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“Be honest, love. Don’t be shy with me.”

She swallowed hard, voice trembling just a bit. “It… it does. It feels… nice. Different.”

His fingers traced gentle circles, coaxing her further as his voice dipped lower, thick with

promise.

“Hmm… shall we continue?”

Maya nodded shyly-and that was all Damien needed.

Damien’s gaze lingered on her face-the flush of arousal, parted lips, trembling breath. Then he leaned lower, mouth closing over her n****e, sucking gently-deepening the sensation, sending a shiver straight through her.

Maya gasped sharply, eyes closed, savoring the sensation as the warm, intense suction ignited a wildfire through her body. Her moans grew louder, trembling beneath his touch as she discovered a secret pleasure for the very first time. Her fingers curled tightly into Damien’s shoulder, heart pounding wildly, every nerve flaring alive-overwhelmed, yet craving

more.

Damien's hunger deepened, fueled by her trembling body. He tightened his grip, tongue tracing slow, deliberate circles as desire pulsed urgent and fierce.

Every soft moan, every shiver jolted him-he ached to claim her completely, to show her how deeply she stirred something primal within. While his lips and tongue lavished her n*****s, he glanced up, drinking in the pleasure etched across her face-dark, blazing, utterly his. Leaning closer, he sucked harder, devouring every reaction she gave, savoring the way she melted beneath him.

Maya inhaled sharply, unraveling the last threads of her restraint. Her fingers curled tightly into the fabric of his shirt, clutching as an electric shiver coursed through her.

"Ahhh… Damien… mmm…"

His mouth moved with purpose-teasing, worshipping, igniting every nerve ending he could reach. The world shrank until nothing existed but the heat between their bodies, the pulse of racing hearts.

His hands roamed lower, tracing her waist before his fingers brushed along the waistband of her silken bottoms, teasingly exploring the warmth beneath. Then they slid around to rest on her hips, gently cupping her ass with a possessive, yet tender squeeze.

"Don't hold back… tell me what you need," he whispered, voice thick with hunger and something softer-an urgent plea only she could answer.

Before Maya could answer, a sharp alarm sliced through the moment, shattering the heat. Startled, she blinked and scrambled to silence her phone, the sudden intrusion yanking her back to reality.

Damien groaned, running a hand through his hair. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

He closed the gap between them, wrapping his arms around her and pressing kisses to the side of her neck. “Where were we?”

Maya hesitated. “I… I need to get ready. Call time’s at 8 a.m.”

“I’ll cancel the shoot,” he murmured against her skin.

“No… you’re not doing that,” she said firmly, though her cheeks warmed.

Damien’s voice dropped, laced with mock frustration. “How many times can I get c**k-blocked in one place?”

Maya shyly chuckled, tugging her top tighter to cover her bare chest. “Maybe… it’s the universe saying you need to wait a little longer.”

“Fuck the universe,” he muttered, low and frustrated, pressing closer anyway.

Maya turned to face him, eyes meeting his. “I’m… sorry.”

She hugged him tightly at the waist, resting her head against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart. “I need to take a shower. Harper’s probably going to knock any minute. Do you… want to wait here, or should I just see you downstairs?”

Damien’s arms tightened around her, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. “At this rate… I’m going to be suffering from serious blue balls,” he murmured, lips brushing the top of her head, warm and possessive. “I’ll stay… just don’t take too long, or I might just borrow one of your panties and take care of myself.”

Maya’s cheeks flamed, heat creeping up her neck. “Stop! You’re… you’re crazy,” she stammered, half laughing, half scolding him, utterly flustered by his boldness.

Shaking her head, still blushing, she gently pushed away. “I really need to… shower,” she murmured, stepping back and wrapping her arms around herself.

Damien smirked. “How about I join you?”

Maya shot him a playful glare. “How about no?” She stood on her tiptoes, pressed a quick

kiss to his lips, and whispered, “Patience, love.”

With one last flustered glance, she turned and headed toward the bathroom, heart still racing from their interrupted intimacy.

Damien was left alone, a slow, knowing smile curling his lips-she was finally letting herself

relax around him.

He sank onto the edge of Maya’s bed, fingers drumming lightly against his thighs as the heat between his legs throbbed insistently.

The thought of her behind the closed bathroom door-naked, wet-made it nearly impossible for him to stay still.

The taste of her lingered on his tongue.

Her n*****s were flawless-small, perfectly round, and a delicate shade of soft pink that spoke of untouched innocence yet held an undeniable allure. They stood taut and inviting against the creamy canvas of her skin, exquisitely sensitive to his touch. Virgin and pure, yet impossibly sexy-like tiny blossoms flushed with life, breathtaking in their delicate vulnerability.

Every subtle twitch, every hardening under his fingers sent a shiver of raw desire through him, making them impossible to resist.

The memory of her breathless moans, her skin shivering beneath his touch, pulsed vividly.

If tasting that tender heat was intoxicating, he couldn't wait to explore deeper-the forbidden places where her juices waited, warm and rich, promising even more primal surrender.

The hunger coiled tighter inside him-a desperate craving to taste every inch of her, to lose himself in her essence.

He tried to divert his attention, letting his eyes roam the small, tidy room-everything perfectly in place. Not a trace of disorder. Even her bed looked pristine, except for a faint crease on the right side where the sheets had been disturbed.

That told him she was a calm sleeper-and that she favored the right side. Perfect. He committed the detail to memory.

His gaze drifted to the bedside table, landing on a familiar journal-the one he had gifted her when she went home from the hospital. Seeing her use it tugged at something deep in his heart. Each page likely held fragments of her thoughts, dreams, and fears. Curiosity flickered -he wondered if she had written about him, about them, about the moments they shared. But respect held him back.

It was her private world, a place he wasn't meant to enter without her permission. Some secrets were hers alone, and that made her feel even more real-more delicate, more precious to him.

He leaned back, letting the quiet settle around him, the journal is a silent reminder of the depths of her mind he had yet to touch.

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It struck him then, in the stillness-that just as her journal was her quiet world, Maya herself had become his. Since the first moment he laid eyes on her, something inside him had shifted; the chaos around him dulled, the static in his mind faded, and all that remained was

her.

She wasn't his weakness; she was his poison-sweet enough to ruin him, potent enough to sharpen his every instinct. She made him want to protect, to claim, to destroy anyone foolish enough to touch what was his. She gave him the edge he never knew he needed.

Half an hour later, the bathroom door creaked open, and Damien was hit with the maddening scent of lavender and vanilla-her addictive, intoxicating fragrance. Maya stepped out dressed in a flare floral printed summer midi sundress that swayed gently around her knees.

Her cheeks still flushed from the shower's warmth, and her damp hair was wrapped in a towel, loose strands framing her glowing face. She moved with quiet grace, sunlight filtering through the window and catching the golden warmth of her skin.

Damien's eyes lifted, drinking in the sight-fresh, radiant, utterly hers.

He stood and closed the distance, sliding an arm around her waist and pulling her close. His lips brushed warmly against her cheek as he whispered, “You are so beautiful and damn irresistible.”

Maya’s cheeks deepened, a shy smile tugging at her lips. She glanced up, eyes sparkling.

“You’re probably the only one who thinks that. Now let me go-I still need to dry my hair.”

He brushed a soft kiss beneath her ear, voice low and teasing.

“Lying to be humble? I can name a few who’ve been throwing themselves at you.” Then his tone dropped, darker, sharper.

Maya smiled, eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Jealous or possessive? Which one is it?” she teased.

Damien smirked, eyes darkening with desire.

“Both.”

He captured her lips in a heated kiss before pulling back just enough to murmur,

“Now go dry your hair-before I lose control and rip that dress right off you.”

Maya stepped back toward the bathroom, a playful smirk tugging her lips as she began drying her hair. Damien leaned casually against the doorframe, eyes never leaving her.

The soft rustle of towel, the glint of morning light on damp skin held him rooted-captivated, waiting, craving what was to come next.

When Maya finished, she grabbed her purse and tugged his hand gently.

“I’m done! Come on. Breakfast’s waiting. And so is the day.”

They moved toward the door, and when Damien pulled it open, they were startled to find Harper standing there. Her hand hovered mid-knock, frozen as her eyes roamed between Damien and Maya, a mischievous smirk curling her lips.

“Well, well… good morning, lovebirds! Hey, boss,” Harper teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Did you sneak into Maya’s room last night after I left… and actually spend the night together?”

Before either could respond, Ashcroft’s door swung open, and he took in the scene. A teasing grin spread across his face.

“What do we have here? Looks like someone’s handling unfinished business bright and early.” he said, voice laced with amusement.

Damien shot Ashcroft a sharp look.

“You know the site I had dug last night is still available.”

Ashcroft caught the hint and threw up his hands in mock surrender.

“Alright, alright! Message received. Shall we head for breakfast?” Ashcroft’s innocent, annoyingly smug smile flashed across his face.

The four of them headed downstairs together, the early morning light streaming through the windows as they stepped into the lobby. The island was waking-distant waves crashing, birds calling, the scent of salt and tropical blooms thick in the air.

Inside the dining area, a casual breakfast spread awaited-fresh tropical fruit, flaky pastries, strong coffee, and a variety of juices. Sunlight bathed the table, lending a lighter, more cheerful mood.

The rest of the team was already gathered, greetings exchanged with easy smiles and nods. The clinking of cutlery and murmurs of conversation filled the room, but beneath the surface, an eerie tension lingered.

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Maya felt it first-a prickling at the back of her neck. Her gaze flicked to the corner by the window, where Ethan sat silently, posture rigid, eyes burning holes into her. Those eyes-dark, cold, and burning with something deeper-seemed to pierce right through her.

There was no warmth. Only shadowed intent.

A chill ran down her spine as his stare pressed like a silent threat.

Damien caught her glance and went rigid beside her, jaw tightening as his eyes fixed on

Ethan.

And just like that, the serene island morning shattered, leaving the air charged and uneasy.

Damien stepped silently in front of Maya, positioning himself between her and Ethan's burning gaze. He stood tall, a solid barrier, his presence daring anyone to cross the line.

Leaning down just enough, his breath warmed her ear as he murmured, "Don't let him bother you."

Then, soft and protective, he pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

Maya’s heart fluttered, steadying beneath his touch, and she nodded, drawing strength from

him.

Together, they moved toward the table where Harper and Ashcroft waited. The four of them sat close, a tight-knit unit amid the watchful eyes of the others. Damien and Maya settled side by side, backs deliberately turned to Ethan, while Harper and Ashcroft took the seats across, both facing him head-on.

A few tables away, Ethan sat stiffly, his rehearsed smile was gone. His eyes locked onto Maya like a predator stalking prey-hard, intense, and unblinking.

Harper’s voice dropped, sharp with unease.

“Miller is giving me serious creeps. He’s still staring at you like you owe him a fortune. If his gaze could burn, there’d already be a huge hole in your back.”

Ashcroft’s jaw clenched, eyes narrowing as he studied Ethan’s rigid stance.

“His presence here raises a lot of red flags.”

Harper shrugged, trying to mask her concern with casual pragmatism.

“Glad today’s the last day of shooting. I heard he’s leaving the island tonight-early

commitment tomorrow. Trina wants us to wrap up as soon as possible. His manager pushed for it, apparently.”

They skipped the buffet this morning. Instead, fresh dishes were brought to their table- elegantly plated, the quiet service matching the heavy atmosphere pressing down on them.

A sudden movement caught their eyes-Ethan rising from his seat. His deliberate pace and unblinking stare sent a shiver down Maya’s spine.

Harper’s voice dropped to a low, urgent whisper, tinged with dry humor.

“Oh shit… he’s coming this way. Brace yourself.”

She flipped open her phone with an exaggerated sigh, pretending to scroll through messages while sneakily shooting side glances at Ethan. Then she nibbled on her food like it was the most fascinating thing in the world-completely ignoring the tension building around them.

Damien placed a firm hand on Maya’s shoulder and pulled her closer to him, a quiet, protective gesture.

Ethan stopped just in front of the table, a calculating smirk curling his lips.

“Morning, Maya. Still as lovely as ever.”

Unease rippled through Maya, but she kept her voice steady.

“Morning, Mr. Miller.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed, his body coiling like a spring ready to snap.

Ethan’s gaze shifted to Damien, a mocking edge creeping into his tone.

“What’s with the formality? Not used to that. Let’s drop it, okay? We’re not strangers.”

Ashcroft cut in smoothly, voice cool and measured.

“Seems like you’re having a hard time moving on from the past, Miller. From what I see, Maya here only ever considered you an acquaintance-right from day one. But you… you keep dragging the past back like it still matters.”

Ethan’s smirk didn’t falter, but his eyes darkened with something colder-resentment, maybe

even regret.

“I don’t recall our paths ever crossing, Mr. Ashcroft,” he said smoothly, voice low and edged with challenge. “So, tell me-why the hostility?”

Ashcroft’s eyes glinted coldly as he leaned back in his seat, a mocking smile curling on his

lips-teasing, biting, and deliberately insulting. His voice was calm but laced with undeniable authority,

“Hostility? You’re mistaken. I don’t waste energy hating people-it’s pointless. What you’re seeing is just my baseline reaction when dealing with someone like you-people who don’t… matter.”

He held Ethan’s gaze unflinchingly, cold and steady.

“Least of all someone who keeps crashing what should be a peaceful morning. This is the second time you’ve ruined my breakfast.”

The air thickened as Ashcroft’s stare sharpened, ruthless and absolute, making it crystal clear who held the leash.

“You’re nothing but a parasite, Miller-feeding off memories that aren’t yours, clutching at something you convinced yourself exists between you and Maya. But Maya is family. And I don’t take kindly to anyone disrespecting those I protect.”

Leaning forward, his voice dropped low-dangerous, brutal, and deadly serious.

“With just a single word, I can end you. Your career, your reputation-gone. Don’t be an idiot; you know exactly what I’m capable of.”

His eyes burned into Ethan’s, voice cold and final.

“Take this seriously. Keep your distance from Maya-or you’ll learn just how far I’m willing to go.”

Ashcroft’s gaze was like ice, sharp and unyielding, sealing the warning without a word.

Ethan held Ashcroft’s gaze for a tense moment before letting out a dry, dismissive laugh. ” Oh, I’m very much aware, Mr. Ashcroft,” he said, his tone dripping with mockery.

Then he shifted his eyes to Maya, a sardonic smirk curling his lips.

“Quite the bodyguard you’ve got there. Must be nice.”

Damien’s eyes darkened, his voice low and dangerously calm.

“Careful, Miller. That might be the last words you ever say.”

Ethan chuckled, unfazed, his smirk widening as he sneered,

“Oh, and of course-the great Damien Blackwood. For a moment there, I thought you’d just

let your best friend do all the talking.”

Damien pushed his seat back, rising instantly with a flash of controlled fury, but Maya’s hand caught his wrist gently, her eyes steady as she silently urged him to sit.

A cold, distant darkness flickered in Maya’s eyes-an unfamiliar shadow, sharp and resolute, that no one had ever dared to witness before. Her gaze locked with Ethan’s-steady, unyielding, a silent warning smoldering beneath the surface.

The moment their eyes met, Ethan swallowed hard, the weight of her silent warning pressing down on him like a blade. He instinctively took a small step back, unsettled and wary.

Maya stood, the shift commanding the room. Her voice rang out, sharp and unflinching.

“What do you want from me, Ethan?!”

Her words snapped through the room, drawing immediate attention. Conversations halted and all eyes turned toward them.

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Damien rose instantly, positioning himself firmly behind Maya, a silent shield. Harper and Ashcroft moved to flank them, muscles tense, ready for any sign of trouble.

James and Lee, nearby, sensed the shift in energy and quickly closed the distance, forming a tight barrier around Maya.

The air thickened-this wasn’t just a confrontation; it was a warning.

Ethan faltered, words failing him. “Maya… I… I just-”

She held up a hand, cutting him off.

“Just what?!” Her voice was low, but edged with fury. “You know what-save it. I’ve tried being civil since day one, but you keep pushing. Crossing every damn line. You’ve put me in uncomfortable positions since the moment you arrived, and not once did I stoop to being rude to you. But now? You insult the people I care about. You don’t get to do that, Ethan.”

Her eyes hardened, voice cold and steady.

“We went to the same university for a year-so what? Just because you ‘saw’ a sliver of

vulnerability in my life doesn’t mean there’s some special connection between us. There isn’t.

She drew a slow breath, locking eyes with him.

“You’re an old schoolmate. An acquaintance. Nothing more. If you can’t accept that, stay a stranger. I didn’t reciprocate then, I don’t now, and I won’t ever. Whatever respect I had for your is gone.”

Her tone was calm but final.

“So please, Mr. Miller-respect my space. Stay away.”

For a brief moment, hurt flickered in Ethan’s eyes before hardening into something colder,

sharper.

“Why? Is it because I’m not as good as Damien Blackwood?” His voice dripped with venom,

each word deliberate.

Then came a mocking laugh, cruel and contemptuous.

“You think he’s perfect, Maya? He’s not. A man with blood on his hands and shadows at his back-shadows that will swallow you whole.”

He leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowing, voice taunting.

“You honestly believe you can survive in his world? If it’s just his money you’re after, I’ve got money too-more than enough to give you every shallow little dream you’ve ever wanted.”

A sly, venomous smirk tugged at his lips.

“You don’t need to cling to him like some desperate ornament-unless, of course, you’re addicted to the way he fucks you, to the tricks he uses to keep you moaning in his bed. Tell me, is that-”

SLAP!

Before he could finish, Maya’s hand shot out-sharp, fierce, and stinging-landing squarely across Ethan’s cheek.

The room went silent, the echo of the slap lingering.

Maya's eyes burned with resolve. Her voice was low, ice-cold.

"How dare you! Let this be the first and last time you disrespect me like that. You don't get to decide what I want, who I choose, or how I live-and you sure as hell don't get to insult it. Stay the hell away from me, Ethan-or next time, it won't be just a slap."

Her words hung in the air, leaving no room for argument.

Ethan froze, Maya's voice cutting sharper than the sting on his cheek. The bravado drained from his face, replaced by raw hurt, regret, shame. His eyes wavered, searching hers as if hoping to reclaim some fragment of the past.

"I… didn't mean-" he started, voice low and pleading. But the words died when Damien's shadow fell over him.

Damien stepped forward-cold, precise, merciless. His fist shot out like a striking viper, smashing into Ethan's jaw with a bone-crunching crack. Ethan hit the floor hard, gasping, every instinct screaming that he had crossed someone not to be forgiven.

Gasps rippled through the room-eyes wide, hands flying to mouths. Every heartbeat synced with the raw intensity of Damien's fury.

Maya’s hand flew to her mouth, eyes wide, heart racing-shocked, yet comforted by his protective rage.

Harper’s brows shot up, lips curved in a devious smile.

“Hell yeah… ruthless as ever. That’s how you do it,” she muttered.

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Ashcroft’s gaze was sharp, calculating, but a faint smirk tugged at his lips-a silent nod of approval.

Damien loomed over Ethan, shadows cutting across his face, eyes unyielding.

In one swift motion, he grabbed Ethan by the collar and lifted him as if he weighed nothing. Then another punch slammed into his face. Blood spurted instantly.

“You ever disrespect my woman again,” Damien snarled, each word sharp as a blade, “and I won’t just break your jaw. I’ll make you regret every breath you take.”

Another punch connected, sending a tooth snapping free.

Damien shoved him away, letting Ethan crumple to the floor like dead weight.

The room thickened with tension. Every gasp underscored the lethal warning: cross Damien Blackwood, and the cost is far more than pain.

He didn't give Ethan a chance to answer. His voice sharpened, cold and cutting.

"You think you've got the upper hand because some puppet master picked you for a role you barely understand?"

A dangerous smirk tugged at his lips.

"You're nothing but a pawn, Miller. Disposable. You have no idea what you've walked into, and you sure as hell don't know how I collect debts."

The air seemed to shrink around Ethan, Damien's presence suffocating, predator-like.

Stepping closer, Damien's shadow deepened.

"You don't walk into my territory, peek into my life, and pretend you matter," he growled.

"I'm done playing along. Pack your things and disappear-now. Every second you stay…"

His eyes narrowed, cold and murderous.

"…is another second closer to me burying you where you stand. And if you know anything about me, you know I don't make empty threats."

The room fell silent, charged and heavy, the weight of Damien's words pressing down like a

storm.

Ethan locked eyes with Damien, then glanced at Maya. He struggled to rise, wincing, when his manager stepped forward to steady him. Irritated, he shoved her away.

"Don't touch me!"

She stumbled back, eyes wide, hands raised, and stepped aside.

Ethan staggered upright, still reeling, but a crooked smirk tugged at his lips. A low, mocking laugh escaped him.

"Seems I hit a nerve… got a reaction out of Damien Blackwood. Consider that a small victory,

huh?”

His gaze shifted to Maya. For a moment, the cruelty drained, replaced by something unsteady-regret, maybe shame.

“Maya… I didn’t mean it like that. I shouldn’t have said those things to you. I’m sorry-I really

am.”

He paused, eyes darting to Damien, a flicker of cold calculation returning.

“But I don’t regret saying what I said about him. I meant every single word. And that was barely a fraction of what he’s capable of. You really think he’s your protector? Your safe place? Wake up, Maya. Look at the man standing next to you. He’s ruthless. Dangerous. He doesn’t hesitate to destroy anyone who gets in his way-and if you stay beside him, he’ll destroy you too. Don’t be naïve enough to think you’re the exception. You’d be a fool to trust

him.”

Damien’s jaw tensed, a dark pulse beating at his temple. For one harrowing second, he didn’t look at Ethan-he looked at Maya, afraid of what he might see in her eyes.

Doubt. Fear. Distance.

But she didn’t step back.

Her gaze stayed fixed on Damien’s face-steady, unflinching, warm. The soft rise and fall of her chest trembled, but she didn’t falter.

Something sharp and raw clenched inside him.

Ethan scoffed.

“She’s still standing because she doesn’t understand what you are,” he muttered, wiping blood from his mouth.

“You think you can hide behind pretty words and extravagant gestures, but the truth will

surface soon enough, Blackwood. And when it does…”

His gaze cut to Maya, colder now.

“She’ll run. Just like anyone with common sense would.”

Ashcroft’s fist tightened at his side. He stepped forward, voice low and deadly.

“You’ve got guts, Miller. No denying that. But guts won’t keep you breathing if you keep crossing the line.”

Maya moved before Damien could stop her. One step forward, her hand settling on Ashcroft’s arm-a silent signal she could handle this.

Her voice was soft, yet unwavering.

“I already know who he is, Ethan.”

Maya’s fingers brushed Damien’s arm-barely a touch, but it sent a surge of heat up his spine.

“Yes, he’s dangerous,” she said softly.

“And yes, he can be ruthless when he needs to be. But he’s also the man who never gave up on me-even when I pushed him away. He’s the man I’m willing to take a risk for. I chose him. I choose to be with him. I choose to stand beside him. And I choose to love him.”

Her eyes shimmered-not with fear, but fierce certainty.

“And if I end up destroyed along the way… so be it. It’s my decision. You don’t get to stand here and tell me what’s best for me.”

Ethan’s defiant smirk faded as his mouth opened… then closed.

Damien felt the tight coil in his chest loosen with every word she spoke. But his lethal edge never left his gaze. He stepped forward, placing himself fully between Ethan and Maya.

“You’ve said enough,” Damien growled, ice-cold.

“Leave-now.” His jaw clenched, the threat sharp and lethal.

“Or… you won’t walk away at all.”

Ethan held his stare too long, jaw tight in silent defeat.

Maya’s voice drifted through, soft but edged with authority.

“Just… leave, Ethan.”

Ethan’s eyes fell on Maya, flickering with regret and pain. His jaw clenched, fists tight-but defiance crumbled under the weight of fear and silent defeat,

Fine… but don’t say I didn’t warn you. Just be careful, Maya. Bad choices have a nasty habit of catching up to you. And when they do… don’t be so sure Damien will be there to protect you.”

He didn’t apologize again.

He stepped back.

A few deliberate steps, then paused, glancing over his shoulder. A shadow flickered in his eyes, a dangerous glint dancing there, a cold smirk tugging at his lips.

By the way, Maya… you might want to ask him what really happened to Dr. Beckett.”

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For a long moment, no one moved.

The door had already swung shut behind Ethan, but the echo of his voice still lingered in the room-sharp, poisonous, clinging to the air like smoke.

You might want to ask him what really happened to Dr. Beckett.

The room felt too still. Too heavy.

Damien didn't flinch. Didn't speak. Didn't even look at anyone.

But Maya felt it-the subtle shift beneath the surface. Like a beast straining against its chains, growling just behind his eyes.

The silence stretched.

Harper was the first to break it, her tone low, uncomfortable. "Well… that was intense."

No one laughed.

Ashcroft's gaze remained fixed on Damien, unreadable. "You want me to handle him?"

It took Damien a heartbeat too long to answer.

"No." His voice was calm-too calm. "He's already handled."

Ashcroft didn’t push, but the warning in his eyes said this isn’t over.

Her adrenaline, spiking since the slap, finally collapsed. Her knees felt unsteady. Her pulse

stuttered.

God… what just happened?

She blinked and looked around the dining hall-the crew frozen in various states of shock. Harper. Ashcroft. James. Lee. Her colleagues. Her friends.

Every single one of them looked stunned. Some startled. Some trying to pretend they weren’t watching.

Heat crawled up her neck.

“This is…” she forced out, voice cracking slightly. “I-I’m so sorry.”

They looked at her in surprise, but the words kept tumbling out, breathless and shaky. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. Now the entire shoot is ruined and Ethan’s gone. We’ve all

been working so hard for days and I-" She swallowed, feeling the weight in her chest tighten. "-I ruined everything."

Harper was the first to move. Her expression softened, eyes gentling as she stepped forward.

"Hey," she said quietly, voice steady and warm, "you didn't ruin anything. He did."

Trina moved in next, tone surprisingly gentle. "Harper's right. You didn't ruin a thing, Maya. If anything… you did us all a favor. The way he's been acting? Someone needed to put him in his place."

Mary gave a slow nod, her voice calm but firm. "I don't normally condone violence," she said, glancing briefly at the spot Ethan had been standing, "but in this case… he got exactly what he deserved."

Sienna and Jessa exchanged a brief look, then gave Maya a soft smile and a quiet nod-a silent show of support that said, we're with you.

The words hit something deep inside her.

And just like that-the floodgates opened.

Maya shook her head, trying to speak, but no sound came. Her throat was bone-dry. Her chest tightened, and tears-hot and uncontrollable-welled in her eyes before she could fight

them back.

Her gaze swept the room again, and the weight of guilt crashed over her all at once.

“I… I’m… s-sorry,” she choked out, voice breaking with every word. “I’m really sorry-”

The tears came before she could stop them, spilling over as she shook her head-

and then she turned and bolted.

“Maya!” Damien called sharply, already stepping after her.

Harper’s hand shot out, stopping him with a firm shake of her head. “Boss… don’t. Not yet. I’ll go.”

Damien’s jaw tensed. “But-”

Ashcroft stepped in beside him, calm and unyielding. “Give her space, D. Harper knows what

to do.”

Damien hesitated, muscles taut with instinct to follow-but finally stopped, fist clenched at his side as Harper hurried after Maya.

She didn’t waste a second.

Harper slipped out and spotted Maya halfway down the corridor, shoulders trembling as she tried to wipe away the tears with the back of her hand.

“Maya!” Harper called-not sharp like Damien’s, but soft, urgent.

Maya slowed but didn’t turn around. The adrenaline was gone now-leaving her shaky, drained, and painfully aware of the chaos she’d left behind.

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Harper jogged the last few steps and reached her, gently grabbing her wrist.

“Hey… hey, look at me.”

Maya drew in a ragged breath and finally turned. Her eyes were glossy and red, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’m sorry…”

Harper's expression softened further. "Stop apologizing."

"But I-" Maya's voice broke as she gestured back toward the dining hall. "Ethan's gone and the shoot is ruined and everyone worked so hard and-"

"And none of that is your fault." Harper cut her off gently but firmly. "He caused it. He crossed the line. You reacted like any sane person would. Honestly, I would've punched him long before Damien did."

A tiny, breathless laugh escaped Maya-half disbelief, half relief. She swiped at her eyes again.

"You didn't ruin anything, Maya. You stood up for yourself. And if anyone in there has a problem with that? Then they're the problem, not you."

Maya's shoulders trembled, the fight slowly ebbing out of her body. "I just… I hate that I dragged all of you into it."

"You didn't drag us into anything," Harper said, giving her hand a squeeze. "Didn't you hear what Trina said? You actually did us all a favor."

Maya blinked, still trying to steady her breathing. "What do you mean?"

Harper let out a long sigh, rolling her eyes slightly. "Ugh… okay, fine-I'll tell you." She lowered her voice. "We had a meeting. A secret one. And I say secret because you weren't there."

Maya's brows knitted. "A secret-?"

"Yeah. Look… Ethan showing up like that? It was shady as hell and everyone felt it. Turns out there's more to it-but we weren't given the full details. Boss just ordered Trina to get rid of him-quietly. Legally cut ties, make sure it's solid and in our favor." She gave Maya a pointed look. "We were never planning to actually use any of the materials with him in it."

Maya stared. "What?"

Harper nodded quickly, talking faster now. "All of this-the shoots, the photos? It was all just

for show so he wouldn't suspect anything. And you were kept in the dark because… well-he knows you. If you knew it was fake, there was a risk you'd give it away."

Maya's lips parted in disbelief.

"The real shot list for the launch?" Harper continued. "Only includes the venue and the staff. No 'third person, no fake ambassador, none of that. The boss already made that call days ago."

Maya blinked, stunned. "I… I had no idea."

Harper's expression softened again. "Exactly. That's why you shouldn't feel guilty." She nudged Maya gently. "Like Trina said-you actually did us all a favor. You just… accelerated what we were already trying to do. And now that he's gone? You've basically given us all another full day off!"

Maya blinked, taking a shaky breath. "I… I don't know," she admitted, voice quivering.

She rubbed at her temples, trying to force clarity, but it was useless. Her chest felt tight, and exhaustion pressed down on her like a heavy weight. "I don't even know what I'm feeling anymore… relief, guilt, fear… all at once. It's too much."

She met Harper's eyes. "I need space… I need some air. I'm… completely overwhelmed-my thoughts, my emotions… everything's all over the place right now. I can't even think straight."

Harper gave her a soft, understanding nod. "Okay. Take all the time you need. Let's step outside for a bit-just breathe. No one's rushing you."

Maya's eyes filled again, but this time with something gentler. "Thank you."

She gently guided Maya toward the exit, walking at her pace, careful not to crowd her. Once outside, the morning heat and ocean breeze hit her face, a sharp contrast to the tension inside, and she took a shuddering breath, letting it out slowly.

Harper stayed close, silent but grounding. "You don't have to process everything at once," she said softly. "Right now, just focus on this-breathing, feeling the air. Everything else can wait a moment."

Maya's shoulders trembled as she nodded, letting the tension begin to seep out of her body. Her feet carried them almost instinctively, drifting toward the shoreline, each step sinking softly into the sand.

The sand was warm beneath their feet, the grains shifting and slipping as they walked. A gentle wave rolled in, lapping at their ankles, sending a refreshing, grounding jolt through her senses. Maya let her gaze wander to the horizon, the endless stretch of water and sky

offering a strange kind of clarity amidst the whirlwind in her mind.

Harper followed silently, giving Maya the space she clearly needed, her presence steady and unintrusive. The only sounds were the rhythmic crash of the waves and the soft whisper of the breeze-a lull that began to untangle the knots of panic and exhaustion inside Maya.

Maya's voice trembled as she spoke, barely above a whisper. "Harper… I'm scared."

Harper glanced at her, steady and calm. "About what?"

Maya swallowed hard, words tumbling out in a rush. "About what Ethan said before he left… about Dr. Beckett. The way he said it… it felt dark, eerie. It's bothering me. I have so many questions. He told me to ask Damien about Dr. Beckett, but… how did he even know about him? What does Damien have to do with it?"

Her steps slowed as memories pressed in. "I remembered back on the yacht-Nick told me it was them who came to rescue me. It was Damien who carried me out of that place. And at the hospital, when I asked James about Dr. Beckett, all he said was… 'Everything's been taken care of. You don't have to worry.' And Damien… he said the same. That he could guarantee Dr. Beckett would never bother me again."

Her voice wavered, almost breaking. “I… I’m confused. Did he…? And what does Ethan mean when he said Damien has blood on his hands and shadows at his back? I don’t… I don’t understand. I want to ask Damien, but I’m scared. I’m worried… I…”

Her words faltered, and the waves lapped gently at her feet, almost echoing the turmoil she felt inside.

Chapter 198

The waves crashed softly in the distance, a rhythmic reminder of calm beyond the chaos in her mind. Maya’s fingers dug into the warm sand, her chest still tight from adrenaline that hadn’t fully faded. She could feel Harper’s presence beside her-steady, unwavering-but something in her friend’s expression made her pause.

Harper didn’t speak for a long moment, her eyes shadowed with something darker, as if she were weighing words that carried more weight than usual. The wind tugged at her hair, but she didn’t brush it away, letting it fall over her shoulders as if shielding her face from the sun -or maybe from the truth she was about to deliver.

Finally, she said, calm but heavy, “You’ve seen how Damien reacted when Ethan disrespected you. He almost shattered that asshole’s face with just two punches.”

She paused, letting the weight of her words settle. “And… in my opinion, that’s him holding back. Not just because so many eyes were on him, but because you were there.”

Her tone dipped, colder now, almost void of empathy. “And if what Miller implied is true-that Damien did something to that piece-of-shit doctor-I wouldn’t be surprised. That bastard hurt you. Whatever happened to him, he deserved it.”

Maya's voice trembled. "Harper… what are you-"

Harper cut her off, stepping closer, her voice dropping conspiratorially. "Maya… you have to understand. There's another side to this world, one that most people never get to see. For those at the top-people like Damien and Ashcroft-it's not just polished floors, perfect smiles, private jets, fancy suits, champagne… There's a dark side too."

Maya froze mid-step, her head snapping toward Harper, brows lifting. "Dark side?"

Harper's gaze didn't waver. "Yes. And it's a side that only comes out when it has to. When people cross lines… when someone you care about is threatened… that's when you see it."

Maya's chest tightened, a mix of fear and awe curling through her. Dark side…?

The thought sent a shiver down her spine. She looked out at the waves for a moment, letting the rhythm of the ocean wash over her, but it did little to calm the storm inside.

"I… I don't know if I can even imagine it," she whispered. "I mean… Damien… he's always so… calm. Gentle with me. And now… this?" Her eyes flicked to Harper, searching for reassurance. "You mean all that power… all that control… he can just-snap?"

Harper didn't answer immediately, letting Maya sit with the weight of her words. When she

finally spoke, it was quiet, almost mournful. “Not snap… Maya. He chooses when to show it. And what you saw today? That was just a sliver. Most people never see the rest.”

Maya’s knees weakened slightly. Her heart raced, thoughts tangling. “And if… if there’s really blood on his hands… how can I… trust someone like that?”

Harper’s hand lightly touched her arm, firm but gentle. “You don’t have to understand everything right now. Just know this-you can trust him to protect you. That’s the part that matters. The rest… will reveal itself when it has to.”

Maya exhaled shakily, letting her gaze fall to the waves again. Somewhere beneath the fear and confusion, a stubborn thread of certainty began to weave itself through her chest. She trusted Damien. She had to.

Her voice trembled. “Harper… doesn’t this scare you? If you were in my shoes… how can you be so calm, knowing the person you love is capable of—”

Harper cut in smoothly, her tone teasing but edged. “Of what? Killing?”

Maya nodded, eyes wide.

Harper’s expression softened, gaze still sharp. “Maya… you have a pure, genuine heart. That’s good. But surviving… surviving in this world sometimes means making impossible decisions. Choices you never

imagined having to make. You may think it's too much, too dark… maybe it is-for someone who hasn't been tested."

She paused, letting the words sink in. Then leaned closer. "Put it this way… when Miller said what he said earlier, didn't something ignite inside you? Didn't your instincts tell you to slap him? Admit it or not, there was a surge-a rush of adrenaline that made you want to do more, wasn't there?"

Chapter 199

Maya's voice trembled. "I… I was so mad. The way he insulted me-it ignited something inside me. I felt offended, hurt. He made me out to be some cheap… gold digger, like my pride didn't matter. Like everything I've worked for… who I am… didn't mean a thing. I couldn't just let it slide."

Harper nodded. "Exactly, Maya. Same with that doctor. You chose to be polite even when he crossed the line. Look what happened? He took advantage of it and hurt you. Kindness isn't wrong-it's never wrong-but you have to know how to set boundaries. Draw a line, put your foot down-make it clear there are consequences for crossing it. Not everyone in this world will be kind. If you let them push you around, they will. People only treat you the way you allow them to."

Her gaze sharpened, voice low and unwavering. "So if Damien really did something to that doctor, like Miller implied… so what? He did it because he hurt you. Are you going to hate him for protecting you? Push him away because he decided to make that bastard pay? Why? Do you feel sorry for him?"

Maya blinked, chest tightening, pulse racing. Harper wasn't asking-she was challenging her. Making her confront the reality that her anger, her hurt, didn't have to make her doubt

Damien.

Her knees went weak. She sank into the sand, the cold grit grounding her. Her chest heaved, breaths shallow as adrenaline slowly drained, leaving a heavy ache behind.

Her mind spun-fear, relief, anger, confusion-all tangled together. Harper's words echoed, sharp and unwavering: He did it because he hurt me… not because he's cruel… not because he enjoys it…

"I… I…" she whispered. "I don't even know what to feel right now. Relief? Fear? Gratitude? I… I'm too overwhelmed."

Harper crouched beside her, resting a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It's okay to feel that way. You've been through a storm in minutes that would take most people days to process. Let it out. Breathe. You don't have to have it all figured out."

Maya's eyes glistened with unspilled tears. "I… I just keep thinking about what Ethan said… about Damien. Blood on his hands, shadows at his back… I don't know what that means. I don't know what he's done… or what he's capable of."

Harper glanced around, then leaned closer, whispering like a secret. "You've heard the stories about Nicholas Ashcroft, right? Sole heir to the Ashcroft fortune? Certified playboy, owns it

all. But here's the thing-not once has he officially taken over the corporate side. Not like Damien. That's still run by his dad… or uncles, or some cousins."

Maya blinked. "So… what does he do then?"

Harper arched a brow. “Another role. Behind the scenes.”

What kind of role?”

She smirked, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “Let’s just say… they call him the Prince of the Underworld.”

Maya froze.

Harper nodded slowly. “Yeah. He gets things done clean-but not by the book. Big-shot mafia vibes. Rumors are loud, nothing confirmed.”

Prince?” Maya repeated, barely audible.

Harper’s eyes glinted. “Mhm. And if there’s a prince… there’s got to be a king, right?”

Maya’s heart thudded. “His father?”

Harper shook her head. “Nope. People agree it might be… Mr. Blackwood.”

Maya inhaled sharply. “Damien?”

Harper shrugged. “Who knows? Even if it is-so what? You think the man who makes your knees weak is just a pretty face in a suit? He’s got that dangerous edge. You noticed it too.”

Leaning closer, Harper’s voice dropped, heavy with intent. “Didn’t he tell you his world is dangerous? He wasn’t lying. That wasn’t poetry-it was a warning wrapped in romance. And Miller’s words… they only confirmed it.”

Maya swallowed hard. Pulse skipping.

Harper’s gaze sharpened. “All that control, that quiet dominance, that intensity-it doesn’t come from spreadsheets or marketing decks. That man’s been forged in something far fiercer than boardrooms. And he doesn’t let just anyone in… yet he let you.”

Maya’s voice was barely a whisper. “But… if he’s really part of that world… what does that make me? What does that mean for us?”

Her brows drew together, heat chased by cold fear. “I’m not built for violence, Harper. I’m not ruthless. I don’t even know how to pretend to be that kind of woman. What if I’m not strong enough to handle it-handle him?”

Harper leaned in, serious. “Let me ask you something.”

Maya looked up.

If someone did something to Jamie-really hurt him-if his life was on the line… what would you do?" Her eyes locked on Maya's, "What extremes could you go to, to protect him?"

Maya blinked, caught off guard. "I… I don't know."

You do," Harper said softly. "You just haven't been pushed that far yet. But if someone came after your brother? You'd burn the world down."

Maya's eyes darkened slightly, voice barely a whisper. "Hypothetically… yes. I'd do anything for Jamie."

She paused, then looked Harper dead in the eye. "I'd probably kill anyone who threatened his

life."

Harper gave a slow, approving nod. "See? That fierce version of you is there. Just waiting for the right reason to come out."

Her tone softened, grave. "So… hypothetically, if Damien does have a part in that 'dangerous world'.."

She held Maya's gaze. "If he's not hurting or killing for thrill-if he's protecting the people he loves, keeping you and Jamie safe… I'd stand beside him. I'd want to understand. But I'd still choose him."

She placed her hand over Maya's. "Love like that? Rare. If he's willing to fight the world for you… maybe it's time you show him you'll fight back."

Maya closed her eyes, letting the waves and Harper's presence steady her. Fear didn't have to dictate her choices. She could feel everything-the danger, the love, the adrenaline-and still

choose.

And she chose Damien.

Chapter 200

Harper stayed silent for a long moment, watching the horizon. Finally, she spoke, voice low and heavy. "Maya… Damien has enemies. People who want what he has. People who want to see him fall. No matter how hard they try, they fail-because Damien Blackwood doesn't have weaknesses. Not one. Until you."

Maya's breath hitched.

Harper's eyes softened, tinged with something darker-anger, regret, a warning. "I'm almost certain you weren't part of his plan. You came into his life unannounced. He fell for you. He wants a future with you. And I'm sure… he's doing everything in his power to protect you… to protect what you both share."

“Maya…” Harper’s voice thickened with unspoken emotion, almost breaking. “Enemies don’t care who gets hurt along the way. They exploit emotions to destroy their target. They’ll hurt the people around you to get to you. They’ll find your weaknesses-and use them. It will either break you… or fuel you to fight back.”

Harper’s gaze returned to the open water, calm but unyielding. “We all have skeletons in the closet, secrets we hide-not because we’re ashamed, but because we want to protect the people around us.”

She finally turned to Maya, her gaze steady. “Open your eyes, Maya. Look beyond the surface. Read between the lines. Didn’t you hear what Damien told Miller earlier? About him being a pawn… about some puppet master picking him for a role?”

Maya nodded, her mind spinning with the weight of the revelation.

Harper’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “Damien’s story… it’s not mine to tell. But one thing I know for certain… you are his weakness. And his enemies know that. Miller is just the beginning.”

Maya’s voice trembled, but her resolve was firm. “I need to talk to Damien. I want to understand this side of him… this side of his world.”

Harper exhaled slowly, eyes scanning the open sea. “That’s the right thing to do, Maya. But before you do, you need to make sure-deep in your heart and mind-that you’re ready. The moment he opens that door, lets you in completely-into that part of his world, into that life… there’s no turning back.”

Maya met her gaze, determination flickering in her eyes. “I know. But I need to know. I need to understand.”

Harper gave a soft, almost bittersweet smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Do it… face it, so you can be ready for what's coming. And Maya… no matter what happens, I'll always be right behind you, okay?"

Maya clung to Harper without thinking, anchoring herself to something solid. Her voice trembled, barely above a whisper. "Thank you… for always being here. I don't know what I'd do without you."

She buried her face in Harper's shoulder, words muffled but urgent. "I… I'm scared, Harper. Scared of what I'll see, what I'll learn… but I have to. I need to understand him… all of him."

Harper tightened her hold, steady and unwavering. "You're not alone in this, Maya. I've got your back-always."

For a moment, the crash of the waves, the swirl of fear and uncertainty, all of it felt slightly lighter, somehow more bearable.

Back in the dining hall, the tension that had been simmering all morning finally erupted. Damien's fist slammed against the table with a deafening crack, splintering the polished wood. The shards scattered across the floor, but no one dared move-no one dared breathe t oo loudly.

His anger wasn't just in the force of the punch; it seeped through every fiber of him, a dark, potent energy that made the air thick and heavy. His jaw was tight, muscles coiled, and his eyes burned with a storm that hadn't been seen before.

Maya’s absence made the tension more palpable. Without her there, his fury had no anchor, no restraint, radiating outward like a storm.

James, Lee, and the others stayed frozen, each aware of the raw power in the room, the danger that hung in the air like a tangible thing. Every heartbeat seemed to echo against the splintered table.