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Chapter 261

Only when the elevator began to rise did Harper let out a shaky exhale, muttering under her breath, “That was close.”

Maya’s eyes widened, chest still tight from the sudden pull. “Harper! What the heck was that? Why did you drag me away like that?”

Harper pressed herself back against the wall, forcing a nervous laugh that didn’t reach her eyes. She clutched her stomach dramatically, shaking her head. “Uh-right, well… my stomach. Yeah. Must’ve been something I ate earlier. Feels like it’s about to kill me, and I did not want to make a scene in front of your future mother-in-law.”

Her voice was too quick, too rehearsed.

Maya frowned, suspicion tugging at her. “Harper…”

But Harper only waved her off, straightening with an overly casual grin. “Don’t worry about me, love. I just need the bathroom. That’s all.”

Meanwhile, back in the lobby, Damien’s hand lingered lightly on his mother’s arm. His voice lowered, carrying a weight that softened the air around them.

“Mom,” he said, calm but with an undercurrent of anticipation, “there’s someone I want you to

meet.”

Dahlia’s head tilted ever so slightly, curiosity flickering across her features. “Oh?” she murmured, her voice steady though her eyes sharpened with interest.

A faint smile tugged at Damien’s lips-small, rare, but genuine. “Someone very special to me. I’m sure you’ll like her.”

For the briefest second, the polished mask Dahlia wore slipped. Her brows lifted, and though she quickly composed herself, her lips softened into the faintest smile. “Her?” she asked, voice quiet but threaded with warmth. Her gaze lingered on Damien, softening, almost luminous. “Is she the reason my son looks… different. Almost like a man who’s learned how to smile again.”

Before Damien could speak, Ashcroft cut in, his grin wicked and unrestrained. “Correction, Aunt Dahlia,” he drawled, leaning back with deliberate mischief. “Not just smiling-laughing. The man’s obsessed. In fact…” he waggled his brows, voice dropping in mock conspiracy, “I’d say he’s been a little too busy these past two days… probably trying to make babies.”

Damien’s jaw tightened. His gaze shot to Ashcroft, the steel in his eyes slicing through the

Elem

levity of the moment. A slow, measured exhale followed, barely hiding the flush creeping over

his ears.

Ashcroft only raised his hands in surrender, smirk unfaltering. “Hey, just speaking the truth,

brother.”

Nick’s low chuckle filled the pause, clearly enjoying the exchange, while James and Lee wisely kept their eyes trained ahead, masks of professionalism intact.

Dahlia didn’t miss the spark that lit in her son’s eyes at the mention. It tugged at her heart, softening her lips into a knowing smile she couldn’t quite conceal. Yet beneath that warmth, a quiet ache lingered-a shadow of sadness she carried. Her thoughts drifted, unbidden, to her dearest friend… and the daughter she once dreamed might stand beside Damien one day.

Damien turned slightly, a rare flicker of softness lingering on his face as he glanced over his shoulder. He meant to call Maya forward, to place her before his mother without hesitation.

But the space behind him was empty.

His brows knit together, confusion sharpening his features. Where the hell-? Maya was right there only moments ago. And Harper… gone too.

A muscle ticked in his jaw, irritation mixing with surprise. His gaze swept the lobby quickly, searching for even a glimpse of them, but there was nothing-just the quiet elegance of the resort and his men standing at attention.

The elevator chimed softly, and the doors slid open. The resort manager stepped out, pausing mid-step when he spotted the group. His expression shifted instantly into one of polished professionalism.

“Mr. Blackwood,” he greeted with a respectful nod. “Madam Blackwood.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Have you seen Miss Thompson?” he asked, his tone deceptively calm, though the steel beneath it made the manager straighten even further.

“Yes, sir,” the manager replied quickly. “I saw Miss Lin pulled her toward the elevator just a few minutes ago. They seemed in a hurry-likely headed up to their suite.”

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Damien’s jaw tightened, the smallest muscle flickering. Harper. Of course.

He gave a clipped nod, dismissing the manager with a glance before his gaze flicked back to the still-closing elevator doors.

Dahlia’s gaze flicked toward Damien, noticing the brief tightening of his jaw and the faint shadow that crossed his usually composed features. “Damien… what’s wrong? Where is she? ” she asked gently, concern threading her voice.

Damien shook his head, masking his unease with practiced control. “Nothing, Mom, looks like she went to her room first.” He paused, voice softening. “We’re heading back tomorrow. Why don’t you stay and come back with us then? Let’s have dinner tonight.”

Dahlia considered him for a moment before nodding, a small, approving smile tugging at her lips. “That sounds good. I’d like to see the resort while I’m here anyway.”

Damien’s eyes flicked to James, who understood immediately. With a subtle nod, James moved toward the front desk to ensure Dahlia’s room would be ready-everything in perfect

order for her stay.

Damien then turned back to his mother. “For now, why don’t you come upstairs with me? You can rest and get comfortable in my suite while we prepare your room. I’ll call her to come over, It’ll give us a chance to talk quietly, too.”

Dahlia inclined her head, following him with a measured, elegant step.

Damien led his mother through the lobby with steady precision, every eye subtly drawn to the small but powerful presence she carried. The quiet authority she exuded turned heads without a single word, and even Damien walked a fraction taller beside her, as if the air itself demanded respect.

They reached the elevator, the soft chime signaling its arrival. As the doors slid open, Dahlia stepped inside first, curiosity flickering in her eyes. She glanced around at Damien, her voice gentle but tinged with genuine intrigue. “So… what’s her name, son?”

Damien’s stride faltered ever so slightly, caught off guard by the question, though his composure remained intact. He met her gaze, his tone softening. “Maya… Maya Thompson.”

The name seemed to hang in the air, almost too familiar. Dahlia’s breath hitched imperceptibly. Maya Thompson… It resonated somewhere deep, brushing against memories she hadn’t dared revisit in years. Almost like… Malia. Her long-lost friend, the one she’d searched for endlessly, whose absence had left a quiet ache in her heart.

“Beautiful name,” she murmured under her breath, a small smile touching her lips, careful to remain composed. But beneath the elegance, a flicker of emotion shimmered in her eyes- curiosity, recognition, and a faint, lingering hope.

The elevator doors slid open, revealing a quiet, polished hallway bathed in soft light. The serene hush of the corridor contrasted with the whirlwind of thoughts in Dahlia’s mind. Damien’s hand brushed hers in a reassuring gesture as they stepped out, the familiar weight of family and legacy grounding them.

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A few steps out of the elevator, Damien’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He slipped it out, thumb swiping the screen.

Maya: Sorry, love. Harper suddenly pulled me upstairs-she’s not feeling well, stomach trouble. I didn’t mean to slip away without saying anything. Please tell your mother I’m sorry. I’m with her now in the room, making sure she’s okay.

Damien’s jaw eased, the storm in his chest settling a fraction. He typed back quickly, his expression softening as his mother walked silently beside him.

Damien: It’s alright, love. Stay with Harper until she’s better. When you’re done, come to my suite -I want you to meet my mother properly.

Maya simply responded, “Ok,” and Damien slipped his phone back into his pocket.

The suite door clicked shut behind them, the hush of the hallway giving way to the quiet luxury of Damien’s private space. Dahlia’s eyes swept the room with the kind of precision that missed nothing. Her gaze immediately landed on a pair of neatly placed women’s bedroom slippers by the door, the faint scent of lavender and vanilla curling gently through the air-an aroma that clearly did not belong to Damien.

Her brow arched. “You’re sharing a room with her, son?”

Damien didn’t flinch. “I asked for her things to be moved here earlier,” he replied evenly, his tone making it sound less like an explanation and more like a fact carved in stone.

From behind him, Ashcroft let out a low whistle, grinning. “Brother, you really got an upgrade, huh? I’m proud of you.”

Dahlia’s attention flicked to him, her voice cool. “What do you mean, Nicholas?”

Ashcroft's grin widened as he spread his hands innocently. "Oh, Aunt Dahlia, if only you knew. This wasn't rainbows and unicorns. Damien had to put in the work just to get Maya to even look his way. Let's just say… he fought for it. Still fighting for it."

A flicker of curiosity lit Dahlia's eyes. "Hmm. Interesting. It sounds like this woman is playing hard to get."

Ashcroft barked out a laugh. "Oh no, no, no-that's not it at all. Maya's different. She doesn't want complications, doesn't want to be seen. She's just trying to survive. The truth is, she keeps pulling away because she believes she doesn't belong in his world."

He tipped his chin toward Damien, mischief dancing in his eyes. "But Damien here? He's

relentless. He'll build her a world of her own if that's what it takes. Told you-your son's in love, Aunt Dahlia."

Damien's head turned, his gaze cutting sharp enough to silence most men. "Are you done talking now?"

Ashcroft only grinned wider, unbothered, while Dahlia's lips curved in the faintest smile. But his words lingered, echoing in her mind like a whisper she couldn't ignore. He'll build her a world of her own if that's what it takes. Told you-your son's in love.

Her gaze flicked toward Damien, studying the subtle changes etched into him. Was it possible? Could this woman-this Maya-truly be the reason for the rare light softening her son's features? For the calm threaded through the edges of his ruthlessness?

Dahlia’s chest tightened with something unfamiliar-hope, perhaps, or maybe disbelief. Damien had always been iron, cold and unyielding, but now… he looked different. As though someone had managed to slip past his armor and find the softness hidden beneath.

Who is she? Dahlia wondered, curiosity sharpening into a quiet hunger for answers. What kind

of woman has the power to touch him this way?

Her voice slipped into the quiet, smooth but deliberate. “Tell me, Damien,” she asked, eyes narrowing with quiet calculation. “Is she the reason behind Volkov’s presence?”

The shift in Damien was immediate. His jaw tightened, the muscle ticking hard, and his eyes darkened-dangerous, cold enough to slice through steel. Beside him, even Ashcroft’s grin faltered, his usual lightness vanishing as his expression hardened.

“Yes,” Damien said at last, his tone low and edged with iron. “You knew about his delusions. He has eyes everywhere. And now…” He exhaled slowly, the weight of it grinding through his chest. “He’s already started to make his move.

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Dahlia’s lips pressed into a thin line, the faintest crease of concern etching her brow. “This… this is a war, isn’t it?” Her voice was quiet, but every word carried steel beneath the softness. “And you… are you sure it’s worth it? Risking yourself, everything, for her?”

Damien's gaze didn't waver. The room seemed to shrink around the tension between them." Yes," he said, each word deliberate. "She's worth it. Every risk, every move… she's worth it."

Dahlia studied him for a long moment, the storm in her eyes softening just enough to betray the rare flicker of pride-and a cautious worry for the son she knew so well.

He held her gaze, unflinching, the steel in his posture tempered by an uncharacteristic vulnerability. "I love her, Mother," he said, his voice low but unwavering. "She's the only choice I've ever made in my life from my own will. I want a life with her-a future with her. And I will do everything… everything to keep her safe. To make that future ours."

For a heartbeat, Dahlia remained silent, taking in the rare intensity in her son's eyes. She saw the depth of his conviction, the sincerity that cut through his usual impenetrable composure. A subtle smile tugged at her lips, but it was tempered by concern.

"You… you truly mean that," she murmured, her voice a whisper, yet edged with awe. "You're fi nally in love, Damien. And it's real."

Her gaze softened, but the sharp glint of a strategist never left her eyes. "I see it in you… the way she brings a light to your shadowed corners, a softness I thought I'd never witness. Who is this woman," she paused, letting the words linger just enough to tease, "that has managed to claim not only your heart but this side of you I thought belonged only to me… and your grandmother?"

As the words left her lips, Dahlia allowed herself a moment of reflection, letting the rare. warmth linger.

She must be remarkable, she thought quietly, almost to herself, to have unsettled Damien Blackwood so completely, yet anchor him in a way only love could. To change him… this way… she must truly be extraordinary.

Her eyes flicked toward Damien, still resolute, still guarded yet unflinchingly open for the first time in years. If he sees a future with her… then perhaps it's real. Perhaps she is worth every

risk.

Damien met her gaze evenly, a faint, confident curve tugging at his lips. "You'll meet her soon, Mother."

Dahlia returned a soft smile, her hand brushing gently against his cheek. "I'm looking forward to it, son."

Not long after, a knock sounded at the door. James entered promptly, calm and professional. "Sir, Madam's room will be ready shortly. We've also had some food prepared for her."

Damien inclined his head in acknowledgment. "Thank you, James."

He then took a seat across from his mother, his tone quiet but threaded with concern. "How was your trip, Mom?"

Dahlia's eyes darkened slightly, a shadow of old memories crossing her face. "We followed that lead and went to an address… their old residence, the place they lived after Malia eloped with her then-boyfriend. Neighbors said they only stayed there six months before leaving." She drew in a slow, steadying breath.

“I managed to get another address where they had moved. We went there, only to find the apartment building had burned down. People nearby said a young couple with a newborn lived on the upper floor. When the fire started, they couldn’t get out in time, and the rescue came late.” Her gaze met Damien’s, voice tightening. “I had the police and medical records checked-thankfully, it wasn’t her. But… that’s all I could find, for now.”

Her fingers brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear, eyes softening yet glimmering with worry. “I’m really concerned, son. What if… something happened to them?”

Damien’s gaze softened, though his tone remained measured. “It’s hard to find someone who doesn’t want to be found, Mother. Maybe it’s time to…”

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“No!” Dahlia’s voice cut through the room, firm, resolute. Her hands clenched briefly before falling to her lap. “I will not stop. I can’t stop. You don’t understand, son. Malia… she’s like a sister to me. My best friend. The only person I had when I was at my lowest. She even saved my life-risking her own just to keep me alive. If it weren’t for her then, I’d be long gone. When she said she was leaving, she promised she’d always stay in touch, no matter what. And she kept that promise… until suddenly it stopped. Seven years ago.”

Her voice faltered, and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. She laughed softly through the ache of memory. “The last time she phoned me was the day her daughter turned eighteen. She was so emotional… she even cried, talking about how her daughter was now an adult, how soon she’d leave them. She complained about this one boy-so arrogant, always pursuing her daughter. She joked about imagining just… shooting him in the head! And she even mused about posing as a college student just to attend university with her daughter, to keep an eye on her.”

Ashcroft leaned back slightly, a wry grin tugging at his lips, though a hint of caution laced his tone. “Wait-didn’t you want Damien to meet her daughter? Well… I don’t think that’s gonna happen, Aunt

Dahlia. If your friend hates arrogant boys, then your son is doomed! That's one terrifying mother-in-law if I ever saw one."

He paused, eyes widening as if a thought just struck him. "Umm… Aunt Dahlia, why don't you try looking for the daughter instead?"

Dahlia exhaled slowly, a trace of frustration in her voice. "I don't know her name. For both our safety and hers, the less I know, the better. I know about milestones, little things… but names, locations… nothing. It's all I have left, really."

Damien's brow furrowed, concern sharpening his features. "What do you mean, for both your safety, Mother? Who is this person, really?"

Dahlia drew in a slow, measured breath, her eyes momentarily distant. "Her family… they're incredibly powerful. More powerful than ours, even combined. She left because she fell in love with someone her family could never accept. She didn't want any part of it-the power, the wealth… all she ever wanted was a simple, peaceful life with someone she truly loves."

Before she could continue, a soft knock echoed at the door.

Outside, Maya hesitated, hand hovering over the polished wood, pulse racing, breath catching with every second. She had imagined this moment countless times-the first real test of her place in Damien's world.

Frozen, she inhaled slowly, trying to steady the rush of nerves, knowing that behind this door lay the family she had been striving to be a part of-and the scrutiny she feared might define her future with Damien.

Chapter 266

Inside the suite, the room fell into silence at the soft knock. Conversation stopped mid-breath. Damien's gaze flicked toward the door, his tone quiet but certain.

"That must be her."

Across the room, Dahlia exhaled slowly. She straightened in her seat, posture flawless, though the faint crease in her brow lingered. Her hand reached for the delicate porcelain cup resting on the table. She lifted it with unhurried grace and brought it to her lips, eyes drifting toward the floor-to-ceiling windows as though the horizon could answer the questions still circling her mind-questions about her friend, about the past she could never quite put to

rest.

Damien crossed the room and opened the door. Standing there was Maya, hesitant and wide-eyed, nerves thrumming through her frame.

"Hi," she managed, her voice soft but trembling at the edges.

Damien's expression softened, a smile tugging gently at his mouth. "Hi, love." He leaned in and pressed a kiss to the top of her head, grounding her instantly. Then, with the quiet steadiness of command, he murmured, "Come in."

She stepped over the threshold, the faint scent of lavender following her. The moment her eyes adjusted to the suite, she noticed Dahlia's figure seated by the glass windows, elegant and commanding even from behind. Maya's pulse spiked, her palms damp. Every step felt heavy as Damien's hand settled at her lower back, guiding her forward with calm assurance. They reached the living area, and Damien stopped just short of where his mother sat. His voice, steady and deliberate, filled the quiet.

"Mother, I'd like you to meet Maya."

He turned slightly, his gaze softening as it fell on her. "Love, this is my mother."

Maya's throat tightened, but she drew in a breath, willing her voice to remain steady. She bowed her head slightly in respect. "Umm… good afternoon, Madam. It's… it's a pleasure to meet you."

For a heartbeat, silence reigned. Dahlia lifted her cup again, sipping slowly before lowering it. Her eyes shifted toward Maya just as the younger woman straightened from her bow.

And then it happened.

Dahlia's face drained of color, her eyes widening as if she had just seen a ghost step out of

her past. The porcelain cup slipped from her hand, shattering against the marble floor.

The sharp sound made Maya flinch violently, stumbling back a step, fear flickering in her eyes. Instinctively, Damien moved-immediately positioning himself in front of her, his broad shoulders shielding her from his mother's sudden, startling reaction.

“Mother!” His voice was sharp, protective, demanding answers.

Ashcroft pushed off the wall at once, his easy grin gone, his body tense, ready. Even James, usually calm and collected, stiffened, alert where he stood by the door.

But Dahlia didn’t move. She sat frozen, eyes shimmering with tears that threatened to fall, her entire body trembling.

Her gaze never left Maya.

And then, in a voice broken with disbelief, she whispered a name that made the air crackle with tension-

“M… Ma… Malia…”

Maya stiffened, the name slamming into her chest like a thunderclap. Malia. Her mother’s name. Her breath hitched, confusion crashing over her in dizzying waves. Why… why would Damien’s mother call me that? Her stomach twisted, every nerve alive with panic.

Dahlia pushed to her feet with startling urgency, porcelain shards crunching faintly under her heels. Her eyes glistened, wide and unblinking, fixed only on Maya. She took a trembling step forward, as if drawn by a force she couldn’t resist.

Damien shifted instantly, an unmovable wall between them. His arm swept subtly behind him, steadying Maya with a protective touch at her hip. His voice cut through the air, low and sharp.

“Mother. What are you doing?” His eyes narrowed, dangerous now. “Her name is Maya. Not

Malia.”

Her gaze darted over Maya’s face again, drinking in every detail, every line, every shadow of resemblance that made her chest ache. Tears welled hot in her eyes, spilling over as her

voice cracked.

But Dahlia only shook her head harder, her breath coming unsteady. “No… you don’t understand.” Her voice quivered, filled with disbelief and something deeper, almost reverent. Her eyes never left Maya, drinking her in as if every heartbeat confirmed the impossible. “She … she looks just like her.”

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Maya’s lips parted, a tremor running through her. She knows my mother’s name. Why? How? The weight of it pressed down on her chest, stealing the air from her lungs, as her thoughts spun out of control.

Swallowing hard, she stepped out from behind Damien’s protective stance, her hands trembling at her sides. Her voice came out fragile, unsteady, but laced with urgency.

“Madam… you… you know my mom?”

Dahlia’s breath caught, her eyes widening even further, glistening with recognition and disbelief. Her teacup still lay shattered on the carpet, forgotten.

“You…” Her voice cracked as she took a slow, trembling step forward. “You’re Malia’s daughter?”

The words hit the room like a thunderclap.

Ashcroft froze mid-step, his jaw falling open, all his usual playfulness gone in an instant. James stiffened, his composure faltering, eyes darting between Damien and Dahlia. Even Damien always the unshakable Blackwood-felt the ground shift beneath him, his body tightening as though a wave of realization had just crashed over him.

Pieces began snapping together, too many to ignore. The silence that followed was thick, suffocating, as though every person in the room had just witnessed the start of something they could never come back from.

Dahlia suddenly spun around, nearly stumbling, and snatched up her purse from the couch. Her hands dove inside, frantic, rummaging, scrabbling through its contents with a desperation that made her fingers tremble uncontrollably.

Damien exhaled sharply and moved toward her, lowering himself into a squat so he could meet her at eye level. Gently, he reached for her hands, still buried in the purse, steadying them with his own.

“Mom… calm down.”

Dahlia froze, her chest heaving. Slowly, her tear-streaked gaze lifted to meet her son’s. The weight in her eyes was unbearable, ancient grief resurfacing in a tidal wave.

Her lips quivered as she whispered, voice breaking.

“Son… son… I think… I think I finally found her. Malia… she… she looks exactly like Malia.”

The room held its breath.

Maya’s knees went weak, her pulse hammering as Dahlia’s words sank in. She thinks I look like my mom? But why… why does it sound like she’s been searching for her? Could my mom be the friend Damien said his mother has been trying to find all these years?

Then, like shards of glass slicing through her thoughts, a memory returned-Damien’s voice back in the cabin, telling her that his mother’s closest friend had suddenly cut off contact seven years ago.

Seven years ago.

The same year her parents’ car went off the road. The year her world shattered.

A tremor rippled through her chest, her breath catching painfully as the pieces began sliding into place.

Dahlia's trembling hands finally stilled as she pulled something from the depths of her purse -a worn photograph, its edges frayed, the colors softened by time. Her fingers lingered on it for a moment before she pressed it into Damien's hands, her eyes brimming.

Damien lowered his gaze to the photo. Two young women stood side by side, so close their shoulders touched, their smiles wide and carefree. The one on the left was unmistakably his mother, youthful and radiant. But the woman beside her-her eyes, her smile, even the curve of her face-was Maya.

His breath caught in his throat. For a heartbeat, he thought he was staring at Maya herself.

Damien's jaw clenched, a muscle ticking as he lifted his eyes from the photo to Maya, standing pale and trembling across the room. The resemblance was undeniable.

Slowly, he whispered, voice rough with disbelief, "She… she looks exactly like you."

Damien held the photo steadily, then extended it toward Maya. Her trembling fingers hovered over it before she carefully took it, as if the paper might shatter in her hands.

Her eyes widened, taking in the image. The resemblance was uncanny-the woman beside Damien's mother was undeniably her. A choked breath escaped her lips, and her hands shook as tears welled in her eyes.

“This… this is my mom,” she whispered, voice barely audible, the weight of realization pressing down on her chest. Shock, disbelief, and something achingly familiar collided inside her, leaving her momentarily frozen.

She tore her eyes away from the photo, tears streaming freely now. Her gaze scanned the room, taking in the stunned expressions of everyone around her, before finally settling on

Damien, who remained calm and steady. Then, hesitantly, she looked at Dahlia.

Dahlia’s own tears spilled over, one hand flying to her mouth as her voice cracked. “Oh my God… I finally found you…”

She stepped forward, closing the distance, stopping just a hand’s length away from Maya.

“Madam…” Maya’s voice trembled.

“Sweetheart… I… I’m Dahlia,” Dahlia said, her voice thick with emotion. “Your mom… your mom is my dearest friend. I’ve… I’ve been searching for her everywhere. Where is she? How is she?”

Maya’s sobs broke through as she shook her head. “My mom… she… she passed away seven years ago.”

The words hit Dahlia like a physical blow. Her knees weakened, her hands clenching as if to hold onto the world around her. “What? No! No… no… no…”

“Ma… madam…” Maya reached out, her voice quivering, unsure how to bridge the gap between grief and comfort.

Dahlia’s knees buckled, the world tipping as the weight of years of searching, the sudden. shock of seeing Maya, and the cruel reality of loss hit her all at once. Her hands fumbled helplessly, grasping at the air, the photo slipping from her fingers and fluttering to the floor.

Damien reacted instantly, catching her as she swayed, steadying her against his chest. His arms wrapped around her lightly but firmly, grounding her in the room, while his eyes-dark, tense, yet full of fierce concern-never left hers.

“Oh… my God… no… Malia!!” Dahlia’s voice shattered, cracking under the weight of grief and disbelief. Tears poured down her cheeks, each one a testament to years of longing and heartache. Her body trembled violently, her chest heaving as if she could no longer draw in

air.

And then, as if the weight of the world had finally crushed her, her knees gave way. Dahlia collapsed forward, fainting into Damien’s arms.

“Mom!!” Damien shouted, panic flooding his voice as he caught her before she hit the floor completely. His hands were steady, strong, but his heart raced.

He snapped toward James, his tone sharp, urgent. “James! Call a doctor-now!!”

Damien’s grip on his mother tightened, his jaw set with fierce determination, while Maya stood frozen, heart pounding, realizing just how deep the past and its losses ran in this family. The room was silent, heavy with grief, fear, and a fragile, unspoken hope-each

heartbeat a reminder that some truths, once found, could change everything.

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Maya stood frozen. Her heart pounded painfully in her chest, her breath shallow as panic and grief swirled together. She wanted to move, to help, but her legs felt like stone.

“Damien…” her voice broke, soft and uncertain, as if she feared speaking would make the reality sharper.

“Stay back, love,” Damien said quickly, his tone gentler but firm as his eyes flicked to her. “It’s okay… I’ve got her.” Yet beneath the steadiness in his voice, his jaw was tight, his shoulders tense. He had never looked so torn between two worlds-his role as Dahlia’s son and his instinct to shield Maya.

He lifted Dahlia carefully onto the couch, adjusting her head against the cushions with practiced care. Her hand slipped from his grasp, cold and trembling, and Damien swallowed hard.

“Mom… wake up.” His voice lowered to a murmur, coaxing, pleading.

Maya finally found her footing, stepping closer despite her nerves. Her eyes locked on Dahlia's pale face, her lips trembling as guilt and confusion pressed down on her chest. Did I cause this? Did the truth about my mom break her this much?

Ashcroft placed a steadying hand on Damien's shoulder. "She'll be fine. Don't lose your head now." But even his voice lacked conviction.

Not long after, another knock came at the door-this one sharper, urgent.

James moved quickly to answer, ushering in the resort's in-house doctor, a man in his forties with a calm but efficient demeanor. He carried a leather medical bag and immediately crossed the room.

"What happened?" the doctor asked briskly, already checking her pulse and lifting her eyelids. "She fainted. Her pulse was unsteady," Damien replied, his voice clipped with tension. The doctor nodded once, pressing his stethoscope to her chest. After a moment, he straightened, his tone steady but decisive. "She needs to be moved to a bed where she can lie flat. The couch won't do-it's too rigid. May we move her to one of the bedrooms?"

"Yes," Damien said instantly, his tone leaving no room for question. He looked at James." Prepare the second bedroom."

"Right away, sir." James disappeared down the hall, returning moments later with the door open and the bed turned down.

Damien rose, lifting his mother carefully into his arms, her slight frame seeming too fragile in that moment. His jaw was tight, his shoulders squared, but his grip was protective, unyielding.

“This way, sir,” James guided, leading them toward the spare bedroom. The doctor followed close behind, already pulling gloves from his bag.

The door closed softly after them, leaving the suite’s living area suddenly hushed.

Maya stood frozen where she was, her eyes fixed on the hallway Damien had disappeared down. Her chest tightened with every breath, the echo of Dahlia’s cries still raw in her mind. She wrapped her arms around herself unconsciously, as if trying to hold her trembling body together.

Ashcroft lingered nearby, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed. His usual grin was nowhere to be found. Instead, his eyes tracked her, sharp and knowing, though softer than she expected.

“Not exactly how you pictured meeting your future mother-in-law, huh?” he said at last, his tone light but not mocking.

Maya blinked at him, lips parting, but no words came out. The weight in her chest was too heavy.

Ashcroft tilted his head, his gaze lingering on the closed bedroom door before shifting back to Maya.

“I don’t know all the details,” he admitted softly, “but I do know your mom was… very important to her.” He let out a slow sigh, running a hand across the back of his neck. “Aunt Dahlia’s spent years searching for her-seven long years of chasing leads, traveling, hoping, and always ending up with dead ends.”

His voice dipped lower, more careful. “And now, to find out the person she’s been desperate to see again is already gone…” He trailed off, eyes flicking toward Maya, who kept her head bowed, shoulders trembling.

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Ashcroft hesitated, then leaned back slightly, his tone gentler. “It’s a painful blow, no doubt. But don’t worry, Maya… she’s strong. She’ll get through this.”

Maya lowered her eyes, fresh tears burning as she nodded faintly. All she could do now was

wait.

A soft knock broke the silence. Ashcroft rose and pulled the door open. Standing there was a woman who looked to be in her early forties, dressed sharply in a tailored suit and tie that gave her an air of composed authority.

“Sir,” she bowed politely.

“Come in,” Ashcroft said, stepping aside. His tone softened as he gestured between them.” Maya, this is Kim-Aunt Dahlia’s personal assistant. Kim, this is Maya… Damien’s wife.”

Maya’s eyes widened, heat rushing to her cheeks at the introduction.

Kim moved forward and bowed respectfully, her words precise. “Ms. Maya, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Maya lifted her hands quickly, flustered. “N-no, please… I’m not his wife.”

Ashcroft smirked, leaning lazily against the doorframe. “Not yet. But you will be. So it’s just the same.”

Kim straightened, her eyes lingering on Maya for a moment too long. A flicker of surprise- almost recognition-passed over her usually composed face. Her gaze softened as if something clicked inside her, like a puzzle piece sliding into place.

The resemblance was undeniable. She had seen that same smile, those same eyes, in the old photograph her boss carried everywhere. The woman Dahlia had spent years searching

for.

Kim’s chest tightened, though she masked it quickly with a professional nod. “I… understand now,” she murmured almost to herself, then quickly composed her features again.

Maya tilted her head slightly, catching the way Kim’s eyes lingered on her. It wasn’t the polite curiosity of a stranger meeting someone new-it was something deeper, sharper. Almost… recognition.

Her chest tightened. Why is she looking at me like that?

Kim blinked, realizing she'd been staring, and quickly lowered her gaze, slipping back into her

professional composure. "Forgive me," she said smoothly, "you just… resemble someone very dear to Madam."

Ashcroft's brows rose faintly at that, but he didn't comment. Maya, however, felt her pulse quicken, her mind immediately going to the photo Damien had shown her-the one of her mother standing beside Dahlia, smiling as though they'd shared the world.

Her voice came out fragile, trembling. "You… you've seen her before?"

Kim hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "Not in person. But Madam has shown me her photograph many times over the years. She never stopped searching."

Kim's lips pressed into a tight line, as if steadying herself. "The resemblance, Ms. Maya… it's striking."

Maya's throat constricted, her tears threatening again. She couldn't tell if the weight pressing down on her chest was grief, fear, or a strange new bond tying her closer to Damien's world.

Maya swallowed hard, her voice trembling as she finally spoke. "She's… she's my mom. And she… she passed away seven years ago."

Kim's expression softened instantly, her professional mask slipping into something more human-grief mirrored with sympathy. "I'm so sorry to hear that, Ms. Maya," she murmured, bowing her head respectfully before straightening again. Her gaze shifted toward the closed bedroom door where her Madam lay. "James called me… told me Madam fainted. I had a feeling it was because of this."

Maya gave a small nod, her tears returning.

Kim exhaled deeply, a trace of heaviness in her tone. "It broke her. She's been waiting, searching… holding onto hope for so long. And to finally learn this truth… it must feel like the ground has been ripped away beneath her."

She paused, then added with quiet conviction, "But I know Madam. She's stronger than anyone realizes. Even if she never got to reunite with your mother, she will cling to what she has left of her-" her eyes flicked back to Maya, soft but certain, "-you."

Maya's lips trembled, her heart caught between grief and something she couldn't name.

Kim allowed a faint, knowing smile to curve her lips. "The universe has strange ways of weaving paths together. Who could have imagined? That the daughter of her dearest friend- the one she's been praying would someday stand beside her son-would be the very woman her son found, on his own. Fate, destiny, call it what you will… but it feels as though your meeting was always meant to be."

Kim's words lingered in the air, warm and profound, sinking deep into Maya's heart. Before she could respond, Ashcroft leaned back in his chair, folding his arms with a grin.

"I agree!" he chimed in, his tone lighter but sincere. "You know, from the beginning, I honestly couldn't figure out how-or why-you caught Damien's attention. No offense, sis, but you probably know better

than anyone… there are women who'd sell their souls just to get a fraction of his attention." He shook his head, chuckling. "But you? You didn't even try. You just… broke through his walls without lifting a finger. And every minute, whether he admits it or not, he's falling deeper and deeper. The two of you-" he gestured between her and the closed bedroom door, "-you're meant to be. What do you call that? Soulmates! That's it. You're each other's soulmates."

Then he paused, his face twisting in mock horror. "Damn! I can't believe those words just came out of my mouth. That's so cheesy it makes me cringe!" He rubbed his arms dramatically as if brushing off goosebumps. "Ugh, gross. I feel like I need a drink after saying

that."

The sudden shift earned a soft chuckle from Maya, her tears easing for the first time since everything unfolded. Even Kim let out a light laugh, shaking her head at Ashcroft's theatrics. Ashcroft was just about to rise for a drink when a soft click from the bedroom made him pause, attention snapping back.

Kim straibeing yearned for good news, for some sign that the storm of grief could finally give way to clarity. She barely dared to breathe as the bedroom door began to open.

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The soft click of the bedroom door echoed through the suite, leaving Maya and those remaining in the living room with a quiet, tense pause.

James stepped out first, his expression composed as always, followed closely by the resort's in-house doctor. Damien trailed behind them, closing the door gently before facing the room.

The doctor gave a brief nod before addressing Damien. “She just needs to rest. Her vitals are stable now. What happened was shock, compounded by stress. Allow her time to recover. I’ve left some medication-mild pills for anxiety. They’ll help calm her down, but only take them when absolutely necessary.”

Damien inclined his head, his voice steady but carrying weight. “Thank you, doctor.”

“My pleasure.” The doctor offered a polite bow. “Call me anytime if there’s anything else.” James stepped forward at once. “I’ll see you out, doctor. Thank you.”

With that, James and the doctor exited quietly, leaving Damien standing by the door, his presence filling the room, dark eyes flicking instinctively toward Maya.

Kim gave a respectful nod as Damien approached. “Sir,” she greeted, her tone precise but

warm.

Damien acknowledged her with a small nod in return, then turned toward Maya, giving her a reassuring glance.

Kim’s eyes flicked back to Damien. “How’s Madam?”

“She’s fine now, just resting,” Damien replied, his voice calm but measured. “How was her condition before today?”

Kim exhaled softly. “Madam was fine for the most part, but the past three days have taken a toll on her-especially after we followed the last lead to the old apartment building that burned down. Madam grew anxious… restless, barely sleeping or eating while waiting for the medical records. When we finally confirmed it wasn’t her friend, she felt a sense of relief.”

Damien responded with a thoughtful hum, “Mmm.”

He then moved to sit beside Maya, close enough for comfort and support. “Kim,” he said gently, “I’m sure you’ve met my wife-Maya.”

Maya’s eyes widened in surprise, caught off guard by the formal introduction.

Ashcroft murmured under his breath, smirking, “Told you.”

Kim’s face softened into a genuine smile. “Yes, sir. I’ve already met Madam,” she said, her tone respectful yet kind.

Maya shook her head quickly,”Please… don’t call me that. Maya is fine.”

Kim inclined her head, her expression understanding. “Of course, Ms. Maya.”

She gave a small, respectful bow. “Excuse me, I’ll check on Madam.” With that, she turned and walked briskly toward the bedroom where Dahlia was resting, her footsteps soft but purposeful.

Ashcroft slapped his thighs with a loud clap and rose from his seat. “Well! That was intense. But I’m glad Aunt Dahlia’s fine. Now, I need a drink.” Without another word, he strode toward the bar, the tension of the past hour slowly rolling off him.

Damien shifted slightly, sitting closer to Maya. His hand moved around her back, drawing her gently against his chest. “I’m sorry, love,” he murmured, voice low and steady. “I’m sorry if my mom scared you. I had no idea your mother was the friend she’s been searching for all these years.”

Maya’s lips trembled as she shook her head, pressing a hand lightly against his chest. ” Damien… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble. I…”

“Shhh…” he interrupted softly, tilting her chin toward him. “What are you sorry for? Mom will be fine. She just needs to rest.”

Maya nodded, resting her head back against his chest, letting his steady heartbeat soothe her nerves.

Damien’s voice grew slightly more serious. “I must warn you.”

Maya lifted her head, eyes searching his. “What do you mean?”

“When Mom wakes up… she’ll have a lot of questions,” he explained, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “If you’re not comfortable answering something, just tell me. I’ll handle it.”

Maya exhaled slowly, letting the tightness in her chest ease just a little. Her gaze lifted to Damien, a quiet determination settling over her features, softening the edges of her grief.