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breath hitched, pulse racing. “Maybe I am,” she whispered, bold and teasing. Damien’s hands roamed her body, pulling her flush against him. His lips found hers in a deep, devouring kiss. “I can take… more than you’ll ever imagine,” he murmured against her mouth, voice rough with need. “And I’ll make sure you feel every inch of it.” Her fingers tangled in his hair, shivering with anticipation. “Then… don’t hold back, love.” Damien’s grin darkened, predatory, full of raw hunger. “Oh, love… that’s exactly what I intend to do.” Their bodies pressed together, bare and burning, every step toward the shower deliberate, slow, dripping with tension. The hot, teasing electricity between them was unbroken, each glance, brush of skin, and whispered word a promise of the heat to come. Steam filled the room as Damien turned the water on, the spray cascading over their bodies, slicking every inch of skin. His hands moved with purpose, sliding over her back, down to the curve of her ass, soap lathering between them as he worshiped every part of her. Maya mirrored him, palms running down the hard planes of his chest, feeling every taut line of muscle beneath her trembling fingers. He leaned in, lips brushing her ear, voice low and dangerous. “You said don’t hold back right? Then let me teach you how good I can make you feel.” His mouth crashed onto hers, claiming, hungry, as the water pounded around them. She moaned, fingers tangling in his wet hair, her body melting against his. He pressed her back against the warm tile, his hands gripping her thighs, lifting her effortlessly. She gasped, instinctively wrapping her legs around him, the slick slide of his c**k against her heat making her whimper. “Damien…” she breathed, desperate, hips arching forward. He growled, the sound vibrating against her lips. “I can’t wait any longer, love. I need to be inside you.” With one thrust, he buried himself deep, the water making every movement hot, slick, overwhelming. Maya cried out, her nails raking down his back as her body stretched around him, filled to the hilt. “Oh God… Damien…” Her moans echoed off the walls, her voice breaking as he began to move, slow at first, savoring every inch, every tremor, before setting a harder rhythm that had her clinging desperately to him. Clar The water poured down their joined bodies, every thrust harder, deeper, the sound of wet skin meeting amplified by the echoing shower. Maya’s head fell back against the wall, her cries raw and breathless as pleasure coiled tight in her belly. “You feel so fucking good,” Damien groaned, lips closing over her throat, biting, sucking, marking her as his. His hips drove upward in powerful strokes, each one pressing deeper, making her shudder and gasp. “So tight around me, love… you’re making me lose control.” “Don’t stop,” she begged, her voice trembling, broken by moans. “Please… ahh-don’t stop,” she gasped, her cry dissolving into trembling moans. Her body moved with his, hips rolling helplessly as he pounded into her, water streaming down their tangled bodies, steam wrapping them in heat. Every thrust dragged her closer to the edge, her walls tightening, fluttering, her climax rushing through her like fire. “Damien!” she cried out, her body shaking as the orgasm tore through her, clenching around him, pulling him deeper into her release. Her cry pushed him over the edge-his growl ripped from deep in his chest as he drove into her one last time, spilling into her with a raw, guttural sound that vibrated against her skin. He held her tight, hips jerking against hers as he emptied himself, his forehead pressed to hers, breath ragged, broken. Steam and water poured around them, the world falling away until there was only this-only them. When their trembling finally stilled, Damien kept her cradled against him, still joined, still inside her, his lips brushing her damp hair. His voice was low, rough, and unguarded. “Always mine.” Maya clung to him, her body weak but her heart racing, her whisper breaking through the sound of rushing water. “Always… yours.” He kissed her

softly then, reverent where he had been rough, sealing the words between them. “I love you,” Damien murmured, hoarse and raw, every word burning with truth. Her lips curved, trembling, her reply carried on a soft sigh as she melted against him. “I love you too.” And under the pounding water, tangled in steam and each other, they held on-because in that moment, the world beyond them simply didn’t exist.

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The steam had barely cleared when they finally stepped out of the shower, bodies sore, skin flushed, hearts still racing. Damien wrapped Maya in a thick towel, pressing a lingering kiss to her damp hair before handing her one of his shirts to slip into. She wore it with an easy.

smile, the fabric swallowing her frame, her bare legs peeking out beneath the hem.

Maya chuckled softly, smoothing the hem. “You know… I actually brought my own clothes.”

Damien’s gaze darkened, slow and deliberate as it traveled over her. “I know,” he murmured, voice low and teasing. “But I prefer you in mine. It makes it clear who you belong to.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she laughed, rolling her eyes. “So it’s not about comfort, it’s about

possession?”

“Exactly,” he said with a wicked grin, tugging her closer by the waist. “And for the record, you look far too good in my shirts for me to let you wear anything else.”

Maya leaned against him, giggling. “Well… I guess it saves me on laundry, too.”

Damien smirked, brushing his lips across her temple. “Then it’s settled. Whenever we’re home

you’ll wear only my clothes.”

Maya’s brows lifted slightly, her voice soft, almost uncertain. “Home?”

His arms tightened around her, pulling her flush against him until her face rested against his chest. He pressed a slow kiss to the top of her damp hair, his voice low but steady. “Yes… our home.”

Something inside her ached at those words. Warmth spread through her chest, chasing away every shadow of doubt. For the first time in a long while, the word home didn’t sound like a place-it felt like him.

By the time they dressed, their hunger had shifted. The craving for intensity was replaced by a simpler one-food. Damien moved around the kitchen with a casual grace, sleeves rolled up, shoulders broad as he chopped vegetables and set pans sizzling. The scent of garlic and butter filled the air, making Maya’s stomach growl despite the warmth still coiling in her belly.

“Mmm, smells good, love. I still can’t believe the Damien Blackwood can cook,” she teased, perched on a stool at the counter, chin in her hand as she watched him work.

Damien smirked over his shoulder, sliding a pan across the burner. “Not everyone has the privilege of tasting my cooking. I only cook for myself… and for someone I love.”

She rolled her eyes, though her smile lingered, soft and playful. When he finally set the plates

down-perfectly seared chicken with roasted vegetables-Maya’s heart swelled at the domestic normalcy of it all. After everything between them, this-sitting across from him, sharing a meal-felt almost surreal.

Halfway through lunch, her curiosity got the better of her. She set her fork down, studying him with quiet intensity. “Damien… can I ask you something?”

His gaze flicked to hers, cautious but open. “Go on.”

“You’ve told me so much about business, about the empire you’ve built… the things the world sees. But not much about your family.” Her voice softened. “What was it like growing up? Besides, you know… being trained as the heir.”

For a moment, Damien was silent, his fork paused mid-air. The cool mask he always wore slipped, revealing something far more vulnerable underneath. Slowly, he set his fork down and exhaled.

“Typical, in some ways,” he began. “Inside the house, titles didn’t matter. My grandparents handled most of the parenting because my parents were… busy. Dad was running the company, and Mom had her own empire to manage. But despite that, they tried. They showed up for the important things. School events, milestones… they cleared their schedules when they could. That mattered.”

His jaw tightened slightly, his voice dropping to a lower, almost confessional tone. “What I never got growing up was coddling. If I was wrong, I was wrong-no soft landings, no gentle words. Funny thing… my dad was the softer one. My mom… she’s a strong woman, probably stronger than I’ll ever be. When she makes a decision, my dad goes along. So if I wanted. something, I went to her, because whatever she said was final. Same with my grandma- between her and my grandpa, her word was law.

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But inside the house, that was the rule. Outside, they let the man take the lead-it’s about respect, about appearances, about keeping balance. It’s a world of roles, of hierarchy… but behind closed doors, my mother’s word carried the weight.”

He paused, eyes drifting for a moment, then gave a small, almost ironic laugh. “When I took over the company, she started worrying about me.” His lips curved into a wry smile, a soft chuckle slipping out. “In fact… she still does.”

His expression sobered, voice lowering. “She said I’d end up too cold. Too ruthless. She wanted me to learn softness… balance. Every time we see each other, without fail, she reminds me. She tells me I should marry someone simple. Someone outside our world of money and power. A woman with a kind heart, a pure soul. Status doesn’t matter-money doesn’t matter. Those things I can provide. But kindness… purity? That’s something no amount of wealth can buy.”

Maya listened quietly, her chest tightening as his voice dipped even lower. His words struck something deep inside her, an ache she couldn’t quite name. Someone simple… someone

pure.

Her lashes lowered, hiding the flicker of doubt in her eyes. Was that what he saw in her? Or was she still too far from what his mother imagined-too scarred, too complicated, too

ordinary?

She forced a soft laugh, but it came out thinner than she intended. “Sounds like your mom knows exactly what she wants for you,” she murmured, trying to sound light even as her throat tightened.

“In fact…” Damien’s voice faltered, hesitating for the first time. His gaze shifted away, as though weighing whether to say it aloud. “My mother has a friend. A very dear friend-she’s always called her the sister she never had. This friend has a daughter… your age, actually. About ten years younger than me.”

His jaw flexed, a faint sigh slipping through. “For years, my mother’s been encouraging me to meet her. To… build a connection. But the truth is, she hasn’t seen this friend in over a decade. Ten years, maybe more. Every now and then she’ll get a call-weddings, pregnancies, children being born. Big milestones, nothing else. No visits, no address, no way to find her. Just… a distant voice on the other end of the line.”

He raked a hand through his hair, eyes lingering on the food gone cold in front of him. “She’s away now, following up on some lead. Been looking for this friend for years.” His voice dipped, quieter, almost thoughtful. “It has been seven years since she last heard from her. I

never asked too many questions… but I know one thing-whoever this woman is, she means a great deal to my mother.”

Maya blinked, her fork stilled on the rim of her plate as his words settled between them. A small, unfamiliar ache fluttered in her chest-part jealousy, part something softer. She forced a laugh that came out thin.

“So… your mom wants you to be with her friend’s daughter?” she asked softly, her voice almost too casual, betraying the knot forming in her chest.

Damien’s eyes found hers instantly, steady and calm. He shook his head slowly. “Not like that,” he said. “Well… somewhat. She wants me to meet her to try to build a connection. She’d prefer it, yes. But she’s never been one to tell me who I must be with.”

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his, thumb brushing a slow, reassuring circle over her knuckles. His voice dropped, warm and sure. “Are you worried, love?” His voice dropped, rich and steady. “Do you really think I’d ever let anyone-not even my mother-decide who I belong to?”

Maya stared at their joined hands, his steady warmth easing the knot in her chest. She drew in a shaky breath, exhaling with a soft laugh that carried more fragility than humor. The jealousy didn’t vanish, but it dulled, edged out by the comfort of his touch and the weight of his promise.

“1-” she started, then faltered, her lips curving into a small, uncertain smile as her gaze dropped. “It’s just… your mom. She might not…” Her voice thinned, almost breaking. “…she might not accept me.”

Damien’s gaze softened instantly. He reached across the table, lifting her chin gently so their eyes met. “Maya… listen to me.” His thumb brushed lightly across her cheek, steadying her. My mother doesn’t decide who I care for. She can have her preferences, her ideas-but what matters is what I choose. Who I love. What matters… is us.”

He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “It doesn’t matter what anyone says… or what the world thinks. The only thing that matters to me is you-what you think, what you feel, what yo u want. You’re exactly what I want. I will choose you… always.”

Maya’s chest swelled with a mix of relief and lingering doubt. She exhaled shakily, her lips curving into a small, vulnerable smile. “I… I just… from the very start, my scars, my baggage… they’re my insecurities. I’m scared of being seen. I’m scared of complications,” she admitted softly, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’m scared that… I’ll never be enough for your world.”

Damien cupped her cheek gently, his thumb brushing softly across her skin. She leaned into his hand, eyes locking with his, searching for the truth in his gaze. “Listen to me, love,” he

murmured, voice low and steady. “I love your scars, your baggage-every part of you. Everything I do is to build a world where you feel safe, where you belong. I want a future with you. From the very beginning… I always have, and I always will.”

He leaned forward, pressing a tender kiss to her lips. “You are… and will always be… my forev er choice, Maya.”

Her chest tightened, warmth blooming from the center outward, and for the first time, she let herself truly exhale. She let herself believe it-because she could feel it, deep in her bones. For the first time, she truly belonged, and his love made it real.

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Morning light streamed in through the wide glass windows, spilling across the sheets in soft golden waves. Maya stirred, blinking against the brightness, and found herself wrapped in Damien’s arms. His chest rose and fell beneath her cheek, steady and unyielding, like a heartbeat she could anchor herself to.

For a moment, she didn't move. She simply let herself exist in the cocoon of his warmth, the rhythm of his breathing grounding her. Safe. Wanted. Chosen.

Her fingers drifted over his bare skin, tracing the lines of muscle, the faint scars etched into him-marks of battles she'd never witnessed, reminders of a life lived in shadows. She thought of her own scars-those carved by hardship, by survival, by pain she had carried alone and hidden for so long… and yet, he had looked at them as though they were part of

what made her beautiful.

Damien stirred then, his voice low and husky from sleep. "You're staring, love."

She flushed, biting her lip. "Maybe I like what I see."

His eyes cracked open, sharp even half-awake, though softened now in the quiet morning. A slow, sinful smile curved his lips. "Careful. If you keep looking at me like that, we'll never get

out of bed."

Her laugh bubbled out before she could stop it, light and free. "You're insatiable."

“And you,” he murmured, rolling so she was pinned beneath him, his weight pressing her into the mattress, “are mine.” His mouth brushed her jaw, her throat, trailing heat that made her toes curl. But just as quickly, he pulled back, his expression shifting-gentler, almost reverent. “Maya… thank you. For trusting me.”

Her chest tightened, emotion swelling. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“I do,” he said firmly, brushing his thumb across her bottom lip. “Because you could’ve run. You could’ve let fear win. But you didn’t.” His gaze held hers, unflinching. “And I swear to you, I’ll prove every day that you’re safe with me. That you belong here-beside me.”

Something hot pricked at her eyes, but she blinked it away, managing a shaky smile. “You already have.”

He kissed her then-slow, claiming, tender in a way that unraveled her more than any fierce passion ever could.

The world outside might have been ruthless, unforgiving, but here, in this moment, with him…

Maya felt untouchable.

Still, as the morning stretched on and Damien eventually pulled away to take a call, a faint unease flickered at the back of her mind. His words had wrapped her in warmth, but deep down, she couldn’t shake the fear that this fragile peace-their peace-was something the world would try to shatter.

And she knew… it wouldn’t be long before it did.

They had planned to leave by sundown yesterday, but the quiet had been too tempting, the isolation too rare. One more night had felt like stealing time from the world, slipping into a cocoon where only they existed-between lazy naps, movies half-watched, meals shared, and bodies tangled again and again in heated release. It was indulgent, intoxicating, dangerously easy to forget reality when wrapped in his arms.

But reality had a way of finding her.

The sharp trill of her phone broke through the haze, vibrating against the nightstand. Maya reached for it, the screen flashing Harper. She answered with a smile, only for it to falter when her friend's face appeared, eyes wide with a mix of irritation and unease.

"Finally! Do you even check your phone anymore?" Harper hissed, pushing her hair back. Behind her, the dim background revealed the resort lounge, but emptier now. "Everyone's already left, Maya. It's just me here-with Ashcroft, James, and Lee. Outnumbered three to one. Do you have any idea how awkward this is?"

Maya blinked, guilt pricking her chest. "They all… left? Already?"

"Yes!" Harper threw up her hands. "And you-what, decided to hole up in paradise for another night without telling me? I swear, you better come back before I murder someone. Or worse- before they try to corner me with their brooding and testosterone."

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A laugh escaped Maya despite the knot in her chest, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. She promised Harper they'd be back soon, though the unease in her stomach twisted tighter as the call ended.

For now, she pushed it aside, leaning back against Damien's warmth when he returned. But in the back of her mind, the warning echoed: peace never lasted.

They finally tore themselves from the comfort of that private cocoon, showered, dressed, and -though Damien dragged his feet every step of the way-headed back. By late morning, they walked hand in hand across the small landing pad where Damien's helicopter waited, blades

glinting in the sun as if eager to carry them away.

The flight was quiet, intimate in its own way. Maya leaned against his shoulder, her fingers loosely curled with his on the console between them. Damien's hand never left hers, even as he flew, as though parting from her for even a second felt unthinkable.

Not long after, the helicopter touched down smoothly on the resort's pad. Waiting there were James, Lee, Harper, and Ashcroft, their figures sharp against the bright midday sun.

James and Lee moved forward at once, handling their belongings with practiced ease, while Harper appeared almost too eager as she tugged Maya away toward the waiting golf cart to return to the main resort. Damien, however, was immediately pulled into a low, clipped exchange with Ashcroft, the two men's expressions unreadable.

Still, before leaving the pad, Damien made one quiet order: Maya's things were to be moved directly into his room.

By the time everyone regrouped at the dining terrace, the table was already set for lunch. The sea breeze carried the scent of grilled seafood and herbs, but Maya barely tasted any of it. Something about Harper gnawed at her. Her friend laughed at the right moments, spoke when spoken to, but her eyes… they weren't the same. There was a distance there, a flicker of unease she couldn't quite place.

When Damien leaned back in his chair, his hand brushing hers under the table, she tilted her head toward him. "She's different," Maya murmured, keeping her voice low. "Harper. Something's off."

Damien's jaw shifted slightly, his eyes cutting toward Harper before returning to Maya. "I noticed it too," he said quietly. "And it's not just her. Nick's been… off as well."

Maya's stomach tightened. "You think something happened?"

"We'll find out." His voice carried that controlled edge, calm but firm.

Later, when the opportunity arose, they pulled James and Lee aside near the bar. Both men looked confused at the question.

"Nothing seemed wrong last night," James admitted. "The four of us had a few drinks, relaxed for a bit. I left first-figured I'd turn in early."

"Same here," Lee added with a shrug. "Didn't notice anything unusual. The both of them stayed behind after us, that's all. When I saw them this morning, though…" He shook his head. "Yeah. They were already acting… different."

That single word lingered between them, heavy. Different.

Curiosity itched at the back of Maya's mind, and she could see the same flicker in Damien's eyes. Whatever had shifted between Harper and Ashcroft last night, neither James nor Lee could put their finger on it. And that only made the silence louder, the questions sharper.

After lunch, everyone decided to rest at the cabana. The sun warmed the terrace, and the gentle lap of waves against the shore made the air feel lazy, almost too peaceful. But Maya couldn't ignore the unease gnawing at her. She nudged Harper gently, brow furrowed.

"Harper… is everything okay?" she asked softly.

Harper blinked, her usual bubbly tone tipping into defensiveness. "Of course! What do you mean? Of course it's okay. Why?"

Maya hesitated, searching for the right words. "I don't know… it just seems like you're avoiding Nick."

Harper froze. "What?? No!"

Damien, who had been standing nearby, raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, Nick. How come it looks like you're avoiding Ms. Lin here? Did something happen?"

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Bens

Both Harper and Ashcroft answered simultaneously, shaking their heads. “No!”

They exchanged a quick, almost imperceptible side-eye. Harper rolled her eyes at Ashcroft.” Come on! Grow up and move on, okay? Don’t act like it’s a big deal!”

Ashcroft’s voice dropped low, sharp with irritation. “You think so highly of yourself, woman!”

Maya stepped back, panic rising. “Wait, wait! Stop. You-what? What’s going on here?”

Harper exhaled, throwing up her hands in surrender. “Fine! We… we had sex last night, okay? So what? We got drunk, we got carried away-it was the heat of the moment. No big deal!”

For a heartbeat, the air froze. Everyone, except Ashcroft, stared in shock, eyes wide, mouths slightly open. Harper’s cheeks flushed, and she avoided eye contact, twisting a strand of hair nervously around her finger.

Every nerve in Maya’s body screamed, the cabana suddenly too small, too exposed, the lazy sun now glaring. The tension crackled, thicker than the heat, leaving every one of them frozen, wondering what would happen next.

Damien’s voice cut through the tension, sharp and controlled, though the heat in his eyes betrayed his anger. “Nick! We had a deal. My employees are hands-off-what the hell were you thinking?”

Ashcroft raised his hands defensively, a wry smirk tugging at his lips, though his jaw was tight. “Come on, D… give me some credit! It wasn’t like I wanted it to happen. You think I’d be interested in someone like her? She’s… not my type. The alcohol, the moment… it just got out

of control.”

Harper’s face burned red, and her voice dripped with venom. “What?! Are you kidding me? You’re a total douchebag! And don’t flatter yourself-nobody would call you a catch! You’re not my type at all! And please… in bed? You’re a joke! I’ve had better orgasms dreaming, seriously!”

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips, eyes locked on her with a dangerous gleam. “A joke? Harper… please. Last night, you sounded like a damn kitten purring every five seconds, moaning and writhing like you’d never been touched before. Screaming my name like it was a damn anthem. Don’t sit there and act like you didn’t love ev ery second, because I know you did.”

Harper’s eyes blazed, her cheeks flushed with both anger and embarrassment. She jabbed a finger at him, voice sharp and unrestrained. “Oh, don’t you dare twist that, Ashcroft! You think

lars

you were in control? Please! You were barely doing anything, and yet somehow, you convinced yourself you’re some kind of god in bed. Newsflash-if I was purring, it’s because I was trying not to laugh at how predictable and… boring you were! Seriously, I’ve had better orgasms imagining I was alone than dealing with your ego last night. So save your

self-righteous nonsense!”

Her laugh was sharp, almost bitter, and she crossed her arms, staring him down. “You’re full of yourself.”

Before Ashcroft could even open his mouth to fire back, James ended his call and cleared his

throat.

James swallowed hard, shifting slightly on his feet. “Boss… we have a problem.”

Every head turned toward him, the laughter, insults, and tension from moments ago vanishing into sudden unease.

Damien’s brow furrowed, his tone sharp. “What?”

James nodded. “The Madam… she’s on her way.”

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The cabana fell silent. The sea breeze that had once felt warm now cut like ice.

Damien's head snapped toward James, his jaw ticking. "Why?" His voice was calm, but it carried the weight of a storm waiting to break.

James shifted, his expression uneasy, "I only managed to reach her assistant. Madam arrived yesterday, and late last night she received a new lead-something she says can't wait. When word reached her that you weren't heading back today, she insisted on flying out to see you in person. And… it seems word of the conflict with the Volkovs has reached her as well. She wants to speak with you directly. She's already in the air, on her way here."

Maya's pulse stuttered. Madam? Did he mean… his mother? She was coming here?

Ashcroft let out a low whistle, running a hand through his hair. "Well, that explains the sudden tension in the air."

Damien's eyes cut to him, sharp as blades. "Not a word, Nick."

Ashcroft raised his palms in mock surrender, though his smirk said otherwise. Harper rolled her eyes, muttering under her breath, "Drama never takes a day off with you people."

Yet beneath her calm exterior, Harper was panicking. Wheels in her head spun rapidly, searching for a way out of this situation. She had already made a reckless mistake last night -alcohol mixed with her weakness had led her into bed with Nicholas Ashcroft-and the last thing she needed now was another "bomb" dropping that would make her situation even more precarious. It would only make her situation worse… more awkward, more complicated.

She forced her smile a little wider, straightened her posture, and reminded herself to stay composed, even as her heart raced.

Maya's chest tightened. She had never met Damien's mother, but from the way he spoke of her-stronger than his father, decisive, impossible to sway-she wasn't just a parent, she was power embodied. The Madam's word was law behind closed doors, and even Damien, ruthless and unyielding with everyone else, spoke of her with something rare: respect laced with love. For all her steel, she was the one person who could still reach him, soften him, and that made her all the more intimidating in Maya's eyes.

But it wasn't just the thought of meeting her that made Maya's stomach knot. James's words echoed-a new lead. Her pulse stumbled. A lead… did that mean Madam had finally found her old friend? The one with the daughter. The woman Damien's mother had always hoped he'd end up with.

The insecurity crept in like poison, unbidden and sharp. What if Madam arrived, not just to see Damien, but to push him closer to that girl? What if she looked at Maya-scarred, complicated, too ordinary-and decided she wasn't good enough?

Jealousy twisted inside her chest, ugly and uninvited. She hated that it even crossed her mind, but she couldn't shake it. Damien had chosen her, promised her. Yet the thought of another woman, perfectly molded to Madam's expectations, gnawed at her until her throat felt tight.

Damien's hand brushed hers, his voice low enough that only she could hear. "Love," he murmured, his gaze sharp on her face, "what's wrong? You went pale just now."

Maya blinked quickly, forcing a small smile she didn't feel. "I'm fine," she whispered, but the tremor in her voice betrayed her.

Before Damien could press further, Harper leaned across the table, plucking a slice of watermelon from the fruit platter and popping it into her mouth in one bite. Mischief sparkled in her eyes. “Ohhh, I get it now.” She smirked, pointing her fork at Maya. “You’re nervous, aren’t you? Worried about meeting your future mother-in-law?”

Maya’s cheeks flamed. “Harper!” she hissed, mortified, but her friend only laughed, clearly savoring her discomfort.

Perfect, Harper thought, a grin tugging at her lips. Finally, an excuse to hide out a little longer. She pushed the thought aside, letting it fuel her teasing.

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“Relax” Harper drawled, fanning herself as if in a mock swoon. “From what I’ve heard, Mrs.

Blackwood is the whole package-elegant, refined, strong as hell, runs everything with an iron fist. She’ll either adore you on the spot… or eat you alive. No pressure.”

Damien’s jaw tightened, his stare slicing across the table like a blade. One look, and Harper shrank back into her chair with both hands raised. “Kidding, kidding,” she muttered, though her grin betrayed her.

Maya forced out a laugh, but inside her stomach twisted tighter.

Damien stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the wood floor. His entire presence shifted -harder, colder. “James. How long?”

“An hour, maybe less,” James answered quickly.

The weight of his words dropped like a stone, silencing the cabana. Even the waves outside seemed to hush, the lazy calm from earlier shattered in an instant.

Maya’s pulse spiked, her fingers tightening in her lap. An hour. Less than that until the Madam

arrives.

Damien’s jaw clenched, his gaze cutting toward the horizon as if he could already see the incoming helicopter. He exhaled sharply through his nose, muttering more to himself than anyone, “So soon…”

Harper blinked between them, clearly out of her depth now. “Okay, is anyone else going to explain why this suddenly feels like a royal inspection?”

“Because it is,” Ashcroft drawled, leaning back with an amused curl to his lips, though his eyes flickered with unease. “The Madam doesn’t make casual visits. If she’s coming here personally, it means something’s brewing.”

Maya’s throat tightened. She barely heard the rest of what they were saying-her mind was already spiraling. An hour. Less than an hour until I stand face-to-face with the woman Damien both respects and fears.

Her chest squeezed painfully. What if Madam looked at her and saw only flaws? What if one glance was enough to decide Maya wasn't the kind of woman worthy of her son?

As if sensing her storm, Damien's hand found hers under the table, his grip firm, grounding. His eyes locked on hers, the steel in him softening in a way he reserved only for her. "Don't worry, love," Damien murmured, low enough that only she could hear. "Nothing to

worry about. Don't listen to them-it's alright. This is good. You'll finally meet my mother."

Maya nodded, swallowing the flutter of nerves in her chest. The tension eased slightly with Damien's hand still holding hers, grounding her.

Harper's eyes flicked between Maya and Damien, a sly thought forming. Perfect… this is my chance too. I can hide out and avoid the Madam without anyone questioning it.

She leaned closer to Maya, voice soft but playful. "Hey, how about I stay back with you in your room while you freshen up? Gives you a chance to catch your breath while they…. welcome the Madam."

Maya blinked, still tense, and Harper continued, wiggling her brows. "What do you think? Looks like you're about to suffocate in panic. Take a breather, relax, freshen up a bit. You'll be at your best when you meet your future mother-in-law."

A small, secretive grin tugged at Harper's lips. And me? Yeah, I'll just hang out here… totally safe, totally invisible. No awkward introductions for me.

Maya forced a small laugh, nodding, relief softening her shoulders. “Yeah… that sounds good.”

“See?” Harper said, patting her shoulder lightly. “Nothing to stress over. You’ve got this-just breathe, love. And besides…” She side-eyed Ashcroft, smirking. “…I’ll take any excuse I can get to avoid sharing space with you-know-who.”

Ashcroft snorted, leaning back slightly with a lopsided grin. “Pfft! You think I want to share space with a lunatic woman like you? Please… I’ll pass.”

The group decided to head back to their rooms to freshen up before whatever was coming. They stood, stretching lightly, the weight of anticipation hanging over them, and began walking toward the main resort building.

Just as they reached the lobby, moving toward the elevators, a low, steady hum cut through the air. A sleek black SUV-polished, dark, impossibly imposing-glided to a stop in front of the entrance. Its presence was silent but undeniable, a statement that someone of significance had arrived.

Chapter 259

The air seemed to tighten around them. Maya’s stomach dropped, and her hand instinctively found Damien’s, squeezing it. Her pulse quickened, a flutter of nerves that refused to settle.

Damien’s jaw tightened imperceptibly, his gaze flicking toward the vehicle with a mixture of anticipation and caution, the calm he usually wore now edged with alertness.

No one else seemed to notice-except Harper. Standing beside Maya, her posture stiffened, shoulders subtly tightening as her eyes darted around, searching for a spot where she could disappear.

The driver stepped out, moving with precise, fluid motions to open the rear door. A woman emerged, each step measured, deliberate, yet effortless. She exuded authority without aggression, elegance without artifice. Her face was gentle, warm, and kind-but beneath it all, a commanding presence radiated, subtle but impossible to ignore.

Maya instinctively stayed close behind Damien, her fingers tightening on the fabric of her dress. Harper mirrored her caution, her eyes darting between Maya and the woman approaching.

Damien's voice cut through softly but firmly. "Stay here."

He stepped forward, Nick at his side, and the world seemed to shift around the meeting of mother and son.

Dahlia's gaze found Damien first-steady, unflinching, threaded with a softness that only he ever saw. Her posture was regal, every movement deliberate, yet beneath the controlled elegance lay a warmth reserved entirely for him. Her lips curved into the faintest smile as he leaned down, brushing a kiss across her cheek.

"Mother," Damien greeted, his tone calm and even, though the slight bow of his head and the gentleness in his inflection betrayed a quiet reverence.

Dahlia lifted her hand, cupping his cheek with a rare tenderness. “You look good, son,” she said softly. Her affection was neither coddling nor sentimental-simply firm, deliberate, and true, cutting straight through the formalities of the moment.

Damien’s eyes softened almost imperceptibly before he straightened, his usual composed mask settling back in place.

Nick, unable to contain himself, bounded forward with a wide grin. “Aunt Dahlia! Gorgeous as ever,” he said, planting a kiss on her cheek with easy familiarity.

Her expression softened further, a genuine smile appearing as she chuckled lightly. “Nick”” she replied warmly. “You’re here too! How have you been?”

“Better now that you’re here,” Nick answered with playful charm.

Dahlia shook her head in mock exasperation, the low laugh carrying a warmth that seemed to fill the space.

James and Lee followed, stepping forward with careful respect. Both men inclined their heads as they greeted her.

“Madam,” James said, firm but measured, his voice betraying both respect and a quiet

steadiness.

Lee added in kind, “Welcome back, Madam.”

Maya and Harper hung back, giving space as they watched the scene unfold. Maya’s pulse quickened, a swirl of curiosity and apprehension knotting her stomach. Harper, usually composed, shifted uneasily, her fingers fidgeting at her sides, eyes flicking around as if seeking a way out. A tight coil of panic settled in her chest-she sensed the weight this woman carried, and the mere thought of facing her made Harper’s heart hammer violently against her ribs.

Chapter 260

The lobby seemed to shrink the moment Dahlia Blackwood stepped inside.

Even without a word, her presence commanded the space. Every line of her posture radiated elegance and quiet authority, the kind that needed no introduction. Heads would bow, voices would lower-because a woman like her did not simply arrive. She arrived.

Damien held himself tall, shoulders squared, but there was a subtle shift in him-an almost. imperceptible softening in his gaze, the kind reserved only for his mother. For all his ruthlessness, in front of Dahlia, he wasn’t untouchable. He was her son.

“You’ve been keeping yourself too busy,” Dahlia said, her eyes sweeping over him with sharp precision, though her hand lingered for one more heartbeat on his cheek. “Always running, never resting.”

Damien’s lips curved faintly. “Says the woman who flew across the ocean without warning.”

A small smile tugged at her mouth. “Touché.”

Nick chuckled under his breath, earning a sidelong look from Dahlia that was both amused and chiding. “Nicholas Ashcroft,” she said, her tone laced with fondness. “You still can’t resist inserting yourself into other people’s moments.”

He grinned wider. “Guilty as charged, Aunt Dahlia. But you know you love me for it.”

Her laugh, low and genuine, startled the air with warmth before fading just as quickly into

composure.

Behind them, James and Lee stood respectfully, their greetings acknowledged with a firm nod. Dahlia’s gaze lingered on each of them, weighing, assessing, but her tone remained measured, polished. “It’s good to see familiar faces still standing by my son.”

Maya shifted nervously in the background, her fingers tightening on the hem of her dress. Dahlia hadn’t even looked her way yet, but the weight of her presence pressed down like a storm cloud. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to be invisible or noticed-and both possibilities terrified her.

Harper, beside her, angled herself slightly behind a column, pretending to admire the lobby’s décor. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. Don’t look at me, don’t look at me, don’t look at me.

Before the moment grew too formal, Damien asked, his voice gentler than usual, “How was your trip, Mom? And… what brings you here?”

Her smile faltered, poise giving way to something more fragile. “It was… tiring,” she admitted

softly. For the first time since stepping out of the SUV, the weight she carried showed. ” Another lead. Another road that ended nowhere.”

A pause She drew in a slow breath, her eyes clouding with something heavier than exhaustion. “Seven years, Damien. Seven years, and not a single word from her. I keep telling myself she’s just… busy, living her life somewhere. But the longer the silence stretches…” Her voice trailed, her throat working as though the words themselves were too heavy to carry.

The lobby stilled around her. Even Nick-usually quick with a quip-pressed his lips together, uneasy under the raw ache in her voice.

Damien’s jaw ticked, the hard lines of his face carved deeper, but when he reached for his mother’s arm, his touch was uncharacteristically gentle. “You’ll find her,” he said quietly, with the kind of certainty that didn’t waver. “You always do.”

The faintest smile touched her lips, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “I only hope I’m not too late when I do.”

Behind Damien, Maya's chest squeezed tight. The way seven years lingered in the air scraped against something inside her, unsettling and sharp. She didn't know why-but the ache in Dahlia's voice stirred a strange unease in her bones.

Maya was so wrapped in the weight of Dahlia's words that she almost missed it-the stiff way Harper stood beside her, the sheen of sweat at her temple, the way her fingers tapped restlessly against her thigh as though counting down invisible seconds.

Then, without warning, Harper's hand clamped around Maya's wrist.

"Harper-!" Maya barely had time to yelp before she was tugged toward the elevator. Her steps stumbled to keep up, her heart lurching in confusion. The gilded doors slid shut behind them, sealing the two of them away from the lobby and the commanding presence of Dahlia Blackwood.