**Intern 181**

Chapter 181

Her hand swatted his chest, cheeks flushing a deeper shade. “You’re incorrigible.”

He tilted his head, lips ghosting over hers in a teasing brush. “And yet…” His voice dropped softer, heavier, “you still chose me.”

“I did,” she whispered, her breath mingling with his. “And I always will.”

The air between them thickened, charged with something undeniable, as Damien’s hand tightened on her waist, drawing her even closer – the promise of what was to come lingering in every breath and heartbeat.

He leaned in, claiming her with a deep, slow press of his mouth, slow, devoted, as if sealing a

VOW.

When Maya parted her lips to catch her breath, Damien took the opening without hesitation, his tongue sliding inside to claim her mouth with a hunger that was no longer restrained. The kiss deepened-thick, hot, desperate-the air around them charged with unspoken need.

His hand traveled up her spine, fingers splaying between her shoulder blades, pulling her closer until their bodies aligned like two pieces meant to fit. She melted into him, a soft moan escaping as his mouth moved over hers with aching, possessive purpose.

Then his lips parted from hers, trailing fire along her jawline, brushing that tender spot beneath her ear. His voice dropped low, breath warm against her skin.

“Maya… I need you.”

Her breath hitched, warmth pooling where his mouth traced her pulse. Her hands fisted in his shirt, clinging to him as if the world was slipping away-because right now, it was. There was only him. Only this.

“Damien…” she breathed, already undone.

His hands slid to her hips, gripping with just enough force to draw a gasp from her lips. Then his voice dropped, hoarse and low, laced with a raw, almost fragile intensity-

“Make love with me.”

His gaze held hers-fierce, desperate, vulnerable. This wasn’t just lust. This was a plea to be chosen, claimed, loved in return.

“Say the word, Maya,” he whispered. “Give me your permission.”

Damien leaned back in his chair, his gaze smoldering as he studied her. There was a stillness to him, a kind of leashed hunger that made her pulse stutter.

Her heart thundered loud enough to drown the silence. The weight of his gaze held her, fierce and unyielding. She swallowed hard, every fiber of her trembling with want.

Her lashes fluttered as she opened her eyes, breath unsteady, skin flushed, lips parted. Every inch of her trembled beneath the weight of his gaze-her soul wide open.

“I want you, Damien,” she whispered.

That was all he needed.

He stood. Then he held out a hand.

“Come with me.”

Her breath caught, lips parting. She rose-pulled toward him by some unseen force, and slipped her trembling hand into his. He didn’t speak. Didn’t smile. He just watched her with that devastating intensity as he led her through the bedroom.

Every step toward the bedroom was torture. His thumb caressed the back of her hand, but otherwise, he kept his distance. No rushed kisses. No wandering hands. Just the tension between them thickening with every silent step.

The moment the door clicked shut, the world shifted.

In a blur, Damien spun and backed her against the wall, his mouth claiming hers with a hunger that stole her breath. His hand cradled her jaw, tilting her head just right as he deepened the kiss-slow, devastating, and all-consuming.

His hands closed around her wrists, lifting them above her head with firm, sure strength. The chill of the wall pressed against her bare skin, sharp beneath the heat of his body caging her. Her breath hitched, pulse pounding as every nerve ignited beneath his touch.

Maya gasped softly and helplessly as her back arched to meet him.

He kissed her harder, deeper, groaning low in his chest when she moaned into his mouth. His free hand fisted the fabric of her dress at her lower back, hauling her tighter against him while the other held her wrists in place.

Chapter 182

“Fuck,” he breathed, voice rough and wrecked. “You make me lose my mind, Maya.”

His mouth found her neck-biting, licking, sucking-until her knees weakened beneath her. His hands roamed her sides, greedy and hungry, mapping every curve as if he’d never let her

Then, without breaking the kiss, he led her toward the bed.

In the dim light, he eased her down onto the bed, his touch slow, deliberate-like a man handling something he'd ached for far too long. Maya sat at the edge, breath shallow, heart pounding. He knelt before her, chest rising hard, eyes drinking her in as if burning the sight

into his memory.

He met her eyes, and they simply stared-breathing the same air, caught in the same pull. Maya sat there, chest heaving, eyes wide and vulnerable, her flushed skin glowing in the soft light. Her lips were swollen from his kisses.

His fingers trailed a slow caress down her thigh, while the other cupped her face. She leaned into his palm-warm, trusting.

"I need to see you," he murmured, his breath hot against her skin. "All of you."

She nodded, trembling, her cheeks burning. "Okay."

The word was barely a breath, but it lit something primal in him. His fingers slid higher on her thigh, slow and deliberate, feeling the shiver that ran through her. Damien's gaze never left her face-watching every flicker of emotion, every tremble of her lashes-as if committing

her to memory.

“You’re the most dangerous thing that’s ever happened to me,” he murmured.

He pulled his hands away, but the heat of his touch lingered, leaving an emptiness she instantly hated. Then, without a word, he caught the hem of his shirt and stripped it over his head in one fluid motion.

Maya’s breath hitched.

Muscles tensed beneath his golden skin, every line of his body taut with restrained hunger. Then he leaned in, lowering her slowly onto the bed.

His body followed, pressing down until they fit-chest to chest, pulse to pulse, every inch ignit ing a fire between them.

Maya’s heart hammered, nerves knotting her stomach. This was it-the moment she’d both longed for and feared. She was surrendering her purity to the man she’d chosen, the man she loved, and who loved her.

Her mind raced: What if I’m terrible? What if I can’t do this right? Her cheeks flushed hotter. Isn’t it supposed to hurt the first time? Can I handle that?

Then Harper’s mischievous voice echoed in her mind: “Just listen to your body, babe.”

She closed her eyes, breathed deep, clutching that advice like a lifeline. Tonight, she would trust, feel-every trembling moment.

Every breath pulled them closer to the edge-where time blurred, and nothing existed beyond the heat of their skin and the promise ahead.

In that suspended moment, nothing mattered but the slow, searing path they would take-tog

ether.

Chapter 183

The world narrowed to the heat of their skin, the rapid beat of their hearts, and the simmering pull between them.

Damien’s lips traced from Maya’s jaw to the hollow of her neck, each touch a promise, each ki ss a vow. The night stretched before them, ripe with anticipation, every breath and movement drawing them deeper into a hunger neither could resist.

He kissed her softly at first, then deeper-hungrier-his hand gliding down her arm as his mouth traced her jaw to the delicate line of her throat.

His palm cupped her breast, squeezing gently as his fingers teased her soft curves. Then he found the edge of her neckline, tugging it lower to reveal white lace framing the delicate swell. His lips trailed down her chest, lingering-nuzzling, tasting, claiming her inch by inch.

It took all his control not to drag the lace down and bare her perfect swell. Even through the thin fabric, he saw her n****e pressing against it-taunting him, daring him. Every muscle ached to strip the barrier, to feast on the sight he craved. But he held back, savoring the slow burn, drawing out every soft moan she gave like a secret meant only for him.

His hand slipped from her breast, trailing down her side, tracing her waist before gliding over her thigh. He pushed her dress higher until his palm met the warm, bare skin just below her hip. Then upward. His fingers slid between her legs, grazing the thin fabric of her underwear with a featherlight touch that made her hips twitch.

He groaned again, guttural, finding her wet and ready.

A soft gasp slipped from Maya, body jolting at the touch. Her fingers dug into Damien's shoulders, breath stalling as her heart pounded.

Heat unfurled low in her belly-molten and impossible to contain. For a moment, the world vanished. Only the rush of sensation. Only him.

He exhaled a low, primal sound vibrating deep against her throat.

"Fuck," he growled against her ear, dark and rough. "You're already so wet for me."

His c**k, steel-hard, strained against his pants, pressing maddeningly into her molten center.

“Feel that?” he growled, voice low and lethal as he ground into her with punishing pressure. That’s what you do, love. No one makes me this hard-not even in my darkest, filthiest fantasies.”

His mouth grazed her throat, breath hot, voice ragged. “Want to hear a secret?”

She nodded, breath catching, body trembling beneath his heat. Her cheeks burned, but she didn’t look away.

He leaned in, lips brushing hers-just the faintest contact, enough to steal her breath.

“I’ve imagined this,” he murmured, voice rough with hunger. “So many nights… your moans shaking under me, slick and aching. You coming apart on my c**k, riding me like you were made for it-all for me.”

His gaze dragged from her lips down her body, lingering with dark intent. “I’ve come undone with nothing but your name in my head, Maya.”

Maya swallowed hard, pulse pounding so loud she barely heard anything else. She felt him- hard, aching-the proof of his need. Pride and want flooded her chest.

“I’ll be gentle. I’ll take it slow, love,” Damien murmured, voice thick with restraint. His thumb brushed her cheek-tender despite the fire behind his eyes. “It’s your first time-I want you to remember how it feels to be wanted like this.”

He lowered his mouth to her ear, breath hot. “To be claimed.”

Then he pulled back just enough to meet her dark, unwavering gaze.

“I’ll make sure you never forget what it means to be mine.”

His mouth returned to hers, trailing down her neck and claiming her in a slow, hungry kiss while his fingers slipped beneath the thin fabric of her underwear.

Her hips lifted instinctively, chasing his touch.

“That’s it,” he rasped, kissing the corner of her mouth, then lower, trailing scorching kisses down her neck. “Let me take care of you.”

Chapter 184

He nudged her thighs wider, settling between them, his hardness pressing firmly through the last fabric barriers. His hips rolled slowly, teasing her with the promise of what was to come.

“Damien…” she whispered.

He kissed her deeper, tongue teasing hers, while his finger stroked her folds-featherlight at first, then firmer-until she gasped against his mouth. Just as he hooked his finger to pull the fabric aside and finally feel her warmth-

DING DONG.

DING DONG. DING DONG.

The shrill doorbell sliced through the charged silence like a blade, tearing them out of the heat and into cold reality.

Both froze.

Damien's head dropped to her shoulder as he let out a guttural growl, disbelief and frustration.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Maya gasped, grabbing the blanket and yanking it over herself as if it could shield her from the jarring intrusion. Chest rising and falling rapidly, cheeks burning, lips kiss-swollen and parted.

Damien stayed frozen above her, the tension coiled tight in every muscle.

His body hovered above hers, muscles tense, jaw clenched like he was fighting every instinct not to snap and storm the door. One hand wrapped around her thigh, the other buried in the sheets beside her head.

His forehead dropped to hers.

“Don’t move,” he growled against her lips, voice thick with restrained desire. “Whoever that is better be ready to die.”

She let out a breathless laugh, but heat sparkled in her eyes-frustration, want, and something almost feral.

“I think…” she murmured, catching her breath as she brushed a finger down his jaw, “we should just stick to the real dessert for now-how about that blueberry cheesecake?”

DING DONG. DING DONG.

Damien closed his eyes. Breathed in through his nose.

Then cursed under his breath and stood, raking a hand through his hair before snatching the shirt he’d tossed on the floor. “I swear, if it’s Ashcroft, this door’s the last thing he sees before

I lose it."

Maya bit her lip, still flushed, trying to sit up. "It could be important…"

He pulled his shirt back on with a quick, annoyed snap. Then fixed her with a sharp look.

"Unless the building's on fire or someone's bleeding out-I don't care."

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

"Damien! Open the damn door! I know you're in there!"

That voice-so familiar.

It was Ashcroft.

Maya's eyes widened-then she burst into helpless laughter. "Oh my God."

Damien looked at the ceiling, like he was bargaining with a higher power. “Of course it is.” He turned to Maya, voice low and rough, barely more than a growl. “This isn’t over.”

He leaned down and kissed her forehead, then helped her to her feet. Maya padded to the mirror, smoothing her hair and adjusting her clothes, cheeks still tinged pink.

They left the bedroom-Maya headed for the dining area, Damien stalking to the door, running a hand through his messy hair before yanking it open with a scowl.

“What,” he bit out.

Ashcroft blinked, his eyes flicking inside just long enough to catch Maya crossing the room toward the dining area. A wicked grin spread across his face-like the devil himself had just walked in. “Uh…” he said, then glanced back at Damien. “Am I interrupting?”

Damien just stared, eyes narrowing.

Ashcroft cleared his throat. “Well, I’m back. And I got what we need.”

Damien’s voice was flat. “Fine. Wait here.”

Ashcroft raised both hands in mock surrender. “You’re not gonna kill me, right?”

“I haven’t decided yet, Damien replied, low and dark. “But I already have someone digging a

site.”

With that, Damien slammed the door in his face.

He turned and slipped back inside, wrapping Maya in his arms from behind, burying his face against the side of her neck. She let out a soft sigh, melting into him without hesitation.

“I’ll take my leave…” she whispered, voice gentle. “Early call tomorrow-a full day of shooting. Luckily, it’s all indoors. The heat’s been really draining.”

Chapter 185

Damien groaned, tightening his hold. “Yeah, well, my kind of heat doesn’t cool off with an indoor shoot… or a cold shower. Maybe you should just move in here with me, hmm?”

She turned her head slightly, cheeks flushing a soft pink as she met his gaze with a playful, shy smile. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” she murmured, a little breathless. “Besides, my boss already said this is a work trip, not a vacation. Isn’t that right, Mr. Blackwood?”

He pulled back just enough to meet her gaze, a sly smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.” I see… well, Ms. Thompson, if that’s how it is, I’ll let Trina know you’re taking the day off-for a private meeting with the boss. My orders. Sound fair?”

Maya smiled, “Tempting offer, but I’ll have to decline. Can’t risk mixing business with pleasure. Besides, I’d hate for the boss to get distracted during a meeting.”

A knowing smile curved his lips.

“Fair point. Fine… but when we get back, I expect private time with my future wife to settle unfi nished business.”

Maya smiled, cheeks flushing as her heart hammered in her chest. “I’ll think about it…” Then, surprising him, she turned in his arms, rose onto her toes, and captured his mouth in a slow, tender kiss-soft and full of promise. “Goodnight… my future husband.”

His eyes darkened, fingers curling tightly around her waist, drawing her impossibly close.” God, you’re killing me.”

She smiled against his lips, then pulled back just enough to reach for her purse.

But Damien caught her again, his gaze smoldering with raw need, and his lips claimed hers once more-slow, possessive, devouring.

He pulled back just enough to murmur against her skin, “I love you.”

His words stirred something fierce inside her. His deeper, demanding kiss bound them-soul and flesh.

Breaking the kiss, his voice dropped low, hoarse and rough with need.

“You’re mine. Only mine. Maya Serene Thompson.”

The weight of his claim sent a shiver through her, heat pooling deep in her belly. His mouth found hers again-urgent, hungry-lips coaxing hers open as he whispered fiercely, “Say it.”

Her breath caught, cheeks flushed crimson, but she held his gaze, voice soft and certain. “I love you too.”

And with one final, breathless kiss-both tender and fierce-she sealed their bond.

“And yes… I’m yours, Damien Blackwood.”

His arms tightened around her, as if holding her close could freeze time-anchor this moment, this feeling, deep inside his heart.

He exhaled hard, forehead against hers, fingers gripping her waist. His voice dropped, rough and ragged.

“You’re not making this easy for me, love.”

“You’ll survive…” she whispered, a soft smile curving her lips as her breath warmed his skin. Her voice held quiet certainty-gentle, yet threaded with just enough tease to leave him aching for more.

“You’re worth the wait,” he murmured softly into her ear.

Reluctantly, he loosened his hold, fingers tracing a final caress along her jaw. Wordless, he took her hand and led her to the door.

He opened it-only to be met with chaos.

Chapter 186

The sharp cadence of Harper’s voice hit him first, slicing through the quiet like a whip. Her words tumbled out rapid-fire, each punctuated by the jab of her finger.

Ashcroft leaned casually against the hallway wall while Harper stood in front of him, arms crossed, mid-rant. She pointed a sharp, scolding finger right at his face, voice rising with every word.

“…and if you ever interrupt like that again, I swear to God-”

Both paused, heads turning toward the open door.

Harper’s eyes widened. “Oh. Hey, lovers.”

Maya chuckled softly as Damien muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, I need a damn gun. Then he stepped back, letting her slip past.

Maya stepped into the hallway, cheeks flushed, trying not to look too obviously kissed senseless. She met Harper’s smug grin with a warning glare.

“Don’t,” Maya mouthed.

Harper’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “I didn’t say anything,” she said aloud, sounding far too innocent.

Behind her, Ashcroft gave Damien a once-over, raising a brow at his rumpled shirt and the faint sheen of frustration clinging to him like smoke after a fire. “You look… tense.”

Damien gave him a cold look that could curdle steel. “You’re pushing your luck.”

Ashcroft smirked. “Hey, I come bearing gifts.” He held up a slim folder.

“This better be damn worth interrupting me,” Damien growled, stepping forward and snatching the folder. “I was occupied.”

Ashcroft opened his mouth to protest-then caught Damien's cold, warning glare and thought better of it. "Right. Totally… occupied."

Harper jabbed a finger at Ashcroft, eyes blazing. "You barged into a very private moment for some dull-ass business crap? Real smooth, genius."

Ashcroft shrugged with a lopsided grin. "How was I supposed to know? A little warning would've been nice. And seriously-are you sure you're not a guy in disguise? That jab felt like it came from a linebacker. Stay away from me, woman!"

Harper smirked, folding her arms. "Please. If I wanted to hurt you, you'd be on the floor crying for your mommy. That was just a love tap."

"Harper," Maya said, tugging her arm gently, voice low but laughing beneath it.

Damien's jaw twitched, but Maya caught the faint twitch at the corner of his lips.

Harper sighed dramatically, throwing an exaggerated glare at Ashcroft.

"Well, since this genius already ruined the mood, might as well spend the rest of the night fishing for juicy details."

Harper wasn't done. She tapped a finger on her hip, tilting her head at them with mock

impatience.

"Alright, lovebirds-one juicy goodnight kiss before I snatch your girl, boss man. Chop-chop, show me some fireworks before I drag her off for serious girl time."

Maya rolled her eyes. "You're impossible."

"I'm romantic," Harper shot back with a wicked grin. "Now pucker up, woman. I need something juicy to gag over later."

Damien arched a brow. "She always like this?"

"Worse," Maya muttered, cheeks flushed as Damien leaned in, brushing his lips over hers in a kiss that sent a warm pulse through her chest.

Harper clapped her hands. "Perfect. Now hands off, corporate Casanova. The leading lady's got a date-with wine, gossip, and me."

Maya gave an exasperated sigh. "Please. Stop talking. Time to go."

She linked arms with Harper and pulled her toward the hallway with mock urgency.

Ashcroft cleared his throat. “Alright, I missed a lot, didn’t I?” He turned to Damien. “Ready to go over everything?”

Damien nodded shortly, eyes still locked on Maya as Harper led her toward their suite, whispering gleefully in her ear,

“So? Tell me everything. And don’t you dare skip the spicy bits. I want a full-color, surround-sound recap-

”

The door clicked shut behind them.

Damien lingered in the hallway a beat longer, folder tight in hand, jaw clenched as he inhaled

her fading scent-lavender, with an undercurrent of something deeper, something warm. His.

Chapter 187

He stayed still until her laugh echoed faintly through the suite walls. Then, slowly, he turned and stepped inside-smile creeping across his face, totally involuntary, completely hers. All because of her.

Ashcroft stepped inside Damien's suite just as Damien shut the door behind them, turning the lock with a sharp click. He glanced toward the still-messy dining table-the wine glasses, the dim light spilling from the slightly opened bedroom door-then smirked.

"Damn," he said, waggling his brows. "It really was a very private moment, huh? So… was it a

success?"

Damien gave him a look. "What are you talking about?"

Ashcroft threw himself onto the nearest armchair with zero shame. "Oh, come on. Don't make me spell it out. Did you two finally seal the deal or are you still out here suffering from chronic blue balls?"

Damien's jaw flexed. "Shut up before I punch that smug grin off your face. Your timing always sucks. And besides-none of your damn business."

Ashcroft lifted both hands in mock surrender. "Alright, alright. Next time, a heads-up would be nice, though. This is the second time I've nearly walked into live porn. First the yacht, now this? You know how traumatizing that is for a single man?"

Damien didn't answer. He just grabbed the nearest throw pillow and hurled it straight at Ashcroft's head.

“Fuck off.”

Ashcroft swatted it away with a laugh. “Okay, okay-down to business.” His grin faded as he leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. “About that rat. Found something interesting.”

Damien’s eyes sharpened. “Speak.”

The warmth she left behind only fueled his ruthless resolve. He would burn every enemy to ash and clear the path-for her. No mercy. No hesitation. Only cold, unyielding vengeance.

Ashcroft’s expression grew serious as he leaned forward, ready to lay out what they’d uncovered. His tone shifted, the playful edge fading away.

“Didn’t take much to get him talking. Guy’s a coward. All he wanted was cash and a way out. I promised him a new identity, a plane ticket, and a full stomach-he opened up like a busted faucet.”

He nodded toward the folder, a silent cue for Damien to take a look. Then he strode to the bar, grabbed a cold beer, twisted the cap off with a snap. His voice cut through the silence as the air thickened around them-laid-back on the surface, but loaded underneath.

“Turns out Orion’s been in deep shit for years. On paper, they look stable, but behind the scenes? Bleeding money. And guess who’s been injecting cash to keep them from sinking?”

Damien’s eyes narrowed. “Russians?”

Ashcroft nodded once. “Exactly. Which ties into that activity we flagged in Moldova a few days ago. According to this guy, someone flew in from Moldova about three weeks ago. Not just to visit but to deliver a message. Orders, actually.”

Damien didn’t look up, still scanning the contents of the folder.

“What kind of orders?” His voice was low, controlled-but razor-sharp.

Ashcroft took a swig of his beer, voice flat. “Steal the contract from Altair-by any means necessary. And here’s the kicker-they specifically named Ethan Miller. Said he was to be the one sent for the job. No exceptions.”

A long pause followed. The tension in the room turned thick and metallic.

Damien’s knuckles clenched around the armrest of his chair. “So they’re trying to throw us off balance-make us chase shadows while they set their real move in motion.”

“Exactly,” Ashcroft said. “They’re trying to control the narrative-using Moldova and Orion as scapegoats. Miller’s just a pawn. I did some digging-aside from his university ties to Maya, there’s nothing else. It’s clean. But whoever’s pulling the strings? They already suspect something. That’s why we’re getting all these sudden distractions.”

He exhaled sharply. “We need to act fast, D-before the curtain rises and all hell breaks loose. I say it’s time we set the next trap in motion.”

Damien’s jaw tightened. No more waiting. The game had moved beyond the shadows. It was time to strike.

Then came the soft clink of silverware.

He glanced over.

Ashcroft, calm as ever, had taken a generous spoonful of the blueberry cheesecake and was already halfway through chewing. Like this was just another late-night snack instead of a strategic war briefing.

“What the hell are you doing?” Damien barked. He immediately stood, grabbed the rest of the

cake, and put it away. “That’s mine.”

Ashcroft shrugged, licking the spoon with a sly grin. “Don’t be greedy! Sharing is caring, you know. Besides, you left it unguarded.”

Damien shot him a sharp look. “Eat something else! This is mine!”

Ashcroft took another slow bite, eyes gleaming with mischief. “I’ll just ask Maya to get me

one too.”

Damien’s gaze hardened, voice thick with warning. “Why the hell would she give you anything? You want something, go find your own. But don’t you bother her for it.”

Ashcroft grinned, unfazed. “Whoa, easy there, Romeo. She’s family now-family loves and cares for each other.”

Damien snapped, voice sharp and cold. “Shut up! She doesn’t love you, and she sure as hell won’t need to care for you!”

Ashcroft chuckled, raising an eyebrow. “You’re fucked, man. You should see yourself right now-like an angry lion ready to pounce.” He laughed, leaning back with a mock-surrendering gesture. “Damn, you’re possessive. I better watch myself or I’ll end up on your blacklist.” Damien exhaled sharply, the corner of his mouth twitching despite himself. “Just finish that damn cake so we can get this over with,” he muttered, turning toward the living room.

He pulled his phone from his pocket to call James, his steps steady-but the faint smile tugging at his lips gave him away.

Yeah, he was fucked.

Completely. Utterly.

Hopelessly in love with her.

And he didn't even care to hide it anymore.

They didn't waste another second.

Within minutes, James and Lee were inside the suite, the atmosphere shifting the moment the door shut behind them.

"I want eyes on Maya doubled," Damien said, voice clipped-pure business. "No room for

error, no assumptions. Lee-you'll handle that personally. And make sure Miller never gets anywhere near her."

Lee nodded sharply. "Understood."

"And James…" Damien turned to him. "Call Monroe. I want the perimeter around her house reinforced-especially for Jamie."

"Got it," James replied. "I'll have him on it within the hour."

Damien’s gaze hardened. “The enemy’s making their move. No more turning back. Make sure everything’s in place-the next step goes into motion in two days.”

Orders were given. Plans were shifting.

The trap had been set.

Chapter 188

By the time the four men finally broke off, it was well past 2 a.m. The suite had quieted, the dark island sky pressing against the glass walls. Beyond, the horizon was an inky blur-the sea and stars swallowed by night.

But Damien’s mind hadn’t.

When he stepped back into his room, the first thing he noticed was the bed.

The sheets were still rumpled-creased and marked by her. His eyes locked on the space where she’d lain not long ago, and the image hit him like a punch to the gut.

And just like that-he was right back in it.

Maya, breathless beneath him. Skin flushed. Lips parted. Her eyes-those wide, wanting eyes -glassy with need and trust. Her voice trembling as she whispered she wanted him. Only

him.

God, he could still feel her.

The way her body arched under his mouth… how her n*****s strained against the fabric, stiff and needy just from the press of his lips.

He should've pulled the lace lower, sucked one into his mouth-felt her squirm, moan, shatter just from that.

And when he slipped his hand between her thighs-

Fuck.

She was soaked, her arousal seeping through the thin fabric of her panties-hot, wet, and so ready for him. That single barrier was all that kept him from feeling her completely.

That single touch nearly broke him.

He wanted to tear everything off her, throw her down, bury himself inside that tight, virgin heat until she was screaming his name.

But she was giving him something no one ever had-her first time, her trust, her love.

So he held back. Slowed down. Touched her like a man starving, intent on making her feel every inch of him, every ounce of his want.

And then… the doorbell.

He clenched his jaw. His hands. His fucking soul.

Ashcroft had no idea just how close he came to murder that night.

Damien dragged a hand over his face, eyes falling back to the bed. Her scent was still there- lavender with a hint of vanilla, that soft, clean, maddening fragrance clinging to the sheets… now intensified, laced with the sweet, unmistakable scent of her arousal. Sex. Heat. Her.

It was everywhere-wrapped around him, under his skin, haunting him.

And all he could think of was finishing what they started.

He was hard again-aching, pulsing with a need that had nothing to do with just sex. This wasn't about fucking. It wasn't even about release.

It was her.

He wanted to make love to her.

A different kind of urge gripped him-deeper, consuming, dangerous in its intensity. He wanted to bury himself inside her and stay. To mark her. Claim her. Worship every inch until she knew-without a doubt-that she belonged to him.

And that he'd never let her go.

Calm the fuck down, Damien.

He was tempted to satisfy himself-stroke his hard c**k while devouring the scent she left behind, chasing release.

But he didn't get to have his. Not when she hadn't. If Maya didn't have hers, he sure as hell wasn't taking his.

He exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his hair, jaw tight.

Redirect. Refocus. Anything but that.

He forced himself to look away from the bed-from the pillow still holding her scent, from the lingering imprint of her body, from the maddening ache.

Instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the folded piece of paper Maya had given him earlier.

His thumb grazed the paper, handling it like something sacred. Every line whispered of her- delicate, intentional, deeply her. He could see her in every careful stroke, feel the warmth of her fingers lingering on the page. It grounded him, calmed the storm just enough to breathe.

Because this wasn't just a design.

It was a promise. A vow without fanfare. A silent way of saying I'm not going anywhere.

A simple ring, yet unlike anything else-two hands intertwined to form an infinity symbol, a quiet testament to eternity.

Even in her imagination, her simplicity shone. No oversized diamond, no need to flaunt. Just

forever. Just them.

Chapter 189

But she didn’t deserve simple.

Not his Maya.

He would bring this to life-and more.

He’d honor every line, every intention, but the final piece? It would be laced with stones rare and precious, as exquisite and unrepeatable as she was.

Damien stared at it long, the tightness in his chest shifting into something softer… heavier.

She loves me.

She chose me.

And now, more than ever, he had to protect that-protect her.

Because what they had wasn’t just love. It was a vow. A quiet, burning truth.

And he'd make damn sure the world knew:

She was his. Forever.

He grabbed his phone, snapped a picture, then tucked the paper inside his safe like it was treasure worth more than gold.

He collapsed onto the bed, eyes shut tight, desperate for sleep.

But his mind refused to quiet-haunted by the war ahead, the enemies lurking in shadows… and the thought of her, burning hotter than any battlefield.

Sunrise arrived in a blink-gold and pink spilling fast across the island sky.

Damien's eyes were shut, but he wasn't sure if he'd actually slept. His body felt heavy, but his mind was sharp and restless, racing through plans and threats as if no rest had touched him.

The faint hum of the ocean carried through the open window, a calm contrast to the storm inside his head.

He rolled onto his side, gaze fixed on the soft glow leaking around the curtains.

He took a quick, hot shower to wash away the restless tension clinging to his skin. Fresh and sharper now, he pulled on a plain blue shirt and board shorts-simple, unassuming. He caught his reflection in the mirror, studying the sharp lines of his face.

Phone in hand, he stepped out and down the quiet hall.

A few steps later, he stopped in front of Maya's door. He knocked softly.

No answer.

Had she already gone down for breakfast?

Last night, just past midnight, they'd heard her door open. Damien had asked Lee to check the peephole-Harper had slipped out quietly, leaving Maya alone.

He paused, fingers curling lightly on the doorframe. Checked his watch-6:50 a.m. She was alone. Maybe she'd slept in.

He exhaled slowly and knocked again, softer this time. Then waited. Still no answer.

Figuring she needed rest, he decided to leave her be and send a quick text instead.

Just as he turned to head back, he heard it-the soft click of Maya's door unlocking, followed by the slow creak as it opened.

The door swung open slowly, revealing Maya-eyes heavy-lidded and barely open, sleep still clouding her gaze. She blinked against the morning light, hair tousled and loose. She wore silk pajamas that shimmered faintly, matching the pale blush of dawn.

"Damien…" Her voice was a low, sleepy whisper, barely more than a breath as she leaned against the doorframe, still caught between dreams and waking. "What time is it?"

She rubbed at her eyes with a delicate hand, slow and languid like a cat stretching after a nap. The soft fabric slipped slightly on her shoulder, revealing the smooth curve of her collarbone.

Damien stepped closer, voice low and steady. "Almost seven. Thought you might still be asleep."

Maya gave a faint, tired smile, then yawned, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. " Harper kept me up all night… guess I needed it."

He studied her-the way early light softened her features, the gentle rise and fall of her chest beneath silk.

"Do you want to have breakfast together downstairs?" he asked. "Or I can call room service if you'd rather stay in."

She blinked slowly, last tendrils of sleep lingering in her eyes. After a brief pause, she nodded. “No, that’s okay. Let’s eat downstairs.”

She stepped back, giving him room. “Do you want to come in?”

Damien nodded once, then stepped inside without hesitation.

As the door closed softly behind them, his gaze lingered on her silhouette, heart thudding with quiet certainty.

Maya walked back toward the bed, stretching one arm high as she yawned. “Mmm… you’re early today.”

Damien slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her gently into him. He tilted her face toward his, their eyes locking inches apart. His voice was low, warm.

“Good morning, love.”

Maya startled, fully waking. She blinked, whispering, “Good morning.”

Damien leaned in for a kiss, but Maya quickly raised a hand to cover her mouth.

He pulled back, eyebrow raised, surprised.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth yet!” she admitted, cheeks flushed.

Damien chuckled, low and amused. “I don’t care.”

Before Maya could protest, he gently pulled her hand away and captured her lips in a soft, lingering kiss.

Maya’s cheeks flushed deep pink as warmth spread through her. Her hesitation melted away, replaced by a sweet surrender to the moment. Her hand dropped slowly, fingers brushing his chest as she leaned in.

The world outside faded-the worries, the plans, the threats-all drowned beneath the quiet intimacy of shared breath.

When Damien pulled back, his eyes held that familiar smolder, soft but fierce.

“See?” he whispered, voice thick with promise. “Some things don’t need to wait.”

Maya smiled, heart pounding. “You’re impossible.”

He grinned. “Only for you.”

His eyes trailed slowly down her face, lingering on the curve of her neck before settling on the subtle outline pressing through the silk of her top-her n*****s hard against the fabric.

His hands tightened around her waist, pulling her closer until the heat of their bodies pressed

together.

“You’re not wearing a bra?” he growled, voice low and thick with desire.

Maya’s cheeks flushed a soft pink as she looked up.

“You’re not supposed to wear one when you go to bed,” she said lightly, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Comfort comes first, you know.”

Damien’s gaze darkened with hunger. He tightened his hold, fingers tracing slow, deliberate

circles on the smooth fabric.

Without breaking eye contact, he lowered his mouth to her neck, pressing feather-light kisses beneath her jaw. His breath hitched as his hands slid down, gripping her hips possessively, pulling her impossibly closer-every inch of her igniting a fierce heat inside him.

“You’re tempting me,” he murmured, voice low and rough. “And you know exactly what happens when you do.”

Chapter 190

Her pulse drummed in her ears, each beat matching the slow, deliberate brush of his lips along her skin. The air between them was thick with unspoken promises, the kind that made her knees weaken and her thoughts scatter,

Her chest rose in a shallow, unsteady draw of breath, a warm flush spreading across her cheeks as his lips trailed fiery kisses down her neck. She leaned into him, hands resting lightly on his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath her palms.

“Damien…” she whispered, her voice trembling between desire and caution.

He lifted his head just enough to catch her gaze, eyes smoldering with an intensity that both scared and thrilled her. “How about that unfinished business?” he murmured, low and husky, thick with promise and need.

“It’s… early,” she stammered, cheeks burning. “I… I haven’t even showered.”

His lips curved into a slow, wicked grin. “Good,” he drawled. “I like you before the world gets to touch you.”

His hand warmed her skin, traveling slowly upward beneath the soft silk of her top. Fingers traced a deliberate path, sending shivers down her spine as they neared the curve of her ribs. His touch was a promise-a challenge, an invitation-that made her pulse quicken and breath

hitch.

His kisses moved down her neck to the hollow above her chest, warm and demanding. With the tip of his tongue, he teased the first button loose, pressing soft kisses before undoing the second. Slowly, he freed the buttons until her silk top gaped open, exposing half of her bare, flushed breast beneath his hungry gaze.

He leaned back slightly, eyes roaming over her with unhurried appreciation.

Heat flared in her cheeks, and she instinctively crossed an arm over her chest.

His smile deepened as he reached out, gently coaxing her hands away.

“Don’t hide from me, love…” His voice was barely more than a whisper, tender and full of longing.

Maya’s cheeks flushed as she glanced away, fingers nervously fidgeting. Damien gently reached out, tilting her chin with his fingers to face him. His touch was soft but firm, silently commanding her gaze to meet his-an unspoken invitation she couldn’t resist.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he murmured, his voice low and full of awe.

Then he leaned in, capturing her lips again with a slow, tender kiss.

He deepened the kiss, his hands sliding beneath the fabric as if drawn by an invisible pull. Fingers traced the warmth of her skin before cupping her breast with a gentle squeeze. His thumb brushed over her hardened n****e, wrapping it lightly between his fingers.

Maya unintentionally jerked back from the touch, a flush of surprise and shyness flooding her cheeks. It was the first time anyone had touched such a sensitive, private part of her, and the unfamiliarity made her heart race.

His brow furrowed with concern as he gently cupped her face, searching her eyes for any discomfort.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he whispered softly, his thumb brushing reassuringly over her cheek.

“I’ll go as slow as you need. Just tell me if anything feels too much.”

Maya’s cheeks deepened in color as she whispered, “This is my first time… someone’s touched me…” Her voice faltered, shy and uncertain, trailing off as she glanced away, vulnerable yet trusting.

She bit her lower lip, her eyes flickering with a mix of nervousness and trust.

“I… I’m just not used to this,” she admitted quietly, voice barely above a whisper.

Damien’s voice softened, gentle and reassuring. “I’ll be careful, love. I promise I’ll take care of you-every step, every touch.”

A playful smile curved his lips as he leaned closer. “Now… tell me, how does my touch feel? Does it feel good?” he whispered, his breath warm against her skin.

Her cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red. Deep down, yes-it did feel good. More than good, actually. She wanted more, even if she wasn’t quite ready to admit it aloud.

Damien’s eyes darkened with a slow, teasing smile.