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Chapter 161

He paused, letting the words settle before going on, softer now.

“I get it. You’re being careful. But if you say you’re taking the risk-then you have to really take

You can’t halfway love someone and call it brave. That’s not risking anything. That’s staying safe.”

His gaze didn’t waver.

“He took the leap with you. Dropped every shield he’s ever had. I just hope… you’ll meet him

halfway. Only then will you know if it’s love-or just fear holding you back.”

Maya just sat there, heart pounding. Guilt tightening like a vise around her ribs.

She hadn’t meant to hurt him. But she had.

His words hovered like a quiet verdict-honest, unforgiving.

A mirror held to her fear.

Then Harper's voice cut through the stillness-quiet, but steady.

"Well… I guess that was their first official lover's quarrel."

Maya turned, startled by the weight in her friend's voice.

Harper wasn't teasing. No sarcastic smile. No arched brow. Just a calm steadiness in her eyes… and a quiet urgency beneath it.

"Come on," she said. "Let's take a walk."

Maya hesitated.

Her eyes flicked to the closed balcony door. Behind that thin pane of glass stood the man everyone seemed to agree had already given her more than she was ready to accept. The man who had asked for nothing in return but honesty. Trust. A chance.

And she'd hurt him.

Not because she meant to-but because fear had a grip on her.

And now… she wasn't even sure she deserved the look he gave her-that quiet kind of devotion. That unshaken kind of promise.

Her fingers curled slightly, like she needed to grip something-anything. But all she found

was the shame coiling in her chest.

Then slowly, she stood-less out of certainty and more because her legs moved on instinct, pulled by something deeper than logic.

She didn't say a word-just gave James and Lee a faint nod before following Harper out of the room.

They slipped out into the quiet hallway. Harper led her past the suites and down a discreet ramp hidden behind a glass wall. The path opened to a softly lit garden terrace, where jasmine vines framed a secluded alcove. A single stone bench sat beneath blooming bougainvillea, facing the distant shimmer of the sea-peaceful, private, perfect for a quiet conversation.

Maya sat slowly, arms folding around her middle as she looked toward the dark horizon.

Harper waited until the quiet had settled-then said, quietly:

“You know… he wasn’t just angry because you doubted him.”

Maya’s brows pulled together.

Harper glanced at her. “He was angry because you doubted yourself. And maybe that’s worse.”

The words landed like a soft thud in her chest.

“He’s not asking you to be perfect, Maya. Just honest. He’s already giving you that-even when it terrifies him.” Harper’s voice softened.

Maya stared at the sky, eyes burning.

“I know you’ve been through a lot,” Harper went on gently. “You built walls that kept you alive. You’ve been surviving for so long. But maybe now… those walls are just keeping you from

living.”

Harper glanced over at her. “You already crossed that line, Maya. You’re not standing on the edge anymore-you’ve already stepped into it. You chose to take the risk. So what is it now? What’s holding you back?”

Maya let out a shaky breath, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“I… I don’t know.”

The words scraped from her throat, raw and uncertain. Her eyes stung. She tried to blink it away, but seeing Damien’s face-his anger, his disappointment-knowing she was the reason

… it cracked something deep inside her.

Then the floodgates opened.

“I’m so stupid, Harper,” she choked out. “I’m scared I can’t match what he’s giving me. Scared I’m just taking and have nothing to give back. And if I let myself feel all of it-if I stop holding back, if I go all in-it’ll vanish. Like everything else I’ve ever let myself want. And I’ll be the one who ruins it.”

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Harper sat still for a moment, letting the silence settle before speaking gently.

“You don’t ruin something just by being afraid, Maya. You only ruin it if you stop showing up. And the difference now? You’re not alone in this anymore. So fight for it-because he’s already fighting for you.”

Maya’s voice cracked. “How? I’ve never been in a relationship. The only love I know is for my parents… for Jamie. I don’t even know how to love myself. I’m so weak…”

Then her voice broke completely, and she hid her face in trembling hands.

Harper's expression softened. She moved closer and gently wrapped an arm around her shoulders, letting Maya lean into her.

"You're not stupid, Maya. And you're definitely not weak. You're just feeling something real for the first time-and it's scary. But don't let fear turn into regret. Don't ignore what your heart is already trying to say."

She squeezed Maya's hand gently.

"It's like the first day of school. You're nervous, unsure you don't know if you'll fit in, or mess up, or even survive the day. But then… you find your rhythm. You make friends. You stop second-guessing every step. You settle in."

Her voice dropped, softer now-like she was sharing a secret.

"Love isn't about getting it right the first time. You don't need to have it all figured out to feel it. It's messy, terrifying, unpredictable-but the real kind, the one that sees your broken pieces and stays? That kind changes you. And when it's real, you'll fight for it with a strength you never knew you had."

She pulled back just enough to look Maya in the eyes again.

“And if it’s scary, that just means it matters. So don’t run from it just because it’s new. Let it grow. Let him in.”

“We’re taught to listen to our heads. But completely ignoring your heart? That’s not strength. That’s fear in disguise.”

Maya swallowed hard.

“You’ve been in survival mode for so long-taking care of Jamie, giving everything you had for everyone else. That’s love, Maya. Quiet, fierce, selfless love.”

Maya let out a soft, trembling sound-half breath, half surrender.

Harper gently reached for her hand, her touch steady and grounding.

“And now… someone finally wants to give that kind of love back to you. You don’t need years to know when it’s real. Sometimes love shows up out of nowhere-and changes everything.”

Maya’s lips parted, her breath uneven. “But… what we have is still so new.”

Harper smiled gently, but firmly.

“If it’s real, you don’t run. You hold on.”

Her voice softened, wistful.

“Trust me, I’ve loved slow-and fast. Sometimes, it’s the fast kind that sticks.”

Tears welled up in Maya’s eyes again, but this time they brought no shame-only release. Harper’s words didn’t erase the fear, but for the first time, they gave her something stronger to hold onto.

Chapter 163

They sat in silence for a moment longer, the sound of the ocean filling the space between them, until Harper gently nudged Maya’s shoulder.

“Be honest with me,” she said softly. “Do you love him?”

Maya let out a shaky breath, her eyes flicking toward the stars before falling back to the ground.
“Maybe… How would I even know?”

Her voice was raw-honest, defensive, mostly… lost.

“It’s still so new. I mean, I’ve known of him for years-through magazines, headlines, interviews. He was always this… larger-than-life figure. But I’ve only really known him- personally-for what, a month?”

She let out a dry, breathless laugh. “Last night, I had my first kiss. My first real romantic kiss. And then this morning-what, eight, nine hours ago?-I agreed to be his girlfriend.”

She paused, her voice trembling.

“And just half an hour ago… he was talking about me being his wife.”

Her fingers curled at her sides. “It’s too fast. All of it. It sets off alarms in my head-like, is this even real? It’s starting to feel too good to be true. And that terrifies me.”

Harper stayed silent, giving her the room to breathe, to feel.

“So… do I love him?” Maya’s breath came slow and uneven, like the answer was stirring just beneath her skin. “Maybe. I don’t know how to name it yet. But when I’m near him-when I see him, hear his voice-it’s like something in me wakes up… Like the world quiets down and it’s just him and me. The way he looks at me… it’s not just attention. It’s like I’m the only one who exists. Like I finally matter, in a way I never have before.”

Her voice softened to a whisper, charged with something fragile and electric. “And when he touches me… it’s not just touch. It’s fire. Like he’s tracing every scar, every fear, and somehow turning them into something beautiful. It undoes me-makes me forget everything except that moment, that feeling. It’s terrifying and thrilling all at once.”

She let out a soft, trembling laugh, her cheeks flushing with quiet embarrassment.

“I want to be around him all the time,” she admitted, voice barely above a whisper. “Just the thought of seeing him again makes my chest flutter. I catch myself wondering if he’s eaten, if he’s slept, if he’s okay. That’s not nothing, right?”

She paused, eyes lowering. “But then I wonder… is this love? Or am I just… swept up in it because he’s the first man who’s ever made me feel seen? Touched? Wanted?”

Her throat tightened. “I don’t know what this is, Harper. I’ve never felt it before. I don’t know how to hold it-how not to ruin it. And maybe that’s why I keep second-guessing everything. I’m scared to even hope it’s real.”

Harper’s expression softened as she listened, arms folding loosely across her chest. When Maya finally ran out of words, Harper stepped in closer, her voice calm-steady-but her eyes gleamed with mischief.

“And when he’s near… when he touches you, kisses you, or even just looks at you-don’t lie, it sends shivers down your spine, right? Gets you all hot and bothered. Makes you ache down there… makes you want to touch yourself just thinking about him?”

Maya’s head snapped up, eyes wide in horror. “Harper!” she gasped, blushing furiously.

But she didn’t deny it.

Instead, with a groan, she buried her face in her hands. “Oh my God.”

Harper just grinned. “That-everything you just said, everything you’re feeling? That’s exactly how it starts.”

Maya peeked at her through her fingers, brows drawing together. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Harper said with a sly smile, “that whole emotional rollercoaster you just spilled? The butterflies, the brain fog, the way your body lights up like it’s been waiting for him its whole life? That’s not stupidity, babe. That’s textbook falling. Headfirst. Heart pounding. Panties halfway down.”

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She winked.

“Congratulations. You’re officially screwed-in the best way possible.”

She placed a steady hand on Maya’s shoulder, grounding her.

“Look, you think love shows up with a rulebook? A checklist? A nice little warning sign that says ‘This one’s safe’?” Harper snorted softly. “Please. Love’s a hurricane in heels. It’s messy, reckless, inconvenient-and completely worth it.”

She tilted her head, a teasing glint in her eyes. “You know what people always screw up? Thinking love needs years to count. That you’ve gotta know someone’s coffee order, favorite color, and childhood trauma before you can say, ‘Yep, this one’s mine.’ But love? It’s not that polite. It doesn’t wait for perfect timing. It shows up uninvited, kicks down the damn door, and says, ‘Hey, I live here now.’”

She gave a short laugh, fondness flickering in her eyes. “My first love? We knew each other since grade school. Grew up together, same college, the whole friends-to-lovers slow burn. We were together nearly seven years. Everyone thought we were endgame. Honestly? So did 1.”

Maya’s eyes widened slightly.

“But it didn’t work out,” Harper said with a casual shrug. “No cheating, no fights. We just… grew apart. Fell out of love like two people quietly stepping off a train at different stops. Three months later, he meets this woman at a bus stop-total stranger. They talk. Sparks fly. No drawn-out courting, no second-guessing. A month later, he proposes. They’re married now. Two kids.”

She smiled, soft and wistful. “And they’re good, Maya. Really good. I’ve met her. We’re all friends now. And you know what that taught me? When it’s right, you don’t always need a decade to know. Sometimes, it just clicks-and that’s enough.”

Harper gave Maya a sharp, knowing look. “Yeah, maybe it’s fast. Maybe it’s terrifying. But love doesn’t knock. It crashes in. Grabs you by the throat. Leaves you breathless.”

She smirked. “And girl, I’ve seen you around him. You don’t just melt around him, Maya-you glow. The second he walks into a room, your whole body forgets how to play it cool.”

Maya let out a shaky laugh, and Harper leaned in, her voice lower, silkier. “You don’t need to have it all figured out. You just have to stop sprinting in the opposite direction of what you already want.”

Maya hesitated, her voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t know if I can. But it feels real. Like… something I don’t want to lose.”

Harper didn’t interrupt. She just waited.

“I want to try,” Maya said, soft but sure. “I want to go all in… I don’t want to run from it. From h im.”

Harper’s smile curved slow and sultry. “There it is. That’s all love needs-just enough guts to stay when your instincts scream run.”

Maya blinked fast, but the tears still slipped through.

Harper reached over, brushing one away with the pad of her thumb. “He’s your person. I can see it in your eyes. So stop acting like it’s some fluke you stumbled into. You think the universe plays games like that? When it’s right, it burns right through you. And baby, you’re alr eady on fire.”

Her tone dropped an octave. “And let’s be honest-He’s not choosing some polished fantasy. He’s choosing you. The messy, moody, overthinking, soft-hearted you. And you? You’ve already been choosing him-in a dozen quiet ways you haven’t even said out loud yet.”

She squeezed Maya’s hand and added, lightly but firmly, “So stop asking if you’re enough-yo u are. Stop questioning if it’s real-it is. And stop wondering if it’ll last, because here’s the truth: it lasts if you keep choosing it. If you don’t walk away.”

She gave her a small nudge with her shoulder, her grin teasing now. “He chose you, babe. Out of all the people in his high-powered, money-stacked, lingerie-model-packed world. He. Chose. You.”

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Maya’s breath hitched.

“And yeah,” Harper added with a wicked little smile, “you’re young, but he’s thirty-five, Maya. That man is not investing that level of emotional intensity, bedroom tension, and black-card energy just to ‘see where it goes.’ You really think he’s still in his ‘playing around’ era?”

She rolled her eyes. “And let’s not forget-your boyfriend isn’t just some guy. He’s Damien frea kin’ Blackwood. Women would sell their souls just for a glance. And he’s clean-no scandals, no messy rep. He’s not like his playboy best friend.”

She raised a brow. “Sure, he’s probably slept with a lot of women-he admitted it himself. I mean, let’s be real… He’s thirty-five, filthy rich, and sexy as hell-of course he’s been with women. It’d be tragic if he weren’t.”

She leaned in, grinning. “But you… you’re his first kiss. His first serious, official relationship. How wild is that?”

Harper’s eyes lit up, mischief spilling over. “Okay, but seriously-how was the kiss? Tell me everything. Was it deep and possessive? All tongue and heat? Or soft at first, then like… he couldn’t help himself and had to devour you? Did he hold your face? Your waist? Did your knees go weak?!”

Maya’s mouth opened but no words came out. Her cheeks turned a shade that could rival sunburn, and she practically buried her face in her hands with a helpless little groan. “Oh my God, Harper-”

Harper cackled. “Aha! That blush says it all. You’re a goner.”

Then she leaned back dramatically, placing a hand over her chest. “Have you imagined the day you finally give up your V-card to him? Girl. You might not be able to walk for a week. I’m sure he’s big-his build screams it. Let’s be honest-a man that good at building empires? You know he’s good in bed too. You won’t just see stars, Maya. You’ll be naming constellations afterward.”

Maya blinked, stunned by the reminder. Her cheeks flushed deeper, warmth spreading across her face like a gentle fire. She looked down, twisting a strand of hair between her fingers, then glanced back at Harper with a shy smile.

Harper smirked. “Girl, you broke a billionaire’s brain. The man’s been running empires since you were barely legal and now he’s out here fumbling for your hand like a teenage boy. That’s not lust. That’s love, panic, and a full-blown identity crisis.”

Maya’s heart raced, caught between fear and hope, vulnerability and desire.

In Harper’s words, she found both comfort and courage-a reminder that love was never simple, never safe, but always worth the risk.

As the ocean whispered outside, Maya made a quiet promise to herself: she would stop running. She would stop second-guessing.

She didn’t know where this love would take her-but she was done playing small. If Damien Blackwood was the storm, then she’d be the girl who learned to dance in it.

Chapter 166

Damien’s POV

The glass door clicked shut behind them.

Outside, the night stretched wide and silent, a sharp contrast to the echo of Maya’s voice still ricocheting in Damien’s chest. Cool air kissed his skin, but it did nothing to ease the burn crawling up the back of his neck.

He gripped the railing like it was the only thing keeping him tethered.

Ashcroft leaned beside him, forearms resting on the railing, his gaze steady on the dark horizon. For a while, neither of them spoke-the only sounds were the rustle of palm leaves and the faint crash of waves in the distance, the quiet tension hanging between them.

Then, after a few beats, Ashcroft said plainly, “You scared the shit out of her, man.”

Damien’s jaw clenched. “I’m starting to wonder if this is even worth it.”

Ashcroft turned his head, one brow lifting. “You’re giving up already?”

“Everything was going fine. Better than fine. And yet every time I think we’ve taken a step forward, she pulls away like I’m the danger. I’ve crossed lines I swore I’d never cross-for her. I meant every damn

word I said back there. But the way she looked at me?" Damien's voice lowered. "She really thinks I'd walk away that easily."

Ashcroft took a sip from his glass, eyes unreadable. Then, voice calm, he said, "And that's exactly why she panicked."

Damien let out a breath through his nose, slow and hard. He hadn't planned on saying it-not like that. But it hadn't felt like a risk. It had felt right. Harper joked, Maya laughed, and then-

Then her laugh had cracked, and she'd started running.

Right into the place that always made him ache: her fear of not being enough.

He hated that part of her. Hated that he couldn't erase it. Hated that she still looked at herself like a temporary placeholder in someone else's dream.

"She looked at me like I'd dropped a bomb on the table," he said, voice low. "Like I'd pulled her into some fantasy she didn't ask for."

"Because to her, that is a fantasy," Ashcroft said simply. "You don't get it. You're Damien godd amn Blackwood. And for most people, that name comes with terms and conditions."

"Not for her," Damien said flatly, eyes cutting to him. "You, of all people, know exactly what I'm putting on the line."

“I know that. But she doesn’t. Not yet.” Ashcroft replied evenly.

That silence stretched again. This one tighter.

“I’m not playing games with her,” Damien finally said. “I’m not saying things I don’t mean.”

“No one said you were.” Ashcroft straightened, rubbing a hand along his jaw. “But you’ve got to remember-this girl’s been holding herself together with duct tape for years. And tonight, you basically looked her in the eye and said, ‘Here’s the rest of your life. Just say yes.’ That’s a beautiful thing, D.”

Ashcroft paused. Then added, gently, “But it’s also terrifying when you’re still learning how to believe it’s real.”

Damien turned back to the sky, hands gripping the railing again. His voice was quiet, but every syllable was deliberate.

“I don’t want perfect. I want her-as she is. With the fear. With the doubts. With the hurricane of thoughts in her head. I don’t care if she takes a year to say yes… or never says it at all. But I needed her to know that I’m not going anywhere.”

Ashcroft nodded slowly. “She heard you. That’s why she looked like someone took the floor out from under her. Doesn’t mean she knows what to do with it yet.”

Ashcroft exhaled slowly, his voice calm but direct.

“She’s not afraid of you, D. She’s afraid of what being with you means. You walked into her life and flipped it upside down-shook everything she thought was stable. You’re used to being the one in control, the one who decides. Getting what you want and knowing how to hold it. But Maya? She’s used to surviving in silence. To juggling chaos without ever being seen. She’s been running on fumes, not for herself, but for everyone else.”

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He glanced sideways, voice quieter.

“She buried her own dreams just to make space for everyone else’s. Then, all of a sudden, someone’s seeing her. Someone trying to carry weight she’s never let anyone else touch. Choosing her. Offering things she never thought she deserved. Especially when you’ve spent your whole life thinking no one ever would. That kind of shift doesn’t feel safe when you’ve ne ver had a soft place to land. It feels dangerous. Like free-falling.”

Damien’s fingers curled around the railing, knuckles tight.

“I don’t want to be her free fall, Nick. I want to be her anchor. The one constant she can trust, not something that throws her off balance.”

He exhaled slowly, jaw tense.

“But how do you prove to someone who’s never had safe… that you are?”

A beat of silence passed before his voice dropped again, rough and quieter now.

“She says she wants me. Then she pushes me away. I don’t know how much more of that I can take without breaking something… in me or in her.”

Ashcroft didn’t speak right away. He took a slow sip from his glass, eyes still trained on the

endless black sea.

Then, quietly, “Then don’t break. Not her. Not yourself.”

He glanced sideways at Damien, voice firm but not unkind.

“You’re not just some guy she’s dating. You’re the guy. The one she’s letting in even when every instinct is telling her to run. That’s not fear of you—that’s fear of losing herself in you. And you-” Ashcroft pointed slightly with the glass, “-you’re terrified of giving too much and having it not be enough. But you said it yourself, D. You’ve already crossed every line. So don’t pretend you’re halfway in.”

He paused, letting that hang in the humid air between them.

“You want her. So don’t ask for easy. Ask for real. And if you want real with her, you’ll have to walk beside her fear until she learns it’s safe to stop running.”

Ashcroft’s voice softened slightly, more personal now.

“She doesn’t need you to save her, Damien. She just needs to believe she can stand still-and

you’ll still stay.”

Damien’s jaw flexed, the muscle ticking hard beneath his skin. He looked away, breathing slow through his nose, like he was trying to get a grip on the fury coiled tight in his chest.

“I’m not halfway in,” he muttered, voice low, dangerous. “I’m in this more than I’ve ever been with anyone in my goddamn life.”

He turned toward Ashcroft now, eyes sharp, voice clipped.

“You think I don’t know she’s scared? I see it in her eyes every time I get too close. I feel it in the way she pulls back just when I think we’re okay. But I’m not asking her to drown in me. I’m just-” He broke off, exhaling roughly. “I’m just asking her to try. To stop assuming I’ll vanish the second it gets hard.”

His voice dipped, almost quiet. “I’d carry her fear if she let me. I’d walk through fire if it meant she’d finally believe I’m not going anywhere.”

He looked back toward the sea, jaw set tight. “But if she keeps running, Nick… even I have a breaking point. And I’m not sure what it’ll do to me if I reach it.”

Ashcroft’s tone was steady, but there was steel beneath it.

“If she runs, chase her. That’s what you do when it matters.”

He paused, watching the way Damien’s fingers curled tighter around the glass.

“And if you’re hitting your breaking point… then remember why you’re doing this in the first place. You didn’t just fall for her by accident, Damien. You chose her.”

His voice softened

“So be patient, D. Don’t treat her like one of your billion-dollar deals you’re trying to close. This isn’t some corporate merger or hostile takeover. It’s not a ‘take it or leave it’ offer.”

He cracked a crooked grin.

“It’s her. Your future. And trust me, some things-especially the ones that scare the hell out of you-are damn worth waiting for.”

He met Damien’s gaze dead-on.

“She’s choosing you too-anyone with eyes can see it. But come on, man… remember who she is. What her life was like before you bulldozed your way into it. She’s not used to being seen, let alone being fought for.”

Ashcroft leaned forward slightly.

“You walked into her quiet little life, Damien. Now you have to give her time-let her walk into yours at her pace.”

Ashcroft let out a dry chuckle, swirling the amber liquid in his glass.

“Love’s a bitch, isn’t it?” he muttered, casting Damien a sidelong glance. “One minute you’re untouchable, the next you’re out here on a balcony, brooding like a heartbroken poet.”

Damien didn’t reply.

Ashcroft took a slow sip before continuing, his voice softer now.

“You used to walk away from deals if they so much as twitched wrong. Now look at you- ready to burn the damn world down for a girl who’s still figuring out if she’s allowed to want something for herself.”

He paused.

“But that’s what love does, doesn’t it? Turns kings into wrecks. Turns silence into longing. Makes you stay, even when everything in you wants to run.”

Then he turned fully to Damien, his tone a rare mix of sincerity and challenge.

“You love her, don’t you?”

Damien let out a slow breath, eyes fixed on the horizon as if the answer could be found somewhere in that stretch of darkness.

“I do,” he said, low and firm.

A breath passed. The admission wasn’t a revelation. It was a surrender.

Ashcroft nodded slowly, a half-smile tugging at his lips.

“Good. Because now everything changes. You’ve got to fight for her-with patience, with grit, and without breaking either of you.”

He gave Damien a sideways glance, teasing but sincere.

“Seriously, ditch the corporate attitude when it comes to her. This isn’t a deal to close. It’s a life to build.”

Then Ashcroft clapped him on the shoulder.

“Besides, love sucks… until it doesn’t. She’s worth it. You know that. You’ll figure it out-just don’t be an idiot.”

Warm salt air brushed against his skin, the faint scent of jasmine drifting on the breeze- nature’s quiet reminder that some things, like the tides, move in their own perfect time.

Chapter 168

Back to the Garden

Laughter drifted faintly through the garden-soft, fractured, edged with tears.

Maya pressed a hand to her mouth, trying to smother the shaky laugh that had slipped out. Not from humor, but from being cracked open-raw, exposed, overwhelmed.

“You really are something else,” she whispered, shaking her head at Harper. “I envy you… I wish I had your boldness, your courage, and that whole ‘I don’t give a damn’ attitude.”

Harper tilted her head. “Maya, why the hell should I live my life worrying about what people think-if the cost is bottling up who I really am? No thanks. I don’t give a fuck. Not because I’m wild, but because I’ve learned the hard way-playing small for others just makes you disappear.”

She leaned in, voice low but fierce, and the garden around them-quiet, moonlit, humming with night sounds-seemed to hold its breath.

“You’ve just lived your life too long playing it safe, babe. So safe that somewhere along the way, you tucked that fierce version of you in a locked drawer and forgot where you left the damn key. But she’s still in there. And it’s time to let her out.”

Harper straightened and gave Maya a pointed look. “I mean… seriously. Remember who your boyfriend is. Damien freaking Blackwood. You think the world won’t notice? You stay stuck in this sweet, goody two-shoes role too long, and trust me-someone bold might come along and try to steal him.”

She smirked, eyes gleaming. “And I’ll be the first to slap some sense into you if you let that happen.”

“So yeah, be scared if you have to. That’s normal. But don’t be a damn coward. Don’t let fear take the wheel while your heart’s stuck in the backseat. Not when you’ve got a man who’d move heaven and hell for you.”

She leaned in with a wicked grin. “So either grow your claws or hand me the keys-because! swear, I’ll gift-wrap that man and hand-deliver him to one of those silicone-stuffed Barbies in our department. Or better yet, I’ll auction him online. Pretty sure half the women on the internet would fight to the death and pay a fortune for him!”

Harper leaned in, softer now. “Just open your eyes, your ears, and that stubborn little heart of yours. Listen to what people around you-people who know him-are saying. You notice anyt hing in common?”

Maya swallowed. “He never let anyone in… until me.”

Her voice was barely audible, but the weight of the words hung in the air like a secret finally spoken.

Harper’s expression softened, the teasing gleam in her eyes giving way to something deeper. “Exactly. And that’s not nothing, Maya. That’s everything.”

She touched Maya’s arm gently, her voice softening.

“You didn’t just walk into his life-you cracked it wide open. So yeah, it’s fast. It’s messy. It’s terrifying. But love doesn’t follow rules or timelines. It just… is. And when it finds you, you either fight for it-or spend the rest of your life wondering what would’ve happened if you had.

Harper leaned in a little closer, her tone low and certain.

“Every time you feel like running, remind yourself why you took the risk. Take the leap, and one of two things happens-it’s either worth it, or it teaches you what you needed to learn. Either way, it’s not wrong. It’s brave. And that makes it worth it.”

She offered a quiet smile.

“Because at the end of the day, you’ll know one thing for sure… you tried. And that’s always better than wondering what if.”

Maya turned her gaze back to Damien’s suite. The soft glow from the balcony spilled out like a quiet invitation-steady, warm, and waiting.

She didn’t know what she was going to say. Or if she even had the right words.

But she knew one thing-she had to try.

Chapter 169

She drew in a breath, hands pressing against the bench as she started to rise-

And then the light went out.

Just like that, the invitation vanished.

And her heart dropped with it.

The balcony light-gone.

Like a door quietly closing in her face.

Her breath caught. Her heart, already bracing for impact, stumbled in her chest.

Was he… done for the night?

Had she waited too long?

A cold knot curled in her stomach.

Stupid. Stupid for hesitating. For letting fear chew up all the minutes she could've used to fix this.

Harper noticed the shift in her expression. "Hey-don't spiral," she said gently. "It's just a light. Doesn't mean he's gone. Maybe he just stepped inside."

But Maya barely heard her. Her mind was already racing-picturing Damien alone in that dark. suite, wounded and closed off again… because of her.

Beside her, Harper checked the time on her phone. “Oh, shit-it’s past midnight? We’ve been out here that long?”

Maya gave a small, dazed nod.

“No wonder I’m suddenly freezing my t**s off,” Harper muttered, then softened as she glanced back at her. “Look, how about we call it a night and get some rest? We’ve got an early call time tomorrow.”

She nudged Maya gently. “I’m sure you’ll see him at breakfast. Pull him aside. Talk it out then. It’ll be okay. Besides…” She shrugged. “Maybe a little pause is good. Gives you both space to breathe. To take it all in. Yeah?”

Maya hesitated, heart torn, eyes flicking once more toward Damien’s darkened suite.

But after a beat, she nodded-slowly, reluctantly, heart still rooted to the balcony behind her.

They walked back to their room in silence, the night thick around them. At their door, Harper gave her arm a squeeze and disappeared inside. But Maya lingered.

She stood quietly in the hallway, eyes locked on Damien’s door. The warmth from earlier still clung faintly to the walls.

Part of her wanted to knock.

But another part-heavier, more cautious-told her to give him space.

Eventually, she slipped inside-but sleep didn't come easy. She lay awake for hours, tossing in tangled sheets, eyes on the ceiling, her heart caught somewhere between regret and resolve.

Tomorrow.

She would find him tomorrow.

She reached for her journal and opened it to a blank page. The words came in waves, raw and unfiltered, as she poured her heart out. Everything she couldn't say to Damien tonight, she scribbled here-fears, longings, what-ifs, and truths too tender to speak aloud.

It didn't fix the ache.

But it helped her breathe.

Eventually, her pen slowed, the ink trailing off mid-sentence. Her lids grew heavy, lashes fluttering as sleep finally began to creep in at the edges-

Her alarm shattered the silence.

Maya groaned and slapped at her phone until the sound stopped. A hollow kind of exhaustion pressed against her skull. She hadn't really slept. Not fully. Her body had lain still, but her mind had run miles.

She sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes, heart already sinking with the weight of what the morning might bring.

But today wasn't about hiding.

Today… she would find him. And fix what she broke.

She got up, took a quick shower, and got dressed.

When she caught her reflection in the mirror, she winced-exhausted eyes, dark circles she couldn't fully conceal, no matter how much concealer she dabbed on.

She stared at herself, then inhaled deeply, grounding her trembling nerves.

"Don't be a coward, Maya," she whispered to her reflection. "You can do this. Talk to him. Be honest. Tell him what you really feel. No more pushing him away. No more hiding. Fight for it. Fight for him. You've got this."

She stepped out of her room and paused, her eyes drifting to the door across the hall. Damien's suite was still and quiet. No sign of movement. No footsteps. No light beneath the door.

Her heart squeezed.

Maya lingered a moment longer, as if maybe-just maybe he'd open it. But nothing.

Chapter 170

With a soft breath, she turned and started walking toward the elevator. Each step felt heavier than it should.

Her phone vibrated. A message from Harper lit up the screen:

"Already downstairs. Coffee's strong. I saved you a muffin. You're welcome-but I'm giving it five more minutes before I eat it myself."

Maya let out a soft breath-half laugh, half sigh-and tucked the phone away.

No more hiding. No more overthinking. Today, she would find him. Today, she would make it right.

She arrived at the breakfast area, scanning the room the moment she stepped in.

The team was already there-chattering in low tones over coffee and plates of fruit and pastries. Even Ethan and his manager had shown up, seated near the buffet with smug ease.

But the one person she was searching for… wasn't there.

Her heart sank, just a little.

Then she spotted Harper, waving at her from the far end of the room, seated beside the floor-to-ceiling windows where the morning light spilled in golden and warm.

Maya wove through the tables and made her way over, her footsteps quieter than usual. She slid into the seat across from Harper, her body there, but her thoughts still scanning the doorway behind her.

Harper took one look at her and smirked. "You're doing that thing again."

Maya blinked, reaching half-heartedly for the glass of water in front of her. "What thing?"

"That thing where you pretend to be fine but look like you just crawled out of a spiral at 3 a.m. after rewatching Bridgerton and overthinking your entire life."

Maya let out a tired laugh, rubbing at the edge of her eye carefully to avoid smudging her concealer. “I didn’t sleep.”

“Shocker,” Harper said, sliding a muffin onto Maya’s plate. “You’re running on nerves, and your face says you’ve been practicing a speech since before sunrise.”

Maya didn’t deny it.

“I was going to talk to him today. I mean, I am-I will, I just..” She hesitated, eyes scanning the entrance again. “I thought he’d be here.”

Harper chewed slowly, her gaze steady. “Maybe he slept in. Or maybe he’s skipping breakfast. Or maybe…” she shrugged, “he just needed a little space too. Doesn’t mean he won’t show. And when he does-you’ll know what to say.”

Maya’s stomach twisted. “What if I already messed it up?”

Harper leaned in, voice softer now, but sure. “Then fix it. You’re not the only one who’s scared, Maya. But you are the only one who gets to decide if fear wins.”

Maya sat in silence as Harper turned back to her breakfast, the clinking of cutlery and soft murmur of conversation filling the air around them.

Her gaze drifted to the floor-to-ceiling window beside them. Beyond the glass, the ocean stretched out, calm and endless. The early morning sun caught the gentle waves, scattering flecks of gold across the water's surface.

Maya watched them roll in-steady, unhurried. As if the sea itself was reminding her: not everything needed to be rushed. Some things moved in their own time.