Intern 221

Chapter 221

Meanwhile, Harper whisked Maya back to her room, the door clicking shut behind them. She stopped short, turning to face her with a sudden intensity, eyes locking on Maya's.

Maya froze. "What's wrong? Is there something on my face?"

Harper's lips trembled, and before Maya could react, she pulled her into a tight, unexpected hug. Maya stiffened for a moment, caught off guard, but instinctively wrapped her arms around Harper.

Harper's voice broke as she spoke into Maya's shoulder, tears wetting the fabric of her shirt. I'm… I'm just so proud of you!"

Maya pulled back slightly, still stunned. "Harper… what's… what's wrong?"

Harper sniffed, a shaky laugh escaping her. "Nothing's wrong. I just… I can't believe it. You didn't run. You took everything in like a champ, accepted him, his world… everything. You stayed beside him, ready to fight for your love."

She pulled back completely, wiping her tears with the back of her hand, then placed both hands firmly on Maya's shoulders, eyes shining. "You showed your strength, Maya. Your courage. And I am just… so proud of you."

Maya’s chest tightened, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She gently squeezed Harper’s hands. “Harper… to be honest, I’m scared. Scared of losing myself, scared of everything this means… but I just… I couldn’t turn away from him. I love him-every part of him-and I want to fight for us, no matter what comes.”

Harper’s face broke into a proud, teary smile. “That’s my girl. You follow your heart, no matter how hard it gets. You just follow your heart. And no matter what, I will always… always be here for you. I got your back!”

Maya’s lips quivered, a small, grateful smile tugging at them. “Thank you, Harper. I… I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Harper gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “You’ll never have to find out.”

She wiped her eyes again, then straightened with a sly grin. “Enough of that. Now it’s time to get you all prepped for probably the most special night of your life.”

With that, Harper dragged Maya further into the room. She pulled her phone out, swiping open a website. “Okay, so… research time. Let’s see what works, what doesn’t. What do you prefer?” She tilted her phone toward Maya, showing different categories with playful

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exaggeration. “Romantic, passionate, slow and sensual, adventurous, kinkier stuff… what are we feeling?”

Maya blinked, cheeks warming. “I… I don’t know… whatever is normal.”

Harper let out a dramatic exhale and shook her head. “Normal? That’s boring, Maya. Listen- sex is… well, it can be simple. Penetrate, pump, finish. Done. But making love? That’s entirely different. Intimate, emotional, careful, adventurous… every touch and every glance has meaning. It’s about connection, about sharing yourself completely with someone. That’s what makes it magical.”

Her eyes softened, voice lowering, almost tender. “So you and Damien… it’s not just sex. When you decide to really let him in, to give him your all… that’s making love. Not just the act, but everything behind it-the trust, the closeness, the emotions. It’s every touch, every kiss, every glance carrying meaning. That’s what makes it unforgettable, what makes it yours.”

She paused, letting the words sink in, then grinned mischievously again. “That’s why tonight isn’t just another night, Maya. It’s going to be something you’ll remember forever.”

Maya’s voice wavered, cheeks burning. “Harper… I’m… nervous. Last night we almost… and this morning too… but it didn’t happen, and I…”

Harper threw her hands up, exasperated but grinning. “Maya! Stop dancing around it! Just say it-what’s the problem?”

Maya swallowed hard, her voice barely above a whisper. “Every time he’s close… when he touc hes me… I feel… something. Like… I actually want it. I think I’m ready… but… does it… hurt? I mean… really hurt?”

Harper's grin softened into a teasing smirk. "Well… it depends. Normally, yes, it should sting a little. But if it's a tiny little-" she wiggled her fingers playfully, "…well, that's a different story. But, from what I can tell… the boss? Let's just say… he's well-equipped."

Maya's eyes went wide, her hand flying to her chest. "Oh… uh… okay… I guess… I mean… I just

Harper waved a hand, eyes sparkling with mischief and reassurance. "Relax, girl. Listen-this isn't about fear. It's about trust, patience, and letting it happen naturally. No pressure, no rush … just connection. Honestly? All you need to do is be yourself, listen to your body, and don't hold back. Let it respond naturally-and let him guide you."

Maya's cheeks flushed, her hands twisting nervously in her lap. "I… I think I can do that. I want to… I just don't know what to expect. I don't want to mess it up. What if I-what if I disappoint him?."

Harper grinned, giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Mess it up? Please. You're not gonna mess up anything. And disappoint him?? Girl-come on! You're a virgin! This is your first time, and he's the lucky guy who gets that honor. Just follow your heart, feel it, trust him -that's all that matters."

Then her expression softened, voice lowering with sisterly weight. "But Maya, listen. If you're not ready-then don't. You're not obligated to give up your virginity just because you love him or because you feel like it's expected. You're the only one who has the right to decide if and when you're ready, alright? Never, ever feel pressured. And if he really loves you? He'll respect that. He'll wait."

Maya's chest tightened, a lump catching in her throat as she nodded. "Thank you, Harper."

Harper suddenly clapped her hands together, shaking her head with mock seriousness. “You know what? Forget about that ‘research.’ Enough porn talk-trust me, when the moment comes, it’ll happen the way it’s supposed to. No manual needed.”

She stood, tugging Maya up with her, a playful grin spreading across her face. “Alright, missy -bathroom, now. Go get ready. Freshen up, take a long bath, maybe a hot shower… whatever helps you relax. Clear your head, ease your body. Tonight’s about you feeling good. I’ll handle the packing, make sure you’ve got everything you’ll need. You just focus on feeling good. Got

it?”

Before Maya could protest, Harper gave her a little push toward the bathroom, laughing. “Go on! Shoo! That man is probably planning something out-of-this-world for you, so the least you can do is show up fresh and glowing. I’ll make sure everything else is perfect.”

Maya bit her lip, trying not to smile, but Harper’s energy was contagious. She laughed softly as she let herself be ushered away, her nerves easing under her friend’s bright, unshakable

confidence.

And as the bathroom door clicked shut behind her, Maya pressed a hand to her chest, heart racing. Tonight wasn’t just any night. Tonight, everything could change.

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Maya stepped out of the shower, her skin warm and dewy, carrying the faint scent of her body wash-lavender with a soft hint of vanilla, calming yet quietly intoxicating. Harper, efficient as always, had

already packed her things and laid out a dress on the bed-a pale yellow midi dress, its silky fabric catching the light like morning sunshine.

“Oh,” Harper grinned, tilting her head as she looked Maya over. “That scent-you always smell like calm and sugar at the same time. No wonder he can’t keep his hands off you.”

Maya flushed, “It’s just body wash,” she muttered, though her heart skipped at the thought of Damien noticing the same thing.

“Mmhm, sure,” Harper teased, lifting the dress and holding it out. “Put this on. It’ll make you look like summer and innocence had a baby.”

Maya chuckled, shaking her head as she took the dress from Harper. “You’ve got a wild imagination,” she murmured, a small smile tugging at her lips.

Maya went through her usual routine before slipping into the dress Harper had set out for her. She gathered her hair into a simple ponytail, the style plain yet striking, drawing attention to the graceful line of her neck. The pale yellow dress hugged her with quiet elegance: satin ribbons tied at her shoulders, a straight neckline that skimmed her collarbones, the smocked bodice molding to her shape before flowing into a breezy midi skirt with a teasing side slit. It was effortless, fresh, and disarmingly pretty.

“Perfect,” Harper said with a satisfied grin as Maya turned toward her. “You look like summer

itself.”

Maya smoothed the skirt nervously, cheeks warming at the compliment. The dress was beautiful, but more than that, it made her feel… vulnerable. Young. Bare to Damien's gaze in a way that thrilled and unsettled her all at once.

Just then, a firm knock echoed at the door.

"Okay, quick-put some lip gloss on. I'll get it," Harper said, rushing toward the door.

She pulled it open with a bright smile. "Oh, hey! Lee. She's ready-come in."

"Ms. Lin." Lee gave her a polite nod as Harper stepped aside, allowing him in.

Maya was slipping her phone into her purse when she noticed him. She looked up with a small smile. "Hi, Lee."

For a second, Lee froze. She looked stunning-simple yet elegant, fresh as sunlight, carrying

an innocence that caught him off guard. His jaw nearly dropped before he quickly composed

himself.

Beside him, Harper nudged his arm with a knowing grin. “She looks amazing, huh?”

Lee gave a brief nod before finding his voice. “Miss Maya… you look beautiful.” His calm tone carried steady across the room, though he cleared his throat a beat later. “Everything’s ready whenever you are.”

Maya’s lips curved softly. “Thank you, Lee. Okay… I’m ready. Let’s go?”

Without another word, Lee stepped forward and reached for the duffle bag resting on the bed.

The three of them stepped out of the room together, the soft click of Maya’s sandals echoing against the hallway floor. Down in the lobby, a golf cart was already waiting. Lee slid into the driver’s seat while Harper and Maya settled in the back. With practiced ease, he steered them through the winding paths toward the helipad, the warm air carrying faint hints of lavender and vanilla from Maya’s freshly showered skin.

At the edge of the helipad, James was waiting, posture sharp and composed as always. He gave them a small nod in greeting as they approached.

Maya’s gaze lifted, and there-just outside the sleek helicopter-stood Damien and Ashcroft. They were mid-conversation, Ashcroft casually leaning one arm against the side of the aircraft, his head tilted toward Damien.

But both men paused the instant they noticed movement. Their eyes found Maya.

Ashcroft's lips parted, and a low murmur slipped out before he could catch himself. "Damn… she's beautiful."

Damien's head turned sharply, a cutting side-eye that spoke volumes without a word.

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Ashcroft lifted his free hand in mock surrender, smirking. "Relax. Just appreciating beauty, not stealing it."

Damien didn't reply-his stare had already returned to Maya, and the look in his eyes was something else entirely.

Maya felt the weight of their stares immediately, and warmth crept up her neck despite the breeze sweeping across the helipad. She smoothed her skirt instinctively, her fingers brushing over the soft fabric as if that could steady her heartbeat.

Harper, walking just behind her, caught the look on Damien's face and had to bite back a knowing grin.

James fell into step at her side, professional as ever, while Lee carried her bag with quiet efficiency. But the air felt different now-charged, as though the world had slowed down for a beat too long.

As they drew closer, Ashcroft gave Maya a playful tilt of his head. "Well, if it isn't sunshine herself." His voice was laced with amusement, though the glint in his eyes betrayed genuine

admiration.

Damien didn't even glance at him this time. His focus never wavered. Every inch of him- broad shoulders squared, jaw tight, eyes dark and fixed on her-was locked onto Maya.

When they finally stopped in front of him, Maya offered a small, polite smile. "Hello."

Damien's gaze softened, though a possessive edge lingered in the way he looked at her. His voice was low, deliberate, and reverent. "Hi… you look breathtaking."

Maya felt her cheeks flush.

Ashcroft let out a soft chuckle, clearly amused by the quiet storm brewing between them." Alright, lovebirds-save it for after takeoff. Go on, have fun!"

Damien's voice was steady, commanding. "Shall we go?"

Maya tilted her head. "Aren't we waiting for the pilot?"

"I'll be flying," he said casually.

“You… know how?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Absolutely. Don’t worry, you’re safe,” he reassured her, a small smirk tugging at his lips.

Maya turned to say goodbye. She gave Harper a tight hug, and Harper whispered, “Remember what we talked about earlier, okay?” Maya smiled, simply nodding.

She then hugged Ashcroft, and Damien’s jaw tightened imperceptibly. Ashcroft raised an eyebrow. “Okay, geesh! Can’t even hug my sister-in-law?”

Damien’s voice was clipped. “Don’t get in trouble while we’re away.”

“Why me?” Ashcroft protested, pointing at Harper instead. “Maybe this woman!”

Harper rolled her eyes. “You talk too much.”

Maya just chuckled softly, trying to ease the tension.

Damien guided her onto the helicopter, fastening her seatbelt with careful precision before taking his own seat. Once everything was secured, he placed the headphones over her ears and met her gaze. “Ready?”

Maya nodded, heart pounding. “Yes.”

Damien’s hands moved to start the engine. The blades began to whirl, a rush of wind and anticipation filling the air. Slowly, the helicopter lifted off the ground, carrying them above the shimmering island, the horizon stretching endlessly ahead.

The helicopter cut through the warm evening air, the island below shrinking into a patchwork of greens and blues. The roar of the blades was steady, almost hypnotic, and Maya felt the thrill of it all-the height, the speed, and the freedom.

Outside, the sun was beginning its slow descent, painting the sky in shades of molten gold, soft coral, and deep violet. Maya’s eyes widened, a genuine smile spreading across her face as she leaned slightly toward the open window. “Wow… it’s… beautiful,” she whispered, awe in

her voice.

Damien’s gaze followed the horizon for a moment, the colors of the sunset reflected in his eyes, but he quickly shifted his focus to the passenger beside him. He didn’t need the sky to capture his attention-her presence, the way her hair caught the fading light, the sparkle in her eyes, the soft rise and fall of her chest as she breathed-it was enough.

“You like it?” he asked, voice low, almost teasing, though there was a softness under the edges of his tone.

“I… I love it,” Maya admitted, turning slightly to look at him. The smile on her lips was unguarded, pure, completely hers.

Damien allowed himself a brief, quiet smile, savoring the moment. Not the sunset. Not the view of the island. Not even the thrill of flying. It was her. Every little detail-her wonder, her warmth, the way she seemed to glow in the golden light.

Maya noticed his gaze, and a shiver of awareness ran through her. “What?” she asked, voice teasing, though her cheeks tinged with pink.

“Nothing,” he murmured, brushing a thumb lightly against her hand as it rested near hers.’ Just enjoying the view.”

She laughed softly, leaning back, feeling a calm settle over her. The world below, the wind in her hair, the horizon painted in molten gold and coral-it all felt secondary to the quiet intensity beside her.

For a long moment, they didn’t speak. The only sounds were the hum of the helicopter and the soft rush of air past the cabin. Outside, the sun sank lower, streaking the clouds with fire, and inside, Maya’s heart raced with a mixture of awe, anticipation, and something deeper, something unspoken between them.

Damien glanced at her once more, letting his hand linger near hers, and a small, almost imperceptible smile curved his lips. The sunset might have been breathtaking, but it didn’t compare to the woman beside him.

Not long after they began their descent, the helicopter finally touched down, the roar of the blades fading into a quiet stillness. Damien stepped out first, moving with that controlled, deliberate grace. He reached Maya's side, opening the door and offering his hand to help her

down.

"Careful," he murmured, a soft smile tugging at his lips.

Her feet touched the soft earth, and she paused, taking in the view. The cabin before her was a perfect blend of rustic charm and modern elegance-wooden beams, stone accents, and wide glass panels that caught the warm glow of the late afternoon sun. A broad deck stretched outward, inviting anyone to linger and take in the scenery.

Surrounding the cabin, the trees swayed gently, their leaves whispering in the calm breeze. The only sounds were the soft rustle of foliage, distant birdsong, and the faint rhythm of waves lapping against the shore below. The seclusion was absolute-peaceful, private, and untouched-making it feel as if the outside world had ceased to exist.

"You… you own this place?" she breathed, still trying to take it all in.

Damien's lips curved into a slow, teasing smile as he wrapped her arm around his waist, leaning close enough that she could feel the warmth of him. His breath brushed against her ear as he whispered, "We own this."

Maya's eyes snapped to his, breath catching at the nearness, heat radiating from him. Her heart thumped-a mix of anticipation, awe, and quiet surrender.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since I saw you earlier,” Damien murmured, his voice low and husky.

Maya didn’t have time to respond-the words had barely settled in her mind before his lips captured hers in a fierce, passionate kiss. She melted against him, her hands instinctively finding his shoulders, losing herself entirely in the intensity of him, in the moment they shared.

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Pulling back, they lingered for a moment, eyes locked, breaths still unsteady. A quiet smile touched Damien’s mouth before he spoke.

“Let’s go in,” he said, his hand warm around hers as he guided her toward the cabin.

The door opened with a soft creak, revealing a space that felt both intimate and expansive. Inside, the rustic charm met modern elegance in perfect balance. Exposed beams stretched high above, dark wood contrasting with pale stone walls. A wide fireplace glowed steadily, casting golden light across supple leather chairs and a low table where a bottle of wine and two glasses waited.

Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the ocean beyond, the last colors of sunset spilling across the waves in shades of violet and gold. The air carried a subtle blend of cedar and salt, soothing and grounding.

Maya stepped forward slowly, her gaze moving over every detail. She turned in place as though afraid to miss a single corner, awe softening her features. For a moment, she forgot to breathe-caught between the elegance of the room and the raw beauty of the world beyond the glass.

Maya’s lips curved into a soft smile as her gaze swept the room. “This place is… beautiful,” she whispered, as though afraid to disturb the stillness.

Damien stepped behind her, his hands sliding gently around her waist, drawing her back into his solid frame. He pressed a soft kiss to her cheek, his voice low and certain against her skin. “You’re more beautiful.”

Heat bloomed in Maya’s chest, and her breath hitched. She tilted her head slightly, just

nough to catch his eyes for a fleeting second, and felt a shiver of warmth run through her. His hand lingered at the small of her back, grounding her, steadying her, and somehow making her heart race all at once.

He turned her gently to face him, his gaze unusually tender, almost vulnerable, the usual sharp edge softened. A small, almost shy smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “Come,” he murmured. “Let me show you around.”

Maya’s lips curved into a soft smile, and she nodded. Together, they moved through the space, each step beside him feeling intimate, ordinary yet extraordinary, as if they were sharing a secret world meant only for them. The brush of his hand at hers, the warmth radiating from his body-every detail made her feel lighter, safer, and utterly at home.

The living room opened before her-expansive yet inviting, with high vaulted ceilings of warm.

cedar, a stone fireplace rising elegantly at its center, and floor-to-ceiling windows framing the sea like a living painting. A low leather sofa stretched before the hearth, woven throws softening the clean lines.

“This is…” Maya trailed off, almost overwhelmed, her fingers brushing over the back of the sofa. “It feels… peaceful.”

He stepped closer, his gaze softening as he looked out the window. The usual edge in his eyes had vanished, replaced by something raw, almost fragile. “I built this place to… just breat he. To escape the noise, the chaos… a place where I can be myself, without anyone watching, without anyone expecting anything.” His voice wavered slightly, heavy with unspoken truths. I have everything I could ever want-power, success, the world at my fingertips-but it’s… empty.”

He turned to her, eyes searching, vulnerable. “… This place… it’s peaceful, it quiets the world, but it’s hollow. Growing up, nobody really asked me what I wanted. It felt like I was programmed to function in a life built for me, not by me.” He let out a bitter chuckle. “It’s silly, but here… I can eat whatever I want-canned food, junk food, whatever. I watch TV, I play video games sometimes. I do things just because I want to.”

He stepped closer still, the space between them charged with quiet yearning, drawing her in like an invisible thread. “…And now… sharing it with you… it finally feels complete. You’re the first choice I’ve made entirely for myself-not for the company, not for anyone else, but for me. And having you here… it makes this place feel alive. It feels like home.”

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Maya felt a lump rise in her throat, warmth spreading through her chest. She reached up, resting her hand lightly on his chest. Her fingers traced the fabric of his shirt as if to anchor herself in the moment.

Damien tilted his head, resting his forehead briefly against hers, his eyes soft and glistening. “Maya…” he murmured, voice low and steady.

“Damien…” she whispered, her voice barely above the quiet hum of the room, reverent and tender. “Whatever you’ve ever wanted… whatever you’ve ever needed, we’ll do it together. All the things

you've kept to yourself, all the moments you've never shared… we'll experience them together. You don't have to carry any of it alone anymore."

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of her head. For a heartbeat, the world outside vanished-there was only them, the quiet of the cabin, and the warmth of being truly seen.

They continued into the open kitchen, where polished marble counters gleamed beneath pendant lights and a wall of glass revealed an herb garden flourishing just outside. Maya paused, tilting her head with a smile. "You grow your own herbs? Does that mean you cook?"

Damien's lips curved into a teasing smile. "Maybe… I guess you'll be the judge."

Maya raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk tugging at her lips. "Oh, so you're saying I get to be your taste tester?"

Damien's gaze softened, a small, almost imperceptible smile tugging at his lips. "Who else would be deserving of tasting my cooking?"

Maya tilted her head, a playful smirk curving her lips. "Hmm… okay. We'll see… but be careful -I can be a very strict critic."

Damien's lips curved into a teasing grin. "If that's the case, I better bring my A-game."

Maya let out a hearty laugh, the sound light and genuine. They continued down the hallway, and Maya's eyes widened as they passed a glass panel revealing a meticulously stocked wine cellar.

"Please don't tell me you drink all that?" she said softly, half in awe, half in disbelief.

Damien chuckled, voice low and playful. "Not all at once. Each meal is best paired with a good wine… and sometimes, each mood has one too."

Damien's smile deepened, a spark of amusement in his eyes. He led her down a hallway lined

with subtle recessed lighting, pausing to show her a sleek office tucked into one corner-its dark oak desk angled toward a private view of the sea, bookshelves running floor to ceiling, filled with carefully curated volumes.

Finally, he reached the door to the master bedroom and held it open, a soft invitation in his

gesture.

Maya stepped inside and paused, taking in the room as the last light of day faded into twilight. The glass wall framed twilight streaks of violet and indigo over the ocean. The bed, dressed in pale linen, and rustic wood headboard, echoed the warmth of the room. Soft rugs muffled footsteps, and sliding doors opened onto a star-dotted deck.

Her heart fluttered. "Damien… it's like something out of a dream."

He watched her take it all in, then stepped closer, his voice lowering, intimate and deliberate. “Only a few people know this place exists. James knows, and Nick knows too, though he’s never actually been here. The resort staff have no idea-except for the senior manager, who oversees the upkeep with a small team of handpicked staff. It’s hidden, on the far side of Aurelia. When I first bought the island… this was the reason. A place just for me, away from everything.”

Maya turned to him, brows lifting slightly.

His gaze shifted to the window, his jaw tight for a moment before softening again. “The resort came later-because I saw the potential in Aurelia, and I wanted to share it. But… this,” he gestured faintly to the space around them, “this was always for me. For privacy. For peace.”

He paused, a teasing glint in his eyes as he looked at her. “I could walk around here completely naked, and no one would see… except maybe the birds, but I doubt they’d gossip.”

Maya laughed softly, but beneath it, her chest ached with a tender, almost painful awareness. The man everyone saw as untouchable and unshakable had carved out a corner of the world just to be unseen, to simply exist on his own terms.

Her voice barely rose above a whisper. “And now… you’re sharing all of it with me.”

A slow, almost imperceptible smile tugged at Damien’s lips. He stepped closer, tilting her chin gently so her eyes met his. “With you,” he murmured, voice low and steady, “I don’t have to hide anymore.”

He leaned in just enough that their foreheads nearly touched, the warmth of him enveloping her. For the first time, the fortress he'd built around himself seemed to dissolve, leaving only the quiet honesty of the man before her.

Damien pressed a soft, lingering kiss to her forehead, the warmth of him settling deep in her chest. "Feel free to explore, rest… or do whatever you like. I'll bring our things in and then start preparing dinner."

Maya's eyes lit up, curiosity piqued. "What are you making? I want to help."

He shook his head, the faintest smile tugging at his lips. "Thanks, love… but no. I want you to relax. I'll take care of everything."

She pouted playfully, though her heart fluttered at the gesture. "Fine… but can I make a request?"

"Anything," he replied, his tone soft, open, entirely for her.

"I want you to make your comfort food," she said, her voice warm, earnest. "I don't care if it's

a bag of chips, canned meat, or even instant noodles… I just want to share what makes you happy, what you really enjoy."

For a moment, Damien's gaze softened, a rare vulnerability flickering in his dark eyes. He stepped closer, brushing a hand gently over hers. "You… you really care about that?"

“I do,” Maya whispered, her thumb tracing gentle circles on his hand. “I want to know everything that makes you… you. And share it with you. Every little thing.”

He chuckled softly, a deep, genuine sound that made her chest warm. “Then it’s settled.” He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. “I want you to feel at home… treat this place as yours. It’s ours, okay? Just… be here with me.”

Maya laughed, a light, joyful sound that filled the room. “Then I guess I’d better get comfortable.”

He smiled, the warmth in his eyes matching the glow in the room, and stepped back to let her settle in, the soft hum of the island around them carrying a quiet sense of home-finally, truly, their home.

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Damien stepped out briefly and returned moments later with their bags. He carried them to the walk-in closet, lingering for a heartbeat, tempted to unpack everything himself-but Maya shook her head with a small smile. “I’ve got it.” He nodded, letting her take charge.

Once the bags were tucked away, Damien drifted toward the kitchen, humming softly. Maya finished unpacking and paused, taking in the room. The cabin’s warm lights cast gentle shadows across the bed and walls, while through the windows the ocean stretched into darkness, moonlight glimmering on the waves.

Drawn by the view, she stepped toward the deck. The night air was cool against her skin, carrying the faint scent of salt and rustling leaves. Leaning on the railing, she breathed deeply, letting the world narrow to the two of them, their secluded haven, and the quiet promise of shared moments ahead.

From the kitchen came the soft clatter of pots and pans, and the comforting aroma of familiar food drifted toward her. Maya smiled, warmth pooling in her chest. Here, with him, she could simply exist-untouched by expectation, free to be herself, and cherished in a way that felt astonishingly, beautifully complete.

She drew in a slow breath of the cool night air, wrapping her arms around herself. The soft rustle of leaves mingled with the distant crash of waves, and the sky above shimmered with stars. For a moment, she simply let herself breathe.

Not long after, Maya heard the soft slide of the deck door opening behind her. A warm arm slid around her waist, pulling her gently back against a solid, familiar frame. She felt his breath brush the side of her neck, warm and reassuring.

“You might catch a chill out here,” Damien murmured, his voice low and intimate, sending a shiver down her spine. “You should’ve worn a coat… or grabbed the blanket.” He dipped his head to the side of her neck, inhaling her scent.

Maya leaned back slightly, resting her head against his shoulder, savoring the quiet closeness. “I’m fine… the weather is perfect,” she whispered, a soft smile tugging at her lips.

Damien pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. “Dinner’s ready, love. Shall we head inside?”

Maya lifted her chin, a playful smile tugging at her lips. “Mmm… I can smell it from here. It smells amazing-and now I’m starving. Lead the way, chef.”

Damien led her inside, his hand lingering at her waist as he guided her toward the cabin. The golden glow of the interior welcomed them back, the comforting aromas of creamy mac and cheese and buttered grilled cheese drifting from the kitchen, promising warmth, laughter, and

a simple, perfect evening together.

He pulled a chair out for her with a small, teasing smile, then moved to sit beside her.

“This looks delicious!” Maya exclaimed, eyes lighting up as she took in the dishes.

Damien grinned. “I was originally planning a nice steak and vegetables for dinner… I hope you don’t mind mac and cheese.”

“Of course not!” she said, smiling. “I love anything with cheese.”

Her eyes lit with a playful warmth. “So this is what comforts you, huh? Good to know. They say the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach… looks like you’re making it far too easy

for me.”

Damien’s lips curved in a quiet, fond smile. “Even if it’s just a glass of water, as long as it’s from you… I’ll be satisfied.”

For a long, perfect beat, he simply watched her, a slow smile tugging at his lips. Words weren't needed- they lingered in the quiet intimacy of the cabin, warmed by the golden glow and the comforting presence of each other.

Finally, Damien shook his head softly, a low chuckle escaping him.

Maya clapped her hands lightly, breaking the spell. "Let's eat! I'm starving!"

He laughed, warm and easy. "Alright then," he said, squeezing her hand before reaching for his fork. "Let's dig in."

Maya scooped a generous bite of the creamy mac and cheese. The cheese stretched invitingly, steam curling upward in the soft light. She closed her eyes, savoring the first rich, velvety taste, the subtle hint of truffle teasing her palate.

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"Mmm… this is incredible!" she breathed, eyes lighting up. "So creamy… that touch of truffle makes it even better. Honestly, the best mac and cheese I've ever had!"

Damien's lips curved into a teasing, satisfied smile. "Should I take that at face value… or are you just saying it to make me feel good?" He lifted his glass, his gaze warm and steady, holding her in that quiet, perfect moment that felt entirely theirs.

Maya laughed, eyes sparkling. "It's true! This is a five-star experience. The mac and cheese I usually have… well, it's straight from the box, and I usually have to fight Jaime for seconds. But this-this is on another level. Creamy, rich, perfectly seasoned… I could eat this forever!"

Damien chuckled, low and warm, making her grin even wider. “So I’m officially your favorite chef now?” he teased, lifting his fork with flourish. “Don’t worry, I accept the title.”

Maya shook her head, still smiling, a little laugh escaping as she took another bite. “Oh, absolutely. But fair warning-if you keep cooking like this, I might get spoiled. I won’t eat anyone else’s food but yours… and then you’ll be stuck cooking for me forever.”

Leaning slightly across the table, Damien brushed a loose strand of hair from her face, his fingers lingering at her cheek. “Then I suppose I’ll just have to keep cooking for you… forever.”

Maya’s cheeks flushed, lips parting in a soft, delighted laugh.

They continued their dinner with easy laughter and lighthearted chatter, the warmth of the cabin wrapping around them as the peaceful night sky, dotted with stars, sparkled outside. Plates were occasionally refilled, bites stolen from each other’s portions, and teasing remarks traded back and forth-the evening unfolding like a quiet celebration of simply being together.

After dinner, Damien pulled a blueberry cheesecake from the fridge, a small smile tugging at his lips. “We didn’t get to enjoy dessert last time. Now we have the whole thing to ourselves.”

He served her a generous slice and cut one for himself. They savored it slowly, the creamy richness mingling with the faint tartness of the berries, each bite punctuated by soft murmurs of appreciation and small smiles exchanged across the table.

When the plates were cleared, Maya immediately reached for the sink. “I’ll wash these,” she said.

Damien shook his head gently. “No need. There’s a dishwasher; use it.”

Maya protested lightly, insisting hand-washing was better, more satisfying. Maya held firm,

her tone soft but insistent, and eventually he relented. They stood side by side at the sink, washing dishes, teasing each other like children as soap bubbles splashed and laughter filled the kitchen.

Once everything was done, they moved to the living room, settling in front of the fireplace with glasses of wine. Maya leaned against Damien, her head resting on his chest, and felt the steady warmth of him beneath her. The crackle of the fire and the soft glow of the flames created a cocoon of intimacy around them.

After a quiet stretch of shared warmth, Damien’s voice softened, edged with care and curiosity. “Maya… can I ask… how you ended up as Jaime’s sole guardian?”

Maya’s fingers tightened around her glass. She drew a slow breath, eyes fixed on the fire, drawing strength from its steady glow. Memories she rarely faced flickered behind her eyes- shadows she had carried alone, too dark even to share with Jaime. Yet with Damien, she felt an unexpected safety, a quiet permission to let someone in. For the first time, she felt she could speak-and truly breathe.

She drew a shaky breath, memories pressing in.

“It was… the only option,” she began softly. “Our parents passed away the day after my eighteenth birthday. I remember that day so clearly-it was a Saturday, late afternoon. We were supposed to go on a camping trip the next day, and Mom decided to head to the grocery store to grab some things.”

Her voice caught. “Before they left, Mom hugged me tightly. She said, ‘Maya, you’re officially an adult now. Look after your brother, okay?’ And Dad… trying to lighten the mood, laughed and said, ‘And we’re only going to the grocery store… no boys allowed inside the house!’ We all laughed together, completely unaware that… it would be the last time.”

Tears slid down her cheeks, her voice cracking. “God, I wish I could hear that laugh one more

time.”

She sniffed, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. “We waited and waited-one hour, two, three-and still, they hadn’t come back. It was past dinner time, so I made a simple meal for Jaime and me. I kept calling them, again and again, but neither could be reached.”

Her hands trembled as she continued. “Then, just before eleven, I saw headlights flash outside the window. At first, I felt relieved, thinking they were finally home. But something in my stomach felt wrong. A few minutes later, someone rang the doorbell. I opened it quickly, only to be met by an older man in uniform-and a woman beside him, also in uniform. He introduced himself as Detective Wilson, and the woman was Officer Janice. He… he told me my parents had been in an accident. My knees went weak. Then he said I needed to come with them to the hospital. I froze. Jaime had already fallen asleep, and I didn’t want to wake

him-but I had no choice. I shook him gently, trying to explain, and his little eyes blinked up at me, confused. I had no answers. I didn’t even have the words.”

Her voice trembled as she swallowed. “When we arrived at the hospital, I thought they’d be in a room, hurt but alive. But they led us to another side… and I saw the word ‘Morgue’ above the door. My stomach dropped. I wanted to scream, to run, to wake up from this nightmare… but I couldn’t.”

The dam broke. She cried, covering her face with both hands as sobs shook her body. Damien rubbed her back gently, his voice soft. “I’m so sorry, love.”

She drew in a shaky breath, trying to steady herself. “The report later said their car lost control, swerved into the other lane, and collided head-on with a semi. The driver was drunk- he didn’t even avoid try to avoid them. They… they died instantly. Just like that. Gone. No chance to say goodbye. No chance to stop it. Just… gone.”

Damien wrapped his arm around her, holding her close as she trembled against him. She buried her face in his chest, finally letting go of the grief she had carried alone for so long. For the first time in years, a fraction of the weight lifted, soothed by the steady warmth of someone who truly cared.

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She drew a shaky breath, trying to steady herself. “I had just stepped into adulthood, and the next thing I knew-I was in a sterile hospital hallway, holding Jaime’s hand, being told I had to identify our parents’ bodies.”

The dam broke then, and she finally let it out-sobs wracking her body, tears flowing freely as Damien held her close, steadying her against him.

Damien just held her, arms wrapped tightly around her trembling frame, letting her cry into his chest without a word. He didn’t rush her, didn’t offer empty comforts-he simply stayed, grounding her, sharing the weight of her grief with the steady warmth of his presence. Slowly, her sobs began to ebb, leaving behind a fragile calm.

Maya composed herself, pushing away gently from his chest. Damien reached into his pocket and handed her a handkerchief. She took it, wiping her tears, sniffing, and clearing her throat before continuing. “Since I was legally an adult, I became Jaime’s guardian. He was only eight… and it was my responsibility to protect him. We had no one else.”

She paused, swallowing hard. “I had so many questions about the accident… but the weight on my shoulders left no room for answers. All I could do was focus on one thing-just survivi ng, for Jaime and for myself.”

She let out a small, bitter laugh, though her eyes still carried the weight of sadness. “From that moment on, everything changed. No aunts or uncles stepped forward. My dad’s relatives cut ties immediately, dodging any responsibility. Not one of them even came to the funeral. And my mom’s side… we never knew them. She never spoke of them, and I never asked.”

Her fingers clenched in her lap. “I didn’t think I was ready. But it was either me or foster care, and I couldn’t let that happen. Thankfully, our parents had insurance-enough to get us by. Until Jaime’s condition surfaced not long after, slowly draining whatever safety net we had

left.”

Her voice dropped, heavy with memory. “The hospital bills kept piling up. I had to sell our family home and move us into a small apartment in a low-income district. I dropped out of school to work full-time, stretching every penny just to survive. But I knew finishing school was the only way to give us stability. So when I was offered a scholarship again, I took it.”

A faint, wistful smile touched her lips. “Balancing work and studies wasn’t easy, but I had no choice. I needed money for his prescriptions, check-ups, and to save for his operation. Every class, every shift, every sleepless night-it was all for him.”

She paused, drawing in a slow, steadying breath, a spark of excitement flickering in her eyes.

“Then one day, my professor handed me an internship letter. I honestly never imagined I’d be chosen-there was only one spot in the whole city. Applying felt like reaching for something impossibly far… and yet, I got in. The moment I saw my name on that acceptance, I felt like I was flying-completely over the moon.”

She straightened, turning to face Damien. Her eyes met his-soft, steady, with firelight dancing in their depths. “And the rest… well, I think you already know. I didn’t realize it then, but that one opportunity… it changed everything. It brought me here… to you.”

Her hands sank into her lap, and she closed her eyes briefly, the weight of it all pressing down. “I never talked about it… not with anyone. Not even Jaime.” She opened her eyes and met Damien’s gaze. “But with you… somehow, I feel like I can. I can let you in. You’ve shared your life with me… all of it, raw and unguarded. If you trust me with your truth, then maybe I owe you the same. You deserve to see mine, too.”

Damien’s gaze softened, his usual reserve melting into something quiet, almost vulnerable. He reached out, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering a heartbeat longer than necessary. “I’ve never been one to believe in fate or destiny,” he murmured, low and steady. “I live by facts, by outcomes, by what I can see and control. But… since our paths crossed, I’ve started to wonder. Sometimes… maybe fate does have a way of finding us.’

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He gently reached out and held both of her hands, his fingers warm and firm around hers. His gaze met hers, steady and unwavering. “Even when we don’t see it coming, even when it feels impossible… life has a way of bringing us exactly where we’re meant to be. And in this case,” he murmured, voice low and sure, “it brought me to you.”

He leaned in, pressing a soft, lingering kiss to her forehead before cupping her face with both hands, thumbs brushing along her cheeks. “Maya… I promise you,” he whispered, voice low and intimate, threading through the quiet of the room, “from now on… I’m here. For Jaime, for you-for both of you. You’ll never have to struggle alone again. I’ll make sure you’re safe, cared for… happy. You have me… everything… together. Always.”

Maya’s chest swelled with emotion, her eyes glistening as she met his gaze. Her hands gripped his, her voice trembling yet warm. “I… I don’t even know how to thank you, Damien.” Tears welled and then spilled over as she added, “With you… I finally feel safe. Truly safe. Like I can finally breathe again.”

Damien’s thumb traced gently along her cheek, brushing away her tears. “Shh… don’t cry,” he murmured, his voice low, rough with feeling. “I hate seeing you like this.”

Maya sniffed, then held his hand against her cheek, offering a soft, shy smile. “I’m just… happy,” she whispered.

Something inside Damien snapped at her words. His chest tightened with longing and protectiveness. “Maya…” he breathed-and before she could respond, he drew her gently into

his arms.

The firelight flickered across the room, painting them in gold and shadow, as he leaned in and captured her lips. The kiss was deep, slow at first, tasting of unspoken promises and quiet devotion, then building into a passionate rhythm that made them both forget everything else. The warmth of the fire, the soft crackle of flames, and the intimacy of the cabin wrapped around them, cocooning them in a world where only the two of them existed.

Maya pressed closer, her hands threading into his hair, pulling him even nearer, and Damien responded in kind, one hand sliding to her back to hold her flush against him. Every flicker of the fire mirrored the heat between them, every breath and shiver a testament to the intensity of what they felt-desire, relief, love-all merging into one perfect, consuming moment.

When they finally parted, gasping softly, their foreheads pressed together, hearts beating in perfect unison. Damien's lips brushed hers once more, softer this time, a tender echo of the firestorm they had just shared. "God… I love you, Maya," he murmured, low and steady. "You're mine… completely."

Maya's smile bloomed, warm and radiant, her hands lingering on his chest. "I love you too, Damien… I'm yours, completely," she whispered, a shiver of joy running through her as the words settled between them.

Damien's gaze darkened, heat pooling in his eyes as his hand trailed slowly down her arm. The quiet intimacy between them shifted, charged with a new, playful edge. He smirked. "So… how did your little 'research' with Harper go earlier?"

Warmth crept under Maya's skin as she caught his meaning, then she burst into a laugh. "Oh, that? It didn't happen."

Damien's brow lifted, a slow, knowing arch. His voice dropped, rough with teasing suspicion. "Is that so?"

Maya nodded, lips curving. “Mmhmm. Let’s just say… it turned into a heart-to-heart. More like a one-on-one private coaching session instead.”

Damien’s gaze lingered on her, sharp with amusement, though the heat in his eyes hinted at something darker. His thumb traced slowly over her knuckles as he murmured, voice low and deliberate, “Private coaching, hm? Tell me, love… should I be worried?”

Maya’s lips curved into a sly smile, her eyes soft but alight with mischief. She leaned closer, her voice dropping to a playful whisper meant only for him. “If anything… you should be thankful, not worried.”

Damien’s lips curved into a faint, questioning smirk, though his gaze stayed dark and intent on her. His thumb traced idle circles against her hand as he murmured, “Thankful, hmm? And how so, love?”

Maya tilted her head, letting the silence stretch just long enough to make him lean closer. Her eyes glimmered, the corner of her mouth tugging upward. “Because,” she whispered, drawing it out, “Harper might have given me… let’s just say, very useful advice.”

Damien’s brow arched. He leaned in, brushing a kiss over her earlobe. “Useful?” he echoed, his voice edged with intrigue.

Maya bit her lip, savoring the flicker of heat in his eyes before offering pieces of the truth in a soft, conspiratorial tone. “She told me… not to be afraid.”

His mouth trailed down the side of her neck, the warmth of his breath sending shivers through her. “Hmm… what else?”

Her breath hitched. Tilting her head, she bared her neck to him, voice breaking in a whisper. That I just need to be myself… listen to my body… and don’t hold back.”

His lips pressed harder against her skin, deepening the kiss. “What else, love?”

A soft moan slipped from her throat, unbidden. “To just follow my heart… feel it… and trust you.”

Damien’s mouth descended lower, grazing her shoulder with slow, deliberate kisses. “Is that all?” he murmured.

Her fingers curled into his shirt, her voice trembling with heat. “And… to let my body respond naturally. To just… let you guide me.”

His hands slid along her sides, tracing the curve of her waist before pulling her flush against him. The firelight danced across the room, painting them in molten gold-the gleam in their eyes, the heat in their skin, and the tension that had been burning between them, now crackling like the flames.

Damien’s lips found hers again, lingering before he gently eased her down onto the couch, bracing his weight so he wouldn’t crush her. His kisses trailed from her mouth to her neck, then teasingly lower across her chest. “Like this?” he whispered against her skin.

Soft, involuntary moans slipped from Maya, feeding his hunger, sharpening his need.

Chapter 230

The cabin pulsed with heat-not from the crackling fire, but from them, from the aching nearness of two bodies drawn together, from the hunger coiled tight between each breath. On the couch, tangled in an intimacy that left no space for air or doubt, the world outside fell away. There was only the firelight, the silence between heartbeats, and the slow, relentless burn of desire.

Maya lay stretched out on the couch, the firelight painting her skin in a soft golden glow. Damien sat beside her, leaning over, his presence shadowing hers-close, consuming. His hand slid down with unhurried intent, finding the slit of her dress. With a slow push, the fabric gave way, and his palm found the bare silk of her thigh.

He caressed her in languid strokes, fingers trailing up and down, leaving heat in their wake. Every pass sent a shiver through her, her body arching instinctively into his touch. Her lashes fluttered shut, lips parting as she bit down softly, holding back the flood of sensation. But it was useless-the electricity of him was too much, too sharp, too alive.

A soft, helpless moan escaped her throat, low and trembling, betraying her surrender. Another followed as his touch deepened its rhythm, coaxing her body to answer him, to crave more. Each sound only pulled his gaze darker, hungrier, as if every breath she gave belonged

to him.

Damien's mouth descended in a trail of fire, each kiss pressing lower down the delicate line of her chest. When his lips brushed the swell of her breast through the thin fabric of her dress, Maya's breath caught. She arched into him without thought, as though her body craved the warmth of his mouth, the burn of his skin. A soft, aching sound slipped free, trembling against the quiet.

His hand moved with intent, sliding lower until it found the curve of her thigh, the slit of her dress parting beneath his touch. His fingers traced upward in a slow, maddening journey, every stroke deliberate, coaxing her higher with nothing but anticipation. When he reached the lace edge of her panties, he lingered-teasing, stroking, savoring the way her body

trembled for him.

Then his touch grew firmer, pressing through the delicate barrier, and he felt it-the heat of her, damp and waiting, desperate for more. Maya gasped, her hips lifting into his hand, a plea unspoken but undeniable.

She moaned-low, helpless, raw. The sound slipped from her throat without thought, her body betraying her need as she shivered beneath his touch. Her lips parted, his name escaping in a trembling whisper-"Damien.."-heavy with want, hushed like a prayer she couldn't contain.

A deep, satisfied growl rumbled from Damien's chest as his lips hovered above hers, brushing just shy of contact. "I love how your body responds… how it trembles, how it presses into me, begging," he murmured, voice husky, vibrating against her skin, each word igniting a fire she couldn't resist.

Damien's fingers began to move, gliding slowly along the length of her folds, tracing the curve of her wet heat, each stroke drawing more of her desire to the surface.

Sultry, breathless moans shivered through the room, mingling with the crackle of the fire. Maya's body quivered against his hand, pressing eagerly into his palm as his fingers traced her slick folds. Each slow, deliberate stroke sent sparks of heat coursing through her, making her arch and writhe, every nerve alight with delicious tension. Her breaths came in ragged, gasping bursts, lips parting as a soft whimper escaped. She trembled, hips tilting instinctively, pressing harder into his touch, every movement betraying the firebuilding inside her. The more he explored, the more her body melted, helpless and hungry, surrendering entirely to his skilled, teasing touch.

Damien’s fingers slipped further in, nudging the lace aside until his skin finally met her bare, slick folds. A shiver ran up his spine at the first touch-warm, slick, and impossibly soft, yielding beneath his fingers. He felt the delicate smoothness, the subtle, intoxicating heat, the growing dampness that spoke of her need. Every curve, every quiver beneath his touch was exquisitely intimate, each sensation sending a surge of possession and desire through

him.