Intern 621

Chapter 621

Ken remained seated as Damien paced across the study, his anger still visibly simmering beneath

the surface.

He allowed him a few seconds before speaking.

“Money has a way of revealing what people truly value,” he said quietly. “And anyone willing to

choose it over their own blood was never worth much to begin with.”

Ken regarded him with open distaste.

“The truth is, Viktor didn’t have to work very hard to convince them.”

Damien stopped pacing and turned toward him, his breathing heavy and his fists clenched tightly

át his sides.

“How? D

Viktor already have some kind of connection to them before the accident?”

Ken shook his head.

“No. It’s because they barely had a relationship with Julian to begin with. His family never

approved of the life he chose for himself because they believed he had wasted his intelligence and

his future by settling down with someone they considered unworthy of him.”

“Unworthy?!” Damien spat, disbelief mixing with the anger already burning through him. “It was the

other way around! Malia walked away from her own family and everything that came with being a

Lockwood because she chose Julian!”

“Yes, but they didn’t know that,” Ken replied. “As far as they were concerned, Malia was nothing

more than an ordinary scholarship student with no family name, wealth, or social standing behind her.”

Ken’s voice took on a note of contempt.

“They never cared much for Julian’s marriage, and they had even less involvement in the lives of his children.”

Damien stared at him, his fury taking on an entirely different edge.

“They’re fucking idiots. They already had gold standing right in front of them, and they were too fucking blind to see it. Instead, they looked down on her and sold their own blood for scraps!” His lip curled in disgust.

“Hell, I’d give them ten million if they went and killed themselves.”

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“Couldn’t agree more,” Ken replied coldly.

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“But that’s exactly what made it so easy for Viktor. He wasn’t asking devoted relatives to abandon people they loved. He was offering opportunistic vultures a chance to profit from a family they had already decided they wanted nothing to do with.”

His voice hardened.

“And apparently, two million dollars was all it took.”

Ken leaned back in his chair.

“They took the money, severed whatever little connection they had left, and never looked back. Julian was dead, and as far as they were concerned, Maya and Jaime might as well have never existed.”

Damien turned away, disgust rolling through him.

“They looked down on Malia and her children as though they weren’t good enough for their family, when those fucking parasites weren’t even worthy of standing beside Malia herself, much less

Maya and Jaime!”

The irony was almost insulting. They had judged Malia for having no family name, no wealth, and

no social standing, never realizing that she had deliberately walked away from a bloodline more

powerful and prestigious than anything they could have imagined.

But as satisfying as their ignorance might have been, something still didn’t make sense.

Damien’s anger gave way to suspicion, and he abruptly turned back to face Ken.

“But why? Why would Viktor do that in the first place? Why would he care whether Julian’s family stayed in Maya and Jaime’s lives?”

Ken regarded him steadily, the contempt in his expression giving way to something far more

serious.

“Because he needed them powerless.”

He loosely interlocked his fingers in front of him.

“Think about it. Maya lost both of her parents overnight. She had just turned eighteen, but

suddenly, she was the only person Jaime had left. No parents. No relatives. No one to take even

some of that responsibility off her shoulders.”

A trace of anger entered Ken’s otherwise composed expression, his voice taking on a colder edge.

“She didn’t have the luxury of wondering whether something about the accident didn’t add up. She

had a little brother depending on her. She had to figure out how they were going to survive."

His eyes remained fixed on Damien.

"And Viktor made damn sure she stayed in that position. The more isolated they were, the easier they were to control. Maya's entire world became about keeping herself and Jaime afloat."

Ken shifted slightly in his chair, one hand settling against the armrest.

"Why would she start digging into an accident she had already been told was unavoidable when she was too busy trying to make sure she and her little brother had something to eat the next day?

Ken fell silent briefly, giving Damien time to absorb the cruel reality and connect the pieces as the larger picture of Viktor's manipulation slowly began to take shape.

It made sickening sense.

The more Damien understood, the more his anger grew. What he had once believed to be a series of unfortunate circumstances in Maya's life was beginning to look like the work of a puppet master quietly pulling strings from the shadows.

Every hardship Maya had endured became even more infuriating in hindsight.

Viktor hadn't simply erased Cassandra from the accident. He had manipulated Maya's

circumstances afterward to keep her too overwhelmed with survival to ever question the story she had been given.

Then an unsettling thought struck Damien.

"What about Jaime's condition?" His eyes shot to Ken. "Did he have something to do with that too?

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"No," Ken answered without hesitation. "Jaime's illness had nothing to do with Viktor. That was an

unfortunate circumstance no one could have anticipated."

A fraction of the tension left Damien, but Ken wasn't finished.

"Unfortunately, it still worked in Viktor's favor. Maya was already struggling to keep them afloat.

Once Jaime became sick, survival wasn't her only concern anymore. Keeping her brother alive

became her entire world."

Ken's voice grew colder.

"Doctors. Treatments. Medications. Hospital bills. Whatever little time, money, or energy she

might have had left went toward Jaime."

Damien remained silent as the implications sank in.

"Viktor didn't cause Jaime's illness," Ken continued. "But once he realized what was happening, I imagine he breathed a little easier. It became another distraction he never had to create himself"

That realization left a bitter taste in Damien's mouth.

For years, Maya had fought desperately to keep her brother ällve, never knowing that the same struggle consuming every part of her life had also benefited the man who buried the truth about their parents.

Damien’s attention returned to the documents spread across the desk, eventually settling on the recurring transactions.

“What about these? The ten thousand every month?”

Something subtle shifted in Ken’s expression.

“That,” he said, “is the most interesting part.”

Damien looked up from the documents.

“What do you mean?”

“It started with Cassandra’s guilt.”

Damien’s attention sharpened at the mention of her name.

“She wanted to do something for the family of the people who died in the accident. But given her

mental state at the time, Viktor assured her he would take care of everything on her behalf.”

Ken reached for the page containing the recurring payments and tapped it lightly with his finger.

“And he did,” he said, a hint of contempt entering his voice. “Just not in the way Cassandra

believed.”

Chapter 622

Damien looked at him.

There was something in the way Ken said it that told him he was about to uncover yet another layer of Viktor’s deception, and whatever carne next would likely be another reality he wasn’t going

to like.

“You and I both know Cassandra’s mental state was already fragile even before the accident,” Ken

continued.

“And the way she was living was only making it worse. Antidepressants, sleeping pills, alcohol, drugs. She was mixing things that never should have been mixed while already barely holding herself together.”

He paused and let out a heavy breath, shaking his head.

“She was hanging by a thread long before she got behind the wheel that night. The accident was

simply what finally snapped it.”

His expression grew somber.

“Cassandra Volkov was complicated. Reckless, self–destructive, and responsible for a great deal

of pain. I’m not excusing any of that.” His voice lowered. “But I sincerely believe she was never as

evil as her father.”

Damien remained silent.

“She felt guilty about what happened to the people in that car,” Ken continued. “And once that guilt began eating away at her, she wanted to do something for the family they left behind.”

His fingers rested against the documents on the desk.

“She wanted them supported. She wanted to know they had enough money to live comfortably

and that whatever they needed would be provided for. So she asked her father to make sure the

victims‘ family was properly taken care of, no matter what it cost.”

Ken’s expression turned colder.

“And Viktor promised his daughter that he would.”

His fingers moved to the page containing the recurring ten–thousand–dollar payments.

“But the father and daughter had very different definitions of what it meant to take care of

someone.”

An uneasy feeling settled in Damien's gut.

Take care of them how?" he demanded. "Maya took care of both of them. Nobody else!"

"He paid someone to keep an eye on them," Ken answered. "Not to give them a comfortable life, and sure as hell not to make things easier for them. He paid someone to make sure they were alive, breathing, and getting by. And most importantly, to make sure they never started asking questions about the accident."

Damien stared at him in disbelief.

If that was true, then Viktor had kept eyes on Maya and Jaime from the very beginning.

"What? You mean to say…"

"Yes," Ken cut in, already knowing where his mind had gone. "Viktor Volkov knew who Maya was long before you did. Back then, she was nothing more than part of a task he had promised his daughter he would handle. But the moment you came into the picture, that simple task became a threat."

Damien slammed both palms against the desk.

“Son of a bitch!”

His hands curled into fists against the wood as fury tore through him.

Viktor had known.

All that time, the bastard had known exactly who Maya was while Damien himself had known

nothing about the connection between her and Cassandra.

His teeth ground together.

“Who’s the fucking dog Viktor paid to watch them?”

Ken gestured toward the folder.

“Everything is in there. The answer is on the last page.”

Damien snatched the folder from the desk. His grip tightened around it hard enough to bend the

edges as he rapidly flipped through the documents until he reached the final page.

It was a photograph.

The instant he saw the face staring back at him, his entire body went rigid.

He knew that face.

His expression darkened instantly.

Damien pulled the photograph free and stared down at it, his fingers slowly tightening around the

paper

This is…” he said, his voice dangerously cold.

“Janice Torres,” Ken finished.

He let the name settle before continuing.

“Sixty years old. Widowed. Retired home–care aide. One daughter living overseas.”

Damien slowly lifted his eyes to Ken.

The photograph crumpled inside his tightening fist until the paper was crushed completely within his palm.

“It started shortly after Maya and Jaime moved into that low–income housing complex,” Ken

continued. “Viktor paid Janice ten thousand dollars a month to keep an eye on them.”

Damien’s expression turned murderous.

“Ten fucking thousand dollars a month?!” he roared, slamming his fist against the desk. “Then why

the fuck did Maya have to work herself to the bone just to keep them alive?! Why did she have to

work day and night, barely sleeping, barely eating, worrying about every goddamn bill while that bastard was throwing ten thousand dollars a month at someone to fucking watch her struggle?!”

His chest heaved as he glared at Ken, his fury spilling past the limits of his control.

“Why?!”

“Because Maya and Jaime were never supposed to see a single cent of that money,” Ken answered

coldly. “The ten thousand was Janice’s payment. Viktor wasn’t paying her to make their lives

easier. He was paying her to watch them.”

His voice hardened.

“Her job was to stay close and know what was happening in their lives. She wasn’t supposed to

pay their bills, ease Maya’s burden, or give them anything that could significantly improve their

circumstances.”

Ken held Damien’s furious stare and tapped the documents with one finger.

“Viktor wanted them alive, Damien. That was all. Alive, struggling, and too consumed with

surviving to start asking questions he didn’t want them asking.”

The muscles in Damien’s jaw tightened.

“So he was willing to spend ten thousand fucking dollars every month, but instead of using that

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money to actually help them like his daughter asked, he used it to protect her fucking secret?!

His fingers curled against the edge of the desk until his knuckles whitened.

“He could have made their lives easier! He could have compensated them for what Cassandra did! Instead, he paid someone to stand there and watch Maya struggle every fucking day just to make sure she never got close to the truth!”

His voice rose with every word, fury burning through whatever restraint he had left.

“That sick son of a bitch was fucking playing with their lives!”

Ken remained composed despite Damien’s fury.

“Viktor Volkov has never been the charitable type. Giving Maya and Jaime money would have done nothing for him. There was no power in simply making their lives easier.”

“He would rather spend ten thousand dollars a month playing his sick games, as you put it, because that allowed him to remain in control. He could keep them exactly where he wanted them.”

Ken paused.

“The irony is, choosing that particular woman to serve as one of his chess pieces eventually

backfired on him.”

Damien’s anger momentarily gave way to suspicion.

“What do you mean by that?”

Ken’s expression turned grim.

“She became a liability.”

Damien straightened.

“How?”

Chapter 623

he word immediately put Damien on edge.

A liability

Considering everything he had learned about Viktor, Darnien knew exactly what happened to

people the man considered liabilities.

They were silenced, discarded, or made to disappear.

“What the hell happened?”

Ken’s expression remained serious as he turned his attention back to the documents spread

across the desk.

“Based on my investigation, Janice Torres knows nothing about the truth behind the accident, and

she knows nothing about the Volkovs.”

Ken reached for the remote again and pressed a button.

The same wall where Damien had watched the truth about the accident unfold only minutes earlier

lit up once more. This time, however, there was no moving footage.

A still photograph appeared on the screen.

Damien immediately recognized Janice, although she looked younger. She stood outside the

entrance of the apartment building where Maya and Jaime used to live, speaking to a tall,

unfamiliar man dressed in dark clothing.

Ken pressed another button.

A second photograph appeared from a different angle.

Then another.

The images captured the same encounter in sequence. Janice speaking with the man near the

entrance. The two moving farther to the side of the building. The man handing her what appeared to be a business card. Janice looking down at it before turning her attention back to him.

“A month after Maya and Jaime moved into that building, Viktor sent someone to approach her with an offer,” Ken explained. “She was told that a distant relative wanted someone to quietly watch over the children but preferred not to become personally involved in their lives.”

Ken paused.

“They made it sound like some sort of test. If Maya and Jaime proved themselves responsible and

worthy, they would eventually inherit a substantial amount of money from this supposed relative

Until then, Janice was simply supposed to be a good neighbor, stay close to them, and report back

how they were doing.”

Damien stared at the images on the wall and let out a sharp, humorless scoff.

“And she fucking believed that?” His lip curled into a sneer. “What the hell is this, some kind of fucking movie? A mysterious rich relative secretly testing two orphaned kids before handing them a fortune? Who the fuck believes something that ridiculous?”

Ken gave a small shrug.

“Apparently, she did. And she had ten thousand reasons every month not to question it too closely.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed.

“Janice was already struggling financially herself,” Ken continued. “She had retired from working as a home–care aide and was living on a modest pension. What little savings she had accumulated over the years had already taken a significant hit because of her daughter.”

He pressed another button.

The image on the wall changed to a mug shot of a woman whose appearance immediately caught Damien’s attention.

Her face was gaunt and hollow, with sunken cheeks, sallow skin, and dark circles beneath

bloodshot, heavy–lidded eyes. Deep lines around her mouth and forehead made her appear decades older, while her thin, unkempt hair and worn features spoke of years of substance abuse and neglect.

“This is Janice’s daughter,” Ken said. “She’s only forty–one. She lives overseas, works as a bartender at a local pub, and has spent most of her adult life getting into trouble with the law.”

He gestured toward the records on the screen.

“Drug possession, domestic assault, disorderly conduct, impaired driving, to name a few. She has no children and has already been through four failed marriages.”

Ken clicked to the next image, revealing financial records.

“More importantly, she developed a serious gambling problem and accumulated substantial debt.”

Damien’s expression tightened.

“Janice had been dipping into her own savings to help her daughter and sending her money whenever she could,” Ken continued. “So when someone offered her ten thousand dollars a month for something that sounded relatively harmless, it was difficult to refuse.”

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Damien stared at the financial records as the pieces fell into place.

“So she wasn’t chosen at random. Viktor deliberately found someone financially vulnerable enough that ten thousand dollars a month would be almost impossible to refuse.”

“Yes, but that’s where Viktor miscalculated,” Ken continued.

“What he never accounted for was that somewhere along the way, it stopped being just a job to her. Janice became genuinely attached to Maya and Jaime. Whatever reason she originally had for entering their lives, the affection she developed for them over the years was real.”

Damien’s brows drew together as the realization hit him.

“And that made her a liability,” he muttered.

“Exactly,” Ken confirmed. “Viktor is a heartless man. Genuine human attachment isn’t something he considers when he decides to use innocent people as pieces in his games. He expected Janice to care about the money, not the people he was paying her to watch.”

The realization did little to ease the anger burning through Damien.

He understood what Ken was telling him.

Maya and Jaime had never spoken about Janice with anything but genuine affection and gratitude. And on the few occasions Damien had seen the woman himself, even if only from a distance, nothing about her behavior toward the siblings had ever struck him as threatening or insincere.

Their affection for her was real.

And apparently, her affection for them was just as genuine.

But none of that changed the fact that Viktor Volkov had deliberately placed her in their lives, and

she had been on his payroll for years.

That alone was enough for every protective instinct in Damien to reject the idea of simply dismissing her as harmless.

“But something changed recently,” Ken said, pulling him from his thoughts.

“Take another look at those transactions.”

He pointed toward the folder on the table.

Damien reached for the documents again and scanned the dates.

For nearly four years, ten thousand dollars had been transferred every month without fail.

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Then the payments had abruptly stopped.

His eyes settled on the date of the final transaction, and his stomach tightened.

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It was around the same time Maya had been released from the hospital after the kidnapping.

Damien looked up sharply. “The last payment was only a few months ago. Did Janice tell them she

wanted out?”

“That, I don’t know,” Ken admitted. “So far, I haven’t found anything explaining why Viktor suddenly stopped paying her. But I did find this.”

Ken pressed another button, and the financial records disappeared, replaced by a grainy still frame

from another surveillance recording.

“This came from a surveillance camera at the bus stop across the street from the housing

‘complex.”

He pressed play, and the still image came to life. Damien’s eyes moved across the screen before

settling on the timestamp in the corner.

A little after two in the morning.

Then he noticed the date.

It was the day after he had seen Maya and Jaime standing at that very same bus stop and offered

them a ride to the hospital.

Something about the timing immediately unsettled him as a troubling possibility crossed his mind.

Could it be?

Damien pushed the thought aside and focused on the footage again.

Because if his suspicion was right, he wasn't sure he could forgive himself for being so careless.

Chapter 624

Damien's gaze remained fixed on the screen as the grainy footage continued to play.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

The street remained quiet and nearly deserted, illuminated only by the dull glow of streetlights lining the road. The entrance to the housing complex stood empty, with no sign of movement anywhere nearby.

Still, Damien couldn't shake the growing tension in his chest. He leaned forward slightly, his eyes scanning every corner of the screen as he waited for whatever had happened that night to reveal itself.

Moments later, a black vehicle entered the frame.

It slowed near the housing complex before pulling over along the curb. The headlights went dark, but no one got out.

For a while, the vehicle simply sat there.

Then movement near the entrance of the building caught Damien's attention.

Janice stepped outside.

She glanced around before pulling her cardigan tighter against the cold, rubbing one hand over her opposite arm as she made her way toward the waiting vehicle.

The driver's door opened as she approached, and a man stepped out.

Damien's attention sharpened immediately. He studied the man's build, posture, and movements, searching his memory for any sign of recognition.

Nothing.

But he was certain it wasn't Viktor.

, there was something about the man that raised Damien's suspicions. He made no attempt to

conceal himself or even glance around to see if anyone was watching.

There

was an almost arrogant confidence in the way he moved, as though being seen outside

Janice's building in the middle of the night was of absolutely no concern to him.

Damien had encountered enough men like him to recognize that kind of brazen confidence.

He didn't need to recognize the man to know exactly what he was looking at.

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One of Volkov's lapdogs.

There was no audio, but at first, the conversation appeared calm.

Then the man said something.

Janice’s entire expression changed.

Her hand flew to her mouth as she shook her head repeatedly. She took several steps backward,

clearly refusing whatever he had just told her.

The man immediately moved forward and grabbed her arm.

Janice tried to pull away, but his grip only tightened as he yanked her closer and said something

else, this time directly into her face.

Whatever he told her changed everything.

The resistance slowly drained from Janice’s body.

Fear replaced it.

Her eyes widened, and unmistakable worry spread across her face as she listened. After several

seconds, she reluctantly nodded.

Only then did the man release her.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out what looked like a small bottle. Before Janice could

react, he seized her hand, forced it open, and shoved the bottle into her palm.

Then he pointed a finger inches from her face and delivered what looked unmistakably like a

warning.

Janice nodded repeatedly.

Apparently satisfied, the man turned away, climbed back into the vehicle, and drove off, leaving Janice standing alone on the curb, whatever he had given her still clutched tightly in her palm.

Janice remained where she was, watching as the black vehicle disappeared down the street.

The moment it was gone, her entire posture crumpled.

Her upper body folded forward, and her shoulders began to shake, rising and falling with what

could only be silent sobs.

For a long moment, she simply stood there beneath the streetlight, visibly breaking down.

Eventually, she pulled herself together, wiped at her face, and slowly made her way back toward

the building.

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Before she could reach the entrance, the screen went black.

Ken switched off the projector, and the faint hum of the machine disappeared.

“That’s the last thing I could find connecting her to Viktor’s people,” he said.

“There were no more payments after that night. No more meetings. No phone calls I could trace. Nothing.”

Damien didn’t respond.

His gaze remained fixed on the now–blank screen as the suspicion that had been weighing on him since he first saw the date grew heavier.

“What the hell did they talk about that night?” he muttered. “What did that man give her? And why did the payments suddenly stop?”

He dragged a hand roughly over his face.

“Fuck! That son of a bitch!” His voice exploded through the room. “I’ll kill him. I swear to God, I’ll fucking kill him myself!”

“Calm down, Damien.”

Damien whipped his head toward Ken.

“You don’t understand. That morning was the first time I’d interacted with Maya outside the company.” He pointed sharply toward the blank screen. “I was coming back from an event when we happened to pass through that area. Maya and Jaime were standing at that exact bus stop. We stopped and offered them a ride to the hospital.”

His jaw clenched.

“And then, before fucking sunrise the next day, one of Volkov’s lapdogs suddenly shows up outside her building?”

Damien shook his head, his expression darkening.

“That’s not a fucking coincidence. Someone must have been watching. Viktor found out I’d

willingly given a woman the kind of attention I never gave anyone, not even his own daughter, and he sent one of his dogs to deliver a message."

The realization hit him with enough force to momentarily silence him.

"I was reckless," he muttered.

His anger suddenly turned inward.

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"Fuck. I shouldn't have approached her that day. I should've known better."

Then another thought struck him. His mind raced through one possibility after another, each worse than the last.

"Knowing Volkov, I wouldn't put anything past him. Whatever the fuck that man gave her, I have a bad feeling it was meant to hurt Maya."

Damien finally turned away and dropped heavily into the chair.

He leaned forward, planting his elbows on his knees before lowering his head into his hands.

“Just hours after that…” he said, his voice suddenly quieter.

His fingers tightened against his scalp.

“That piece–of–shit doctor took Maya.”

Ken immediately understood where his mind had gone.

“That was a coincidence,” he said firmly.

Damien’s head snapped up.

“I already looked into it,” Ken continued. “There’s nothing connecting Viktor or any of his people to that doctor. As far as I can tell, the kidnapping had nothing to do with them.”

Damien slowly lowered his gaze, his shoulders sagging beneath the weight of everything he had just learned.

That should have made him feel better.

It didn’t.

If anything, everything they had uncovered seemed to leave him with more questions than

answers.

Ken studied him for a moment.

“We may not have all the answers yet,” he said. “But at least now you know the truth about what

Viktor has been doing all these years.”

His expression grew more serious.

“And now that you know the game he’s been playing, you’re in a much better position to beat the

bastard at his own game.”

Ken rose from his chair and walked around the desk. When he reached Damien, he placed a hand

on his shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze.

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“But none of that matters right now. Viktor can wait, and once you find Janice, you’ll have a better

chance of getting the answers you need.”

He paused.

“Right now, there’s something far more important you need to figure out.”

Damien already knew what he meant, and Ken’s next words only confirmed it.

“You need to figure out how you’re going to tell Maya everything.”

Chapter 625

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the bastard at his own game.”

Ken rose from his chair and walked around the desk. When he reached Damien, he placed a hand on his shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze.

“But none of that matters right now. Viktor can wait, and once you find Janice, you’ll have a better chance of getting the answers you need.”

He paused.

“Right now, there’s something far more important you need to figure out.” Damien already knew what he meant, and Ken’s next words only confirmed it.

“You need to figure out how you’re going to tell Maya everything.”

Chapter 626

Aww that Apt

news of the weave walked away unhurt. The possibility that her Alesund was

stating enough

wing wounds she had spent years

Jange has been part of her and Jane’s lives when they had no one. She was someone they

Nugh to come Kay

A he had to be the one to tell her that the relationship had started with a lie a truth

that cutant years of memores Maya had beleved were genuine

in

Damen er he gave the weight of those words setting heavily over him.

“The will be he

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The not saving it wont hurt

Move has SuPot the

Kenned “But you know better than anyone what

recce to decide what she does with the truth.”

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I’s been a ven one ex Get some est Damen

Ken emoved his hand and Damer nocted before ring to his feet He turned to face the

oiter men and met his eve

Thank you. You dont have to do any of this His scenty was unmistakable 1 don’t know

how can ever repay you but if you ever need anything you only have to ask

Kan shook his head

You don’t hate Harger when you found out she had used you and your company to hide her

identity You may not have known anything about what was happening, but in my eyes, you

stil did us a tremendous favor by keeping our daughter safe”

He gave Damien a meaningful look

If anything I owe you far more than you owe me. This is the least I could do

Ken then held out his hand

“And now that my daughter is finally ready to take over, I think it’s time for the younger generation to take things from here.”

His outstretched hand remained between them.

“Consider this the official beginning of our alliance.”

Damien glanced down at Ken’s outstretched hand before taking it firmly.

“Alliance,” he repeated.

They shook hands, sealing an understanding that had begun under far less pleasant

circumstances.

Damien gave him a small nod before releasing his grip.

“I’ll take my leave. Have a good evening, sir.”

He turned toward the door, but had barely taken a few steps when Ken called after him.

“Wait.”

Damien stopped and turned around.

Ken walked back behind his desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out a hard drive. He held it out

to Damien.

“Here. Take it. Everything I found is on there. The footage, the documents, the phone calls, the messages, and all the bank transactions.”

He paused, his demeanor turning noticeably colder.

“Under normal circumstances, there’s more than enough evidence there to put Viktor behind bars. But in this case, I think prison would be far too forgiving.”

Damien accepted the drive and dipped his head slightly.

“Thank you.”

He turned and headed for the door.

His hand was already wrapped around the doorknob when he stopped again.

“Mr. Takahashi.”

“Anything else?” Ken asked.

425 Pants

Damien turned fully to face him, meeting his eyes with unmistakable sincerity.

“Nick may have a reputation, but he’s sincere about Harper. I hope you’ll give him a chance.”

Ken stared at him before suddenly bursting into genuine laughter.

“You’re vouching for your best friend, Blackwood?”

A faint smile tugged at Damien’s lips.

“Good night, Mr. Takahashi.”

With that, he left the study, gently closing the door behind him.

The soft click of the latch seemed to shut away everything they had discussed inside. The faint smile was already gone from Damien’s face as he headed toward the stairs.

The manor had grown quiet, everyone seemingly retired for the night.

But Damien was nowhere near ready to rest. The weight of everything he had learned followed him upstairs, the silence doing little to quiet his mind.

He had to tell Maya.

What he didn’t know was how the hell he was supposed to begin..

How was he supposed to tell the woman he loved that there was a possibility her parents could have survived? That Viktor had known far more about her family than any of them had ever realized? And that Janice, someone she and Jaime had trusted enough to consider family, had originally entered their lives because Viktor had paid her to watch them?

Tonight certainly wasn't the time.

She had already been through enough for one day, and dropping everything he had just learned on her now would only add to it.

But he couldn't keep it from her either.

Sooner rather than later, Maya needed to know the truth.

Damien glanced down at the hard drive in his hand. His grip tightened around it before he slipped it into his back pocket and continued toward the bedrooms.

The hall was just as quiet as the rest of the manor. Not a sound came from behind any of the closed doors as Damien passed them.

When he finally reached their bedroom, he quietly turned the handle and eased the door open.

He immediately noticed that the room was still brightly lit.

Then he saw Maya.

She was curled up on the couch with her knees drawn toward her chest, but at some point, sleep must have overtaken her. She had slumped awkwardly onto her side, her head resting against the cushions, her legs still tucked close to her body.

She must have fallen asleep waiting for him.

He stepped inside and gently closed the door behind him, careful not to make a sound.

Crossing the room, he bent down and carefully slipped one arm beneath Maya's knees and the other around her back before lifting her into his arms.

She barely stirred.

Damien carried her to the bed and gently lowered her onto the mattress.

As he pulled the covers over her, Maya shifted.

"Mmm… Damien?"

Her voice was thick with sleep. Her eyes fluttered open just enough to find him through her

drowsiness.

Damien leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

“Yes, love. It’s me. Go back to sleep. I’m just going to change.”

“Mmm… okay.”

Her eyes slipped closed again.

Maya turned onto her side, burrowing comfortably into the pillow, and within seconds, her breathing settled back into a slow, even rhythm.

Damien remained beside her, unable to look away.

Even asleep, she was breathtaking. There was something so peaceful and innocent about her face that it made his chest ache, especially knowing how much she had been forced to endure over the past seven years because of the carefully fabricated lies surrounding the tragedy that had changed her life.

And all those times he had wanted to take her out, to proudly show the entire world that she was his woman and he was her man, he had held himself back because he thought keeping

her away from Viktor's attention was the safest way to protect her.

NEW AU Thot caution

What a fucking joke.

All that caution. All that restraint.

And Viktor had known exactly who she was all along, long before Damien himself had even known her.

Damien's hands slowly curled into fists at his sides as anger burned through him all over again.

Chapter 627

Damien forced himself to release the tension in his hands and rein in his emotions.

There was nothing he could do about Viktor tonight.

Most importantly, Maya needed to rest. She had already been through enough emotionally that day, and with Jaime still not completely out of danger, the last thing she needed was another devastating truth weighing on her.

He quietly walked over to the closet, where Maya had neatly arranged his clothes.

His eyes settled on a jacket hanging toward the back. He pulled out the hard drive, slipped it deep into an inner pocket, and pushed the jacket farther out of sight.

For now, it would be safe there.

Damien closed the closet and headed into the bathroom to clean up and change for bed.

Not long after, he emerged feeling refreshed and dressed more comfortably in a plain white T–shirt and a pair of lounge pants.

He switched off the lights, plunging the bedroom into darkness, then quietly made his way back to the bed and slipped beneath the covers beside Maya.

Careful not to wake her, Damien wrapped an arm around her and gently pulled her closer.

Maya stirred at his touch.

Still asleep, she instinctively shifted toward his warmth. Then she turned in his arms and nestled herself against his chest, her eyes never opening as she tucked her head beneath his

chin.

Damien held her a little tighter.

Her warm breath brushed against his chest as she settled there, her ear resting directly over

his heart as though, even in sleep, its steady rhythm was where she felt safest.

He lowered his head and pressed a lingering kiss to the top of her hair.

“I love you.”

Morning came far sooner than Damien would have liked.

Sunlight filtered through the curtains, spilling across the bed and slowly pulling him from an uneasy sleep.

The first thing he became aware of was the absence of Maya's warmth against him.

His eyes snapped open as he sat up and looked around, but Maya was nowhere in sight.

He reached for his phone on the nightstand and checked the time.

He was already pulling up Maya's number when he heard the bathroom door open.

Maya stepped out, freshly showered, with one towel around her body and another wrapped around her wet hair.

Relief immediately washed over him as he released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

Maya stopped when she noticed him sitting upright on the bed.

"Oh! You're awake."

She walked toward him with a smile, leaned down, and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Good morning.”

Before Maya could straighten, Damien wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her onto his lap.

“Ah!”

Damien caught her securely against him, a mischievous smile spreading across his face as she stared at him in surprise.

“Well,” he murmured, his voice still husky from sleep, “waking up to you wearing nothing but a towel certainly makes it a good morning.”

Heat immediately rushed into Maya’s cheeks.

“Shameless!”

She gave his chest a playful smack and tried to push herself upright.

“Now let me up. I need to get dressed.”

His smile widened, but he reluctantly released her. Maya stood and adjusted the towel around herself.

“It seems like you came in pretty late last night. Why don’t you get some more sike? ‘ro going to check on Jaime. You can just meet me there later”

Damien climbed out of bed, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her cheek

“Let’s go together I’ll get ready.”

Maya smiled and nodded.

Damien headed into the bathroom while Maya went to get dressed.

As the bathroom door closed behind him, the last traces of sleep disappeared from his mind.

He stripped off his clothes, stepped into the shower, and turned on the water.

The icy spray struck his skin like a shock, stealing his breath for a second as it poured over his head and down his body.

Damien closed his eyes and stood beneath it, letting the cold water clear his mind and dull some of the anger still simmering beneath the surface.

By the time he finally reached for the faucet, the fury from the night before had cooled considerably.

But no amount of cold water could wash away what he now knew.

The truth was still waiting for Maya.

And once she knew it, everything would change.

Until last night, Damien had been certain of what he intended to do with Viktor.

But this was no longer only about him, or even about settling his own score with Viktor.

This was Maya’s family. Her parents. Her life that Viktor had manipulated from the shadows for years.

Whatever happened next, she deserved a say in it.

He could hunt Viktor down. He could drag every last secret into the light and make damn sure the man had nowhere left to hide.

But when the time came to decide Viktor's fate, that choice would belong to Maya.

And whatever she decided, Damien would make damn sure Viktor lived with the

consequences.

When Damien stepped out of the bathroom, Maya was already dressed and waiting for him.

The Chore

He quickly got ready himself, and by eight o'clock, they were both ready to leave.

Damien opened the bedroom door, and almost at the exact same moment, the door to Harper's bedroom opened as well.

Harper stepped out, and directly behind her was Nick.

The unexpected sight brought both couples to an abrupt stop, and for one awkward second, all four of them simply stared at each other.

Before either Damien or Maya could say a single word, Harper immediately raised both hands in defense.

“Whatever it is the two of you are thinking, it’s not what you think!”

Damien’s brow lifted at the unprompted explanation, while beside him, the corners of Maya’s lips began to twitch as she fought back a teasing smile.

“He did not spend the night in my room,” Harper continued quickly, pointing over her shoulder at Nick without taking her eyes off them. “He literally just got here like fifteen minutes ago!”

Nick stared at the back of her head, looking somewhere between amused and offended by how urgently she was defending herself.

Damien still didn’t say a word, and Maya merely shrugged, though she could no longer stop the teasing smile from spreading across her face.

“We weren’t thinking anything,” she said innocently before adding, “You’re just being

defensive.”

Harper blinked, her mouth opening as though she already had a comeback waiting, but nothing came out.

Instead, warmth slowly crept into her cheeks, and that was all it took for Nick to lose the battle against his amusement.

A laugh escaped him from behind her, only to abruptly die when Harper, without even looking back, drove her elbow straight into his stomach. His amused grin instantly twisted into a

pained grimace.

“Oof!”

“Don’t,” she muttered through clenched teeth.

Nick pressed his lips together in an attempt to behave, though the grin slowly creeping back. onto his face suggested he wasn’t particularly sorry.

Chapter 628

Harper's enthusiasm followed them all the way downstairs.

They had barely made it to the dining hall when they ran into Hiro.

"Good morning!" he greeted everyone with a polite bow before turning his attention to Harper.

"Everything has been set up the way you wanted."

"Eeeeek!" Harper squealed and immediately raised her hand for a high five, which Hiro casually returned.

"Okay, okay… um… so we'll just grab some breakfast, check on my buddy Jaime, then we'll head over there. Okidoki?"

Hiro chuckled and shook his head.

"All right. I'm heading out for a bit too, but I promise I'll be back by noon."

Nick, who had been listening to the exchange, finally cut in.

“Um, excuse me. Just in case you two haven’t noticed, we’re standing right here. Care to

include us in the conversation?”

Harper rolled her eyes at him.

“Awww, poor baby. But nope! You’ll find out later, okay? So stop being so dramatic.”

Maya and Damien exchanged a look but wisely kept their mouths shut. It was far too early in the morning to get dragged into their banter.

Harper’s attention returned to Hiro as curiosity got the better of her. She leaned closer and

lowered her voice.

“Are you going to see Emi?”

Hiro nodded before glancing cautiously from side to side, then brought a finger to his lips.

“Shh! Keep your voice down. Someone might…”

“Tsss!” Harper straightened. “It’s not like I said it out loud.”

She gave

him a knowing look before pointing a finger at him.

“And maybe it’s time you started thinking about how you’re going to tell your dad.”

Hiro didn’t even get the chance to respond before a familiar voice came from behind them.

“Tell me what?”

Harper and Hiro exchanged a wide–eyed look.

They turned toward Ken’s study, where Ken and Aiko had just emerged and were walking toward them.

Everyone straightened and greeted the two older men.

Harper, however, suddenly looked far too cheerful.

“Ahehehe… Uncle Aiko! You’re here!”

Ken’s eyes narrowed suspiciously at his daughter.

“Why are you suddenly acting like you have something to hide?”

“What?!” Harper’s voice jumped an entire pitch as she whipped toward him. “Dad! Did you know accusing someone without evidence is a crime? I can sue you for defamation!”

Ken let out a disbelieving huff.

“Ha! I’d like to see you try!”

Unfortunately for Harper, her attempt to divert the conversation failed miserably.

Aiko turned back to his son.

“Hiro. What is it you wanted to tell me?”

Hiro immediately tensed. He rubbed the back of his head, suddenly looking far less composed than usual.

“Um… I… uh…”

Harper’s eyes darted between father and son. Seeing Hiro struggle, she quickly jumped in to

save him.

“Oh! Um… Uncle Aiko, as you probably already know, Ashcroft and I are together now.”

She stepped beside Nick and wrapped both hands around his arm.

“Which means the marriage arrangement between Hiro and me is no longer valid. And that

means…”

She glanced at Hiro before flashing Aiko an overly bright smile.

“Hiro is officially single and ready to mingle!”

Hiro’s eyes widened, but Harper barreled on before he could stop her.

“And he just wanted to tell you that he’s ready to go out there and, you know…” She made a vague gesture with her hand. “Mingle.”

Hiro immediately choked on his own breath and broke into a coughing fit.

Somehow, Harper had only managed to make the situation worse.

Aiko stared at his son, visibly taken aback. Then his expression hardened.

“Don’t you have any shame? You’re a grown man, and you’re letting a woman speak for you?”

Hiro bowed his head.

“Gomen’nasai, otōsan.” (I’m sorry, father.)

Whatever tension had formed between father and son broke when Ken suddenly burst into hearty laughter.

“Aiko, I actually think it’s a good idea. It’s about time your son went out and found you a daughter–in–law. Someone sweet, loving, and proper.”

He gave Harper a pointed glance before looking back at Hiro.

“Your son is far too nice for my daughter. She’s a handful. Let someone else deal with the

chaos.”

Nick choke back a laugh, disguising it with a cough as he tried desperately to keep a straight face. Aiko, meanwhile, gave a firm nod of agreement, while Hiro couldn’t help laughing

outright.

Harper’s mouth fell open.

“What’s so funny?!”

She smacked Hiro on the arm before whipping around toward her father.

“Dad! What exactly are you trying to say?” Her offended gaze immediately shifted to Aiko.” And Uncle Aiko? You’re agreeing with him too?!”

Ken simply pointed at her.

“See? A handful.”

He completely ignored his daughter’s offended gasp and turned his attention to Maya.

Unclaimed Prizes Inside

Tap to claim your bonus before it’s gone

Maya smiled gently and nodded.

“I’m holding up well, Uncle Ken. Thank you for asking. And yourself?”

Ken’s expression softened into a genuine smile.

“Oh, I’m good. I’m good. Have you had breakfast yet?”

“Not yet. We were just heading to the dining hall.”

Harper looked between the two of them before clearing her throat.

“Um, excuse me, Dad. Just in case you didn’t notice, your daughter is standing right here. Care to include me in the conversation?”

Nick’s eyebrows shot up.

He slowly turned toward her, immediately recognizing his own words being thrown back almost exactly as he had said them.

Harper caught his look and gave him a smug little smile.

Ken, however, barely spared her a glance.

“How could I possibly miss you? Your mouth is so loud I could hear you from inside my study.”

Harper’s mouth dropped open.

“Dad!”

She stomped her foot and pouted.

“That’s…”

Ken simply waved her off before she could finish and turned his attention to Nick.

“Ashcroft.”

The smugness vanished from Nick’s face in an instant.

He straightened so quickly he might as well have been a soldier snapping to attention.

“Sir. Good morning.”

Ken regarded him for a moment.

Unclaimed Prizes Inside

Tap to claim your bonus before it’s gone

NICK Visibly swallowed.

“Um… yes. Of course. Absolutely, sir. Whenever you’re free.”

“Dad…” Harper warned, already suspicious of where this was going.

Ken didn’t even look at her as he started toward the dining hall, with Aiko following beside him.

The moment the two older men disappeared from sight, Harper and Hiro visibly relaxed.

Hiro released a long breath.

“That was close!”

A flicker of guilt crossed Harper's face, but it disappeared just as quickly.

"Well, close isn't the same as caught, so… you're welcome!"

Hiro stared at her, momentarily speechless.

But after years of knowing Harper, he should have expected nothing less. He simply shook

his head.

"I'll go ahead. See you guys later."

He turned to leave and had already taken several steps, putting some distance between them, when Maya suddenly called after him.

"Hiro! Wait!"

Chapter 629

the time the four of them reached the medical wing, they found Cecilia standing outside Jaime's room with Dr. Anderson.

The two appeared deep in conversation, neither noticing their approach at first.

Nora, standing a short distance away, was the first to spot them. As Maya drew closer, she stepped forward and greeted her with a graceful curtsy.

"My Lady."

Maya blinked, momentarily caught off guard.

"Oh… um, good morning, Nora."

A faint, awkward smile touched her lips. "You really don't have to do that."

Nora straightened with a warm smile. She understood Maya's discomfort perfectly. After all, Maya hadn't grown up surrounded by royal protocols and formalities. But for Nora, after decades of loyalty and service to the Lockwoods, behaving otherwise simply wouldn't feel right.

Their exchange finally caught Cecilia and Dr. Anderson's attention, and both turned toward them.

“That might be one request she won’t be able to oblige,” Cecilia said gently.

Everyone’s attention shifted to her as she stepped forward, her eyes meeting Maya’s.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Maya replied with a polite smile of her own.

But she immediately noticed something different about Cecilia.

There was a carefulness in her manner. Despite the warmth in her expression, she seemed almost hesitant, as though she wasn’t quite sure how familiar she was allowed to be with Maya yet.

Dr. Anderson greeted them as well, but before anyone could say anything more, Harper suddenly stepped forward, pinched the sides of an imaginary skirt between her fingers, and sank into an exaggerated curtsy.

“Your Royal Highness,” she declared with ridiculous grandeur, dipping her head as though she were being formally presented at court.

For a beat, everyone simply stared at her.

Nick’s mouth hung slightly open, while Damien could only shake his head at Harper’s latest display.

Even Dr. Anderson looked momentarily taken aback.

Nora simply dipped her head and pressed her lips together, clearly fighting a laugh, while Maya was having an equally difficult time holding hers back.

Cecilia, however, merely blinked before an amused smile slowly appeared on her face.

“That really isn’t necessary, Harper. Titles mean very little to me outside the palace.”

“I know.” Harper straightened, completely unapologetic. “But I’ve always dreamed of curtsying to royalty, so I had to do it at least once.”

Cecilia laughed softly.

“Well, in that case, I’m glad I could be of service.”

Harper beamed, apparently satisfied that she could now cross something off an imaginary list of life goals.

Maya shook her head with a faint smile before her attention shifted toward the closed door behind

Dr. Anderson. The humor in her expression disappeared almost immediately.

“Dr. Anderson, how is Jaime?”

“He’s doing well,” Dr. Anderson replied. “His condition has remained stable overnight. His hemoglobin has also stayed stable for roughly the past ten hours, and we haven’t seen any indication of significant ongoing bleeding.”

Maya felt another measure of reassurance settle over her. Dahlia had told her much the same thing earlier, but hearing the confirmation directly from Jaime’s surgeon eased some of the worry still lingering in her chest.

“Does that mean he’s doing okay?”

“So far, yes. And right now, that’s exactly what we want.” Dr. Anderson offered her a reassuring smile.

“How about his new heart?” Maya asked, unable to keep the concern from her voice.

"At this point, it's functioning well, and we're not seeing anything that would suggest an early problem with the graft. But he's still in the immediate postoperative period, so we ll continue monitoring him very closely."

Maya nodded, absorbing every word. The news was reassuring, but she knew the worry wouldn't completely leave her until she saw Jaime open his eyes again and heard his voice.

"Will he… will he wake up soon?"

"He already regained consciousness last night, which was a good sign," Dr. Anderson reminded her gently. "But for now, we still need to keep him sedated."

His tone remained calm and reassuring.

"A heart transplant is a major surgery. Keeping him sedated and on the ventilator allows his body to rest while we monitor how his new heart is functioning and make sure he remains stable."

Maya glanced toward the room again. The image of Jaime being wheeled out of the operating room yesterday was still painfully vivid in her mind. He had looked so small and fragile beneath the tangle of tubes, wires and machines surrounding him that the sight had terrified her.

"Is it normal for him to still need the breathing tube?" she asked, worry creeping into her voice.

Doesn’t it hurt? What if he’s uncomfortable or in pain and he can’t tell us?”

“Yes, it’s normal,” Dr. Anderson assured her. “Don’t worry. The sedation and medication will keep him comfortable, and right now, the tube is simply helping him breathe while his body rests and recovers.”

Maya simply nodded, some of the tension finally easing from her face. Dr. Anderson noticed the change and gave her an encouraging smile.

"If he continues doing this well through the rest of today and overnight, we may begin reducing. his sedation tomorrow and see how he responds Once he's awake enough, stable, and breathing adequately on his own, we can assess whether he's ready to have the tube removed."

Maya’s expression brightened slightly, a flicker of hope breaking through the worry that had been weighing on her.

“That’s good news!”

“It is,” Dr. Anderson agreed. “He still has a long recovery ahead of him, and there are several things we’ll need to watch closely over the coming days and weeks. But for now, he’s moving in the right direction.”

Dr. Anderson glanced toward Jaime’s room before meeting Maya’s eyes again, his smile warming slightly as he offered her one more piece of news he knew would ease her mind.

“I’ve also cleared him for brief visits. But we have to keep them controlled for now, no more than two people at his bedside at a time, and under strict precautions.”

Maya’s eyes immediately brightened. She turned to Damien, who met her gaze with an equally hopeful smile, his quiet reassurance only adding to her relief before she turned back to Dr.

Anderson.

“Can we go see him now?”

“Yes.” A faint smile touched his face. “In fact, I already offered your grandmother the opportunity to go in, but she declined.”

Some of the excitement on Maya’s face gave way to confusion, and a small crease formed between her brows as her gaze shifted to Cecilia.

“You declined? Why?”

Cecilia didn’t answer immediately. Her gaze met Maya’s, but there was an unusual hesitation in her expression.

Nora, who had been quietly observing the exchange, finally spoke for her.

“Because Her Highness didn’t want to go before you, My Lady.”

Maya’s brow furrowed further.

Cecilia cast Nora a warning look, but Nora merely returned it with an apologetic one before continuing.

“Her Highness still isn’t sure she has the right to see the young master without your permission.”

Maya went still.

Her eyes returned to Cecilia, and something inside her softened.

She held Cecilia’s gaze for another moment before a small smile slowly touched her lips.

“You’re our grandmother. Of course you have the right.”

Chapter 630

For a moment, Cecilia stared at her.

The change in her expression was subtle, but Maya caught it. A flicker of surprise passed through her eyes before something warmer and far more vulnerable took its place.

It wasn’t merely Maya giving her permission to see Jaime.

It was the words themselves.

You’re our grandmother.

Such a simple acknowledgment, spoken without ceremony or hesitation, yet it seemed to reach Cecilia more deeply than Maya had expected.

Her lips parted as though she wanted to respond, but no words came. Instead, the warmth in her eyes deepened, carrying an emotion she seemed determined to keep under control.

Maya understood.

And perhaps remembering Dahlia’s words from earlier, she decided not to let the moment become heavier than it needed to be.

Her smile grew a little warmer.

“Come on, Grandma Cecilia,” she said gently, glancing toward Jaime’s room before looking back at Cecilia. “Let’s go see him together.”

Cecilia’s breath caught.

The warmth in those words belonged to a life she never thought she would have the chance to experience. And now, hearing them from Maya so naturally left her momentarily unable to speak.

Her eyes glistened, but she quickly gathered herself and returned Maya’s smile.

“I’d like that very much.”

Dr. Anderson gave them a moment before gesturing toward Nurse Sophia.

“Nurse Sophia will help you get ready before you go in.”

Maya nodded, then looked at Damien. He gave her a small, encouraging smile, understanding without needing to be told that this was something she needed to do with Cecilia.

“I’ll be right here,” he assured her.

Maya smiled before turning back to her grandmother.

“Ready?”

Cecilia nodded.

Together, they followed the nurse to prepare for their visit with Jaime.

A short while later, Maya and Cecilia emerged from one of the adjoining rooms, now dressed in the required PPE.

Dr. Anderson was waiting outside, speaking quietly with Damien and Nicholas, while Harper sat nearby chatting with Nora, apparently keeping the poor woman occupied with an endless stream of questions.

Their conversations stopped when the two women emerged.

Dr. Anderson gave them an encouraging nod before leading them into Jaime’s room.

The room was quiet, save for the soft, steady sounds of the monitors and medical equipment surrounding the bed.

Maya’s eyes immediately went to her brother.

The breathing tube was still secured in place, surrounded by the familiar lines, wires, and monitors that had frightened her so much the day before.

But this time, as she stood there and looked at him, something felt different.

Jaime looked peaceful.

There was no strain on his face, no sign that he was hurting or struggling against the tube. His features were relaxed beneath the sedation, and even the frightening paleness she remembered from yesterday seemed to have eased. A faint hint of color had begun returning to his cheeks, making him look a little more like himself.

Seeing the subtle improvement with her own eyes eased some of the tightness in Maya’s chest.

Jaime was healing.

Her vision blurred before she could stop it. She swallowed against the sudden tightness in her throat, blinking back the tears threatening to spill as she fought to keep her emotions under control.

Dr. Anderson seemed to notice but allowed her a moment before gesturing toward one of the monitors beside the bed.

“This is continuously monitoring his heart rate and rhythm,” he explained. “What you’re seeing here is a steady rhythm from his new heart. His blood pressure and oxygen levels are stable as well, and so far, everything is where we want it to be.”

Maya stared at the monitor, watching the rhythm move steadily across the screen, then shifted her gaze back to Jaime.

“Thank you, Dr. Anderson,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Thank you so much.”

“Of course.” He gave her a warm smile. “If you don’t have any other questions, I’ll leave you both alone with him for a little while.”

He had barely started to turn when Maya stopped him.

“Dr. Anderson?”

He looked back.

“Yes?”

Maya hesitated, glancing at Jaime’s hand resting beside him.

“Can I… can I touch him?”

Dr. Anderson’s expression softened.

“Yes, of course you can. You can hold his hand, talk to him, whatever feels natural. Just be gentle and be careful around the lines and tubes.”

Maya nodded with a grateful smile.

“Okay. Thank you.”

Dr. Anderson left the room, closing the door behind him and leaving Maya and Cecilia alone with Jaime.

Maya moved closer to the bed and tentatively brushed the tips of her fingers against Jaime's hand His skin was warm beneath her touch and that simple warmth brought another wave of relief.

She hesitated only briefly before carefully taking his hand in hers. Mindful of the lines surrounding him, she leaned over and pressed a featherlight kiss to his forehead.

“Hey, buddy,” she whispered close to his ear. “I miss you.”

Her voice trembled, and a tear finally slipped down her cheek.

"You're doing really well. I'm so proud of you." She swallowed against the tightness in her throat. and gently stroked her thumb over his hand "Just take your time and heal, okay? You don’t have to hurry. I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

Another tear followed, and she let out a shaky little breath.

“And I promise, when we get home, I’ll take you to your favorite ice cream place. You can order whatever you want. Even if you make me regret saying that later.”

A soft, tearful laugh escaped her.

She wiped beneath her eyes with the back of her free hand before glancing toward Cecilia.

Her grandmother had remained a few steps away, but tears were already streaming silently down her cheeks, one hand covering her trembling lips.

Maya gave her a small, tearful smile and gestured for her to come closer.

Cecilia drew a deep breath before stepping forward and joining her beside the bed.

Maya looked back at her brother and leaned closer to him again.

“Jaime,” she murmured. “Grandma Cecilia is here with me too.”

Her voice caught slightly, but she managed a small smile. “And when you wake up, you better be extra nice to her, okay? She gave you some of her blood, so technically, we owe her.”

A soft laugh slipped through her tears as she gently stroked his hand.

“Oh, and I have a secret to tell you.”

She leaned closer to his ear, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“She’s Mom’s mother.”

Maya looked at Cecilia, whose eyes immediately filled with fresh tears.

"She really is our grandma." A watery smile spread across Maya's face.as another tear slipped down her cheek. “We have someone we can really call family now, buddy. It's not just the two of us anymore."

A sob escaped Cecilia before she could stop it, and she quickly covered her mouth as her shoulders trembled beneath the force of the emotion she had been trying so hard to contain.

Maya’s own tears fell freely now, her soft sobs joining Cecilia’s as their cries mingled with the steady rhythm of the machines surrounding Jaime’s bed.

In the midst of it all, Maya suddenly felt something.

For a split second, she wondered if she had imagined it, but before she could dismiss the thought, it happened again.

Her sob caught in her throat as her eyes widened.

She had definitely felt something.