Intern 151

Chapter 151

Damien didn’t move. But his voice came low and clear.

“There are lines we don’t cross, Miller. I’d think someone in your business would know that.”

Ethan’s brows lifted slightly. “I’m not here to cross any lines.’”

Ashcroft leaned back with an amused smirk. Damien didn’t even blink, but the muscle in his

jaw twitched again.

Maya’s breath hitched. The heat crawled up her neck, tension coiling tight across her chest. It felt like the table had vanished, and she stood between two cliffs-both dangerous, both looking at her like a prize to be won.

She opened her mouth-to say what? To stop them? To lighten the mood? But her voice caught before it came.

“Aww…” Harper’s voice rang out, lilting and sweet like a bell dipped in sarcasm. “That’s definitely a good memory, Ethan. Touching, really.”

The men turned toward her. She batted her lashes innocently, then leaned forward with

smirk that said watch this.

“Just funny though… how Jamie doesn’t seem to remember you.”

A beat passed.

Then Harper lifted her hand and comically intertwined two fingers in front of her chest. “I mean, I talked to the boy-we’re close. Like this close. Tight, even.”

Maya’s lips parted in alarm-oh no.

Harper kept going.

“He told me all kinds of things. Maya’s suitors from the coffee shop, the university-this one guy who kept leaving poems on a napkin-adorable stuff, really. But never once mentioned a supermodel who brought cake and noodles and saved his birthday.”

She tilted her head, voice honey-sweet with a blade beneath. “And Jamie’s sharp, too. That kid remembers everything. So if you really made such a mark… I’m sure he’d at least mention you, don’t you think?”

A slow silence followed.

Damien’s jaw relaxed ever so slightly.

Ethan’s smile faded for real this time.

But only for a second.

Then he chuckled. Low, easy, like he’d just heard the punchline to a joke only he found

amusing.

“Well,” he said, glancing at Harper, “you know how it is. He was young… not feeling well, too. Kids that age-especially when they’re sick-memories get hazy.”

He turned to Maya, gaze lingering just a bit too long. “But I know some things stick. Even if they don’t talk about them out loud.”

He leaned back, exuding practiced ease. “Besides… I wasn’t there to make an impression. I was just trying to help. That’s all.”

The words were casual. But the way he said trying to help-as if that elevated him above the rest-left a faint trace of something smug in the air.

Ashcroft set down his glass with a faint clink, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

“Curious, though…” he said, voice smooth as silk. “Did Maya ask for your help, Mr. Miller? Or was it one of those moments where you mistook a private, intimate family memory for an open invitation?”

“Because from where I’m sitting, it sounds less like generosity and more like you shoved yourself into the spotlight-uninvited, unrehearsed-then called it noble.” He smiled thinly. But I suppose it tracks. You became an actor, after all. Manufacturing emotion. Delivering lines no one asked for. Always auditioning-even off-screen.”

He swirled his drink once, slow and deliberate.

“Some people confuse presence with importance. But not everyone’s applause means they want an encore.”

Ethan chuckled softly, the sound light but tight at the edges. He ran a hand through his sun-dried hair, fingers raking back the strands like the motion might steady him.

“Well… I guess that’s fair,” he said, flashing that signature, camera-ready grin. “Acting does teach you how to read a room. Feel the moment. Step in when no one else will.”

His gaze shifted to Maya-lingering just a little too long.

“And that night? I didn’t need a script to see something real. A sister who’d do anything for

her brother. A boy who deserved more than one melting cupcake.”

He turned back to Ashcroft, voice still cool but firmer now.

“Maybe I wasn’t invited. But sometimes, showing up matters more than waiting for permission.”

Then he smiled wider, leaning back in his seat like the blow hadn’t landed at all.

“Besides… seems to me the only people bothered by that night… weren’t even there.”

Harper leaned forward, eyes glinting with mischief as she clasped her hands dramatically on the table. “Well, I guess there’s only one way to settle this,” she said, voice syrupy sweet but laced with trouble.

She pulled out her phone with a flourish. “Let’s ask the lead himself!”

Maya’s eyes widened. “Harper-”

But it was too late. Harper had already tapped the screen, lifting the phone high like she was presenting a grand finale.

‘Calling: Jamie’ blinked across the screen.

“Wait, you’re really calling him right now?” Ethan asked, clearly thrown off.

“Of course,” Harper replied innocently, though her grin said otherwise. “We’re tight, remember? Like this.” She wiggled her intertwined fingers again for effect. “I’m sure he’d love to join this little beachside reunion. Maybe he can settle who really made an impact.”

Ashcroft leaned back with an amused smirk. Damien didn’t even blink, but the muscle in his jaw twitched again.

Maya, meanwhile, was trying very hard not to slide under the table and disappear entirely.

The room settled into a quiet that felt heavier than before-as if everyone was waiting, but no one knew exactly for what.

Chapter 152

The ringtone cut through the silence, sharp and jarring against the tension that clung to the

air.

Maya wasn't sure if she was hoping Jamie would answer… or silently begging for it to go to voicemail.

Then the screen flickered-and a second later, Jamie's face appeared. Sleep-mussed hair, a bowl of cereal clutched in one hand, and a bleary squint that screamed suspicion.

"Harper?" he blinked. "Why are you video calling me during lunch hours? Is Maya okay?"

Maya leaned in quickly, brows furrowing. "I'm fine, Jamie. Sorry-we're just… having-wait, what are you eating?"

Jamie blinked, caught mid-bite. "Cereal. And chocolate chip cookies. Why?"

Before Maya could launch into big-sister mode, Harper swooped in like a hurricane of

mischief.

"Oh, enough of you, Principal Maya!" Harper teased, snatching the phone and dramatically swiveling it around. "Let the boy enjoy his sugar rush! He's got a fast metabolism and no bills to pay-he earned it!"

She turned the camera to the table with a flourish. "Say hi to everyone, Jamie!"

Jamie grinned. “Oh-hello everyone! Good afternoon!”

His gaze scanned the screen, casual at first… until it landed squarely on Damien.

His whole face lit up. “Hello, Mr. Blackwood! Nice to see you again!”

Damien, who had been sipping his water, paused mid-motion-just the faintest curve at the corner of his mouth. “Good afternoon, Jamie. You’re looking well.”

“I am! Thank you. I’m doing this independent reading project Maya recommended-I think you’d like it too. It’s about financial crime and business ethics in emerging markets.” Jamie said it like he was talking about his favorite cartoon.

There was a beat of stunned silence at the table.

Harper blinked. “I’m sorry, what now?”

Jamie shrugged. “I like reading. Anyway… what’s going on?”

Chapter 153

Harper bit back a grin and looked straight into the camera. “Well, young scholar, we were having a bit of a debate.”

Jamie cocked his head. “About what?”

Harper laughed softly. “Well, you tell us. We’re just talking about your past birthdays. Specifically, the one when you turned eleven. Do you remember someone named Ethan Miller being there?”

Jamie paused mid-bite, spoon still in the air. “Ethan who?”

Ethan’s jaw tightened-subtly, but enough for anyone paying attention to notice.

Harper leaned in with exaggerated helpfulness. “Miller,” she clarified, eyes twinkling. “Tall guy. Maya’s former classmate. He said he brought a cake and groceries and made your birthday extra special. Do you remember?”

Jamie frowned, chewing thoughtfully. “Uh… groceries?”

Then his face lit up in recognition. “Oh! You mean the delivery guy?”

Maya choked on her water.

Ashcroft let out a low whistle.

Harper gasped, hand flying to her chest in mock horror. “Delivery guy?!”

Jamie blinked, unfazed. “Yeah. I thought he worked for one of those campus errand apps or something. He had a bunch of plastic bags and called from the door. Maya looked super annoyed, so I figured it was a mistake.”

He scratched his head, thinking. “Then I heard him say he was Maya’s classmate… wished me happy birthday… and asked if he could come in. I asked Maya if everything was okay, and next thing I knew, he was inside.” He nodded a little, like the memory was slowly piecing together. “I think he brought a cake. Oh-and a toy truck. I didn’t know his name, but Maya let him in, so I was polite.”

He shrugged, casual and honest. “I don’t really remember much else. Except… I was kinda upset that night. Maya bought me a cupcake, and I wanted that, but since the guy brought a whole cake, we had to eat that first. So… I saved the cupcake for the next day.”

Harper let out a dramatic tsk and leaned closer to the phone with a playful smirk. “Oof. That’s rough, Jamie. Imagine going through all that effort, only to be remembered as the guy who delayed a cupcake.”

She turned toward Ethan with mock sympathy. “Tough crowd, huh? Not even a footnote in the kid’s birthday memoir.”

Then, back to Jamie, she intertwined her fingers again. “And to think we’re this close. I’m wounded you didn’t tell me about the mysterious grocery guy.”

Maya reached over and gently tilted Harper's phone toward her, clearing her throat softly.

"Jamie, that's not polite. No matter what, you should always appreciate kindness."

Jamie nodded right away, eyes lowering with guilt. "Sorry, May…"

Her expression softened, a quiet pride warming her tone.

"You should apologize to Mr. Miller too."

She turned the phone slightly, angling it toward Ethan.

A beat passed, then Jamie's voice came through, sincere and steady.

"I'm sorry, sir… and thank you for your kindness."

Ethan's jaw eased slightly, the tension softening just enough for a faint smile to tug at the corner of his lips.

“Oh, that was a long time ago-you don’t need to apologize,” Ethan said gently, his voice smooth, though tinged with something harder to place. “And you’re welcome, Jamie. It was your birthday… I just wanted to make it a little more special.”

His gaze flicked to Maya for the briefest second, searching-for approval? for recognition?- but she was already looking elsewhere.

Then he leaned back in his chair, masking whatever flickered behind his eyes with another polite smile. “Kids. Always honest, huh?”

Ashcroft leaned back, fingers tapping the edge of his glass.

“Touching. Almost Oscar-worthy, really. If the kid remembered you as the delivery guy, you must’ve played the part convincingly.”

He smiled faintly. “Hollywood did pick the right man.”

As the tension at the table finally dissolved-Jamie’s voice still echoing faintly in Maya’s chest-she found herself clutching the edge of her chair as if it could anchor her.

But Harper, ever the mood magician, clapped her hands once and stood.

“Welp! That was emotionally fulfilling and weirdly satisfying. But some of us have jobs to do, and a camera that won’t wait.”

Sienna laughed, grateful for the change of pace. “She’s right. We’re still on a schedule.”

Jessa was already checking her bag, pulling out a pair of lens wipes and nodding to herself. Light’s perfect right now if we head out soon.”

Harper turned to Ethan with a devilish smile. “Come on, Mr. Centerfold. Don’t keep the camera waiting.”

Ethan arched a brow, lips tugging into a slow, knowing smirk. “Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said, standing with unhurried grace. His eyes flicked briefly toward Maya-just long enough to make her pulse trip.

Maya held his gaze for a heartbeat too long before looking away, jaw tightening ever so slightly.

Ethan stretched his shoulders like a man used to the spotlight, then brushed invisible lint from his shirt.

“Besides,” he added smoothly,

“if I’m going to be in paradise, might as well give paradise a good show.”

Harper let out a laugh that bordered on a scoff. “God, you really do rehearse in the mirror, don’t you?”

Ashcroft stood and downed the last of his iced coffee.

“Let’s just hope your face is more photogenic than your timing, Miller.”

Ethan’s smile never faltered. “I guess we’ll let the camera decide.”

As Maya began to rise from her seat, Damien’s hand closed gently but firmly around hers.

“Stay for a bit,” he said lowly, the quiet depth of his voice anchoring her in place.

Maya blinked, heart thudding-not from Ethan’s gaze this time, but from the subtle way Damien’s touch reminded her of where she stood. And who she stood with.

Damien turned his gaze to the others without releasing her.

“Go ahead,” he said, tone calm but unmistakably final.

“We’ll follow.”

There was a brief pause.

Harper gave Maya a look that said ooh, private conversation, but thankfully didn't comment.

"Sure thing, bossman," she quipped, spinning her sunglasses into place.

"Come on, model boy. Time to make you earn your waived fee."

Jessa and Sienna trailed behind, chatting quietly, already shifting into work mode. Ethan was the last to leave-his footsteps slow, deliberate. He glanced back once, jaw tight, but said nothing.

Then they were alone.

Just the two of them beneath the soft rustle of palms and the fading clink of tableware.

Damien didn't speak immediately. His grip on her hand loosened just slightly-but he didn't let go.

He simply leaned in-close, slow, and deliberate-his hand still holding hers as his other

settled lightly against her waist.

Then his lips were on hers.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't sweet. It was deep and possessive, the kind of kiss that left no room for doubt. She felt it-his claim.

The heat. The warning. The need.

And she kissed him back. Just as fiercely. Just as surely.

Her lips lingered, a whispered confession pressed against his-I'm yours. No words were

needed.

In the hush between their breaths, she found a quiet refuge, a place where nothing else mattered but the warmth of his hold and the steady beat of two hearts finally aligned.

Chapter 154

When he finally pulled away, his breath was uneven, jaw tight. He didn't move far-just enough to catch her eyes.

"I've been wanting to do that since earlier," he muttered, low and rough. "Right in front of him.

”

He exhaled slowly. Then added, “I don’t like him calling you May.”

Maya blinked, lips still tingling, pulse still wild.

“I don’t like that he has memories with you in them,” Damien continued, voice sharpening.

“I don’t like that he saw a part of you that was vulnerable. I don’t like that he was there when I wasn’t. I don’t like that he’s part of your past.”

There was no jealousy-only possession. A steady ache of resentment that someone else had touched a chapter of her life that mattered.

Maya held his gaze, unwavering. She could see the storm beneath the surface, fierce and aching-and it struck something inside her.

“You’re right,” she said softly, voice steady but warm.

“He does belong in the past.”

She paused, searching his eyes as if trying to convey all the unspoken hope between them.

“But you… you’re in my present. And I hope… in my future too.”

His jaw twitched, and a subtle shift passed over his face-something like relief, or a guarded hope. His fingers tightened around hers, grounding them both.

“I don’t trust him, Maya,” he said again, voice low and steady, silk over steel.

“There’s something wrong with all this. I can feel it.”

Maya nodded, her own unease simmering beneath her calm exterior.

“I know,” she whispered.

“I don’t trust him either. The way he showed up here, the contract, the way he’s acting… it doesn’t sit right with me.”

Damien’s jaw clenched, his hand gripping hers a little tighter-protective, fierce.

“I’m mad, Maya,” he said, voice rougher now, trembling with frustration.

“Not just suspicious. Mad. Because while I’ve been trying to do things right-to earn your trust, to protect your peace-he just walks in and looks at you like he still owns a piece of you.”

The raw honesty in his tone cut through her calm. The vulnerability beneath his possessiveness was something she hadn’t fully allowed herself to see before.

“I hate that,” he continued, quieter now but no less intense.

“I hate that he got to see you when you were struggling. I hate that he acts like he still belong s in your story.”

Maya searched his face, feeling the weight of his words settle between them.

“Why does it matter this much to you?” she asked softly.

His answer was immediate, unwavering.

“Because he looks at you like you’re a possession he lost. And I don’t like the way that feels.”

Her breath caught. It wasn’t jealousy she saw in his eyes, but something deeper. A quiet storm that spoke of fierce care, of pain, of claiming.

Maya's lips parted, but no words came right away. How could she explain the flutter in her chest? The way his voice-taut with restraint-awoke something deep and aching inside her? Not fear. Not confusion. But the aching truth that he sees her. Not as something fragile to protect, but as something fiercely his.

She took a slow breath, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You're right. He's acting like he lost something. But the thing is… he never had it."

Her gaze held his, steady and sure.

"He doesn't know me. Not really. He saw pieces-scraps of a life I was trying to hold together. But you… you see the whole of me. Even the parts I try to hide. And you stay."

Her hand found his, squeezing gently, a quiet anchor in the storm.

"He belongs in the past, Damien. But you…" Her voice trembled with something tender and

raw.

"You're in my present. And I hope… you'll be in my future too."

Chapter 155

Damien's eyes darkened, a slow smile tugging at the corner of his lips-quiet, almost reluctant, but full of something fierce. He lifted their joined hands to his lips, brushing a gentle kiss over her knuckles.

"Maya…" His voice was low, thick with feeling. "Hearing you say that… it means more than I can say. I don't want to just be part of your story-I want to be the reason the rest of it matters."

He searched her face, vulnerability flickering just beneath his usual guarded calm.

"I won't ever let anyone take what's ours. Not from your past. Not from your future."

His thumb traced soothing circles over her hand as he leaned in closer, voice dropping to a whisper meant only for her. "I'm here. I'm staying. Not going anywhere." He paused, gaze locked with hers. "I chose you, Maya. Only you."

The weight of those words settled around them, warm and steady like a promise.

Maya's throat tightened, emotion rising too fast to swallow. She squeezed his hand, voice trembling but clear. "And I chose you too, Damien. Only you."

Something shifted between them then-gentle, deep, undeniable. Not loud or dramatic, but re al. The kind of moment people search their whole lives for… and sometimes never find.

A quiet vow. A shared truth.

Just the vow in their joined hands. The understanding in their locked gaze.

The unspoken knowing that, here and now, they were exactly where they were meant to be.

Maya broke the silence first, her voice soft, reluctant.

“As much as I want to stay here with you…” she glanced at the time, then groaned, “I’m pretty sure I’m still on the clock. I should go. I might get fired.”

Damien didn’t even blink. “Nobody would dare.”

She raised an eyebrow, amused. “Oh wow. So now I’m getting special treatment from the boss?”

He chuckled, deep and low. “Always.”

Then, more gently, he reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers brushing her cheek.

“Besides,” he added with a quiet grin, “they can’t fire the owner’s wife.”

Maya’s cheeks flushed instantly. “I… I’m not your wife.”

His gaze didn’t waver. “For now. But you will be.”

She stared at him, heart skittering in her chest. “You sound so certain, Mr. Blackwood.”

“I’m confident, future Mrs. Blackwood.”

Flustered, Maya stood, trying to escape the heat in his words-and the way they made her feel. “Enough of your nonsense. We… I… I don’t even know what we are.”

Damien stood too, closing the distance again. But this time, his expression sobered, voice dropping into something tender. Certain.

“Then let’s make it official.”

He reached for her hand, his fingers threading through hers with quiet certainty. The warmth of his touch grounded her, even as her pulse skipped.

“Maya Serene Thompson..” His gaze held hers-steady, searching, unshakable. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

He hesitated just a breath, then added with a soft smile, “I don’t have a ring on me yet-and if I did, the question would be very different. But for now… I want to do this right. No guessing, no almosts. Be mine, Maya.”

Her heart lodged in her throat, beating wildly as if it had already answered for her.

She stared at him, eyes wide, breath caught-but her soul already knew.

She nodded, her voice soft, but sure.

“Yes.”

A slow smile curved Damien’s lips-one of those rare, unguarded ones that melted the last edges of her resistance.

“Good,” he murmured, tugging her gently back toward him. “Because I wasn’t going to take no for an answer.”

She laughed under her breath, her forehead brushing his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. Of course he wasn’t.

“Does this mean I get actual boyfriend privileges now?” he teased near her ear. “Like sending you obnoxiously expensive flowers… or claiming lunch breaks as exclusive Blackwood time?”

She tilted her head up, lips quirking. “Hmm. I suppose we can start with shared coffee rights and see how the rest goes.”

Damien smirked. “Dangerous offer. You might end up with more than coffee.”

She rolled her eyes, but her cheeks betrayed her.

Her eyes sparkled as she gave him a playful shove. “See? Already abusing your privileges.”

But her fingers curled against his chest, betraying how much she didn’t want to pull away. He leaned in, lowering his voice. “You’ve got no idea how long I’ve wanted this. To call you mi ne and mean it.”

She met his gaze, heart thudding. “I know,” she whispered. “Me too.”

They stayed like that for another moment-wrapped in a quiet cocoon that felt separate from the rest of the world. Safe. Certain.

But then Maya sighed, reluctantly drawing back. “Okay… seriously this time. I have to go. If Harper catches me sneaking in all dreamy-eyed, she’ll never let me live it down.”

Damien grinned. “I’ll send her a warning. Or a bribe.”

“Tempting,” she said with a smirk, “But I think I’ll try to keep my dignity intact for at least

another hour.”

As she turned to leave, Damien reached out and gently caught her wrist.

“One more thing,” he murmured.

Maya paused, glancing over her shoulder. “Hmm?”

He brought her hand to his lips and pressed a slow, deliberate kiss to the back of it-his gaze never leaving hers. When he looked up again, his voice was low, steady, laced with meaning.

“You said yes,” he murmured. “I won’t take that lightly… my girlfriend.”

Her breath caught-just for a beat.

Then she smiled. Soft. Certain. Real.

“I know you won’t… and I don’t either. No more maybes… my boyfriend.”

The word felt unfamiliar on her tongue-but it tasted sweet. Right.

And this time, she didn’t wait. She rose on her toes and gave him a quick kiss-light, warm, but full of promise.

Then she turned and walked back toward the pavilion, her heart so full it was a wonder she didn’t float.

Damien watched her go, hands in his pockets, something like a slow fire building in his chest.

Maya Serene Thompson.

His. Officially. Finally.

A beat passed-then he called out, “Wait for me,” and jogged to catch up, falling into step beside her.

And as they walked side by side, fingers brushing, hearts newly tethered, it didn't feel like the start of something fleeting.

It felt like the beginning of everything

Chapter 156

y the time Damien and Maya arrived at the Garden Pavilion, the shoot was already in full swing. Bright flashes of the camera strobed against the soft blush of tropical florals, models in flowing linen swayed to the beat of the wind, and the production crew buzzed around with crisp efficiency.

They walked in hand-in-hand, the subtle intimacy of their joined fingers speaking volumes.

Ethan Miller saw it instantly.

His gaze locked on their intertwined hands with a sharpness that didn't go unnoticed-not by the lighting assistant, nor the makeup artist dabbing powder across his cheek. A flicker passed through his eyes-dark, tense. He didn't even respond when the photographer called his name, not until his manager leaned in and murmured something in his ear.

"Ethan," his manager hissed under her breath as she strode up beside him and leaned in to whisper urgently.

That snapped him out of it.

Just like that, the mask was back on-his perfectly practiced, polished Hollywood charm sliding neatly into place. Smile ready, shoulders squared, Ethan turned back to the camera like he hadn't just been caught staring daggers.

Damien remained on the sidelines throughout the shoot, quiet and composed, a commanding presence even while seated. He watched the monitor with casual interest, occasionally murmuring something to Trina about the campaign layout or production flow. But every so often, his gaze would drift.

To her.

To Maya-his woman.

Anytime Ethan drifted a little too close or lingered too long, Damien's jaw tightened imperceptibly. He wasn't the type to make a scene, but his presence alone was enough to draw invisible boundaries.

And Ethan noticed.

By late noon, instead of heading back to the resort, Trina had arranged snacks and drinks to be brought to the nearby gazebo so the team could rest. The air was warm and salt-kissed, the sea humming gently just beyond the palm trees.

Maya took a seat beside Damien on one of the lounge benches, their shoulders brushing.

“You’ve been here all afternoon,” she said, looking at him from the corner of her eye. “I’m surprised you haven’t gotten bored.”

Clara

He leaned slightly toward her, voice low and amused. “Not possible. Watching you work is… highly entertaining.”

Her lips curved into a smile, but she rolled her eyes. “You mean everyone turning into saints just because the boss decided to grace us with his presence?”

“That too,” he said without apology. “But I trust my team to do what’s right-with or without me watching.”

Then he leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a whisper meant for her alone-low, heated, laced with quiet disdain.

“But I don’t trust the Hollywood pretty boy sniffing around my woman like he’s still the lead in some damn romantic drama.”

Maya arched a brow, but her heart gave the smallest lurch at the possessive growl in his

voice.

“Your woman?” she echoed, feigning lightness, though her pulse betrayed her.

She tilted her head, eyes narrowing just a touch.

“You planning on branding me next?”

Damien didn’t flinch.

“Don’t tempt me,” he muttered, voice low and rough.

She huffed a soft laugh, part exasperated, part… affected.

Then her expression softened, just enough for him to see past the sarcasm.

“He’s just an acquaintance. He doesn’t matter,” she said, her tone calm but sure. “You, on the other hand… you do. So maybe ease up on the territorial growling before someone writes a tabloid headline about it.”

Damien’s eyes darkened, but the tension in his jaw eased just a little-especially when she threaded her fingers through his.

“Relax,” Maya murmured, lips brushing lightly against his shoulder. “Besides… Hollywood pretty boys aren’t really my type.”

Damien raised an eyebrow, a slow smirk tugging at his lips. “Oh yeah? Then what’s your type, Ms. Thompson?”

Maya pretended to ponder, tapping her finger to her chin playfully. “Hmm, let me think… I’m drawn to tall guys, thick brows, deep amber eyes… masculine. You know, in Harper’s words,” hot and sexy.’ And someone who commands the room-the kind of vibe where everyone falls in line the moment he walks in.” She leaned in a little closer, voice dropping to a teasing whisper.

Chapter 157

“Oh, and I like a man who makes sure those Hollywood pretty boys stay far away.”

Damien’s smirk deepened, eyes darkening with amusement and something more. “Good to know,” he murmured. “I might just fit that description perfectly.”

Maya arched a brow, lips curving in mock regret. “Is that right? Hmm… too bad.” She leaned in closer, gaze flicking to his mouth, then back up to his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Blackwood… but I’m already taken.”

His smile turned lazy, smug. “Is that so?”

She nodded slowly, her voice dropping to a breathy whisper that lingered like a secret

between them.

“Hopelessly. For this tall, dangerously attractive man who thinks growling at any other man within ten feet of me counts as subtle.”

Damien’s eyes darkened, the smirk on his lips sharpening. He leaned in until his mouth. brushed the shell of her ear, his breath hot against her skin.

“Sweetheart, if you think that was me being subtle…” His voice dropped lower, rougher.

“Wait till you see how I stake my claim when no one’s watching.”

Maya’s breath hitched, heat rushing up her neck. Her mind blanked for half a second-just long enough for her to forget where they were, what time it was, and that there were still people within earshot.

She cleared her throat, eyes narrowing as she tried to muster a glare, but the pink rising in her cheeks gave her away.

“Okay, Mr. Blackwood,” she said, flustered but fighting a grin.

“Easy with the dramatics… or are you trying to make me swoon in front of the entire crew?”

He didn’t answer-just raised an eyebrow like that had been the plan all along.

Maya tilted her head, eyes glinting with quiet mischief as a slow smile curved her lips. Harper’s words echoed in her mind-Sometimes, us ladies have to take the initiative. Doesn’t mean you’re chasing him. It means you’re confident. Powerful. Sexy.

She met Damien’s gaze steadily, letting the unspoken challenge hang between them.

She leaned in just enough for her voice to drop, sultry and teasing.

“Careful, Mr. Blackwood,” she murmured, voice soft but laced with something daring.

“If you look at me like that any longer,” she whispered, “I might start imagining what it would be like… if I let myself want more.”

Damien’s smirk faltered, his dark eyes locking on hers with an intensity that made her heart skip. For a moment, he was silent-caught somewhere between surprise and something deeper, something raw.

Then his voice came low and husky, barely more than a breath.

“More, huh?”

He leaned in closer, lips grazing her ear, the air between them crackling with electricity. His fingers traced a slow, deliberate path along her arm, sending a shiver up her spine.

“I’ve been imagining that for far too long,” he murmured, voice low and thick with longing.

“You have no idea how much I’ve wanted it to be real.”

Maya’s breath hitched, her pulse quickening. The gentle heat of his touch, the promise in his voice-it was more than she’d dared imagine.

She met his gaze, steady now, a secret smile playing at her lips.

“Maybe… you just have to wait a little longer.”

Damien’s laugh was soft, but there was a fire burning behind it.

“Waiting’s never been my strong suit.”

He closed the distance, his hand sliding up to cup her cheek, their faces just inches apart. The world seemed to shrink until only the space between them remained-electric, charged, impossible to ignore.

Suddenly, Harper’s voice cut through the moment, light and full of mischief.

“Alright, lovebirds! Boss, we get it-you own the place. But seriously, could you please get a ro om before someone calls security?”

She threw them a wink and flashed a wide grin.

“Some of us are still single, you know. Have mercy.” Maya pulled back instantly, heat rushing to her cheeks.

“Harper!” she hissed, half laughing, half mortified.

Damien didn’t flinch. His arm stayed wrapped firmly around Maya’s waist, grip tightening just slightly. His gaze locked on hers, smirk curling at the corner of his lips.

“You’re right, Ms. Lin,” he said smoothly, voice low and amused.

“A room sounds good. And I’ll make sure to put a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the door too.”

Maya elbowed him lightly, her cheeks flushing a deep, tomato red as the heat of the sun seemed to double. She glanced away, trying to hide the sudden flutter in her chest.

Ethan, for his part, sat at a nearby table with his manager, Trina, Mary, and Aimee. He didn’t approach once-not during the break, not even a nod. But his eyes remained locked on the couple, dark and dangerous, simmering with something unspoken as they shared their quiet moments.

Maya accidentally glanced his way and caught his gaze.

That strange silence from him-so different from the lingering stares of the past few days- sent a subtle chill down her spine. Yet, with Damien standing close beside her, she felt anchored, steady, and unshakably grounded.

After the break, everyone returned to their work. A few hours later, the shoot wrapped just as the sun dipped below the horizon. The sky above was a breathtaking watercolor wash of gold and indigo, with the first stars shyly beginning to twinkle through the fading light.

The crew began packing up. There was no more interaction between Ethan and Maya. Nothing said. Nothing done. Just polite distance.

As they walked back to the main resort together, Maya let her fingers graze Damien’s. He caught her hand without hesitation.

“The others are having dinner in their rooms,” she said. “Everyone’s wiped.”

“I asked James to prepare dinner in my suite,” Damien replied, glancing sideways at her.

“Come eat with me?”

She opened her mouth to say yes-then hesitated.

“Can Harper join us too?” she asked, testing the waters.

He paused, expression flickering briefly before he nodded.

“If you want her there.”

“I do,” she said softly.

Damien exhaled through his nose, a half-smile tugging at his lips.

“Alright. If that’s the case, let’s invite Ashcroft too-he’s probably lurking somewhere with a glass of something expensive.”

That made her laugh.

“I’ll text Harper. You text your broody best friend.”

He leaned in and murmured,

“As long as you’re there, I don’t care who else comes.”

Maya’s heart skipped again-God, he could say the most dangerous things with that calm voice and unreadable expression.

Chapter 158

They parted to freshen up in their respective rooms-Maya sent a quick text to Harper, while Damien phoned Ashcroft.

He’d spent most of the afternoon holed up in his suite, fielding call after call, quietly setting their next moves in motion.

They had to be more careful now. With Orion’s shady involvement-and Ethan Miller’s all-too-convenient appearance-they couldn’t afford to trust what they saw.

Better to keep Ashcroft in the shadows, and Damien visible, calm, unbothered. Better than Damien vanishing… or worse-both of them disappearing.

Just before 7 PM, Harper knocked on Maya's door-dressed in matching silk pajamas, a little more glammed up than usual, but still unmistakably Harper: bright, reliable, and always ready to hype her up.

"You ready?" she grinned. "Let's go flirt with danger… and dinner."

Maya gave her a look. "Harper-"

Harper raised her hands in mock innocence. "Relax, I meant you with your Damien. And me… with the dinner. Unless Mr. Ashcroft's bringing someone."

Maya just rolled her eyes and followed her out. Her heart felt light, looking forward to a night filled with good food-and even better company.

They reached Damien's suite just as the sky outside deepened to navy, the last streaks of dusk fading behind the silhouette of palm trees. The door opened before they even knocked.

James stood there and offered a polite smile. "Good evening, Ms. Maya. Ms. Lin. Please, come in." He stepped aside, holding the door open for them with quiet efficiency.

Maya stepped in first, heartbeat stuttering. His room was softly lit, the scent of rosemary and grilled citrus wafting from the dining area.

Damien stood in full view in the living room with Ashcroft, holding a glass of amber liquid. Dressed down in a black linen shirt, the sleeves casually rolled up and two buttons undone, he looked effortlessly lethal-like danger that had no need to announce itself.

The moment his eyes landed on Maya, he set his glass down and crossed the room in a few long, sure strides.

He stopped in front of her and leaned in, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“You made it,” he murmured, his voice low and warm, like a secret meant only for her. “And somehow, you look even more beautiful than I remembered.”

A soft flush crept up Maya’s neck, warmth spreading across her cheeks. Her skin tingled where his lips had touched.

“I could say the same about you,” she whispered back, eyes soft but teasing.

Then she looked past him-and her lips parted slightly.

A table had been set for four, its base adorned with tulips and lavender-her favorites. Maya's mind flickered back to lunch, to Ethan's offhand comment about her dream wedding… and to the way Damien had answered, his voice low and certain:

"Whatever Maya once imagined, I'll make reality look better. If she wants lavender and tulips, I'll plant her a kingdom of them."

She smiled softly at the memory. A bottle of wine breathed gently near the center, its glass catching the warm, golden light that bathed the room, making everything feel deliberately intimate and quietly perfect.

"You didn't have to go this far," Maya murmured, taking in the setup.

"Yes, I did," Damien said simply, his gaze steady. "It's not every night I get to set the table for my girlfriend."

Harper arched a brow. "Wait-officially? Like… with a title? Sealed, signed, delivered?"

Maya's cheeks warmed. Damien slipped an arm around her shoulders and gently pulled her in, his touch both grounding and possessive. She shyly nodded, glancing at everyone in the

room.

“It… happened,” she said softly.

Harper beamed. “Finally.” She pulled Maya in for a tight, genuine hug. “I’m really happy for you, Maya. It’s about time you let yourself feel love-and be loved. You deserve it.”

Before Maya could respond, Ashcroft stepped forward, his signature smirk already in place. He raised his glass toward Damien.

Chapter 159

“Well, well. Congratulations, brother. First official girlfriend at thirty-five.”

Damien gave him a look, then reached for his glass again and raised it. “And what about you? At forty? Or fifty?”

Ashcroft chuckled, unbothered. “I’m pacing myself. Can’t go ruining my reputation all at once.

He took a slow sip of his drink, eyes gleaming with mischief. “Besides, if I ever do settle down, it’s going to be with someone who makes me forget every damn reason I swore not to. “Then he paused, his gaze settling on Damien with something quieter in his expression.” Like you-when you met Maya and knew you found the love of your life.”

Harper blinked. “Wow. That was… unexpectedly poetic.”

Ashcroft smirked. “Don’t get used to it.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Harper muttered under her breath.

Without waiting for an invitation, Harper looped her arm through Maya’s and gently tugged her toward the balcony.

“Come on, queen of Daya. Let’s catch some air before your man claim you all to himself again.”

“Hey-wait for me!” Ashcroft called, trailing after them with a drink in hand. “I’d much rather hang with my future sister-in-law and honorary cousin than stay back and let Damien roast me for being single.”

Maya laughed, light and unguarded, the sound drifting into the warm night. Damien stood in the doorway, watching her. Watching them. The way her smile bloomed so effortlessly. The way her shoulders relaxed in the presence of people who saw her fully.

There was something anchoring about seeing her this way.

Carefree. Real. His.

A quiet presence approached from the side. James.

“Congratulations, boss,” he said with a polite smile. “Ms. Maya is… perfect for you.”

He trailed off a bit, then excused himself, about to walk away.

But Damien called after him, his voice softer, more sincere.

“I remember what you said back then. She reminded me what love looks like. She softens things… and she’s the woman slowly breaking through the walls I’ve built. She’s the one making me feel something again-something real. You’re right, James.”

Then he turned his gaze to Maya.

“I believe it too… She’s perfect for me. And I need your help to make sure she stays safe.”

James smiled warmly, nodded, and gave a respectful bow.

“You can count on me, sir. I’m truly glad you’ve found your happiness.”

Soon, they all settled in for dinner. Ashcroft and Harper immediately launched into rapid-fire banter across the table, their energy electric and contagious. Damien, ever composed, reached for the wine and poured a glass for Maya first-always her first-before filling his

own.

Maya caught James hovering near the edge and smiled warmly. “Come join us, James. And… could you call in Lee too? He deserves a break.”

Then she glanced at Damien, a touch hesitant. “I hope you don’t mind?”

Damien met her gaze without missing a beat. “Of course not. Anything you want.”

James nodded. “Of course,” he said, then quietly stepped out.

Moments later, James returned with Lee in tow, who looked pleasantly surprised but quietly grateful. They both took seats just as the conversation shifted from light updates to travel horror stories.

It wasn’t long before Harper had the whole table laughing, dramatically reenacting a wardrobe malfunction from her cousin’s wedding a few months back, where she’d been a bridesmaid-complete with wild gestures and mock outrage.

“…And that’s when I realized the zipper betrayed me halfway down the aisle! Honestly, it had one job!”

Laughter echoed around the room.

“But don’t worry,” Harper added, lifting her wine glass with a wink. “I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen at your wedding! And yes, there will be exclusive ‘Daya’ merch. I’m talking fans, robes, mini champagne bottles-branded love and chaos for all! I’ll even hire a skywriter. Or make Tik Toks. Whatever your love language is.”

Maya nearly choked on her wine, coughing as she waved her hands like she could physically swat Harper’s words out of the air. “Harper! Stop! You’re ridiculous.”

Laughter spilled out of her, warm and unfiltered. “Whose wedding? Seriously-your imagination’s on overdrive. You should write a book!”

Harper grinned smugly into her glass, ready to fire off another teasing remark-

Maya was still catching her breath from laughing, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye when Damien’s voice cut through the laughter. Calm, certain, and just loud enough to ripple

across the table.

“Ours. Our wedding.” His voice dropped-low, intimate, threaded with something raw and unwavering. “One day, you’ll be my wife.”

Maya’s head snapped toward him, eyes wide-she hadn’t expected him to just say it like that. But Damien didn’t flinch. He turned fully to her, gaze locked like she was the only thing holding him steady.

“Hell-I’d marry you today if you said yes.”

There was no bravado in his tone. Just quiet certainty. A promise wrapped in steel. And a depth that left no room for doubt.

The table went quiet for a second-not from shock, but from recognition. The way he said it wasn’t casual. It wasn’t a tease.

It was a promise.

Maya blinked, caught between disbelief and something deeper unraveling in her chest.

There it was again-that surge of fear and want, crashing in the same place. She wasn’t ready to say yes. But God, part of her wanted to.

“Damien…”

He didn’t let her dodge it.

“However you want it,” he said, his voice dropping lower, meant only for her. “Big or small. Chaos or quiet. Just say the word-and I’ll make it happen.”

Then, a faint smile touched his lips, but his eyes stayed locked on hers.

“I told you… if I had a ring with me, the question would’ve been different.” A pause. “But I want to do it right. You don’t deserve just any ring from a shelf.”

This couldn’t be real. It was too much, too soon-and yet… she believed him. Every word.

Because Damien didn’t speak like a man spinning promises.

He spoke like a man who had already made up his mind.

He leaned in slightly, voice like a vow. “I’ll make one for you. One that’s only yours.”

Maya felt the warmth rise in her cheeks. She couldn’t even look at Harper, knowing her friend was probably grinning like a maniac.

Her heart stuttered-not from nerves this time, but from the certainty in his voice. Steady. Unshaken. Like he meant it… all of it.

Chapter 160

For a moment, Maya just sat there-heart pounding, throat tight, her world quietly tilting off

its axis.

Damien's words echoed in her chest-like a vow burned into bone.

"I'll make one for you. One that's only yours."

She hadn't expected tonight to end like this. Definitely not with that.

When silence finally filled the space between them-thick, humming-Maya did the only thing she could: break it.

She blinked, swallowed hard-then gave a shaky laugh, waving her hands like she could erase the weight of his words.

"Ahh… I get it now. You guys are ganging up on me, huh?" She turned to Damien, forcing a smile. "I can't believe you're fueling Harper's imagination too!"

Her laugh was light, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Okay, enough of this wedding talk. I think these two have had way too much vino tonight."

But no one laughed with her.

The table stayed quiet.

Too quiet.

Everyone just… stared.

Not with amusement. Not with teasing smiles.

Just quiet. Still.

Like they were all waiting for her to see something she was still trying to deny.

“What?” she asked, her smile faltering. “Why are you all looking at me like I grew three heads?”

Silence.

She fumbled, her voice pitching higher. “Come on-don’t tell me you’re siding with them?” Her gaze flicked to Damien. “I mean… You just asked me to be your girlfriend-barely hours ago. We haven’t even had a day.”

A dry laugh slipped out. Sharp. Panicked.

“I mean, what if this doesn’t last? What if you meet someone else? Someone who fits your world better. Or-or the next intern walks in-she’s stunning, brilliant, has some intimidating

last name and-”

She didn’t get to finish.

Damien set his glass down with a soft but decisive clink, fingers tightening briefly before releasing the stem.

He leaned back, jaw taut, eyes hard. When he spoke, his voice was low-measured, but cold.

“Do you really believe that?”

Maya blinked. “What?”

He didn’t look at her right away. Just stared at the table, tension radiating off him in waves.

“You think I’d throw you aside the second someone ‘better’ comes along?”

Then he did look at her-and something in his eyes made her stomach drop.

“I’ve told you more than once,” he said, voice clipped but steady. “My life isn’t perfect. It’s messy. It’s dangerous. But I’ve been trying-changing-because of you. For you.”

His voice dropped further, almost raw. “Everything I’ve done since you walked in… it’s been for you. And you still think I’m just passing time?”

He cut himself off, jaw working.

“You have no fucking idea what I have to-”

“D.” Ashcroft’s voice cut in, calm but firm. “Let’s get some air, yeah?”

Damien didn’t move at first.

Then, wordlessly, he pushed back from the table and stood. Ashcroft followed, and the two of them stepped out onto the balcony. The glass door slid shut behind them with a quiet click

The silence left behind was suffocating.

No one spoke. No one moved.

Until James cleared his throat.

He hesitated, then looked directly at Maya.

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“Ms. Maya,” he began gently. “I know it’s not my place… and maybe you’ll think I’m being biased. But do you remember what I told you in the hospital? When you asked me, ‘Why you?’

Maya dropped her gaze and nodded, throat tight.

James gave a small nod, his voice steady but heavier now. “What I said back then was true… but it wasn’t the whole truth.”

Beside him, Lee shot James a warning look that clearly said, Don’t do this.

But James just shook his head and pressed on.

James continued, his voice steady but earnest.

“You’re the only one who ever got past his walls-and you didn’t even have to try. He’s breaking rules for you. Crossing lines he once swore he never would. That’s not nothing, Ms. Maya.”