Intern 411

Chapter 411

The room didn't rush to fill the silence after Maya's apology. The truth simply sat there- unchanged, unmoved by discomfort.

Maya kept her hands folded in her lap, nodding as if that alone might steady her. She told herself it was just information-normal, even. Their relationship was new. People revealed themselves in layers, and she was still uncovering her own family history in fragments.

But knowing something and feeling it were not the same.

Seven years of insecurity didn't disappear overnight. Years of hustling, measuring every choice in cost and consequence, scraping by day to day-had hardwired her instincts.

She had learned how to endure, not how to belong. Being told she carried a powerful name didn't erase the years spent feeling invisible. It didn't undo the way she'd made peace with being ordinary,

had worn it like armor because it was safer than wanting more.

So even now, her chest tightened-quietly, stubbornly-refusing to loosen.

Across the table, Dominic took it all in stride.

His posture was relaxed, almost casual, but his attention sharpened as he watched her. The way her gaze dropped. The way her shoulders drew in just slightly, as if she were bracing for something

that hadn’t been said aloud.

He’d seen that look before.

Malia had carried her pride openly, worn her worth with an unshakable certainty that had never wavered. She’d known exactly who she was, even when the world tried to tell her otherwise.

But Julian… Julian had been different.

An ordinary man by every external measure, brave enough to fight for love, but quietly burdened by the knowledge of what he wasn’t. Dominic had seen his vulnerability in the moments Malia never noticed- the hesitation, the doubt, the way he sometimes shrank beside greatness.

And now, sitting across from Maya, Dominic recognized the same shadow settling behind her

eyes.

Dominic leaned back in his chair, the tension in his shoulders easing as if he were intentionally shifting the weight of the room. A faint, almost amused smile crossed his face-not arrogance, not pride exactly, but something warmer. Familiar.

“Oh, Maya,” he said gently, waving a hand as if brushing the apology aside. “No need to apologize.

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It’s not exactly the kind of thing the world needs to know about-no résumé section for it, and definitely not LinkedIn material.”

His eyes flicked briefly around the table, casual on the surface, but deliberate enough to invite the others to keep the tone easy-to let the weight of it pass instead of settling on her.

“It’s not a big deal,” Dominic said, keeping his tone deliberately light, like he was talking about a summer program instead of combat training. “Just a family tradition. Once you turn twenty, you do some military training. A couple of summers-long enough to build discipline, awareness, and

teach you not to freeze when things go sideways."

He let out a soft chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck. "In fact, I had to do it too. And I was terrible

at it," Dominic admitted cheerfully. "Couldn't hit a target to save my life. Put me in front of code or

encryption? Fine. Ask me to enjoy combat drills? Absolutely not."

He grinned at the memory. "I was so stubborn I walked out after a week. One. Week."

Charles made a sound somewhere between a scoff and a groan, leaning forward with theatrical

exasperation. "Oh, I remember," he said, shaking his head. "I was so disappointed I nearly had a

heart attack. Do you have any idea the headaches this rascal caused us?"

The sharpness in his words was undercut by the fondness in his eyes, and the room broke into

easy laughter, the tension finally loosening its grip.

Dominic laughed along with them, then nodded as the humor faded into something warmer.

Damien, though…”

His expression softened, pride unmistakable. “He’s been obsessed with airplanes since he was in

diapers. So he extended his training-focused entirely on aviation.”

Chapter 412

He lifted a shoulder in an almost casual shrug. “That’s how he walked away with his wings.”

Dominic paused, the humor in his eyes shifting-subtly, briefly-into something more practical than

ominous.

“Nicholas went through it too,” he added easily. “He can fly if he has to, he just… leaned into different skills.”

A faint shrug followed, casual by design. “Weapons, systems. That sort of thing. Every family has its quirks.”

His eyes returned to Maya, steady and unjudging.

“Remember, sweetheart-in our world,” he said, his voice still light but grounded, “family protection isn’t a luxury. It’s just… practical. We don’t rely on others to keep us safe.”

“We learn to protect ourselves and the people around us. It doesn’t make us special,” he finished gently. “Just prepared.”

Dahlia leaned forward, calm but amused, as if she’d been waiting for the perfect moment to step

“Exactly why I took you out today and showed you the ropes myself,” she said, glancing at Maya with a small, approving smile. “The women are different. We don’t get shipped off to boot camps- the training comes to us.”

Her smile softened, warmth in her eyes. “We learn at our own pace, on our own terms.”

She glanced sideways at Dominic, a glint of shared understanding in her eyes, then turned her

attention back to Maya.

“Remember how your mother and I used to do target practice together?”

Dominic snorted softly. “Yeah. That was their excuse to gossip.”

Dahlia shot him a look-brief, sharp-then simply shook her head before returning her gaze to Maya.

“That’s how it’s always been for us,” she continued. “Let’s just say… women are a little pampered.”

On the screen, Harper immediately perked up, mock outrage flashing across her face.

“Ha! You hear that, Mom?” she said, pointing accusingly. “I knew it. You and Dad wanted your firstborn to be a son-that’s why you forced me through all that training! I was supposed to be a

princess!”

Alice didn’t miss a beat.

“Oh, enough of you,” she shot back, rolling her eyes.

She crossed her arms, lips twitching despite herself. “Don’t twist the story. You were the one who practically begged us to let you train. You enjoyed every single minute of it.”

Harper opened her mouth to protest-then closed it, her smirk betraying her.

Laughter rippled around the room, the tension easing, the sharp edges blunted-if only for a

moment.

Then, Dominic snapped his fingers as if a revelation had just struck him.

“Ah! Speaking of!” Dominic’s voice boomed, crackling with a new, challenging energy.

He turned a sharp, grinning look toward the chair beside him, where Jamie sat. “I believe Jamie

must do the training too! What do you think, son? Ready to earn those stripes?” Charles nodded,

his expression solemn and approving. “I agree. It’s a good idea.” “Oh, hush, you two!” Eleanor cut

in, her voice a sharp but loving blade.” She shot both men a warning look that could have halted a

moving train, effectively shielding Jamie from their predatory focus. “Let the young man decide

what he wants for himself,” she said, her tone softening as she glanced at Jamie, though the steel

remained for the others. “Before you two start shipping him off to some godforsaken boot camp,”

The effect was instantaneous.

Dominic and Charles both went quiet, their posture shifting in a way that made the two powerful

men look suddenly, comically, like children caught with their hands in the glass jar.

Dominic, who had been booming with energy just a second ago, cleared his throat and looked away, his grin sheepishly deflating. Charles didn’t fare much better. He closed his mouth,

adjusted his tie with a sudden, intense interest, and fixed his gaze on a very specific, very

unimportant spot on the mahogany table.

Chapter 413

he heavy tension of the briefing had vanished replaced by the quiet, awkward energy of two

rown men looking like kids waiting for their mother to tell them they could leave the table.

Jamie looked between them, his eyes wide. Seeing the two imposing men he knew reduced to

eepish schoolboys was more intimidating than the training itself.

leaned slightly toward Dominic and whispered Uuoclé Dominic, I think I'll stick with codes and

Toryption too."

is voice was soft, but just loud enough for those neadroydo catch.

ayalet out a small, amused chuckle and shook her headd, the tension on her shoulders easing.

eaaught herself smiling, realizing how much lighter it felelt to see the adults she respected in

ishuoraan, fallible moments-and how, this world didn't feelt quite so distant or overwhelming.

ray befela á flicker of belonging-it wasn’t fear or inadequacy, y just curiosity and trust.

sitelee etstretched, thick and expectant, until Eleanor finally broke the spell with

{“} fast commend the young lady,” Eleanor said, her voice e smooth as polish

red herehead, meeting Alice’s eyes with a look of profound respect. “You raised a

ghter, Aldeenintelligent. Sharp. A fit successor in every sense off the word.”Alice dia

She meet the matriarch’s gaze with a polite, measured smite aand offered a small, deferen

v, a silent bridge between the two powerful women.

ank you Eleleanor,” Alice replied, her voice steady. “Coming from yoou, that is the highest of

npliments.

in, Eleanor sishtered her focus to the monitor, her gaze locking onto Harper through the pixels.

!room seemed toto shrink, the silence sharpening as the matriarch’s attention settled on the

een. 1. “And youuuf Eleanor continued, a faint, approving tilt to her chin. You truly exemplify the T

hashi bloodline.esforaart, precise, and methodical. You carry your name wwwell

be felt a swell of podele sise in her chest. She offered a small, steady smile bee eyes bright but

trolled–the quiet ppddle of a mother watching her daughter recognized footththe strength she had

ays known was therere

en Ashcroft felt it ta suutitle, steady surge of pride at hearing Eleanor praise Pippen indeed, rper’s intelligence, precisioon, and unyielding focus were undeniable. It wasn’t just talent; it was !culmination of her uptoniniging, her grit, and the fierce drive that ran in her bloodd SShe paused,

ting the weight of the praias esettle before adding a sharper, more personal edged her voice.

t remember this, Harper you will need a husband who can keep up with you. A woman of your

caliber cannot afford to be slowed down by someone who can't keep up."As she spoke, Eleanor's gaze drifted. It wasn't a sharp turn, but a slow, calculated slide until her eyes settled on Ashcroft. A ghost of a smirk played at the corner of her lips-a tiny, nearly invisible challenge.

Ashcroft noticed, a half-smile tugging at his lips, his eyes glinting with quiet amusement. He met her gaze for a brief moment-then looked away, faintly unsettled, silently accepting her challenge

without a word.

Chapter 414

Eleanor's praise hung in the air. No one questioned it-nods and faint smiles said all that needed

saying.

The challenge, though, was another matter. It hadn't gone unnoticed. It drew quieter reactions- nothing overt, just a faint shift of attention, a shared awareness among those who already knew

how things stood… and how stubbornly certain people continued to pretend otherwise.

On the screen, the usual spark of sarcastic defiance in Harper's eyes flickered and died, replaced

by a rare, stunned stillness. A soft, flustered heat climbed her neck.”Ah-wow. Thank you,

Grandma Eleanor,” Harper said, forcing a bright smile that came out just a little crooked.

She laughed once-too quick, too loud. “I-uh-I’ll definitely keep that in mind.”

Then, with a shrug that tried-and failed-to look casual, she added under her breath, as if only she

could hear it, “Guess I’ll have to start kissing frogs and… hope one of them actually turns into Prince Charming.”Jaime chimed in, eyes bright with unmistakable mischief. “Or maybe the frog’s

already right in front of you,” he said thoughtfully. “You just haven’t kissed it enough for the magic

to work yet.”

Dominic barked out a laugh. “Ha! That’s a good one, son!”

Ashcroft stiffened. His jaw tightened as his gaze flicked to Harper before he forced it away, fixing on nothing. The tips of his ears betrayed him, faintly red as if the room had grown warmer.

Maya immediately elbowed Jaime, her whisper sharp and weighted. “Jaime! Stop it.”

Jaime blinked up at her, all wide-eyed innocence. “What?” He lifted a shoulder in a small shrug. “I’m

just stating the facts.”

Then he turned, looking straight at Eleanor. “Right, Grandma?”

Eleanor acknowledged with a simple nod. Then, slowly, the corner of her mouth curved.

“The young,” she said mildly, her eyes never leaving the table, “have a way of noticing truths adults work very hard to ignore.”

Eleanor’s eyes, still calm, swept across the table. “All amusement aside,” she said, her voice quiet but firm, “we have a plan to finalize.”

The laughter and teasing faded. Every eye in the room turned to her, waiting.

“No matter how seamless a plan may seem, only fools believe in foolproof ones. We know how Volkov moves-he doesn’t just play to win; he plays to break the rules. “NNShe leaned back slightly,

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the light from the screen reflecting in her steady eyes.

“Confidence is a luxury we cannot afford,” she said, her voice dropping into a register that commanded absolute silence. “We have forty-eight hours. Do not waste a single second of them.”

She let the ticking clock hang in the air for a heartbeat before continuing. “Ensure every gear is greased and every shadow accounted for before the departure date. We don’t hope for the best- we prepare for the worst.”

Dahlia nodded, her expression a mirror of the matriarch’s chilled resolve.

“Dominic will stay behind,” she said, her voice sharp and unquestionable. She didn’t look to her

husband for approval-she simply stated the tactical reality.

“He’ll secure the perimeter here. I’m going with Alice and the rest. Lee and Kim join our detail, and

we'll stay with Jamie during his recovery while the others return."

She paused, a calculated stillness settling over her. "My absence will not raise any alerts. As far as the world is concerned, I am still traveling the globe for my philanthropy efforts-attending galas, chairing charities, and following leads in the search for Malia. My digital footprint is already being managed. To anyone watching, I never stopped moving."

Dominic's jaw tightened, but he didn't argue. The cover story was flawless-the world expected nothing less from Dahlia Moretti Blackwood: a restless socialite driven by unwavering love, fierce loyalty, and a haunting desperation to find her best friend. Her pain was the perfect camouflage.

She looked at her son, her eyes softening only slightly. "Monroe and James must go where Damien goes-which means they won't set foot in Japan. That's non-negotiable, and it's exactly what

Volkov expects to see."

Chapter 415

Damien nodded, meeting his mother's eyes before turning to his father. "I agree. It's best for Dad to hold the manor and manage the company's front while we're dark."

Dominic offered a single, solemn nod of acknowledgment-not just a father's approval, but a

tactical passing of the torch.

"Monroe and James will stay with Hudson to maintain the illusion of my presence," Damien continued, his voice dropping into a stony, absolute command.

"They'll keep the decoy bird moving toward Taiwan as planned. Meanwhile, Nick, Max, Cruz, and I will meet the rest of you in Japan."

On the monitor, Harper leaned in, her smirk replaced by a technical focus.

"And once everything is done and we've moved Jamie to a secured location for his recovery," she

said, her fingers flying across a keyboard off-screen, "Damien, Ashcroft, Max, and Cruz will

dead-head back to Singapore exactly how they arrived-discreetly. From there, we'll show your departure to Taiwan. We need to create a realistic illusion for Volkov."

She tapped a key, and a second, jagged flight path illuminated the screen in a bruised violet glow.

"The attack on Ashcroft Pavilion won't be as loud as the first," Harper explained, her voice dropping

into a clinical, detached rhythm. "But it will be enough. Enough for Volkov to swallow the bait, and

enough to justify the rest of the group 'rushing' to join Damien in Taiwan."

*She looked around the room, her gaze lingering on the family members who were about to

become ghosts. "Aunt Dahlia stays dark in Japan-we'll have a carefully vetted security detail at her disposal. Mom returns exactly as scheduled. It's the only way to keep the profile perfectly, boringly routine."

Harper shifted her focus to Maya and Lee, her eyes lit by the cool glow of the monitors.

“The three of us will head back together,” she said, her voice reclaiming its sharp, tactical edge. * We’ll make our re-appearance in the country as if we never left.”

She leaned back, her silhouette dark against the scrolling data. “A week later, the seven of you fly home from Taiwan, following the exact same manifest structure as your departure. To the world, it’s just a long, successful business trip. To Volkov, you’ve handled the issue, secured the location, and returned- nothing more, nothing less.”

She offered a slow, cold smirk toward the camera, her eyes glinting with the arrogance of a master

architect.

“The perfect, boring alibi,” Harper said, her voice dropping to a clinical whisper. “By the time Volkov even gets a sliver of doubt, the trail will be cold and we’ll already be sleeping in our own beds.”

Ashcroft leaned back, finally looking more at ease as the last pieces of the puzzle clicked into

place.

“I’ve already scrubbed Jamie’s medical records,” he said, his voice clipped and authoritative.”

Everything is in order. His entire medical team is on standby, fully briefed, and ready to move the moment we get the green light.”

Monroe pushed off from the wall, his massive frame casting a long shadow across the glowing

schematics.

“I’ll adjust the schedule for the new security recruits,” he added, his voice dropping into a low, authoritative rumble. “I’ll have them report tomorrow morning to sync with Hudson and Cruz’s arrival.”

He caught Damien’s eye-a silent, heavy assurance of loyalty passing between them.

“I’ll station our most trusted men in the lobby to oversee the hand-off,” Monroe added, his voice

steady. “It’ll look like our standard protocol for new hires to avoid raising suspicion from the other staff. We’ll keep it routine-no reason for anyone to look twice.”

Harper clapped her hands together, the sound echoing tinny and sharp through the speakers.

“Amazing!” she chirped, a grin breaking through her professional mask. She looked between the

faces in the room, her eyes bright with the adrenaline of the digital hunt. “This is perfect. So… are

we all good?”

Chapter 416

Damien offered a single, sharp nod. The planning was done; the variables were locked. He turned his attention to the projector, “Thank you, Harper. I owe you one.”

Harper waved a hand dismissively, her bravado returning in a rush. “Oof! Nah… no biggie! We’re all in this together, right?”

Her grin widened, that familiar spark of mischief lighting up her eyes. “Once we secure Jamie, let’s clean up this ‘pest’ once and for all. I’m ready to stop playing defense and finally focus on my best

friend’s happily ever after.”

Harper leaned into the camera, her face filling the screen until her finger pointed directly at the

lens.

“Remember-I’m the proud founder of the DaYa fan club!” she chirped, her eyes dancing with

mischief.

Eleanor arched an eyebrow, curious. “DaYa?”

“Oh, Grandma!” Harper squealed, practically bouncing in her seat. “It’s Damien and Maya! That’s

how it’s done nowadays-they combine names to make a ‘loveteam name. Like you and Grandpa

Charles would be… ElCha! Aunt Dahlia and Uncle Dominic? DaDo! Totally normal, right?

Eleanor raised a brow, a corner of her lips twitching in amusement. Beside her, Charles let out a

quiet, bemused chuckle.

Across from them, Dahlia shook her head, a small smile hidden behind her hand, while Dominic

chuckled low.

Beside them, Alice couldn’t help but pinch the bridge of her nose, a smirk betraying her effort to stay composed at her daughter’s ridiculous, childish antics.

Jamie, never one to miss an opening, grinned slyly. “Then what about Nicholas and Harper? NiHa…

or NiPer?”

Harper froze, her face morphing into a perfect storm of horror and blush. “Ewww! No!! First-those

names sound awful, and second… there’s no such thing!”

Ashcroft raised an eyebrow, a small smirk tugging at his lips. “I don’t know… I’d say they have a cert

ain ring to them.”

Harper rolled her eyes and waved her hands like she was warding off a curse, her voice rising in

mock outrage. “Nobody cares what you think! Anyway…”

have a serious investment in this romance,” she continued to grin returning. “Plus, we still have iatessort opening to attend, and I am not missing the after-pany Ive already picked out the

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mporc clapped her hands once more, the sound sharp and meetic through the speakers, owed tiba crisp snap of her fingers.

chop-chop! Let’s do this!” she chirped, her face lit with the mania adrenaline of the digital hunt. We gotta world to save, a resort to open, and a wedding to plan!*

nien and MMeya looked at each other, the echoes of Harper’s teasing gistil hanging in the cooling

of the saidgv.

va felt the beaat nse instantly, a deep blush creeping up her neck and distaining the tips of her

nien’s gaze ssttened as he watched, his usual stoic mask slipping foratsa a heartbeat.

looked… impossible to resist.

Chapter 417

Damien didn’t look away. He locked his gaze on her, his eyes dark and unreadable, searching for

something in the silence.

Maya tried to hold it, but the intensity was too much; she looked down at her hands, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm against her ribs.

Jamie's voice cut through the heavy atmosphere like a sharp needle. "May, you're blushing really

hard."

"I am not!" Maya snapped, her voice a pitch too high as she stared at the mahogany table.

Her gaze flicked toward Damien-just for a moment-before she looked away.

A few seconds passed. Then Damien finally broke the stare. He checked his watch, the metal cold

against his wrist as the forty-eight-hour countdown officially began.

"Then we're done here," he said, his voice settling back into that stony, absolute command.

He paused, a flicker of something almost generous crossing his features. "James, wire one billion

to Ms. Lin's account."

James didn't blink. "On it."

"Wait, what?" Harper's voice crackled over the speakers, her face filling the screen.

Ashcroft frowned-not at the amount, but at the gesture, and more so at how eager Harper

suddenly looked. "What for? She specifically said she didn't want the money."

"Excuse me!" Harper cut in, her voice rising in a dramatic crescendo. She threw her hands up, her eyes wide with mock outrage. "I said I love money! I didn't want your money!"

She pivoted toward the camera, her expression shifting instantly into a look of pure, unadulterated excitement. "You really don't have to, Boss, but if you insist? Who am I to say no?"

Alice's sharp eyes locked onto her daughter from across the room. "HARPER LIN! Don't act like you're short on money. Stop embarrassing yourself."

Harper’s expression instantly melted into a wide-eyed, guilt-tripping puppy look. “But it was given, Mother! You never say no to gifts-it’s practically bad luck.”NNShe leaned closer to the lens, a mischievous glint lighting her eyes as she addressed James directly. “Hey, Horton-I’ll text you my personal bank details. Don’t put it on my payroll account. I want this one off the books. I’m not paying taxes on a ten-figure tip.”

James paused mid-gesture, brows knitting as he looked up at the screen. “I seem to recall,” he said

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carefully, “that just this afternoon you were adamant about how your loyalty lies with Ms. Maya.”

Harper gasped, clutching her chest like she’d been gravely wounded. “Excuse you? Of course it does!” She straightened, eyes flashing with theatrical offense. “But you see, a bribe is very different from a performance bonus. This”-she gestured vaguely at the invisible transfer-“is a

performance bonus. Not a bribe. Completely ethical. Totally earned.”

She beamed, then leaned closer to the camera. “Thanks, Boss! You’re the best.”

Her gaze flicked past the lens and zeroed in on Maya. The mischief softened-barely-into something almost sincere.

“Hey, Maya,” Harper said, lifting a finger like she was about to deliver a TED Talk no one asked for.

Fun science fact: being in love actually messes with your brain. In a good way. Your body starts pumping out oxytocin and dopamine-aka the you’re safe, you’re happy, wow life doesn’t suck as

much chemicals.”

She leaned closer to the camera, eyes wide with exaggerated seriousness. “Which means less stress, better sleep, faster healing, and statistically speaking-far less chance of ruining your own

life.”

Then she grinned. “But when you’re upset? Boom. Cortisol everywhere. Tense muscles. Bad vibes. Wrinkles. Tragic.”

She shrugged dramatically. “So yeah. Science says holding grudges is terrible for your skin and your lifespan.”

Harper gasped, clutching her chest. “Untreated emotional constipation? Absolute disaster.”

Her tone softened just enough to let the message land. “Life’s too short to waste it being mad at the person you care about.”

Chapter 418

She waved a hand dismissively, then refocused on Maya. “My point is-science, medicine, and my extremely advanced brain all agree on one thing.”

She raised both hands like she was delivering a final verdict.

“Never. Ever. Go. To. Bed. Angry.”

She nodded solemnly, as if sealing a sacred oath. “It’s medically irresponsible.”

A snap of her fingers. “Bad for your heart, your brain, and your future hot old-people era.”

Then she flashed a grin and a thumbs-up straight at the lens. “Okay! Wisdom dispensed. You’re

welcome.”

The screen flickered and went dark, leaving the room in a sudden, awkward stillness.

Maya stared at the dark monitor, heat creeping up her neck.

Damien exhaled slowly.

“…She’s not wrong,” he said at last.

And somehow, that only made it worse.

The silence stretched-thick, charged-until Ashcroft cleared his throat, mercifully breaking it.

“…She has a point,” he added quietly.

Dominic slapped his hands against his thighs, the sound sharp in the hush. “Well then,” he said

briskly, far too loud, “who wants pie?”

A few heads turned.

“Our baker made fresh marionberry pies this morning,” Dominic continued, already rising to his feet. “Seems like the perfect time.”

Charles’ eyes lit up at once. “Ah-an excellent idea,” he said warmly. “That would pair beautifully with a glass of Leroy Musigny Grand Cru.”

One by one, the room emptied, footsteps fading into the corridors until the room stood still again- too quiet, too large.

The last footsteps faded, leaving only the quiet hum of the monitors. The air felt heavier now, a weight neither of them could ignore.

Only Maya and Damien remained.

The monitors cast a muted blue glow across the table, stretching their shadows toward one

another without quite letting them touch.

They both knew the mission was live-but they also knew there was still a mountain of unsettled matter between them that no tactical plan could solve.

Maya exhaled slowly, the sound barely audible.

“Uhmm…” she said at last, her gaze fixed on the floor. “I-I want to… I want to sleep with Jaime tonight. Spend more time with him before…”

She swallowed, her throat tightening.

“Before we leave.”

Damien didn’t answer right away. His jaw flexed once, then stilled. Whatever he’d been bracing for,

this wasn’t it-but he nodded all the same.

“Of course,” he said finally, his voice low, steady. “You should.”

He paused, softer this time. “He needs you.”

Maya swallowed, her chest tight. “Ok.” She slowly stood, turned, and took a step…

Then Damien's hand closed around her wrist. "I do too…"

Maya froze, a jolt of heat and ache ripping through her. Her heart thudded in her ears, threatening

to drown out everything else. The longing, the frustration, the fragility in his voice-she'd tried to

ignore it, but it hit her now in full force.

"Damien…"

"You promised," he said, voice taut, almost fragile, "we'll talk..

Her lips parted, but no words came. She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat.

"Ok… let's talk."

Damien stood, but didn't let go of her hand.

He gestured toward the door. "Let's go upstairs. Somewhere quieter."

The corridor softened around them, lit by wall sconces that cast a warm glow over dark wood and framed portraits-ancestors frozen in oil and silence. The distant clatter of voices and laughter from the others enjoying pie and wine faded with each step until it was just them. Their footsteps. Their breathing.

They reached Damien's bedroom. He opened the door, and they stepped inside. The door clicked

shut behind them, muffling the sounds of the house.

Damien led her toward the balcony, stopping near a tall window overlooking the garden. Then, hesitantly, he let go of her hand. Moonlight spilled through the glass, silvering the edges of everything it touched.

He stayed facing outward, hands in his pockets, jaw tight, shoulders tense. Maya lingered behind him, silent, feeling the weight of the quiet between them.

Chapter 419

Finally, his voice broke the stillness, low and careful. "How was your day?"

Maya shifted slightly, unsure how to meet him through the silence. "Oh… uhmm. It was fine."

Damien's voice softened, quiet, almost a whisper. "Was it… too much for you?"

He wasn't just asking about the lesson, but… her, all of her, and the fragile tension between them

Maya blinked, caught off guard. "Huh?"

Her chest tightened. Was he asking about the lesson? Or about… everything? Her heart skipped, and

she swallowed hard, feeling the weight behind his words-the unspoken tension, the misunderstanding, the fragility between them.

He stayed looking out over the garden. “The recoil. Was it… too much for you?”

She let out a small breath. “Oh… that. Well… at first, yes. It was a lot. But your mom helped. And… I think I handled it better than I expected.”

He exhaled again, slow and steady. Still facing the garden, still silent for a heartbeat longer. “Hmm

… I’m glad to hear that.”

She lingered behind him, chest tight, heart pounding, feeling both the vulnerability and the quiet

strength that had carried her through the day.

Another minute passed before Damien finally shifted, turning toward her.

Up close, the tension she'd sensed earlier was impossible to ignore. His jaw was set too tight, his

shoulders rigid-not with authority, but restraint. Like he was holding something back with sheer

force of will.

"Maya," he said, then stopped.

He exhaled slowly, controlled, as if weighing each word.

"I'm sorry."

The words landed quietly. No dramatics. No excuses.

Her chest tightened anyway.

"I should've talked to you sooner," he continued. "I shouldn't have assumed. Or decided things on my own and called it protection." His gaze stayed on her face, steady, unflinching. "That was wrong."

At that moment, Maya saw it-the way he looked at her, the tone of his voice-it wasn't just a crack in the armor. It was a total shattering. A phantom blow struck her chest, a sympathetic snap that

echoed deep within her own heart.

The Damien she knew was a force of nature: possessive, untouchable, an absolute power. But the man trembling before her was a stranger. He looked like a child standing amidst the wreckage of something precious, radiating a raw, jagged vulnerability that made his earlier confessions at the resort seem like mere practice. This wasn't just emotion; it was a soul laid bare.

Maya's fingers curled at her sides. She hadn't expected this. Not so quickly. Not so plainly.

"Damien… I…"

His voice cracked, low and ragged, eyes glossy with unshed tears. Not anger this time-sadness. Real, unguarded sadness.

"Please, love… forgive me. I'm so sorry for hurting you… I'm so, so sorry…"

The words weren't just an apology-they were a raw, trembling surrender, a plea that threatened to

pull her under, leaving her breathless and unsteady.

Chapter 420

Maya took a deep breath, her chest tightening as she looked at him. Seeing Damien like this-so raw, so exposed-shattered something inside her.

She wanted to reach out, to hold him, to tell him it was okay, that everything would be fine. She

wanted to shield him from the weight of his own regrets.

But she didn't. Not yet. This moment demanded more than comfort.

They needed this conversation. They needed honesty.

Because if he could lay himself bare-every fear, every regret, every vulnerable fragment of his

heart-then she owed him the same.

She owed herself the same.

Her hands curled at her sides, trembling as she fought the instinct to shield him from the pain.

She would speak. She would confront the truth. She had to-because they couldn't move forward

while the hardest things remained unspoken.

"…. I need to say this," she whispered, though it was meant for him too. "If we skip it now, we'll

never heal-fully, not together."

She lifted her gaze, meeting Damien's eyes with a quiet resolve.

"You didn't just hurt me," she said softly, her voice steady despite the tightness in her throat. "You

made me feel like I didn't get a say. Like my voice didn't matter."

His expression shifted-something dark flickering briefly in his eyes. Regret. Self-reproach.

"I know," he said, his voice cracking, eyes raw and pleading. "And I hate that I did that to you. I hate

that it took others to make me see it. I hate myself for putting you through that."

He swallowed. “Please believe me-it was never my intention. Never. Hurting you is the last thing I would ever do.”

Silence stretched between them-not uncomfortable, but weighted with everything they were still learning how to say.

Maya studied him carefully, searching for deflection, for control-for the Damien who commanded rooms without effort.

Instead, she found something else.

Uncertainty. Fear. Vulnerability-bare and unguarded.

Damien’s shoulders finally sagged, the tension bleeding out of him. He dragged a hand through his hair, then over his face, as if grounding himself.

“I’m not used to this,” he admitted quietly. “Caring this much… and not knowing what the right

move is.”

He lifted his gaze to hers again, steady but stripped bare.

“Every instinct I have tells me to eliminate risk before it ever gets close to you,” he said, his voice lowering. “To control it. Contain it. End it.”

A beat.

“But I’m realizing something,” he continued. “That instinct doesn’t get to override you.”

Her breath stilled. Dahlia’s words surfaced unbidden-he’s learning. Both of you are. And if he could

meet her like this, without armor or control, then she owed him the same.

“That’s what scared me, Damien,” Maya said softly. “Not what you did-but what it meant.” She swallowed. “That loving you might mean disappearing a little at a time.”

He stiffened, the words striking deeper than anything else she'd said. Then he shook his head,

sharp and immediate. Panic flashed across his face as he stepped closer, lifting a hand to her

face, cupping her cheek with careful gentleness.

"No. No-never," he said, his voice rough. "Don't say that, love. Please." His hand stayed warm

against her skin. "That won't happen. And if it ever does… then I've failed you." His eyes darkened

with something fierce and absolute. "I would rather lose everything-even my own life-than fail

you."

Maya held his gaze, absorbing the gravity of his words. She wanted to step into him, to ground

him, to remind him he hadn't failed. That this fear, this moment of unraveling, didn't undo

everything between them.

But another part of her-steadier now-knew better.

“I believe you,” she said quietly. “I believe you don’t want that.” She paused, choosing honesty over comfort. “But intent isn’t the same as impact, Damien. And I need you to understand that.”