone but continued studying him suspiciously. “What exactly did you forget?”

“Nothing important.”

Her eyes narrowed.

Jaime immediately turned toward Emily and Sophia before she could interrogate him any further.

“Okay! I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Harper laughed under her breath while Maya shook her head, deciding that whatever her brother was hiding could wait until after his surgery.

Together, everyone left the dining hall and followed the nurses through the residence toward the private medical wing.

The mood gradually changed as they walked. Jaime had been joking and complaining about food only minutes earlier, but the closer they came to the medical wing, the more the reality of what was about to happen settled over everyone.

This was no longer something they were simply waiting for. Jaime’s transplant was beginning.

As the group continued down the corridor, Alice deliberately slowed her steps until she was walking beside her husband. Once everyone else had moved far enough ahead, she reached for Ken’s arm and stopped him.

Ken turned toward her. “What is it?”

Alice glanced down the hallway before looking back at him. “What was that about?”

Ken’s expression remained neutral. “What was what about?”

“Ken.” Alice gave him a pointed look. “You know exactly what I mean. Those questions about their parents.

When he didn’t answer, her suspicion deepened.

“Does this have something to do with whatever kept you in your study all night?”

The easy expression Ken had worn throughout breakfast disappeared, and Alice immediately noticed the change.

“What did you find?”

Ken briefly glanced toward the others before answering. “Yes. It has something to do with it.”

Alice's brows drew together. "What is it?"

"Not now."

"Ken-"

"I'll tell you," he assured her quietly. "I'll tell everyone, but not before Jaime's surgery. Today needs to be about him."

Alice studied her husband's face, and the seriousness she found there told her that whatever he had discovered was far more significant than he was willing to admit.

"Is it bad?"

Ken remained silent for a moment before placing his hand over hers.

"Let the boy get through his surgery first."

It wasn't an answer, and they both knew it. But Alice also knew her husband well enough to understand that pushing him now wouldn't change his mind.

“All right,” she finally said.

They quickly caught up with the others and continued toward the medical wing.

Chapter 584

Jaime’s room had already been prepared by the time they arrived, and from that point forward, everything began moving much faster.

After changing into a hospital gown, Jaime settled into bed while Emily and Sophia began his preoperative preparations.

They checked his blood pressure, temperature, oxygen saturation, and other vital signs before placing electrodes against his chest and connecting them to the monitors beside the bed. An IV line was also started in his arm for fluids and medications.

Blood was drawn for the remaining preoperative tests, and over the next several hours, other members of his medical team came through the room.

Dr. Nakamura explained what would happen once Jaime entered the operating room, including how he would be placed under general anesthesia and continuously monitored throughout the procedure.

Dr. Anderson came in soon after to review the transplant one final time and answer any remaining questions they might have.

Maya remained beside him through all of it while everyone else stayed outside, giving the medical team enough room to work without crowding Jaime's room.

Every now and then, Dahlia, Alice, or Cecilia would come in to check on him and see how he was doing before quietly stepping back out.

As the morning passed, however, Maya found herself checking her phone more frequently.

There was still no message from Damien.

Even Jaime eventually noticed how often she was checking her phone.

"May, stop worrying," he said. "It's Damien. He always finds a way, remember? If he said he's coming, he'll- get here."

Maya looked at her brother and managed a small smile. "Since when are you the one reassuring me?"

Jaime shrugged. "Since you started checking your phone every five minutes."

She let out a quiet laugh, but it did little to settle the worry lingering inside her.

She knew Damien was doing everything possible to get there. Somewhere above the clouds, he was racing against time to reach them.

But that knowledge dis little to ease her growing anxiety, especially after what Harper had told her.

The timing couidn't have been worse.

The day had started with clear skies, only for news to suddenly break that a typhoon over the Pacific had unexpectedly changed course and was now heading toward Japan.

Harper had quickly assured her that Jaime's surgery wouldn't be affected. The estate had its own backup

power system, more than capable of keeping the entire property running even if the surrounding area lost electricity.

Knowing that gave Maya at least one less thing to worry about.

Outside the estate, however, conditions around Tokyo were already worsening. Flights were being disrupted, and some of their aviation systems were experiencing problems.

More worrying was that they had lost track of Damien's aircraft.

The last tracking data they received showed that his plane had already entered Japanese airspace and appeared to be heading toward the worsening weather before disappearing from their system.

Maya felt increasingly overwhelmed, her mind torn between Jaime's approaching surgery and the uncertainty surrounding Damien's whereabouts and safety.

Outside the windows, the sky had grown darker. Rain fell harder against the glass as the wind picked up, followed by the distant rumble of thunder.

Every time footsteps passed outside Jaime's room, she instinctively looked toward the door, hoping it would finally be him.

Eleven o'clock came and went, followed by eleven thirty, and still Damien hadn't arrived.

Shortly before noon, Nurse Sophia returned with the results of Jaime's final tests, and Maya immediately rose from her chair.

"How is everything?"

Sophia gave her à reassuring smile. "Everything looks/good. His final results came back exactly where we need them to be, so we're cleared to proceed."

Maya released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "No problems?"

“None. The surgical team has already been notified, and they’re preparing the operating room now.”

Jaime lifted his head from the pillow. “So this is really happening?”

Sophia turned toward him with a smile. “It is.”

For once, Jaime didn’t immediately respond with a joke.

Nurse Daniel Park entered shortly afterward with another member of the medical team and began preparing the bed for transport.

“We’ll be taking him to the operating room soon,” Daniel explained. “You still have a little time with him, but we need to start getting everything ready.”

Once Daniel left the room, the others slowly began filing in. With only a little time remaining before Jaime would be taken to the operating room, everyone wanted a chance to see him, offer a few words of encouragement, and make sure he knew they would all be waiting for him when he came back.

Jaime, of course, responded to most of their concern the only way he knew how-with jokes and repeated assurances that he was going to be fine.

In the middle of it all, Dahlia's phone began to ring.

She glanced at the screen and smiled. "Jaime, there are a few more people who want to talk to you."

"Who?"

Dahlia answered the video call before turning the screen toward him.

Dominic, Charles, and Eleanor appeared on the other side.

"There he is!" Charles immediately exclaimed.

Jaime grinned. "Shouldn't you guys be sleeping?"

It was already close to eleven at night for them, but all three had stayed awake just to speak with Jaime before his surgery.

"We wanted to see you before they take you in," Dominic said.

"Well, you made it just in time," Jaime said. "They're about to take me away."

“And bring you back with a brand-new heart,” Eleanor reminded him.

Jaime smiled. “That’s the plan! You still have to teach me your secret to growing those sweet oranges,

Grandma Eleanor.”

Eleanor laughed. “Of course, sweetheart!”

“And don’t forget,” Charles cut in. “I’m still holding you to that chess match.”

“Absolutely!” Jaime grinned. “And you better be ready to lose, Grandpa Charles.”

Charles laughed. “New heart or not, kid, it’s not going to make you any better at chess.”

“We’ll see about that!” Jaime shot back.

Their playful exchange brought another round of laughter into the room. Maya watched quietly from beside his bed, grateful for every smile and laugh they managed to pull from her brother.

Having so many people surrounding him with love and encouragement made the situatisi feel a little less frightening.

As the laughter settled, Dominic looked at Jaime more seriously.

“You’ve got this, kid. We’ll be waiting for the call when you wake up.”

Jaime nodded, his smile still there. “I know. Thank you.”

A short distance away, Cecilia watched with warmth and quiet envy. She was grateful Maya and Jaime had people who cared for them so deeply, but she couldn’t help wishing she shared that same relationship with them.

For now, simply having the chance to be close to them would have to be enough.

The call soon ended, and the next few minutes passed with quiet conversation as everyone remained

Chapter 585

Maya’s heart gave a violent thump.

That voice.

For hours, she had been waiting for it. Hoping for it every time footsteps passed outside Jaime's room, only to be disappointed again and again.

She knew that voice.

Maya spun around.

The hallway behind them was still empty, but hurried footsteps echoed from somewhere beyond the corridor, growing louder with every passing second.

Her eyes remained fixed on the far end of the hallway, afraid to look away. Afraid that the hope suddenly swelling inside her would disappear just as quickly as it had come.

Then a shadow crossed the wall.

A second later, a tall figure rounded the corner at a run.

Maya's breath caught.

For one suspended moment, everything else seemed to disappear-the storm raging outside, the fear that had been clawing at her all morning, the endless hours of wondering where he was and whether he was safe.

He was here.

Damien came running toward them, his eyes already searching the hallway until they found hers. Ashcroft appeared behind him only seconds later, struggling to keep pace.

And just like that, the crushing weight Maya had been carrying in her chest finally began to

loosen.

“Damien!”

Jaime lifted his head from the bed as much as he could and broke into a wide grin.

“You made it!”

Damien reached them, breathing harder than usual. His clothes were slightly disheveled, his hair damp from the rain, but his attention immediately went to Jaime.

“Of course I made it.”

Jaime eyed him. “You look terrible.”

Damien couldn’t help but chuckle. “I flew through a typhoon to get here, and that’s the first thing you say to me?”

“Just making an observation,” Jaime replied casually.

A few relieved laughs broke out around them.

Damien shook his head as he stepped closer to Jaimes bed, his expression turning more serious. “How are you feeling?”

“Hungry.”

Damien’s mouth twitched as he gently patted his arm. “Then I guess you’re fine.”

Maya barely heard their exchange. She was still staring at Damien, trying to reconcile the man standing in front of her with the fact that only minutes earlier, she hadn’t even known

where he was.

Damien finally looked at her, and the moment their eyes met, whatever teasing remark he had been about to make seemed to soften.

“Miss me?”

Maya ignored the question. “What happened? Harper said they lost your plane.”

The lingering worry in her voice wiped the last trace of amusement from his face. Damien stepped closer and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

“I’ll explain everything later.”

Maya clearly wasn’t satisfied, but she nodded anyway. For now, the explanation could wait. He was here, standing in front of her in one piece, and that was all that mattered.

Before either of them could say anything more, Ashcroft bent over with his hands braced against his knees, still trying to catch his breath.

“Damn!” he panted. “You run fast!”

Everyone turned toward him as he slowly straightened, still breathing heavily.

Harper immediately seized the opportunity.

“Ha! Clearly out of shape. What a shame.”

Ashcroft shot her an annoyed look. “I’d like to see you keep up with him.”

Harper smirked. “Please. I wouldn’t have fallen behind in the first place.”

Before Ashcroft could fire back, Daniel stepped forward, greeting Damien and Ashcroft with a respectful nod before reminding everyone that they were already running behind schedule.

“I’m sorry, but we really need to take him in now.”

The mood immediately shifted.

Ashcroft caught his breath and walked over to Jaime’s bed. “Hey, bud. You’ve got this, all right?”

He held out his fist.

Jaime bumped it with his own, a confident smile returning to his face. “You bet!”

Ashcroft smiled and gave his fist one last squeeze before stepping aside.

Damien moved closer next, his attention settling on Jaime. For a brief moment, neither of them said anything before Jaime held out his fist.

“See you when I wake up?”

Damien bumped his fist against Jaime’s. “I’ll be right here.”

Jaime gave him a genuinely grateful smile before turning to Maya as she stepped closer and took his hand again.

“We’re all going to be right here,” she assured him.

“I know, May.”

She tightened her fingers around his, suddenly feeling as though there were a thousand things she wanted to say and not enough time to say any of them.

Instead, she leaned closer. “I love you.”

Jaime’s smile softened. “Love you too.”

Maya kissed his forehead before reluctantly releasing his hand, giving everyone else a chance to have a moment with him.

One by one, the others stepped forward.

Dahlia kissed his cheek while Alice gave his shoulder an affectionate squeeze. Kenji reminded him of all the plans they still had waiting for him once he recovered.

Harper, of course, told him she expected him to come back considerably less annoying, earning another laugh from him.

Even Ken stepped forward and offered a few quiet words of encouragement.

At some point, Lee, Kim, and Max had joined them in the hallway, each taking a moment to wish Jaime well.

As the others moved back, Cecilia was the only one who remained a short distance away. She hesitated, unsure whether she should approach, until Jaime's eyes found hers.

"Grandma Cecilia?"

The simple words immediately brought a smile to her face. Being called his grandmother was still so new that hearing it from him seemed to touch something deep inside her every single time.

She stepped closes, sweetheart?"

"Don't look so

I'll be okay."

Cecilia blink

will. And w

k the moisture gathering in her eyes and reached for his hand. "I know you

u come back through those doors, I'll be right here waiting for you."

I’ll hold you to that.”

everyone another moment before offering a respectful nod.

o delaying it any longer.

the operating room opened, and Nurse Sophia appeared with a gentle smile as d toward Jaime.

took a breath. “Ready.”

a stepped aside as Daniel began wheeling Jaime inside.

ya stood beside Damien, her eyes never leaving her brother as his bed disappeared from

e moment the door closed behind him, the hallway fell painfully quiet.

he continued staring at the closed door, almost as though she could still see Jaime on the ther side.

Then Damien’s hand slipped into hers.

Maya immediately held on, threading her fingers tightly through his.

There was nothing more she could do now except trust the doctors.

They could only wait.

Chapter 586

The silence outside the operating room didn't last long.

Maya remained staring at the closed door until Damien gently squeezed her hand, drawing

her attention back to him.

"He's going to be okay," he assured her.

Maya nodded, her fingers tightening around his. "I know."

She believed that. She had to.

Behind those doors were some of the best doctors they could have asked for, an entire medical wing prepared specifically for Jaime, and the heart that could finally give her brother the life he deserved.

But knowing all of that didn't make waiting any easier.

A low rumble of thunder sounded outside, followed seconds later by rain striking harder against the windows.

With Jaime now in the doctors' hands, Maya finally shifted her attention to the man standing

beside her.

Still holding Damien's hand, she pulled back slightly and looked him over. In all the relief and rush of his arrival, she hadn't really noticed his appearance until now.

He was still wearing Hudson's uniform, and while he had initially looked only slightly damp, up close Maya realized just how wet he really was. The dark fabric concealed most of it, but he was practically soaked through. Water still clung to his hair, and droplets traced down the side of his face and neck.

Maya's chest tightened all over again.

"I'm glad you're safe."

She instinctively moved toward him, ready to wrap her arms around him, but Damien gently caught her by the shoulders.

“Don’t. You’ll get wet.”

Maya stared at him for a moment before ignoring him completely. She stepped forward, wrapped her arms around his waist, and rested her cheek against his chest.

“I don’t care.”

Damien’s mouth curved into a small smile as his arms immediately came around her, holding her tightly against him.

For several seconds, Maya simply stayed there, listening to the steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek.

He was here. He was safe.

But seeing him soaked from head to toe only made her wonder what he had gone through to

reach them.

Maya slowly pulled away and looked up at him.

“What happened?”

Damien knew exactly what she meant.

Ashcroft, who had finally recovered from his sprint through the estate, exhaled and ran a hand through his damp hair.

“That is a very long story.”

Harper completely ignored Ashcroft as though he wasn’t even there and turned her attention

back to Damien.

“I’ve never doubted your flying skills, but in weather like this?” She shook her head, genuinely impressed. “I have to admit, that was impressive.”

Damien hadn’t even opened his mouth before Ashcroft jumped in.

“Oh, it was crazy.” He pointed toward Damien. “I trust D with my life, but there was one moment up there when even I started questioning that decision and considering my chances of survival.”

The exaggerated seriousness in his voice finally earned him Harper’s attention. She looked at him, her expression softening with mock sympathy.

“Aww. You poor thing.”

Ashcroft blinked, clearly not expecting that response from her.

Then Harper folded her arms across her chest and gave him a cold sideways glance.

“As if anyone cares about you.”

Ashcroft’s mouth fell open.

For one glorious second, he had actually believed the woman possessed a heart.

Then he remembered exactly who he was dealing with-and that there was still plenty of unfinished business between them.

“You-”

“Son.”

Dahlia’s voice interrupted him before he could retaliate.

She stepped toward Damien, her relief unmistakable as her gaze moved between him and

“Thank God you’re both safe.”

Without another word, she wrapped her arms around her son and held him tightly for a

moment.

Nicholas immediately cau triumphant smirk.

“See? Someone actually

Harper responded

As Dahlia release

in their rush

Damien

woman

Dab

e both in Dahlia’s words and glanced at Harper with a

about me.”

more than an unimpressed roll of her eyes.

on from the embrace, her presence seemed to remind both men that me, they had barely acknowledged anyone else.

and glanced around, his eyes eventually settling on the unfamiliar older

gently touched his arm.

She turned toward Cecilia and gestured between them. “This is my good

d forward with a warm smile, and Damien immediately offered his hand.

ure to meet you.”

accepted it. “Likewise. It’s nice to finally see you again.”

of curiosity crossed Damien’s face.

I’m sorry, have we met be

s smile softened. “W

me ago. You were only a little boy

Damien’s brows lifted slightly, but before he could ask anything further, Dahlia gestured

toward Nicholas.

“And Cecilia, this is Nicholas Ashcroft.”

Nicholas stepped forward and offered his hand. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Cecilia replied.

Once the brief introductions were made, Damien and Nicholas turned their attention to the others, properly greeting the familiar faces they had barely acknowledged in their rush.

Ken then stepped forward and extended his hand.

“Damien. Nicholas. It’s been a while.”

Damien accepted his hand first. “Mr. Takahashi. Thank you for having us.”

Nicholas followed, offering Ken a respectful bow as he shook his hand. “It’s good to see you again, sir.”

Ken waved away the formality. “We’re not closing a business deal. Ken is fine.”

“Are you sure about that, Dad?”

Kenji’s voice immediately drew everyone’s attention.

Ken looked toward his son. “What?”

A mischievous grin spread across Kenji’s face. “Are you sure you want your future son-in-law calling you by your first name?”

Ken’s brows pulled together. “What son-in-law?”

“Come on, Dad.” Kenji gestured between Damien and Nicholas as though the answer should

have been obvious. “Damien’s already with Maya, so who else do you think I’m talking about?

Harper’s head snapped toward her brother, completely shocked that he would casually say something like that in front of everyone.

“Oh, you are dead meat!”

She lunged toward him.

Kenji immediately darted behind his mother before Harper could reach him.

“Mom!”

Harper tried to move around Alice, but Kenji quickly shifted to the other side, determined to keep their mother between them.

Before Harper could make another attempt to get around their mother, her father’s voice stopped her.

“Nicholas Ashcroft.”

Harper froze in place, her eyes widening.

Shit.

Nicholas

The e

at

completely off guard by the entire exchange, turned toward Ken.

had worn only moments earlier was gone. He was staring directly so serious that the sudden weight of his attention felt almost

relationship with my daughter?”

Chapter 587

“NO!”

Harper and Nicholas answered at exactly the same time.

For a second, the hallway went completely silent.

Harper slowly turned toward Nicholas, only to find him staring back at her with the same stunned expression.

Neither of them seemed particularly pleased that they had responded with the exact same level of urgency.

Ken's eyes narrowed slightly as his gaze moved between them.

"No?" he repeated.

"Absolutely not," Harper answered quickly. "There is nothing going on between us."

Nicholas, however, remained silent.

Harper immediately pointed at him. "Say something! Tell them there's nothing going on between us!"

Nicholas frowned. "Why are you pointing at me like I'm the problem?"

"Because you're usually the problem!" Harper snapped.

"How am I always the problem?" Nicholas shot back, his own annoyance rising. "Maybe you're the problem!"

Harper let out a frustrated groan and stomped her foot. “Ugh! You’re so annoying!”

The exchange was apparently all the proof Kenji needed. Still safely tucked behind Alice, he leaned out just enough to look at his father, unable to resist.

“See, Dad? This is exactly what I was talking about.”

Harper’s irritation immediately found a new target. Her head snapped toward her brother as she warned, “Shut up, or I’ll sew your mouth shut!”

Kenji quickly disappeared behind his mother again, but his comment had already done its damage. Ken was now looking between his daughter and Nicholas with considerably more interest than before.

“So there’s really nothing between you?”

“No,” Harper answered firmly.

Ken’s gaze lingered on her for another moment. “Then why does your brother seem

convinced otherwise?”

That question caught Harper without an immediate answer. She opened her mouth, only to close it again, while Nicholas instinctively glanced toward the person responsible for getting them into this situation in the first place.

Kenji, suddenly aware that the attention had shifted to him, found the floor remarkably interesting.

Harper noticed and narrowed her eyes. “Ask him,” she finally said through clenched teeth.

Ken took her suggestion and turned toward his son. “Kenji? Care to explain?”

Kenji reluctantly looked up. “Well…”

The hesitation immediately put Harper on alert.

“Choose your next words very carefully.”

Her warning should probably have been enough to make him stop. Instead, Kenji seemed to decide he had already gone too far to back down.

“I’m just saying, anyone with eyes can see there’s something going on between you two.”

“There is nothing going on!” Harper shot back, louder this time.

Kenji raised his hands. “I didn’t say you were dating!”

Harper stared at him incredulously. “You called him Dad’s future son-in-law!”

“That was a prediction.” He shrugged as though there were a perfectly reasonable

distinction. “I have good instincts.”

Harper glared at him, searching for something-anything-to throw back in his face. Then an

idea struck.

“Maybe you like him!”

Kenji’s expression changed instantly.

Harper knew she had found her opening and turned toward their father. “Ha! That’s it, Dad. Maybe your only son is the one who likes men.”

That accusation brought Kenji straight out from behind Alice.

“Of course not!” he protested, his earlier amusement disappearing. “Dad, don’t believe her. She’s only saying that because she knows I’m right!”

Harper gave him a smug smile, clearly pleased that she had finally managed to get under his

skin.

Unfortunately, her attempt to turn the tables only made Kenji more determined to get even.

The look he gave his sister made that perfectly clear.

Challenge accepted.

“You know what? You’re the one in denial.”

Harper’s smugness vanished. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. It’s

o like each other, but you’re both too stubborn to admit it.” s came freely. “Why else does he act the way he does exactly the same way around him?”

so wrong with the two of you ending up together anyway? It’s ous about marrying Hiro.”

m Harper’s face for a split second.

he had hit the mark.

I know the truth.”

immediately changed. “What did you say? What truth?”

didn’t answer.

estion suddenly made him realize just how far he had taken things. What had armless teasing had gone too far, and in the heat of the argument, he had said weren’t his to reveal.

ness disappeared from his face as he looked at his sister.

I..”

words died in hi

Harper be

d them. Her parents had heard

him. Worse, Nicholas had heard every single word.

Heat rushed into her cheeks before she could stop it. For one humiliating moment, she felt as though her brother had stripped away something private she hadn’t been prepared to

share.

But Harper recovered, burying the embarrassment beneath a glare that promised violence.

“You’re about to have a broken nose.”

She took a threatening step toward him, and this time Alice finally intervened.

enough, you two.”

m warning in her mother’s voice was enough to stop her.

stepped forward, positioning herself properly between her two children before giving em both a firm look.

The two of you are behaving

Then she pointed at Ker

something like that.”

already written across his face.

the spot like that. Those are not your feelings to sort through, Alice continued.

I’m sorry.”

look before turning toward Harper.

you're one of the boys. Chasing your brother around and threatening to Alice shook her head. "You're a lady. Try acting like one."

d her mouth, but Alice had already moved on.

landed on Nichol

a grown man shows

Harper's eyes widened. "Mom!"

Nicholas looked equally caught off guard, but Alice simply pointed between the two of them.

"You two are adults. Start acting like it and figure out whatever this is yourselves."

"There is nothing to figure out!" Harper protested.

Alice gave her daughter a knowing look.

“Your brother

Harper’s

Alice

gone about it the wrong way, but he was right about one thing.”

altered.

from her daughter to Nicholas before settling back on Harper.

es can see there’s something going on between you two.”

er nor Nicholas said a word.

Alice continued calmly. “There is something to figure out.”

sed, looking between them one last time.

only question is how much longer the two of you are going to pretend there isn't."

Chapter 588

For once, Harper had nothing to say. She could feel the heat returning to her cheeks but refused to let anyone see her embarrassment.

Nicholas, on the other hand, looked as though he wanted to say something but seemed to

have no idea where to even begin.

Throughout the entire exchange, Ken had remained unusually quiet, taking in far more than either of his children seemed to realize.

His gaze lingered on Harper and Nicholas for a moment before slowly shifting toward his

wife.

Alice met his eyes, and neither of them said anything.

They didn't need to.

After all their years together, there was a quiet understanding between them that rarely required words.

Ken might be the head of the family and the one everyone naturally looked to when difficult decisions had to be made.

But when it came to matters of the heart, he knew his wife understood their children in ways he sometimes didn't.

And right now, his wife clearly had the situation well in hand.

As if confirming that very thought, Alice looked between Harper and Nicholas, her expression softening.

She had said what needed to be said.

Whatever happened between their daughter and Nicholas from this point forward was something they would have to figure out for themselves.

For now, there were more practical matters to deal with.

Alice took a step closer and gently cupped her daughter's cheek.

The simple touch immediately softened whatever remained of the tension between them.

“Not

Alice said gently. “And if you really don’t want to honor the

that’s something we can talk about. At the end of the day, you ppiness matters more to us than any arrangement ever could.”

Harper met her mother’s eyes but said nothing.

Alice understood. She knew her daughter well enough to recognize the uncertainty behind her

silence.

“Your father and I also trust you enough to know that you understand your responsibilities,” she continued. “Whatever you decide, we know you won’t make that decision carelessly or without considering everyone involved.”

Something in Harper’s expression softened.

Alice smiled. “You’ll be fine, sweetheart.”

Harper let out a breath and gave her mother a reluctant nod. There was no use denying anything or arguing further. She knew her mother far too well to convince her otherwise.

Alice gave her cheek one last affectionate stroke before lowering her hand.

“For now, let’s worry about something we can actually do something about.” She glanced toward Damien and Nicholas. “They went through a lot just to get here. Why don’t you take them to their rooms so they can shower and change into something dry?”

Before Harper could complain, Alice had already turned toward Kenji.

“And you, young man, you and I will be having a serious talk later.” The look she gave him made it clear he wasn’t getting out of it. “Make yourself useful and tell the kitchen to prepare something for them. I doubt either of them has had a proper meal.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Kenji turned to leave, but stopped when he reached Harper. He stood there for a moment before turning toward her and bowing deeply, his earlier playfulness completely gone.

“Gomen nasai, Ane. I’m really sorry.”

Harper watched her brother for a moment before her expression softened.

The deep bow and sincerity in his voice told her he genuinely regretted taking things too far.

“You’re still an idiot.”

Jahtened and looked at her.

spread across Kenji’s face. Before Harper could react, he threw his arms planted a loud kiss on her cheek.

Harper shoved him away and immediately wiped at her cheek with the back of her hand.

“Eww! You kiss like a fish! Why is it so wet? That’s disgusting!”

Kenji burst out laughing before turning and heading down the hallway.

Lee, Kim, and Max, who had somehow found themselves caught in the middle of the awkward situation, quickly took the opportunity to follow him. Now that the tension had finally broken, they could quietly make their escape.

The affectionate moment between the siblings had lightened the mood, earning a few quiet chuckles from those who remained.

Harper continued furiously wiping her cheek as she watched her brother go. But when she turned back, her eyes briefly met Nicholas's.

She quickly looked away and shifted her attention to Damien instead. With an exaggerated sigh, she finally gave in.

she said gently. "You look exhausted. Eat something and try stay here with Jaime."

immediately returning to the closed operating room door.

and gently touched Maya's arm.

You haven't slept at all since last night. Go with them and rest for a little while."

toward the operating room again. Leaving, even for a short while, felt wrong.

need to understand.

t going anywhere," she assured her. "If there's any news at all, we'll let you know ately. I promise."

operating room one last time before finally nodding.

“Okay.”

With that, the four of them finally turned and made their way down the hallway, leaving the others behind to wait for any news about Jaime.

Meanwhile, behind the closed doors of the operating room, everything moved with practiced

precision.

Jaime was transferred onto the operating table as the medical team took their positions around him. Monitors were connected, medications prepared, and the team began running through their final checks before putting him under anesthesia.

Once everything was in place, Dr. Nakamura stepped beside him.

“All right, Jaime. We’re ready.”

Jaime looked up at the bright lights overhead. “So this is the part where you tell me to count backward?”

Dr. Nakamura smiled b

“From what?”

“One hundred.”

Jaime con

His

surgical mask. “If you’d like.”

moment before shaking his head. “That’s way too easy.”

quiet laugh from one of the nurses, while Dr. Nakamura simply shook ent. “Then choose your own number.”

Gratetfully at the ceiling. “One thousand.”

ura smiled as the anesthetic began flowing through Jaime's IV. Within seconds, lights above him started to blur, and the voices around him slowly grew distant.

thousand…" Jaime murmured.

to make it farther, but the room was already

losely as the anesthesia took effect, his attention shifting to the rything was exactly as it should be.

ward Dr. Anderson and the rest of the team.

his entire focus settling on the patient before him.

Chapter 589

The four of them had fallen into an unusual silence as they walked through the quieter corridors of the estate.

Maya walked beside Damien, their hands still intertwined, while Nicholas and Harper followed several steps behind them.

After what had just happened in front of everyone, the silence between them had become considerably more awkward.

Harper pretended not to notice, and Nicholas apparently decided to do the same.

Maya, however, could practically feel the tension following behind them.

She subtly tugged at Damien's hand.

Damien glanced at her, and Maya immediately shifted her eyes toward Harper and Nicholas before looking back at him.

Say something.

Damien understood perfectly. But instead of helping, he gave her a pointed look of his own.

You say something.

Maya's eyes narrowed.

Why me?

Damien raised a brow.

Why me?

Maya gave his hand another discreet tug, silently insisting that he do something.

Damien merely squeezed her hand in response and continued walking.

Maya stared at him.

He stared right back.

Somehow, without exchanging a single word, the two had managed to have an entire argument over who should be the one to break the painfully awkward silence.

Realizing Damien was determined to hold his ground, Maya finally gave up trying to convince him.

She hesitated for a moment, but they still had quite a ways to go before reaching the residential wing, and continuing the walk in uncomfortable silence was only adding to the anxiety already weighing on her from Jaime's ongoing surgery.

Maya was just about to say something when Harper beat her to it.

“So, Boss…” she called from behind them. “What really happened on your way here?”

The question finally broke the silence.

Damien fenced over his shoulder at her before a faint smile tugged at his lips.

“I don’t

k it’s appropriate for you to still call me that, don’t you think?”

, there was no quick comeback. Her eyes widened as genuine alarm crossed her

What?”

fore anyone could respond, she hurried forward and stepped directly in front of Damien

Maya, throwing both arms out and forcing them to stop.

“Are you firing me?”

Damien and Maya exchanged a startled glance.

Of all the conclusions Harper could have drawn from what he had just said, neither of them had expected that one.

Damien recovered from his surprise and looked at Harper for a moment.

“I’m not firing you,” he clarified. “I just don’t believe you still need the job.”

Harper’s brows pulled together.

“You have an entire empire to run here.” Damien gestured around them. “You know avoid that forever, right?”

Harper slowly lowered her arms.

you

can’t

“Oh. That.”

The panic disappear

enthusiastic.

t immediately, replaced by something far less

dismiss the subject entirely, she decided it

was time Damien learned something else about her best friend.

“And she also has HLT Technologies.”

Damien turned toward her, his brows lifting in surprise.

“HLT Technologies?”

Maya nodded eagerly, unable to hide the pride in her voice.

your Senior PR Generalist is also the founder and CEO of HLT Technologies.” Her ned. “And before you ask, yes, it’s the same company that won the contract to

entire custom security ecosystem for Blackwood Industries.”

s attention immediately shifted to Harper.

quickly added, “And no, she didn’t do anything to influence the process. They won it fair square.”

arper glanced at her best friend, lo Introduction.

Damien, however, appeared g

“Really?”

Harper gave a small

A faint smile cro

For perhaps words. A

most embarrassed by the enthusiastic

“That’s impressive.”

t day, Harper found herself caught off guard by someone’s er cheeks before she quickly brushed off the compliment.

denly remembering the much more important issue, she looked back at

caught herself. “I mean… Damien Am I really fired?”

Damien considered her for a moment before cutting her off.

“How about we become partners instead?”

That stopped her immediately.

“Partners?”

who had been quietly watching the exchange from behind them, looked amien with interest.

nodded. “HLT already proved itself by winning that contract without anyone knowing were behind it. Blackwood Industries has security needs across multiple companies, perties, and operations. If HLT can deliver what we need, there’s no reason our relationship has to end because you’re no longer working for me.”

Harper stared at him as the idea began to register. “So instead of me working for Blackwood

“HLT works with Blackwood

Harper’s entire face lit u

“Oh! I like that!”

Her earlier dis

“Yes!” Ha

She

ned. “Your company and mine, working together.”

peared so quickly that Maya laughed.

Let’s do it.”

hand toward Damien.

t, then back at her.

nership usually requires negotiations and an actual contract, right?”

Damien chuckled. “That’s not usually how I do business.”

“Congratulations.” Harper gave his hand one final shake before releasing it. “You do now.”

Chapter 590

Damien started from the beginning, telling them what had happened in Singapore and how they had briefly thought their cover was blown when someone recognized Hudson.

Nicholas, of course, turned the entire incident into an exaggerated retelling, making it sound far more dramatic than it actually was and earning genuine laughter from both women.

Harper, however, ended up more offended by an entirely different detail.

“Okay, that’s my fault. I went cheap on the other two masks,” she admitted. “I gave you the faces but not the voices. In my defense, I didn’t think anyone would actually recognize Big Daddy.”

Nicholas’s expression immediately soured.

“Can you please stop calling him that?”

Harper turned toward him. “What? Big Daddy? What is it to you, huh?!”

“He’s jealous,” Damien remarked casually.

Nicholas immediately looked at him. “Of course not!”

“Well, too bad, so sad!” Harper shot back.

Something about their bickering felt different now.

After everything Kenji had blurted out earlier, especially after Alice openly said what everyone else seemed to be thinking, pretending there was absolutely nothing between them had become much harder.

Neither Harper nor Nicholas was willing to admit anything, but the question was out there now.

And Damien, apparently, saw no reason to make things easier for either of them.

“Yeah, Nick,” he said casually. “Why would you be jealous anyway? I’m sure Brandy would be more than happy to make you her Big Daddy.”

Harper’s head snapped toward Nicholas.

“Who’s Brandy?!”

The question came out so quickly that Nicholas barely had time to react.

Then he looked at her.

Harper seemed to realize a second too late just how interested she had sounded.

Nicholas’s expression slowly changed as a smug smile spread across his face. “Why?” he asked. “What is it to you, huh?”

Harper's mouth fell open, her eyes widening slightly as a faint blush threatened her cheeks. She quickly concealed it with a dismissive scoff.

"Whatever! Who cares? Probably another random woman you found to scratch an itch." She rolled her

eyes. "Keep it up and eventually that itch is going to, come with crabs."

Nicholas simply stared at her, clearly enjoying how badly she was trying to pretend she didn't care.

"Well…" His smile widened as he threw her own words straight back at her. "Too bad, so sad."

Damien subtly glanced over his shoulder at the two of them, while beside him, Maya pressed her lips together, desperately trying to hold back her laughter.

Nicholas had clearly won that round.

Before Harper could recover enough to retaliate, Maya wisely steered the conversation back to Damien's story.

Unfortunately, what happened after Singapore was far less amusing.

The weather had begun deteriorating not long after they passed Singapore, forcing them to make several detours to avoid the worst parts of the storm.

The constant rerouting had increased their fuel consumption, and as conditions worsened, their tracking connection eventually disappeared.

Damien had also begun shutting down whatever nonessential systems he safely could, conserving power and prioritizing only what they needed to keep the aircraft flying.

Things only became worse once they entered Japanese airspace.

A violent lightning strike rocked the aircraft, and not long afterward, one of the engines failed, forcing Damien to complete the rest of the flight on a single engine.

With the storm surrounding them and no reliable way to communicate with anyone on the ground, their only real option had been to keep going until they finally reached Takahashi Private Aviation and landed safely.

Maya's fingers instinctively tightened around Damien's hand when he reached that part of the story.

But their problems hadn't ended there.

The severe weather had disrupted power and communications throughout the area, making it nearly impossible to contact the estate. Fortunately, the transportation Harper had arranged ahead of time was already waiting for them when they landed.

Even then, they only made it within several blocks of the estate before roadblocks and heavy congestion made the road completely impassable.

Knowing Jaime could be taken into surgery at any moment, Damien and Nicholas had abandoned the vehicle and covered the remaining distance on foot, running through the pouring rain until they finally reached the estate.

Maya abruptly stopped walking and stared at him.

“You flew into a typhoon with no reliable communication and only one engine?”

Damien stopped beside her. “When you say it like that, it sounds worse.”

Damien lowered his voice. “Maya.”

“No, Damien. You lost an engine!”

“And we still had one.”

Nicholas quietly looked away, wisely deciding not to mention just how terrifying that particular part of the flight had actually been.

Maya took a breath and forced herself to calm down. “Why didn’t you turn around?”

“Because I promised Jaime I would be here,” Damien said, tightening his hold on her hand. “And I promised you.”

Some of the anger immediately left Maya’s face.

“You could’ve gotten yourself killed trying to keep that promise.”

Damien held her gaze. “But I didn’t.”

Maya stared at him. “You’re impossible.”

A faint smile touched his lips. “So I’ve been told.”

She wanted to tell him how unbelievably reckless he had been, how furious she was that he had risked himself, and how terrified she had felt when they could no longer.track his plane.

Instead, Maya stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him.

Damien caught her immediately, pulling her tightly against his chest.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she murmured.

His arms tightened around her.

“I’ll try.”

Maya pulled back just enough to glare at him. “Wrong answer.”

A quiet laugh escaped him. “I won’t.”

Another rumble of thunder rolled outside, but this time, Maya barely noticed.

With Maya and Damien still wrapped in each other’s arms, standing there watching them suddenly felt a little awkward for the other two.

Nicholas leaned slightly closer to Harper. “I should get a hug too, don’t you think?”

Harper’s head snapped toward him, a faint blush immediately warming her cheeks. “Why should you? You were just a passenger!”

Nicholas raised a brow, clearly amused by how quickly she had become defensive.

“In your dreams!” she added before turning away.

A slow grin spread across his face. “So, you want me in your dreams?”

Harper whipped back toward him. “That is not what I said!”

Nicholas chuckled, clearly enjoying himself, before turning toward the other two.

“Okay, lovebirds. That’s enough. You can continue that in your room.” He tugged lightly at his damp shirt and grimaced. “I need a hot shower. I’m starting to smell like an old musty rug.”

Maya and Damien finally pulled apart, and the four of them continued down the corridor.

Harper, whether she wanted to admit it or not, had also been affected by hearing just how dangerous their journey had actually been.

She stole a quick glance at Nicholas but immediately looked away. The last thing she needed was for him to think she'd been worried about him, especially after what happened earlier.

But deep down, the relief she'd felt when he arrived safely was impossible to deny.

Maybe there was some truth to what everyone else seemed to see.

Maybe they were right.

Maybe she really was falling in love with Nicholas Ashcroft.