Intern 171

Chapter 171

Breakfast came and went. Plates were cleared, coffee cups emptied, and one by one, the team filtered out of the dining area with the hum of morning chatter trailing behind them.

But Damien never showed.

Maya tried to hide her disappointment behind quiet sips of juice and half-hearted nods at Harper's attempts to keep the conversation going. It was no use. The hollow ache in her chest only grew heavier with each tick of the clock.

Trina's voice eventually cut through the quiet lull. "Alright everyone, we're meeting by the beach tiki bar in twenty. Quick prep and staging before we begin rolling. Let's go!"

Chairs scraped back. Sandals padded off across tiled floors. Soon, the breakfast area was nearly empty.

Maya stood slowly, slinging her bag over her shoulder. Harper walked beside her, tossing the last of her croissant into her mouth. "Still no sign of your brooding lover boy," she muttered under her breath.

Maya didn't answer. She didn't have the energy to joke.

As they stepped through the lobby doors, the late morning sun spilled over them-warm and blinding. Just ahead, Lee appeared from the path leading outside, moving fast. His strides were clipped and focused, jaw set, brows furrowed. Definitely not someone who had just

rolled out of bed.

His shirt clung slightly to his chest, the collar damp with sweat. Like he'd been running.

"Ms. Maya. Ms. Lin," he greeted, pausing just a few feet away, breath still catching as he gave them both a polite nod.

Maya's brows drew together. "Lee? Is everything okay?"

He blinked, slightly caught off guard, then in a blink his expression shifted-too quickly. A small, practiced smile tugged at his lips. "Of course! Sorry, I-uh-I was just in a hurry to get back from the hangar."

Maya tilted her head, unconvinced.

Harper raised an eyebrow. "Hangar?"

"Yes, Mr. Ashcroft had to leave early this morning," Lee replied, straightening. "Something urgent came up. Business-related. I went ahead to make sure everything was ready for his

flight."

“He flew out?” Maya asked, surprise flickering across her face.

Lee nodded. “Helicopter picked him up about an hour ago. He should be back tonight, or tomorrow morning at the latest,”

Maya hesitated, then spoke, voice quieter now. “What about… um…”

Lee tilted his head slightly. “Mr. Blackwood?”

She gave a small nod, trying to keep her expression neutral.

Lee’s reply was calm, but there was a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. “He stayed. He’s still here. I just… don’t know where exactly.”

Maya blinked. “You didn’t see him?”

“No, not since last night. I only saw James at the hangar. He didn’t say anything about Mr. Blackwood’s plans.” He paused, then added with a respectful dip of his head, “If I hear anything, I’ll let you know right away.”

Maya just nodded, eyes dropping to the ground as her shoulders slumped. The disappointment was plain in her posture, even if she didn’t say a word. She bit the inside of her cheek, willing her heart to quiet down.

Harper nudged her gently, injecting lightness into her voice. “Oh, don’t worry, babe. He’s probably holed up in his room, buried under a mountain of documents. You know the boss- every second of his time is probably worth a million. He’s just busy handling business. He’ll

come out soon.”

Maya gave a weak smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

As Harper looped an arm through hers, she threw a quick glance at Lee. A quiet look passed between them-brief, unreadable, but not lost on Maya entirely.

Still, no one said anything more.

Together, they began walking toward the beachside tiki bar, where the day’s shoot was about to begin. The sun was high, the breeze warm, but Maya felt the heaviness settle just behind

her ribs.

The team moved quickly, the tiki bar transformed into a vibrant scene of woven textures, soft tropical lighting, and cascading greenery. Trina directed with brisk efficiency while cameras were tested and the others ran through last-minute touch-ups.

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Maya kept her head down and focused, throwing herself into the logistics-adjusting the product placements, double checking storyboards, quietly liaising with the camera crew when needed.

Before she knew it, the sun had climbed high overhead. The light had shifted into the golden haze of early afternoon, and Trina called for a break. Lunch was being laid out on the shaded tables nearby.

Still no sign of Damien.

Maya's eyes flicked toward the resort, scanning the balconies. Nothing. No shadow. No figure. No Damien.

"Hey, Maya-do you have a sec?"

Ethan's voice came from behind her. She turned, expression neutral.

"Yes?" she asked, keeping her tone even and her gaze focused just over his shoulder.

"I just wanted to ask-uh, about the sequence after lunch. The drone angle-is that still a go or…?"

"It depends on the wind, but yes. We'll reassess after the break," she said crisply, then stepped back, turning slightly toward Harper as if waiting for her input.

Before Ethan could say anything else, Harper slid an arm around Maya's shoulders with perfect timing. "Lunch first, Mr. Miller. You know what happens when she runs on caffeine fumes." She grinned, pulling Maya toward the catering table.

There were other moments too-small ones. Ethan passing by during camera checks, or trying to strike up casual conversation while walking between locations. But each time, Maya kept her answers short, direct, professional.

And each time, either Harper magically appeared at her side, or Lee positioned himself just behind her- silent, watchful, but unmistakably present.

Not once did Ethan get the chance to linger.

Maya appreciated it more than she could say. She didn't have the emotional bandwidth for anything else. Not today.

Not while Damien was still nowhere in sight.

Sienna had gently tapped Maya's arm between takes. "Hey, you okay? You've been really quiet today."

Jessa, ever observant, chimed in from her spot beside the reflector. "Yeah, you seem… off."

Maya forced a small smile, shaking her head. "I'm fine. Just didn't get much sleep."

Even Trina noticed. She passed by with a clipboard and paused, eyes narrowing with concern. “Maya, if you need to take the day off, take it. We’ve got this.”

But Maya had quickly straightened her shoulders. “No. I’m fine, really. I’d rather stay.”

The concern didn’t completely fade from their faces, but they let it go. The shoot resumed. They breezed through lunch, and by early afternoon, the sun blazed overhead, casting strong shadows across the sand as the cameras rolled on.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, Maya caught a glimpse of James.

He was on the far end of the beach, near the path leading back to the resort, phone to his ear and walking toward the lobby with that usual quiet composure.

Without thinking, Maya dropped her clipboard onto a nearby table and took off after him.

“James!” she called.

Harper’s voice trailed after her, confused. “Maya? Where are you-?”

“I’ll be back!” she shouted over her shoulder.

James looked up, surprised, then offered a polite nod as he lowered his phone. “Ms. Maya.”

She stopped in front of him, slightly out of breath. “Hi-I… I was just wondering-” She hesitated, then forced the words out. “I haven’t seen Damien all day. Is he… um, is he alright?”

James tilted his head slightly, then answered in his usual calm, measured tone. “You’re looking for Mr. Blackwood?”

Maya lowered her gaze and gave a small nod.

“He’s in his suite,” James replied evenly. “His schedule’s full today-video conferences, internal briefings, several calls with the board. He’s catching up on business. Being away this long… things tend to pile up.”

Her heart sank a little, even though she told herself it made sense. Of course. Work.

Business.

“He’s alright though?” she asked softly.

James’s eyes briefly softened. “Yes, just focused. That’s all.”

Maya nodded slowly, a whisper of disappointment crossing her face before she quickly masked it. “Thanks, James.”

“If you’d like, I can let him know you asked,” he offered.

“No,” she said quickly, then gentled her tone. “No… that’s okay.”

With a quiet nod, James excused himself and turned back toward the lobby.

Glam

Maya lingered for a moment longer, the warm breeze teasing strands of hair across her face,

the steady crash of waves grounding her thoughts.

Then, almost before she meant to, she called out, her voice barely steady.

“James?”

He paused, turning slowly.

Her voice cracked slightly, vulnerable.

“Is he… mad at me?”

James exhaled softly, a flicker of something gentler in his eyes. He gave her a small, apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Maya… but that’s something only Mr. Blackwood can answer.”

Maya nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat.

“I understand… I’m sorry for asking.”

She turned away, taking slow, measured steps back toward the shoot location.

But then James’s voice stopped her again.

“Ms. Maya.”

She glanced back.

“Mr. Blackwood’s final call today is scheduled for six o’clock. It’s just the usual monthly site check-in-it shouldn’t take long. Most likely, he’ll be finished before eight.”

Maya felt a sudden spark-hope flickering to life. “James… can I ask you for a favor?”

James nodded, a small, encouraging smile tugging at his lips.

“Of course, Ms. Maya. Whatever you need.”

Just before sunset, the final shot was taken and the crew began to pack up. The light softened across the beach, casting golden hues on the ocean’s surface as everyone dispersed, tired but content. One by one, they made their way back to their rooms to rest and freshen up for dinner.

Maya lingered a moment longer, taking in the fading horizon. Then, with her heart quietly pounding, she turned and walked back to her suite.

Inside the room, Maya set her things down and quickly pulled out her phone, sending Harper a text asking her to come over.

Just a few minutes later, there was a knock at the door. She opened it to find Harper already grinning, as if she'd been waiting for the invitation. Once inside, Maya closed the door behind her and quietly shared her plan.

Harper's eyes lit up instantly. "That's my girl," she said, clasping her hands together. "Now we're talking!"

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It didn't take much convincing before Harper was digging through Maya's suitcase like a stylist on a mission, holding up dresses with practiced flair.

"This," she declared, lifting a white cami midi dress with a triumphant grin, "this is the one."

The dress was elegant in its simplicity-lightweight, romantic, and effortlessly flattering. The soft fabric draped beautifully over Maya's figure, cinching gently at the waist before falling just below her knees in a graceful, airy flare. Delicate tie straps sat lightly on her shoulders, lending a touch of sweetness, while the neckline framed her collarbones with quiet allure.

Maya slipped it on as Harper circled her like a backstage stylist, taming her hair into loose waves and letting a few soft strands fall to frame her face. A sweep of blush, a touch of gloss, dainty earrings-and she was done.

Harper stood back and admired her work.

"Jesus, Maya. If he doesn't melt when he sees you, I'm checking him for a pulse."

Maya laughed quietly, though nerves fluttered beneath the sound, tightening her chest.

A soft knock echoed from the door.

Harper padded over and opened it.

It was James.

He offered a polite nod, then turned his attention to Maya with that composed, respectful

smile.

“Ms. Maya. Everything is in place.”

Her heart gave a quiet skip. “Thank you,” she said softly.

James inclined his head. “My pleasure.”

But just as he turned to leave, he paused-his gaze finding her once more. This time, his voice carried something warmer.

“You look… beautiful tonight. Radiant. I hope this evening goes just the way you’re hoping.”

Maya blinked, a little stunned, warmth rushing to her cheeks.

“That’s very kind of you, James.”

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He nodded once more. “I’ll be waiting just outside whenever you’re ready.”

As he stepped back into the hallway, Maya called after him, “James?”

He turned halfway. “Yes, Ms. Maya?”

She hesitated, then smiled-shy, but sure.

“Thank you… for everything.”

James held her gaze for a moment longer, and though his expression remained steady, something softened in his eyes. He gave a final, respectful nod.

Then he turned, leaving Maya and Harper behind, the air around them suddenly thick with silent anticipation and the quiet hum of something about to begin.

Once the door closed behind James, Maya exhaled shakily and crossed the room.

She knelt by her suitcase, unzipped the front pocket, and pulled out a small, worn journal-the corners bent, the leather cover soft and weathered from use. She sat on the edge of the bed, flipping through the pages slowly, her fingers grazing over half-written thoughts, pressed flowers, stray receipts. Fragments of her life-things she'd been too scared to say out loud.

Then she found it.

Tucked between two pages was a sketch, faded slightly where the graphite had smudged. A r ing-simple, hand-drawn, imperfect. The band slightly uneven, the stone no more than a soft outline. It wasn't anything fancy. But it was hers. An idea that had lived in her heart long before she even knew what real love was."

Maya stared at it for a moment, then carefully tore the page out-slowly, cleanly, as though the act itself meant something.

She folded it once and pressed it to her chest, then slipped it into the little purse beside her.

Behind her, Harper watched, her expression soft with curiosity. “What was that?”

Maya didn’t look up right away. Her voice was quiet. “Just something I drew… a long time ago. I want to carry it with me tonight.”

Harper’s smile was gentle. “Then let’s make tonight count.”

Harper stepped closer, her eyes a little glassy now as she looked at Maya-really looked at her. Then, without a word, she pulled her into a tight hug. Maya melted into it, her chin resting on Harper’s shoulder, the steady beat of her heart a grounding rhythm in the swirl of nerves.

When Harper finally pulled back, she kept her hands on Maya’s shoulders and gave her a little

push, just enough to get a better look at her face.

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“Go,” she said softly, her voice brimming with affection. “Go tell your man how much you love him.”

Maya gave a shy, almost teary smile.

But Harper wasn't done.

She grinned suddenly, wicked twinkle returning to her eyes. "Oh-and if it gets steamy…" she wiggled her brows and leaned in like she was about to reveal a state secret, "just listen to your body, babe."

Then she winked.

Maya groaned, half-laughing as she turned toward the door. "You're impossible."

Harper's voice followed her with a dramatic flourish. "And yet-you love me!"

Maya stepped out, the soft soles of her shoes brushing gently against the polished floor as she walked the short distance to Damien's suite. The hallway was quiet, shadows stretching long beneath the warm sconces. James stood just outside the door, straight-backed and composed as always.

He turned as she approached. "You ready, Ms. Maya?" he asked gently.

Maya let out a slow breath and gave a small, nervous smile. She wiped her slightly clammy hands along the sides of her dress. "I'm ready."

James nodded once and stepped aside, opening the door with quiet precision.

Maya stepped through. Her pulse quickened.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, James closed the door behind her-softly, respectfully -sealing her in with the silence.

The suite was dim, the only light coming from a pair of warm stand lamps and the soft flicker of candlelight casting golden halos in the dining space ahead. The air smelled faintly of the sea and something rich, buttery… familiar.

She walked slowly toward the dining area. There, waiting in the center of the room, was a

small round table dressed in crisp white linen. Two place settings. Candles glowing. A bottle of wine breathing quietly in a silver bucket.

Dinner for two.

Earlier that day, when James mentioned Damien's last call would end before eight, an idea had quietly bloomed in her chest. After everything that happened the night before-the tension, the way she responded to Damien's words, and how deeply she knew she'd hurt him –she felt she had to make it right.

She remembered how Damien had originally meant for that dinner to be just for the two of them. But she'd blurted out an invitation to Harper-trying to soothe her nerves-and suddenly it had spiraled into a group affair. Laughter, tension, wine… but none of the quiet intimacy he'd clearly intended.

So tonight, she wanted to give that back to him.

She'd asked James for something simple-but meaningful-and he'd delivered, down to every last detail.

The prawns, for instance. She'd only learned a few days ago, during lunch, that Damien used to love them… but stopped eating them simply because he hated peeling them. So she asked James to serve them anyway-because tonight, she'd be more than happy to peel them for hi

And then there was the dessert. Blueberry cheesecake. She hadn't even known it was his favorite until James quietly mentioned it. He'd added it without her asking.

Not extravagant. Not loud. Just personal. Thoughtful. Intimate.

Just like she hoped tonight would be.

She stepped deeper into the space and slowly exhaled, smoothing her hands down her dress again as she glanced around the room.

Damien wasn't here yet.

But everything else?

Everything was ready.

Then-

A soft click.

She froze.

The door to Damien's bedroom creaked open.

He stepped out, fresh from the shower-dark hair still damp and tousled, water clinging to the ends before trailing lazy droplets down the side of his neck. A towel hung forgotten

around his shoulders, the damp edges brushing against the lean muscle of his arms.

He wore a plain white round-neck T-shirt that clung lightly to his skin, still damp beneath the fabric, and a pair of low-slung black joggers that hung effortlessly on his hips. He looked devastatingly casual-unguarded, barefoot-and somehow even more dangerous because of

"James, make sure to send a copy of that contract by-" He stopped short, mid-sentence, eyes landing on her.

His steps halted, and for a heartbeat too long, neither of them moved.

Maya stood there by the candlelit table, framed in the soft gold glow. Her white dress fluttered lightly at the knees, delicate and feminine, her silhouette soft but sure. Her hair curled in gentle waves around her face, and there was a tremble in her shoulders-one she tried to hide as their eyes locked.

Damien blinked slowly. Once. Like he wasn't sure if he was seeing her or imagining her.

"Maya…" he murmured, his voice low and rough at the edges, fraying like something unraveling inside him.

She smiled, barely-a curve of hope. "Hi."

The silence that followed wasn't empty. It pulsed between them, heavy with all the things unsaid. All the things they'd both carried from the night before.

His gaze traveled over her slowly-not with lust, but reverence. The ribbon straps on her shoulders. The exposed line of her collarbone. The careful way she'd dressed like she wanted him to see her, and only him.

He stepped closer, voice quiet but steady. "What… are you-what is this?"

Maya's fingers curled tighter around the strap of her purse, and she forced herself to meet his eyes. "Dinner," she said softly. "Just us."

"I asked James to help," she added quickly, searching his expression. "I told him to keep it quiet. Please… don't blame him."

His gaze flicked to the table-the candles flickering gently, the wine poured, steam still curling from the plated food. The kind of quiet, intimate scene he'd tried to create the night before.

And then back to her.

"I… I hope I'm not interrupting. I… I just wanted to give you what you planned for us," she continued, voice low, almost breaking. "I know it was supposed to be just the two of us last

night. I know I ruined that."

A flicker of something passed through his eyes. Pain, maybe. But also understanding.

Maya took a breath, pushing through the tightness in her throat. "I remembered how you loved prawns, but stopped eating them because you hate peeling." Her smile was small, nervous. "I don't mind. So I thought… I could do that for you. Again."

Her voice dropped, more fragile now. "And the cheesecake. James said it's your favorite."

She took a step forward, her voice barely above a whisper. “I didn’t do this out of guilt. I did it because I care about you.” Her throat worked around the lump rising. “I want you to see that.”

A breath trembled from her chest, and she glanced down-then back up again, eyes wide, hopeful, breaking. “Can we talk… please?”

Chapter 175

Damien’s POV

I’d been stuck in this room all day-signing documents, attending back-to-back meetings, handling the mountain of responsibilities two weeks away had left behind. Not the kind I could delegate.

Still, my mind hadn’t left her.

Last night had been brutal.

Ashcroft and I ended up on the balcony. The silence between us was thick with tension. He stopped me just in time, before the weight of my emotions tipped too far.

And then I said something I shouldn’t have.

“I’m starting to wonder if this is even worth it.”

I hated those words the second they left my mouth-ignorant, reckless.

It’s worth it. Of course it is.

She’s worth every damn second.

Who would’ve thought Ashcroft would make sense when it came to love?

Cliché, coming from a guy who’s never been in a serious relationship. He’s cold, calculated, ruthless. But with women? He never holds back. That’s exactly how he earned his playboy

reputation.

Maybe that’s what makes him an expert-at least in understanding women better than most.

He talked some sense into me. Pulled me back before I spiraled. Helped me see things clearer, helped me understand Maya’s reaction-what was really behind it.

All the tangled reasons I'd been too blind to see.

Just before we went back inside, Ashcroft got a call from one of our men tailing Orion. They found someone-a desperate bastard drowning in gambling debt, no loyalty to speak of. The kind of guy who'd sell out Orion's side for protection and a fat envelope.

I should've been on that helicopter this morning, wringing the truth out of him myself.

But I didn't go.

Because Maya was here.

Because of the way she looked at me-frightened, confused, like I'd become the very monster she'd spent years trying to avoid.

And because fucking Miller was still here.

I wasn't leaving her-not when that smug piece of shit might try to slide in, like he ever belonged.

Ashcroft saw it all over my face and told me to stay-he'd handle the rat, get the intel, and be back before the end of the day or tomorrow at the latest.

When we got back inside, they were gone.

James said Harper had taken Maya for “a walk.”

I almost followed. My entire body wanted to move-just to find her, to see if she was okay.

But Ashcroft stopped me. Told me to wait. Told me Harper would know what to say. That pushing Maya now would only drive her further away.

So I waited.

I sat in this goddamn room while the sun rose and fell again-and didn’t get a single minute of sleep.

I kept thinking about her.

Should I text? Call? Knock on her door and apologize for throwing my heart down like an idiot and expecting her not to flinch?

But I didn’t do any of it.

I didn’t eat. Didn’t move much, except to shower between meetings. Just sat there, stuck in head- thinking about her. About that nervous laugh… the way her eyes looked when she backed away from me last night.

When the last call finally ended, all I wanted to do was strip out of this suit, take a long shower, and crash. Alone. Maybe sleep would silence the noise for a while.

I walked straight into the shower, let the water scald my skin until I couldn’t think anymore. Didn’t even dry my hair properly. Just grabbed a towel and threw on a shirt and joggers- anything to be out of the damn formality of today.

I heard movement outside.

Figured James was back with food.

I opened the door, still rubbing water from the back of my neck, towel draped over my shoulders. “James, make sure to send a copy of that contract by-”

I stopped.

The dim lighting caught something in my peripheral-a different figure, not where it should

My gaze lifted.

And there she was.

Maya.

The woman I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about since last night… standing in the glow of the candles, wearing a soft white dress that fluttered around her knees like something out of a dream. Her hair fell in waves around her face, lips glossed, eyes wide-but she didn’t look away.

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For a moment, I wasn’t sure if she was real.

I’d had so little sleep-too many goddamn dreams where she came back, only to disappear the second I reached for her.

So I said her name. Quietly. Needing to be sure.

And then she smiled-small, nervous, impossibly real.

“Hi,” she said.

That voice. Soft. Familiar. Unmistakable.

God. She was real. She was here.

The table behind her was set-candlelight, wine, dishes still steaming. Thoughtful. Intimate.

And suddenly I couldn't breathe properly.

Did she do all this for me?

The silence between us wasn't empty-it vibrated with everything unsaid. Every word we'd both held back since last night.

I let my eyes roam over her slowly.

The way the delicate ribbon straps hugged her shoulders… the soft curve of her collarbone exposed beneath the gentle neckline of that white dress. She'd dressed up-for me.

God, she's beautiful.

No designer label, no heavy makeup, no cloying perfume. Just her. Just Maya.

Her simplicity. That softness. The quiet kind of innocence that strips a man bare and leaves him fucking wrecked.

I'm done for.

I want to lift her into my arms, carry her to my bed, peel that dress off with my mouth. Take my time devouring her-marking every inch until she's mine in every way.

Mine. For me. Only me.

Fuck.

This is not the time.

Focus, Damien.

I forced myself to take a slow step forward, voice low, careful-like I was afraid one wrong move might shatter the moment.

"What… are you-" My throat tightened. "What is this?"

Her fingers tightened on the strap of her purse, but she met my gaze squarely, even if her voice wavered.

“Dinner,” she said softly. “Just us.”

Something in my chest clenched-an ache I wasn’t prepared for.

“I asked James to help,” she hurried on, as if expecting anger. “I told him to keep it quiet. Please… don’t blame him.”

I didn’t look at her then. I couldn’t.

Instead, I stared at the table-two plates, still steaming, candles flickering gently.

The kind of intimate moment I planned for her last night.

Only this time-she gave it to me.

Her voice cracked slightly, but she pressed on.

“I just wanted to give you what you planned for us. I know it was supposed to be just the two of us last night. I know I ruined that.”

A flash of pain crossed my mind-because I felt it too.

But beneath that pain was something else. Understanding.

She took a breath, fighting the lump in her throat.

“I remembered what you said about prawns… how you loved them but stopped eating them because you hated peeling them.” A small, nervous smile. “I don’t mind. So I thought… I could do that for you. Again.”

Of course she remembered.

That first lunch we shared… it was one of the simplest, yet most memorable moments.

The way she offered to peel some for me-like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Something so small. So quiet. But it meant everything.

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“And the cheesecake. James said it’s your favorite.”

I swallowed hard, the tightness in my chest creeping higher-choking.

These little things-so small, yet shaking me to the core.

This is her way-her quiet, honest way of learning me, seeing me.

No wealth. No status. Just her.

Simple, thoughtful, real.

And fuck, it means more than anything money could ever buy.

She stepped closer, eyes locked on mine.

“I didn’t do this out of guilt. Or fear. I did it because I care about you.”

Her voice cracked on the last words.

“I want you to see that.”

God.

There it was.

Raw. Unfiltered. Her.

And fuck yes, I saw it.

Felt it.

Every word sank straight into me, cracking something open I didn’t know I’d sealed shut.

She was here. She meant it.

Chapter 177

And for the first time since everything went to hell… It all started to make sense.

She’s definitely worth it. Every second.

My anchor.

My future.

My everything.

The only reason I’m doing what I’m doing now-why I’m crossing lines I swore never to cross.

My reason. My light. My Maya.

Ashcroft was right.

I crashed into her quiet world and shook it. Hard.

And now… now I have to be patient while she finds her way into mine-at her own pace.

And this? This is what that looks like.

This dinner, this softness in her voice, the fire I see trembling behind those eyes…

She’s starting to fight her own fears.

And slowly, gently, willingly…

She’s walking into my world.

I’ve never wanted anything more than for her to stay.

A soft breath trembled from her chest, barely audible-but I felt it like a ripple under my skin.

Then she glanced down, her lashes casting delicate shadows over her cheeks… before she looked up again.

And fuck-those eyes.

Wide.

Hopeful.

Breaking.

“Can we talk… please?”

Her Tears Brought Me to My Knees-3

The crack in her voice nearly dropped me to my knees.

Not because she sounded afraid. But because she sounded brave.

Because she was trying.

Of course we can talk.

I’ve been waiting for that moment-for her-to come back to me like this.

I’ll listen to her.

All day. Every day. For the rest of my goddamn life if she’ll let me.

A beat of silence stretched between us.

I took a step toward her-just one.

But fuck, it felt like a landslide.

Like crossing into something I couldn’t come back from.

“Maya,” I said quietly.

She blinked fast, but I saw the exact moment she broke.

Saw the tremble in her chin before the tears broke free.

“I’m sorry, Damien,” she whispered, voice raw, broken-real.

“I know what I did last night was wrong. The way I shut you down-it hurt you. And I hate that I did that.”

Her breath hitched, splintering halfway through.

“I got scared, and I pushed you away. I ruined everything. I’m so, so sorry.”

Fuck.

Those words-that look in her eyes-hit harder than anything I’d ever taken.

Seeing her cry tore something loose in me.

I hated the way it made my chest feel like it was caving in.

Hated the helpless ache twisting low in my gut, like I’d failed to protect her from me.

I didn’t let her finish.

I closed the distance and wrapped her up in my arms like I was afraid she'd disappear again.

Held her tight, grounding her. Grounding me.

One hand cradled the back of her head. The other curled around her waist-anchoring her to me, right where she fucking belonged.

"Maya," I breathed, barely able to get the words past my throat.

"Please don't cry. You didn't ruin anything, okay? Just…"

I swallowed hard.

"Just stop crying."

My voice dropped, rough and low, "I hate seeing you like this."

Because when she hurt-I bled.

Chapter 178

He held her tighter for a moment longer, feeling her body tremble softly against his. Then Damien gently pulled back just enough to look into her shining, tear-streaked eyes.

“Let’s talk, okay?” he said softly, his voice rough with everything he wasn’t saying-but desper ately wanted her to hear.

Maya swallowed hard, biting her lip as if summoning courage from somewhere deep inside. Then she nodded, slow and steady.

“But before that…” he said quietly.

He cupped her face in his hands, thumbs brushing over her cheeks. Then he kissed her-soft, smooth, deep, and full of longing. The kind of kiss that spoke of all the seconds he’d missed

her.

“I missed you… so much,” he whispered against her lips.

Maya’s cheeks flushed a delicate pink. Her breath hitched, heart pounding. She smiled shyly, eyes sparkling as she whispered back, “I missed you too… more than I thought I could.”

He held her close a moment longer before stepping back, a slow smile spreading across his lips.

He took her hand and led her toward the table. “Have a seat. Let’s enjoy what you prepared… and talk over dinner.”

Damien pulled out the chair for her, his fingers brushing hers as she settled in. He took his own seat opposite her, eyes never leaving her face.

For a moment, neither spoke. The candlelight flickered between them, shadows dancing across the table. The quiet clink of cutlery broke the silence as they both reached for the

prawns.

Maya’s fingers fumbled slightly with the peeling, her gaze flickering nervously to Damien’s.

He offered a small, encouraging smile. “You know, these might just be the best prawns I’ve

ever had.”

She smiled back, warmth blooming in her chest. “You said that last time too.”

Damien grinned, teasing.

“Well, every moment with you is better than the last. Besides, you weren’t officially my

girlfriend then. So this… this is different.”

As they ate, the conversation began-slow at first, careful. Each word a tentative step across a fragile bridge.

Damien’s gaze softened as he cut into his food, then looked up.

“When we came back inside last night, you were already gone. James said you and Harper went for a walk?”

Maya nodded, a sheepish smile tugging at her lips. “Yeah… and I got a bit of a beating too.” She lifted her hands. “Not literally-but you know… Harper-style.”

Damien raised a brow, mouth twitching. “Same. Nick gave me an earful too.” He leaned in, narrowing his eyes playfully. “What’d she do, drag you into a motivational ambush?”

Maya laughed, light and real. “Pretty much. She called me a coward five different ways, reminded me you’re not the kind of guy who lets people in… and told me I’d be an idiot if I didn’t stop running and fight for you. Then gave me a whole lecture about love.”

Damien’s chest tightened. His voice dropped, rough with wonder. “She said that?”

Maya nodded, cheeks warming.

“Yeah. And… she also told me to either grow some claws or hand her the keys-because she might as well gift-wrap you and deliver you to one of the Barbies in our department. Or auction you off online. She’s pretty sure half the women on the internet would fight to the death and pay a fortune for you.”

Damien chuckled low. “Remind me to thank Ms. Lin for the vote of confidence.”

Maya exhaled softly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “You know… Harper said something I haven’t been able to stop thinking about.”

She hesitated, then added, voice low and honest, “She said love doesn’t follow rules or timelines. It just… happens. And when it does, you either fight for it-or spend the rest of your life wondering what could’ve been.”

Damien didn’t move. But she could feel the weight of his attention like a physical touch.

“She also said every time I feel like running, I should remind myself why I took the risk in the first place. Because if I keep letting fear decide for me… I’ll never know what this could really

be.”

Chapter 179

She paused, swallowed hard.

“She was right.”

Her gaze lifted, locking with his.

“Maybe it’ll be messy. Maybe it’ll hurt. But I think it’s still worth it. Because trying-loving-it’s

not wrong. It’s brave. And I want to be brave. For this. For me. For you… for us.”

He reached across the table, hand settling over hers-warm and steady.

“So,” he said gently, “are you done running?”

Maya’s gaze dropped to their joined hands, her thumb brushing his.

“Yeah. I’m done.”

Something shifted between them-quiet and sure, like a knot finally loosening.

A small smile curved Damien's lips. "Good. Because I'm not letting you go."

She smiled back, cheeks flushed, eyes shining. "I'm not asking you to."

Then she reached into her purse, hands trembling slightly as she retrieved something folded. Without a word, she placed the sketch in his hand.

Damien glanced down, brows furrowing. "What's this?"

When he unfolded it, his breath caught.

A ring design. Simple, elegant-a small stone cradled in a setting shaped like two hands intertwined, forming an infinity symbol turned sideways.

One hand was unmistakably hers. The other-meant for the man who would hold her heart.

She gave it to him.

That made it his.

Not gripping. Not claiming.

But holding-gentle, steady, equal.

A symbol of love freely given… and fiercely cherished.

He looked up, something raw flickering in his gaze.

Maya tucked her hair behind her ear, smiling softly.

“I drew that before I even met you…”

Her voice faltered. Eyes dropped, then lifted.

“Before I even knew love like this could exist.”

A breath escaped her, trembling.

“But… it was always about you.”

A quiet laugh broke from her lips, more wonder than humor.

“The way you’d challenge me. Protect me. See me.” She swallowed.

“I think… some part of me was already waiting for you.”

She paused, voice thickening.

“I was scared,” she whispered. “And I hurt you.”

Her fingers twisted in her lap before she looked up again.

“I pushed you away-not because I didn’t believe you. But because I was terrified.”

A shaky breath.

“Terrified that if I let myself have it all… it would vanish.”

A tear slipped down her cheek.

“This-us-it feels like a fairy tale. And I never thought I was meant for one.”

Her voice cracked.

“I didn’t know how to live in it. I was afraid I’d ruin it.”

Then she reached for his hand, anchoring herself to him.

“But I’m not running anymore.” Her voice was steady now. “If you’re still willing to fight for us

… I will too. I’m ready.”

She leaned in, her fingers brushing his jaw.

“I choose you, Damien.”

Her words landed like a vow.

“Not for what you have. Not for what you’ve given me-or even what you could give me someday.”

Her gaze held his, wide open.

“I choose you because you make the world feel terrifying and safe. Because every part of me believes the life I’m meant to live… begins and ends with you. I choose you because my heart keeps whispering that you’re my person. I choose you because… I know I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Damien’s breath caught, his chest tightening. Her words had gone somewhere deep, raw, and real. His eyes darkened, shimmering with an intensity that made the room feel smaller-like it belonged only to them.

He reached out, cupped her cheek, thumb brushing her skin like a promise.

“Maya…” he whispered, voice thick. “You have no idea how much you’ve changed me… how much you are my life now.”

She glanced down at the sketch in his hand, then placed her hand over it.

“Last night, you said if you’d had a ring, the question would’ve been different. You said you wanted to do it right… that one day I’d be your wife. That if I said yes, you’d marry me on the spot.”

She pressed her hand more firmly over the sketch.

“So… consider this my way of saying yes. Maybe I’m not ready for everything all at once. But I’m ready for us. For this. For whatever comes next… and everything after.”

A breath trembled past her lips. A tear slipped down her cheek. But her smile was steady.

“I don’t have diamonds or promises wrapped in gold. I don’t come from a perfect past. But what I do have-what I am offering-is real.”

Her other hand found his.

“I’ll give you my trust. My loyalty. My heart-messy and healing and all in.”

Her voice wavered.

“After Jamie’s operation… once he’s safe and well, and after I graduate… when the world feels

a little less chaotic and if you still want this, still want me…”

She leaned in, their foreheads nearly touching.

“Ask me again. I’ll be ready. Whenever you are… I’ll be there.”

For a moment, Damien forgot how to breathe.

The sketch was still in his hand, but all his focus had narrowed to her-the tears on her lashes, her breath brushing his skin, the soft, unsteady whisper that held the only answer he’d ever truly wanted.

His entire world tipped.

She had given him her heart. Willingly. Freely. With trembling courage and wide-open love.

Damien’s jaw clenched as emotion surged through him-raw, fierce, unrelenting. The part of him that had always been controlled and calculating shattered under the weight of her words.

She chose him.

Of all the people in the world… she chose him.

Not for his name. Not for the empire he commanded. Not because he could shield her or give her everything she never asked for.

But because she wanted a life with him.

Even if it scared her.

Especially because it scared her.

Chapter 180

The night wrapped around them like silk-soft, electric, full of quiet promises waiting to be spoken.

Damien held her close, his heart pounding in sync with hers. The weight of everything they'd shared pressed between them-fragile, fierce, impossible to ignore.

He cupped her face gently, his thumb grazing her cheek as if memorizing the feel of her. "Where the hell have you been all my life?"

Then his mouth captured hers-a tremulous, desperate meeting. It was raw and aching, threaded with desperate devotion and the kind of love that stripped a man bare.

His hands framed her face like she was something precious, irreplaceable. And in that one breathless moment, he gave her everything-his vow, his surrender, his future-sealed in the quiet, trembling press of his lips to hers.

When he finally pulled back, he didn't let her go. He pressed his forehead to hers, their hands still joined over the sketch between them.

"I'll wait, Maya. As long as it takes," he said, his voice like velvet over steel. "But don't mistake patience for passivity. You already belong to me-and I sure as hell belong to you. There's no version of this world where I let you go. No future where I stand by and watch you become someone else's. You chose me… and now, I'll never unchoose you."

He exhaled slowly, grounding himself in her scent, in the steady rhythm of her heartbeat against his chest. His voice dropped to a rough whisper, intimate and raw.

"When the time comes…" he murmured, lifting her hand to his lips, "I won't ask if. I'll ask when "His mouth brushed her knuckles with a devotion that made her breath hitch. "And when I do

I'll make damn sure the whole world knows you're mine."

His eyes locked onto hers, burning with something fierce and relentless. He leaned in slowly, offering her the choice to pull away-but she stayed. Their mouths melded again, tentative at first, then deepened as the flood of all the emotions they'd kept locked inside finally broke

free.

Their mouths lingered together, a slow-burning heat building with every breath, deepening until it consumed them both. When he finally pulled back, their foreheads rested together, breaths mingling, hearts pounding loud enough to drown out the world.

His gaze bore into hers, voice barely more than a whisper: “I love you, Maya.”

She didn’t hesitate. Her hand reached up to cradle his jaw, her thumb gently brushing his cheek. Her voice trembled, but her eyes were steady and clear.

“I love you too, Damien.”

He held her words like a secret treasure, eyes darkening as he absorbed the weight of them- she loves him. The air between them thickened, charged with something electric and raw. His gaze traced every curve of her face, memorizing the softness there, the vulnerability she had just laid bare.

Then Damien traced a slow, soft kiss over her lips, lingering before trailing to her flushed cheeks, and finally to the shell of her ear. A wicked smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as his voice dropped to a low, teasing whisper,

“Still want to eat? Or should I take that as permission to skip straight to dessert?”

Maya let out a soft, shy laugh, a faint blush warming her cheeks. She gave him a gentle, hesitant shove on the chest, her eyes flickering with quiet amusement. “You’re impossible.”

Damien’s grin deepened, eyes sparkling with affection and just a hint of mischief. “But you said you love me. And that you missed me,” he added, raising a brow with playful smugness.

Maya’s lips twitched into a reluctant smile, her eyes narrowing just enough to tease him back. “I was having a moment, okay? Don’t get cocky.”

He closed the space between them, his hand sliding around her waist to pull her flush against him. His breath brushed her ear as he murmured, low and intimate, “Too late. You gave me everything I ever wanted-in one night. I’m allowed a little ego.”