Intern 131

Chapter 131

“Fear’s a luxury I don’t have,” he said quietly, voice low and steady. “But… it’s different when I’m responsible for someone else.”

His gaze locked with hers, sharp and steady-both a promise and a warning.

Heat curled low in Maya’s stomach. The air between them shifted again-warm and dense, like the sun had dipped closer just for them.

She tried to keep her voice light, casual, despite the way her pulse betrayed her.

“You’re very sure of yourself.”

“I am,” Damien said, a slow smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “But you… you’re starting to surprise me.”

Maya blinked. “Surprise you?”

Damien didn’t answer immediately. His eyes dropped to the edge of her towel, where a sliver of red bikini peeked through. His jaw flexed once. Then he met her gaze again.

“I knew you were brave,” he said, voice low, almost reverent. “I just didn’t know how much you’d glow when you stopped hiding.”

Glow. The word struck somewhere deep inside her.

And suddenly, the heat of her embarrassment morphed into something else entirely-a quiet pride, and a reckless desire to stay in this moment just a little longer.

Maya looked down, fingers curling around the edge of her towel. Her voice was quiet, almost thoughtful.

“You said fear’s a luxury you don’t have,” she murmured. “But for me… it’s always been the opposite.”

She glanced up, just enough to catch the flicker in his expression before continuing.

“Fear’s been my compass. It’s how I make decisions, how I survive. I’m always calculating what could go wrong. What I could lose.”

Her eyes softened, almost vulnerable. “Jamie. My job. Myself.”

The silence that stretched between them was thick with heat and something heavier-truth.

“But lately…” she added, her voice even lower now, “I’m starting to wonder what happens if 1 stop letting it lead everything.”

Damien took a slow breath, his gaze pinned to her like he was memorizing every word she dared to give.

“You’re already doing it,” he said quietly. “Facing it.”

Maya gave a faint, self-conscious shrug. Her fingers tugged at the towel’s edge again, knuckles white.

“Earlier… on the yacht,” she said, voice low. “You told me to give you time. To trust you.”

A pause. Then, softer-raw.

“I want to ask the same from you.”

Damien didn’t look away. Not even for a second.

His voice dropped-low and sure, like a vow whispered just for her.

“Take all the time you need,” he said, his voice low but unwavering. “I told you-I’m not going anywhere, Maya. And I meant it.”

Maya’s throat tightened.

He said it so easily. So surely. Like staying was the simplest choice in the world.

She looked up at him, eyes faintly shining. Her voice was quiet but steady. “That’s the part I’m still getting used to… people staying.”

Damien didn’t move, but something shifted in his gaze-her words hitting a raw nerve beneath his calm exterior.

They stood like that for a moment, the distant murmur of the ocean wrapping around them, the warm air thick and still. Close, but not touching. Quiet, but heavy with unspoken things.

Then, before either could speak, Harper’s voice rang out from the beach bar, sharp and teasing.

“Hey lovebirds! Are we sunbathing or reapplying trauma?!”

Maya exhaled-just a soft breath-but it felt like the slow release of something heavy she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

She rolled her eyes and laughed quietly, the sound light and real.

Damien’s lips curved into a small smile.

“Saved by the jester.”

As they walked back toward the group side by side, her shoulder grazing his arm, Maya knew -this day had changed something between them.

She felt it in the lingering heat of her skin, in the steady beat of her heart, and most of all, in the quiet promise carried in his silence.

The group lingered in the shade of the cabana, lounging on oversized cushions with fresh fruit drinks in hand. Laughter floated on the breeze, mingling with the gentle crash of waves against the shore.

“Island hopping next?” Harper asked hopefully, her pineapple drink swaying in her hand. Ashcroft raised an eyebrow. “Ambitious. You sure you’re not too full from adrenaline?”

Just then, James approached, polite but firm. “Apologies, but I wouldn’t advise sailing now. The waves get rougher near sunset-strong winds roll in from the west this time of day.”

Harper let out a dramatic sigh, slumping against a pillow. “Ugh. Buzzkill.” She rolled her head toward Damien. “By the way, boss… who’s the male talent Trina booked for this shoot? Anyone we know?”

James smirked, raising an eyebrow. “Ms. Lin, this morning you were fangirling over Mr. Ashcroft. Switching your attention so fast?”

Harper shot him a mock glare. “Hey, I’m a woman with broad interests.”

Ashcroft grinned, folding his arms. “Careful, Horton. You might start feeling threatened by a pineapple drink.”

Damien shook his head without much interest. “No idea. I let Trina handle all casting. I just sign off on the budget.”

“Fair enough,” Harper said, sipping from her straw. “If he’s hot, I’ll personally thank her.”

Then, with a wicked glint in her eye, she turned toward Maya. “What about you, Maya? Any guesses on the male model? Or should I ask-got any celeb crushes you’re secretly hoping shows up shirtless?”

Maya nearly choked on her drink. “What? No-I mean-” She gave nervous laugh, tugging the edge of her towel tighter around her. “Definitely not expecting anyone shirtless.”

But her mind betrayed her almost instantly-with an image that had haunted her since she was thirteen.

Superman. Henry Cavill. The gold standard of unattainable crushes-broad shoulders, quiet strength, eyes that could ruin you.

She used to say no one could beat Henry Cavill. But standing beside Damien….

even Superman might have to move over.

Clearing her throat, she hoped no one noticed the flush creeping up her cheeks.

“Okay, fine. If you must know… I had a thing for Henry Cavill. There. Happy?”

Harper gasped. “Oof. Big muscles and British charm. I get it. Honestly, respect.” Damien’s gaze sharpened the moment it landed on her-dark, unwavering. His smirk was slow, deliberate. Possessive without saying a word.

“You should be careful who you mention in here,” he said quietly-a warning wrapped in velvet, edged with something far softer beneath.

Her heart kicked in her chest. God.

How did he manage to make something so casual feel like a claim?

Like he was quietly, irrevocably marking territory.

Ashcroft leaned forward with a grin. “So we’re looking for someone who can fly and smolder

at the same time. Got it.”

Harper didn’t miss a beat. She jabbed her straw in Maya’s direction with a dramatic gasp. “Oh come on, boss. The woman’s clearly found her real-life Superman-dark suit, broody eyes, corporate empire and all.”

She wiggled her brows. “And I don’t see Henry Cavill jet skiing with her.”

Maya groaned, burying her face in her hands as laughter rippled through the cabana.

Damien? He didn’t laugh.

But the corner of his mouth twitched-and his hand subtly shifted on the armrest, knuckles brushing hers.

Just barely.

But she felt it. Every last volt of it.

She didn’t look at him.

But she felt the claim anyway.

Quiet. Certain. Unshakeable.

Chapter 132

The teasing eventually melted into easy conversation, the kind that flowed without effort. The group lounged across the oversized cushions, the late afternoon sun casting everything in a soft, golden haze. Someone ordered another round of drinks, and soon Harper had everyone laughing with stories from the PR trenches-like the time a junior associate sent out a press release that began with “Dear Insert Name Here,” or how she once caught two interns strategizing” a little too enthusiastically in the supply closet.

Even James couldn’t hold back his laughter.

Maya giggled until her sides hurt, surprised by how light everything felt-how easy. But what caught her most off guard… was him.

Damien wasn’t just composed.

He was at ease.

Shirt sleeves rolled up, one hand lazily cradling his glass, he leaned back against the cushions like the weight of the world had finally loosened its grip. He actually laughed-really laughed-when Harper reenacted a dramatic PR meltdown. And when Ashcroft made a joke about someone packing a ring light for a hike, Damien shook his head with a quiet chuckle, smiling in a way Maya hadn't seen before.

Even James blinked like he was seeing a rare celestial event.

Ashcroft raised a brow, amused. "Well, damn."

Harper blinked. "Okay, what is happening right now? Who is this man? I've worked under you for almost four years and I swear this is the first time you've laughed like a functioning adult.

Damien just smirked and took another sip. "Don't get used to it."

"Too late," Harper grinned, nudging Maya with her elbow. "I'm blaming you for this."

A little while later, just before dusk, the group finally decided to head back to their rooms. The sun had dipped lower in the sky, painting Isla Aurelia in golden tones that shimmered across the water and gilded the edges of everything it touched.

Maya lingered behind for just a moment, letting the breeze dance across her sun-warmed skin, her heart still buoyed by laughter and the sight of Damien so… unguarded.

She sensed it before she turned.

He hadn’t moved either.

Damien stood a few steps away, one hand tucked into his pocket, the other hanging loose at his side. His head was tilted slightly, the light casting soft shadows across the strong lines of his jaw. But it was his eyes-dark, unreadable, and locked on her-that made her breath catch.

He didn’t speak.

He didn’t need to.

There was something in his gaze-a tether. Quiet. Certain. Like he wasn’t quite ready to leave this moment either.

Then Harper looped an arm through hers and gave her a playful tug.

“Come on, Maya 2.0. Time to rinse off the sea and look semi-respectable for dinner.”

Maya smiled, glancing away just as Damien finally turned toward the path back. But the warmth in her chest lingered.

And she had a feeling his did too.

Back in their respective suites, they took time to freshen up-showers humming in the background, the soft rustle of fabric and clinking of hangers carrying faintly through open balcony doors left ajar to catch the ocean breeze. The island seemed to exhale with them, slowing as the day slipped into evening.

Dinner was a relaxed affair-seafood platters, grilled vegetables, fresh bread, and easy laughter under twinkling overhead lights. Mary lightened the mood with a hilarious story about a failed HR stunt-a rare glimpse of levity from the woman everyone usually saw as the strict, no-nonsense HR lead. Meanwhile, Harper couldn't stop nudging Maya under the table every time Damien quietly refilled her water, gently buttered her bread, or carefully passed her a perfectly seared scallop, each small gesture making her heart flutter in secret.

After dessert, as the plates were cleared away, Harper clapped her hands once. "Alright, everyone-listen up! I know we're all grown adults with jobs, titles, and KPIs, but just hear me

out…"

Ashcroft narrowed his eyes, clearly suspicious. "Uh-oh. That sounds dangerous."

Harper grinned mischievously. "Campfire bonding time. And I mean real bonding. Blankets, firelight, drinks… and maybe a little game?"

Chapter 133

Sienna tilted her head curiously. “What kind of game?”

Harper’s eyes sparkled. “The only game that matters when you’ve got firelight, cocktails, and unresolved tension in the air.”

Jessa-the quiet one-groaned softly. “Oh no.”

With a dramatic flourish, Harper raised her hand. “Truth or Dare, baby.”

The fire crackled to life just beyond the beachfront, encircled by plush outdoor loungers and wide beanbags arranged in a loose ring. Soft instrumental music floated from hidden speakers, blending with the rhythmic rush of waves nearby. Torches flickered along the path, casting a golden glow that made the entire setup feel like a dream wrapped in firelight.

Harper was the first to plop down onto a beanbag, arms stretched wide like she owned the island. “This is giving tropical secrets and emotional breakthroughs, I love it already.”

Ashcroft lounged beside Harper, drink in hand, legs stretched out with the effortless ease of a man who always found the most comfortable spot. “You say that now. Just wait until it’s your turn and someone asks about the naughtiest thing you’ve done on the clock.”

Harper grinned, unfazed. “Bold of you to assume I’d hesitate.”

Maya sat on Harper’s other side, curled comfortably with her knees tucked under her, and next to her were Damien and James-both quiet, both watching with differing degrees of suspicion and amusement.

James, in particular, looked like he hadn't planned on joining at all, but Harper had quite literally tugged him down onto the cushion beside the boss with a no-nonsense "You're bonding, deal with it."

On Ashcroft's other side was Lee, who'd suffered the same fate-dragged in by the arm with no chance to protest. He now sat cross-legged, already snacking on roasted marshmallows like this was a weekly ritual.

Trina, Sienna, Jessa, and Aimee had claimed the opposite arc of the circle, nestled into the cushions with amused smiles and glasses of chilled wine. Mary pulled up a low seat nearby, lifting her brows as she settled in.

"Just remember-HR is present, people."

Harper didn't miss a beat. "Perfect. Then we're either in very good hands… or about to get professionally reprimanded."

Laughter rippled around the circle, and even Mary cracked a smile as she shook her head.

Harper clapped her hands once, drawing everyone's attention. "Okay-before we start, let's all agree: whatever happens inside this circle stays in this circle. Nothing gets used against anyone later. So we have to be honest, carefree, and just enjoy. Deal?"

A chorus of murmured "deal"s and raised glasses followed.

Harper rubbed her hands together, eyes gleaming with mischief. “Excellent. Let the chaos begin.”

She scanned the circle with a grin. “I’ll start. Truth or Dare… Mr. Ashcroft?”

He didn’t flinch. “Hit me.”

“Truth,” Harper purred. “Have you ever sent a steamy photo to someone?”

A ripple of laughter went around the circle.

Ashcroft raised his glass like it was a trophy. “Not just one. Multiple. But all tasteful. Lighting matters, people.”

Sienna chuckled behind her wine glass. “Define ‘tasteful.”

“Artistic angles. Maybe a Greek statue reference or two.”

Laughter exploded from the group. Even Maya laughed, a little too hard, partly to diffuse her own nerves. She could feel Damien’s eyes on her again. When she looked up, he didn’t look

away.

“Okay, okay,” Harper said, “Ashcroft, your turn to ask.”

Ashcroft’s eyes glinted as he scanned the group. “Mary.”

Mary held up a hand. “Truth only. No dares. I have teenage children, I’ve seen enough chaos.” “Fair enough. What’s something you did as a teenager that you never told your parents?”

Mary smirked. “I snuck out of the house to meet a boy. He was the one with the motorcycle. I told my parents I was at a debate meeting.”

Ashcroft looked delighted. “Mary, you rebel.”

More laughter, more teasing. The fire popped and crackled, flames rising higher as the wind shifted slightly.

Soon it circled back.

Harper turned, lips twitching. “Maya. Truth or Dare?”

Maya hesitated, her hands warming against her glass of juice. Everyone turned to her, eyes twinkling with curiosity and affection.

“I’ll go easy,” Harper promised, voice softer now.

Maya exhaled. “Truth.”

A beat of silence passed. Then Harper smiled warmly. “When’s the last time you really, truly let yourself want something?”

The question settled like ash on skin-soft, weightless, but impossible to shake.

Maya blinked, lips parting. Her gaze drifted briefly across the fire.

“Today,” she said quietly. “Just.. today.”

Damien’s hand twitched faintly against his glass, knuckles flexing once before stilling.

For a second, no one spoke. Then Ashcroft leaned in, trying to lighten the mood. “Alright, someone give this girl a dare next. She’s got mystery and poetry all wrapped in one.”

The fire crackled louder, but in that hush between laughter and the next question, Maya swore she saw the corner of Damien's mouth twitch-just barely-into a knowing smile.

Then Ashcroft turned toward him with a glint in his eye.

"Alright, Mr. Stoneface. Truth or Dare?"

Damien didn't flinch.

"Dare."

That caught them all off guard. Even Harper sat up straighter.

"Well, well," she said, eyes gleaming. "Did not have that on my bingo card."

Ashcroft laughed. "You sure, man? Last chance to back out."

Damien met his gaze coolly. "I don't back out."

That was when Harper practically clapped. “Oh, this is going to be fun.” She leaned forward, pretending to think-when in truth, she already had something locked and loaded.

“Okay. Your dare…”

She dragged it out, savoring the build-up.

“…is to whisper something-anything-into Maya’s ear. Something that would make the rest

of us blush.”

The circle erupted with hoots and scandalized gasps. Even James choked on his drink.

Maya froze. “What?” she half-laughed, half-whispered, eyes wide.

Damien didn’t hesitate. He turned slowly toward Maya, sitting just next to him, and leaned in close enough that only she could hear.

His voice dropped to a low, velvety whisper, warm against her ear:

“If I had you to myself tonight, I’d start by undoing that little tie at the back of your dress… with my teeth.”

His voice brushed fire across her skin. And then, just like that, he pulled back-leaving her throat dry, and the rest of the circle none the wiser.

Her spine tingled. She couldn't breathe-didn't want to. Not when a whisper had just rewritten every rule she thought she'd lived by.

Chapter 134

For a beat, no one spoke.

The fire crackled softly. The ocean whispered in the distance.

Maya's heart thundered in her chest-but everything else had gone still.

The circle was silent.

Everyone holding their breath.

Then-

Harper blinked, swallowed hard-then knocked back the rest of her vodka in one dramatic gulp.

She exhaled sharply, eyes wide and shining. “Damn! I think I just had an orgasm.”

Ashcroft chuckled low, swirling his drink.

“Leave it to Damien to turn a game into foreplay.”

Maya’s cheeks flushed crimson. She wished she could melt into the cushions-or disappear altogether. But Damien simply settled back beside her, cool and calm, though the fire in his eyes never wavered.

Harper leaned in with a wicked grin, eyes gleaming. “Okay, now that the boss just blew the roof off-no more baby questions. Let’s get to the good stuff. Juicy secrets, wild confessions

maybe even a little scandal.”

She glanced around the circle with a devilish grin.

“Who’s ready to spill something they’ve never told anyone here?”

Ashcroft chuckled, swirling his drink.

“I like where this is going. Bring it on.”

Maya felt the heat rise again, but this time it wasn’t just from Damien’s gaze-it was the thrill of the unknown waiting to come out under the firelight.

Harper grinned, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Alright, easy one to start-who here is no longer a virgin?”

Almost every hand shot up instantly-Ashcroft, James, Harper herself, even Mary, Aimee,

Trina, Sienna, and Jessa-all of them except Maya.

Mary smiled warmly, her grounding presence shining through. “Well, I have three grown kids now, so yeah-been around the block a few times.”

Aimee nodded with her usual no-nonsense air. “Two teenagers at home. I’m pretty sure I’ve long graduated from that club.”

Trina gave a playful wink. “Let’s just say I’m way past that point-and loving life.”

Sienna chimed in, grinning as she sipped her wine, “Married, yes. No kids yet-but trust me, that doesn’t mean we’re not having fun trying.”

Jessa, quietly observant as always, offered a soft smile. “I’m engaged-wedding’s at the end of the year. But… let’s just say I had my wild phase before the ring locked me down.”

The group erupted in playful cheers and teasing whistles.

Trina grinned, nudging her gently. “I knew there was fire under all that calm energy.”

Ashcroft raised his drink. “Here’s to retired wild phases and future husbands who never need to know the full story.”

Jessa just chuckled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, eyes twinkling with mischief.

The laughter was still echoing when the circle’s attention shifted. Slowly, all eyes fell on Maya.

She felt the warmth rise to her cheeks, a slow-burning flush creeping in. Her gaze dropped to her hands, fingers loosely laced in her lap, as the silence stretched just long enough to make her skin prickle.

Ashcroft raised an eyebrow, smirking. “Well, well. Looks like we’ve got a wild one here.”

Harper leaned in with a wink. “Don’t worry, Maya. There’s still plenty of time to catch up.”

That drew another round of laughter-but Maya only smiled, soft and unreadable, her fingers lightly tracing the rim of her glass.

The fire crackled, the group's energy still high, but something subtle shifted in the air.

Then Damien leaned back, his gaze sweeping the circle as he tilted his head-voice low, deliberately casual.

"Alright. Let's lighten it up. Who was your first kiss?"

Laughter sparked instantly around the circle, a few people groaning, others chuckling at the

memory.

Harper grinned wide. "Mine was in seventh grade behind the science lab. Total disaster. He missed my mouth and kissed my nose."

Ashcroft snorted into his drink. "You know mine. It was a dare-classic spin the bottle situation. She tasted like sour gummy worms and regret."

Laughter rippled around the circle again, Harper nearly choking on her wine.

Chapter 135

Trina raised her hand like it was a boardroom meeting. “Summer camp. Drama counselor. Still my claim to fame.”

Mary rolled her eyes affectionately. “I was sixteen. He was sweet. Now he’s bald and sells insurance.”

Sienna added with a laugh, “Mine kissed me mid-sentence. I choked on my drink and still said yes to a second date.”

Jessa smiled, cheeks pink. “Mine was under the bleachers. Classic, right?”

Aimee deadpanned, “High school boyfriend. We lasted two weeks. I broke up with him because he hated dogs.”

James, ever the shy one, rubbed the back of his neck. “Mine was… prom. She kissed me first. I didn’t know where to put my hands.”

Lee laughed. “Grade ten. It was after detention. We were cleaning the blackboard and she just went for it. Best punishment ever.”

The circle chuckled, warmth and nostalgia weaving through their laughter. Then, as the ripple faded, their eyes inevitably shifted to Maya.

She felt the warmth rise to her cheeks, gaze dropping to her lap. The truth was, she'd never had a first kiss-never been dared, never found the right moment, or maybe she'd just been too afraid to take it.

The silence stretched a beat before Maya looked up, her voice soft but steady.

"I haven't… had my first kiss yet."

A quiet hush settled over the circle-gentle, reverent-like even the night was leaning in to listen.

Harper offered a warm smile, breaking the stillness with a teasing glint.

"Well… that just raised the stakes for tonight."

Ashcroft shook his head with a slow grin.

"You're going to make someone very lucky."

Then-

"I haven't had mine either."

All heads turned. A few people blinked. Harper actually choked on her drink.

Even Maya stared at him, stunned.

No one was buying it.

But Damien's gaze didn't waver. It was sharp and unflinching-but beneath the cool exterior, something tender flickered in his eyes.

"I'm not lying," he said simply. "We're all adults here. I've slept with women-but I've never kissed anyone. Not really. Especially not on the lips."

A few gasps. Someone muttered "No way," under their breath.

"Kissing…" he continued, "is too intimate. It's not just skin. It's connection. It's real. And I wasn't about to give that to anyone who didn't mean something."

He shifted subtly, voice dipping low-meant only for her.

"But I'm looking forward to it."

Maya’s heart hammered, but this time it wasn’t fear. It was possibility.

Harper leaned in close, her eyes sparkling with mischief and something wickedly amused.

“If this is the guy you’re giving your V-card to…” She let her voice drop low, slow and sultry.” Girl, you’re not just lucky-you’re about to cash in on the hottest jackpot of your life. Hope you’re ready to be absolutely ruined… in the best possible way.”

Trina lifted her wine glass gracefully, eyes twinkling as she took a slow sip.

“Well, if Maya’s giving that kind of first to him, then boss is just as lucky.” She smiled knowingly. “Sweet, innocent, and still pure at 25? That’s damn near a unicorn these days. I lost mine at 17 and didn’t look back.”

Mary nodded, folding her hands in her lap with a knowing smile.

”

“Agreed. And let’s be real-since Ms. Thompson joined the company, the boss has definitely mellowed. HR’s been processing way fewer terminations lately.”

Aimee chuckled, arms casually crossed.

“Same here. Finance hasn’t had to fight tooth and nail for budget approvals lately. Just saying.”

Ashcroft raised his glass again, eyes gleaming with playful mischief.

“Well, damn, D! If one day you two get married, are you giving everyone a handsome raise?”

Damien lifted his glass with a sly grin, shooting Maya a meaningful look.

“Don’t worry,” he added low, “I’m generous when it counts.”

The fire crackled, laughter bubbled up around them, and for the first time in a long while, Maya let herself believe in the promise of new beginnings.

Chapter 136

After a bottle of vodka and more stories that had everyone laughing and sharing, the night wound down. One by one, they called it quits and retreated back to their rooms, the soft shuffle of footsteps and closing doors marking the end of the evening.

Before they dispersed, Trina gathered her team with a quick reminder. “Alright, ladies – don’t forget, 8 a.m. sharp in the lobby tomorrow. We’ll have breakfast together first, then start prepping for the shoot. Let’s be ready to bring our A-game.”

The group murmured their agreements, some still smiling from the night's fun, others already feeling the weight of the busy day ahead.

Maya lingered a moment longer by the fire, the last embers glowing like fading stars. She let the warmth of the night settle in her bones, grounding her. Tomorrow would come-with its demands and lights and camera flashes-but for now, this quiet belonged to her.

Then Damien sat beside her.

No words. No fanfare. Just the soft shift of weight on the cushion, and the low hum of his presence folding into hers. Around them, the fire crackled faintly, the ocean whispering in the distance-an intimate soundtrack to a night slipping into stillness.

She didn't have to look to know it was him. She felt him in her skin.

He glanced her way. Firelight gilded his profile in flickering golds and shadows. The air between them thickened-tender, charged. As if the whole world had paused, waiting.

"Damien," she said softly.

He turned his head, surprised by the sound of his name on her lips. "Hmm?"

She drew in a slow breath, letting the salty breeze fill her lungs-as if it could carry away the last of her hesitation. Earlier, she'd watched the women around her laugh without fear, own their stories, live unfiltered. For the first time in a long time, it had stirred something inside her. Bravery. Desire.

A quiet voice, laced with vulnerability, slipped from her lips-barely above a whisper.

"I don't know what this is… or where it might lead," she said, her fingers curling into the fabric of her dress. "I don't know the end game-if there even is one. But…"

Her eyes met his-steady now, despite the storm inside her. Skin tingling from how close he sat. Heart pounding.

"This is the risk I'm willing to take. With you."

The words slipped out like a breath she'd been holding for years. And then silence-stretched and charged-settled around them, thick as the heat in her chest.

Their eyes locked. Fully. Finally.

And held.

Damien didn't move.

Didn’t speak.

His gaze searched hers-slow and reverent-like he was memorizing her. Like he couldn’t quite believe she was real.

A soul he didn’t believe he deserved… but ached for all the same.

The firelight carved golden shadows across his face as his hand rose-unhurried, sure- fingers curling beneath her chin. Tilting her toward him with a touch so gentle it made her chest tighten.

His voice when it came was a low, rough thing. Intimate. Possessive.

“The end game is us,” he murmured, thumb brushing lightly along her jaw.

“And I’m the only one who gets to be your first.”

The truth was, she’d never had a first kiss. Not because she hadn’t wanted to-but because no one had ever made her feel safe enough to want it – Until now.

Then-slowly-he leaned in and kissed her.

Not hard. Not rushed.

Soft at first. Like a question.

But when she kissed him back-when her hands curled into his shirt like she needed to hold on-everything shifted.

The kiss deepened.

His mouth slanted over hers, slow and consuming, like he was starving and she was the only thing he'd ever wanted to taste.

Her breath hitched, fingers tightening around the edge of the seat as heat bloomed low and fast in her belly. It wasn't just the kiss-it was everything behind it. The build-up. The craving.

The tension that had coiled between them for so long it now burned.

It wasn't frantic.

It was hungry.

Measured. Deliberate. Intimate.

His palm flattened against her back, drawing her closer. Her fingers found his collarbone, brushing skin- and the sound he made in response was a low, broken groan that sent shivers all the way down her spine.

Every slow drag of his lips against hers felt like a claiming.

Every breathless sigh a promise of more.

And when he finally pulled back, her lips tingled, her heart pounded, and her body felt suspended in something far more dangerous than gravity.

They sat there-breathless, trembling. His forehead resting against hers. Firelight flickering like it, too, was holding its breath.

Then Damien whispered, voice still hoarse-

“I hope I didn’t disappoint.”

Maya let out a small, dizzy laugh. Smiled.

Then pressed her lips to the corner of his mouth.

“It’s… better than I ever imagined.”

A quiet beat. Then she spoke again-this time softer, more serious.

“I just need you to be honest with me,” she whispered. “Even if the truth is ugly.”

His answer came without hesitation.

“I will.” His thumb brushed over her cheek. “I swear it, Maya. I’ll never lie to you. And I want the same from you.”

She nodded. “I promise.”

Then, faintly, like she wasn’t sure she wanted to break the moment-

“What happens now?”

Chapter 137

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Every breathless sigh a promise of more.

And when he finally pulled back, her lips tingled, her heart pounded, and her body felt suspended in something far more dangerous than gravity.

They sat there-breathless, trembling. His forehead resting against hers. Firelight flickering like it, too, was holding its breath.

Then Damien whispered, voice still hoarse-

“I hope I didn’t disappoint.”

Maya let out a small, dizzy laugh. Smiled.

Then pressed her lips to the corner of his mouth.

“It’s… better than I ever imagined.”

A quiet beat. Then she spoke again-this time softer, more serious.

“I just need you to be honest with me,” she whispered. “Even if the truth is ugly.”

His answer came without hesitation.

“I will.” His thumb brushed over her cheek. “I swear it, Maya. I’ll never lie to you. And I want the same from you.”

She nodded I promise”

Then, faimly like she wasn’t sure whe wanted to break the moment

“What happens now!

“Now… I walk you back to your room.”

His eyes dropped to the small tie at the back of her dress.

“Before I forget where we are. Before I stop caring and start doing what I said I’d do… with that littl

ribbon.”

Heat climbed her cheeks. She blushed-and laughed, breathlessly.

But Damien wasn’t done.

He leaned in again, lips brushing the shell of her ear, voice a velvet threat.

“If we stay here any longer… I won’t just kiss you.”

Her breath caught. Hard.

His jaw flexed. His eyes dropped to her mouth again-hungry-then lifted back to hers, dark and full of restraint that looked like it was tearing him apart.

“But soon…” he whispered. “Very soon.”

A pause. One final look.

“For now-I need a cold shower.”

And when their eyes met again, something passed between them. Wordless. Final.

There was no going back now.

Not after this.

Not after he’d touched her like she was his.

Because deep down… she already was.

Damien stood first, offering his hand.

Maya took it.

No hesitation this time.

His fingers curled around hers as they walked back-slow, unhurried-past the flickering embers past the quieted path. The ocean whispered beside them, stars stretched above like silent witnesses

He didn’t speak. Neither did she. But the air between them fell full-thick wordless

something real and

By the time they reached her doubt her heart

part was

pounding again. Not from nerves he

but from

knowing.

Knowing something had shifted tonight. Irrevocably.

Damien brushed a knuckle down her cheek, then dropped her hand slowly-like it pained him to let

“Goodnight, Maya.”

His voice was husky. Controlled. Barely.

She stepped inside.

Turned once more to look at him.

And whispered back,

“Goodnight, Damien.”

The door closed with a soft click.

And on the other side, Maya leaned against it, fingers to her lips, heartbeat thrumming wild in her chest.

She wasn’t dreaming.

He chose her.

And tonight… she chose him right back.

On the other side of the door, something lingered-heat, tension, the ghost of a kiss that refused to fade.

Two hearts, just inches apart, separated by a sliver of wood and a thousand unspoken thoughts. Damien stood just beyond the door, hand still resting on the knob long after it clicked shut Silence pressed in, but his pulse was anything but calm.

Maya

The image of her soft in the hallway light, cheeks flushed, lips slightly parted from thea kiss- burned behind his eyes That kiss had undone him Not because it was perfect, but because it was hers. Honest New Unscripted

Something he hadn't dared let himself crave in years

He exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his has and turned away from the door His room was still and dark, but he could feel her presence like it lingered in the au between them Like it tied

itself to his skin.

He hadn't meant to say all of that by the fire. Hadn't planned to peel himself open in front of a

crowd. But the second she admitted it—her truth—he couldn't stop himself. He wanted her to

know she wasn't alone in that kind of intimacy. That he didn't take it lightly either.

That he wouldn't take her lightly.

He moved to the window, pushed it open, and let the sea air cool the heat still thrumming beneath

his skin. A kiss. Just a kiss. And yet… his hands were still clenched like he was holding on to

something fragile. Like he was afraid to lose it.

Because he was.

She could walk away tomorrow. Change her mind. Decide this world-his world-wasn't worth the

risk.

But she hadn't tonight.

Tonight, she kissed him back. And that kiss? It wasn't a game. It wasn't strategy. It was her

choosing him in return. And for the first time in years, that felt like hope.

Real. Terrifying. Hope.

He whispered it to the stars, barely loud enough for the ocean to catch.

“I won’t fuck this up.”

Chapter 138

The words drifted into the silence like a prayer-gravel-soft and gut-deep.

A promise not just to the night, but to her.

And on the other side of the wall, Maya felt it. Not in sound, but in instinct. In the quiet press of something unspoken blooming inside her chest.

Inside her room, Maya moved slowly, as if afraid too much motion might break the spell of the night.

She walked to the bathroom, fingers reaching for the delicate tie at the back of her dress-the tie. The one Damien had murmured about undoing with his teeth, voice dark and low against

her skin.

Her hands trembled slightly as she loosened it, his touch still echoing along her body like a phantom.

The shower fogged up fast, steam curling around her like memory.

When the hot water hit her skin, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes, letting it all come flooding back –

Their first kiss. Her first kiss.

The way he had looked at her.

The way he had held her.

As if that kiss had cost him something-something raw. Like it stripped him of control he rarely surrendered.

And she had kissed him back. Willingly.

When she emerged, skin flushed from heat, she felt lighter. But her chest was still tight with everything unsaid, everything unspoken yet felt. She wrapped herself in a towel, padding barefoot to the nightstand.

Her eyes landed on the journal-the one Damien had given her weeks ago, back when she still wasn't sure if she belonged in his world at all.

She reached for it now, fingers grazing the familiar spine. The matching pen slid smoothly between her fingers.

She sat on the edge of the bed, flipped to a fresh page, and let herself breathe.

And for a long moment, she just stared. Then she began to write.

July 20-Isla Aurelia

He kissed me… and I kissed him back.

It was my first kiss-our first kiss. And it felt so good.

Not just because of the heat.

But because it said everything we haven’t dared speak aloud.

All the moments he stared too long.

All the silences that meant more than words.

All the times I was too scared to ask, and he was too guarded to offer.

Tonight… it felt like we finally met in the middle.

No titles. No rules. No masks.

Just two people standing in the quiet, choosing each other.

I've never wanted to trust someone like this.

I've never let myself.

But when he looked at me like that…

I wanted to fall.

Or maybe… I already have. I'm just falling deeper now.

I found the courage to tell him that I'm willing to take the risk-with him.

Is it worth it? I don’t know what the end game is.

But he said… the end game is us.

And I believe him.

Damien Blackwood… I have nothing to offer you but my pure and honest love.

My loyalty. My faithfulness. My heart.

Please take care of it.

I promise-I’ll take care of yours too.

She didn’t know how long she sat there after the final words dried on the page. But eventually, the silence settled around her again-not heavy this time, but comforting. Like a quiet promise.

She closed the journal gently, setting it back on the nightstand.

Then she turned off the lamp, slipped beneath the cool sheets, and let herself curl into the memory of his mouth on hers, the way his breath had caught when she touched his jaw, the quiet rasp of his voice when he said he’d never kissed anyone-not really-until her.

The pillow cradled her head as she exhaled slowly, letting the warmth of the moment wrap around her like the tide easing over the shore.

And for the first time in a long time… she didn't fall asleep worrying about the morning. She fell asleep remembering how it felt to be chosen-and how it felt to choose him back.

Dawn's first light slipped softly through the curtains, painting the room in pale gold and gentle warmth.

Chapter 139

Maya stirred beneath the covers, her breath slow and steady, but the echo of last night's kiss lingered-like a secret flame glowing quietly inside her.

Outside, the island was waking up. The distant call of seabirds, the soft rustle of palm leaves in the breeze, and the promise of a new day filled the air.

Stretching, she reached for her journal on the nightstand-a tether to the night's truth-and smiled faintly. Whatever the day held, she knew this was just the beginning.

Downstairs, the murmur of early voices drifted up-the team gathering, ready for breakfast and the start of the shoot.

Maya slid out of bed, heart steady but hopeful, and prepared to meet the day… and whatever came next.

The morning sun leaked through the sheer drapes, warming the edge of the bed he'd fallen asleep on last night-finally-after hours of tossing and turning with Maya stuck in his head.

That kiss had ruined him.

Not in a bad way. In the kind of way that left a man aching, hard, and helpless.

She had kissed him back.

She tasted better than he'd ever imagined-sweet, a little shy, but with a quiet hunger that clung to his skin long after she slipped into her room and closed the door.

He'd taken a cold shower after that, standing under the stream with his hands braced on the tiles, trying to breathe her out of his system.

It didn't work.

All he could think about was the curve of her lips, the feel of her in his arms, the way her breath had hitched when he kissed her deeper. He was still hard when he got out of the shower, towel slung low, mind spinning.

So yeah… he gave in.

Stroked himself slow, imagining her flushed and breathless beneath him. Once wasn't enough. Neither was the second time. Even after he came, he was still thinking of her.

Eventually, exhaustion won. He passed out with a hand over his abs and her name stuck in his throat.

Now, groggy and warm under the covers, he reached for his phone.

Damien: Good morning. Are you awake?

Her reply came quick.

Maya: Yes. Getting ready to head downstairs to meet the rest.

He smiled.

Damien: Did you sleep well?

Maya: I did. How about you?

Damien: It was okay. Been thinking about you… wish you were beside me.

A pause. Then-

Maya: I've been thinking about you too.

His pulse kicked up again.

Damien: Wait for me. Let's have breakfast together.

Maya: Okay.

Around 7:00 a.m., a gentle knock pulled Maya from the final swipe of lip balm in the mirror.

She crossed the room, her heart already lifting.

When she opened the door, there he was-tall, slightly tousled, and freshly showered in a crisp black tee that somehow made him even more dangerous-looking.

She gave him a soft smile. “Hi.”

Damien’s lips curved, warm and knowing. “Hi. Good morning.”

“Good morning,” she echoed, voice shy but full of something that hadn’t been there days ago.

Then he stepped forward and kissed her.

It wasn’t rushed-just a soft press of lips, familiar now but still electrifying. Her hand grazed his chest, ready to lean in deeper, when-

Click.

The door across the hall swung open. Out staggered Ashcroft, in sunglasses and last night’s shirt, looking like he’d been hit by a freight train made of rum and regret.

“Oh shit!” he croaked, blinking at them. “Guess you two had your first kiss, huh? Well done, brother! I’m proud of you.”

Damien groaned. “You look like hell.”

“I feel like hell,” Ashcroft grumbled, rubbing his temples. “My head’s pounding like a fucking drumline.”

And just then-another door opened.

Harper appeared with an oversized scrunchie barely holding up her hair and a look of sheer defeat on her face. She squinted at the scene: Maya blushing, Damien with his hand still lightly on her waist, and Ashcroft in last night's clothes.

"Oh hey!"

Maya blinked. "Harper… you look…"

"Don't." Harper raised a hand. "Don't even say it. I know. I look like a drunken extra from a

pirate shipwreck. That vodka hit harder than my last breakup-and that one had therapy bills..

She paused, eyes narrowing. "Wait… what did I miss?"

Ashcroft raised a finger dramatically. "They're officially on first base. I caught 'em kissing. Right here. In the open hallway. Bold move."

Harper's eyes went wide, then she squealed. "Wait, shut up! Seriously?! Oh my god, finally!"

Maya buried her face in her hands, laughing into her palms. Damien just sighed, pulling her a little closer as if shielding her from the chaos.

“We were trying to have a quiet morning,” he muttered dryly.

“Key word: were,” Maya said, still giggling.

By the time they made it downstairs, the dining area was already buzzing with early risers. Ocean light spilled through the wide glass doors, casting everything in a golden glow.

Damien’s hand hovered at the small of her back as they walked in-not quite touching, but close enough that her skin tingled from the phantom heat.

Ashcroft had quickly freshened up and joined them at the buffet line, sunglasses still in place like a battle shield. Harper, on the other hand, had collapsed into the nearest chair, sunglasses askew and mumbling something about electrolytes.

Maya glanced at Damien as they grabbed their plates.

“So…” she murmured, eyes flicking to his, “first base?”

He chuckled, the low sound curling down her spine. “I can’t wait for what Ashcroft calls second.”

She laughed, then looked away, cheeks warm.

They filled their plates-tropical fruit, eggs, toasted coconut bread-and made their way to the long communal table outside on the terrace.

She sat beside Damien, their knees brushing under the table. Every little contact felt amplified this morning. Charged. Real.

And yet, so natural it scared her a little.

Harper plopped into the seat across from them, groaning as she reached for her coffee.

“I swear I’ll never drink again.”

Damien raised a brow. “You said that last night.”

“You and your brilliant ideas,” Ashcroft muttered from a chair nearby, head in his hands.

Maya smiled as she peeled a slice of mango, catching Damien watching her again.

He didn’t look away this time.

Something had shifted. Last night had cracked open a new space between them-one that felt both fragile and unstoppable.

She didn’t know where it would lead.

But for now, it was enough to sit beside him in the morning sun… their secret no longer a secret, and the ghost of their first kiss still warm on her lips.

Chapter 140

The group was mid-laughter-Harper reenacting Ashcroft’s dramatic drunken fall from the night before, complete with flailing arms and exaggerated sound effects-when the sound of footsteps cut through the morning buzz. Confident. Steady. A little too polished for island air.

Then came the voice.

Maya?

Clear. Familiar. Just loud enough to slice through the low hum of conversation, commanding attention like it belonged there.

Maya froze, a piece of fresh mango skewered on her fork.

That voice.

It tugged at something buried-something she hadn't thought about in a long time.

She blinked, slowly turning toward the sound.

And there he was.

A tall man in a crisp resort polo and perfectly tailored linen pants, striding toward their table like he owned the view. Dark blonde hair swept back just-so, sun-kissed in all the right places. Clear, striking blue eyes. A sharp jawline, scruffed with designer stubble.

He looked like he'd stepped straight off the cover of a luxury travel magazine.

"Maya Thompson?"

The name sounded foreign coming from him now. Too formal. Too detached. This was someone who used to lean over her sketchpad and call her May, grinning while teasing her about shading lines that made no sense to him.

Maya stood slowly, her chair scraping softly against the stone floor.

“Ethan?”

His face lit up. “It is you!”

Before she could react, he stepped forward and wrapped her in a warm hug.

Maya froze-caught off guard, uncomfortable and stiff, her hands dropping awkwardly to her

sides.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Damien’s jaw tighten, his fist curling on the table as he shifted forward, ready to rise.

She gently but firmly pushed Ethan away-not rudely, just enough to create space.

Damien stilled.

His elbow lifted from the table, spine straightening in one fluid motion. Not tense, but no longer relaxed. On guard. Watching.

For a second, something flickered in Ethan's eyes-surprise, maybe even hurt. But it vanished just as quickly, replaced by a practiced, easy smile. He recovered with the kind of charm that had always come naturally to him… at least on the surface.

"Ah… yeah, it's me," she said, forcing a small, uneasy smile.

Harper's eyes narrowed. "Heeey… easy there, tiger." She leaned in, tone shifting with a spark of realization. "Hold on-are you Ethan Miller?"

Maya blinked, surprised. "You know him?"

Harper blinked back, trying not to choke on her juice. "Uh, yeah. Everyone knows him. Ethan Miller-28, model and actor. Brand endorser for every major lifestyle label in Asia. He was the face of that men's fragrance campaign last year. You know, the one with the horse and the helicopter?"

Jess glanced up from her toast. "Oh. That guy. The shirtless one on the yacht?"

Harper nodded vigorously. "That's the one. My cousin framed that ad in her bathroom. Not even kidding."

Maya tried to process it. The Ethan she remembered wore hoodies to class and carried a duffel bag that smelled faintly of gym socks and spearmint gum. This version was…. elevated. Sleek. Intentional.

“Yeah… I guess that’s me.”

Then his gaze shifted-landing on Maya with that same old glint in his eyes, like no time had passed at all.

“Wow. May.” His voice dipped slightly lower, warm and intimate. “I can’t believe it. You look… İncredible.”

Maya flushed, breath catching. “It’s been a while.”

“You could say that.” He chuckled, gaze sweeping over her subtly. “College feels like a

lifetime ago. I never thought I’d see you here. I’m working with the campaign team for the shoot-came in last night. Early call today for pre-briefing.”

Damien still hadn’t said a word.

But Maya felt him.

The silent presence at her side. The quiet, simmering attention. The firm line of his jaw.

And Harper, of course, soaking it all in like the drama connoisseur she was. She leaned back, sipping her pineapple smoothie with exaggerated interest. “Oooohh… tension incoming.”