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“I… I’ll tell her what she wants to know,” she murmured, voice steady despite the lingering tremor. “As long as I have the answers. That’s the least I can do… she deserves them.”

Her words hung in the air, a fragile mix of resolve and longing, carrying both her promise to Damien’s mom and her own yearning to understand the mother she had lost.

Damien leaned closer, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of Maya’s head, tightening his hold around her as if he could shield her from the world. His voice was low, warm, teasing, yet sincere.

“You’ll have plenty of time,” he murmured softly, “and I’m sure my mom won’t hesitate to ask every little question she’s been dying to know.”

He pulled back slightly to look at her, eyes dark with tenderness. “It turns out… you’re the woman my mom always hoped I’d end up with. I guess that guarantees the fact that your mo ther-in-law already loves you. Probably more than her own son.”

Maya blinked, a mixture of surprise and warmth spreading across her face. She lifted her hands to rest on his chest, heart fluttering. “She… she loves me? Already?” she whispered, a small, incredulous laugh escaping her lips.

Damien’s lips curved into a confident, gentle smile. “Oh, absolutely. She’s been waiting all these years to meet the daughter of her dearest friend… and now, here you are. And the best part? I’m already in love with you. How could she not love you? And besides, She always dreamed of having a daughter… and now, in a way, she finally has one.”

Maya's cheeks warmed, a mixture of shyness and delight fluttering through her chest. She pressed lightly against him, still holding his gaze. "I… I hope I can live up to her expectations," she murmured softly, her voice tinged with both awe and curiosity. "And… I want to know more about my mom too… from her. I want to understand her, who she was, and… everything my mom meant to your mom."

Damien's fingers tightened gently around hers, his eyes darkening with intensity and affection. "You will," he promised, his voice steady. "She won't hold anything back. And I'll be right here with you… through every question, every memory."

He paused, a flicker of concern crossing his features. "Although… now I'm a little worried."

Maya pulled herself up slightly from his chest, brow furrowed. "Why?"

Damien's lips quirked with a mix of teasing and seriousness. "I have a feeling she's going to take all your time. What about me? I like being your priority, you know?"

He leaned closer, his warm breath brushing against her ear as he whispered, a teasing lilt in his voice, "I need you too… we still have a lot to… learn together… hmm."

Maya's breath caught, a flush creeping up her neck as heat spread through her. Her pulse quickened, and she felt her hands instinctively clutch at his chest. "Damien…" she murmured, both flustered and fluttering with something dangerously close to excitement.

He chuckled softly, low and intimate, his fingers tightening around hers. “Don’t worry, love. We’ll make time… even if my mother tries to steal you away.”

Maya’s lips curved into a shy smile, heart fluttering against his steady presence, feeling the warmth of safety, teasing, and unspoken desire all at once.

Their silent moment didn’t last long. Ashcroft’s booming voice cut through the quiet, shattering the tender bubble around them. “Whoa! Don’t get too confident, brother! Remember what Aunt Dahlia said earlier about her mom wanting to put a bullet in someone’s head? Who knows if that arrogant boy-so eager to chase after her-will even come back!”

Damien’s eyes darkened instantly, his jaw tightening as he shot Ashcroft a sharp, icy glare. The warmth from earlier hardened into a warning, silent but deadly.

Maya blinked, utterly bewildered, pushing back slightly from Damien’s embrace. Her eyes flicked between him, seated beside her, and Ashcroft, leaning casually against the wall with a glass of amber-gold liquid in hand. “Wait… what? Arrogant boy? Bullet to the head? What… what are you two talking about?”

Ashcroft laughed, throwing his hands up in mock surrender, clearly relishing the ripple he’d set off. “Apparently your mom told Aunt Dahlia there was some arrogant boy pestering her daughter-so bad she considered putting a bullet in his head.”

Maya blinked, “My mom? Arrogant boy?” then a slow lightbulb of recognition went on.

“Oh… oh-William. From high school!”

Damien snapped, every inch suddenly alert. “You remember his name?” His voice had a hungry, narrow edge to it.

Maya startled, then the tension cracked, and she let out a soft, incredulous laugh. “That was ages ago-just high school nonsense. He was the basketball captain, loudmouthed and full of himself.” She gave a little shrug, a smile tugging at her lips. “He’s a family man now. Ended up marrying the cheer captain right after college, and they’ve got two kids.”

Damien didn’t look convinced. His jaw tightened, the threat rolling off him like a dark current. “You’re keeping tabs on him? Are you still in contact? Is he reaching out to you? Where is he? What’s his full name? I’ll-” He cut off, the words raw and too close to a promise. “I’ll hunt

him down and be the one to put a bullet in his head.”

Maya blinked, caught between horror and amusement, and quickly reached for Damien’s hand. “Damien-calm down. He’s harmless. I’m not even in touch with him. I just happened to see it on social media, that’s all.”

Ashcroft, lounging in the doorway with his glass, let out a delighted snort. “See? Nothing to worry about. Unless, of course, you’re planning to go full-on vigilante over a high school jock.”

Damien exhaled sharply, the fire in his eyes dimming to a low, possessive smolder. He looked both absurdly protective and deeply human all at once. Then, almost too smoothly, his gaze snapped to Ashcroft. “You run your mouth like a woman. Which reminds me…” His eyes narrowed. “I still have a score to settle with you.”

Ashcroft arched a brow, sipping his drink. “Oh? And what score would that be?”

Damien’s jaw tightened, his voice low, pointed. “You and Harper. What was that about?”

Ashcroft froze mid-sip, Damien’s question landing harder than he expected. For a rare moment, the usual cocky grin slipped from his face.

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Ashcroft swallowed, a flicker of unease crossing his features. He forced a casual shrug, but it did little to hide the tension coiling in his chest.

“Harper?” Ashcroft echoed, tone casual, but the twitch in his jaw betrayed him. “What about

her?

But the question hit a nerve, and despite his easy front, something unsettled twisted in his

chest.

Damn it. He remembered everything. He’d been tipsy, sure, but not drunk-not enough to forget-and Harper wasn’t either. It had been late, just the two of them left, the air thick with alcohol and reckless silence. One glance, one spark, and heat took over.

And she wasn't like anyone else.

He hated admitting it, even to himself, but Harper was beautiful. Too beautiful. And fiery- always too chatty, too sharp, too strong-willed for his liking. He preferred women who bent easily to his control, submissive, soft, the kind that let him lead without resistance. Harper? She was the opposite. With her, every second was a tug of war-power against power, and that made being "alpha" impossible.

And yet… he couldn't deny it. Last night had been wild, unrestrained, intoxicating. The best sex he'd ever had. Just thinking about it made his jaw tighten, a mix of pride and irritation flaring in his chest.

The kind of heat that burned into memory and refused to let go.

He hated it. He craved it.

But that wasn't something Damien-or anyone-needed to know. Not now.

Ashcroft's grip on the glass tightened, the amber liquid trembling as if it carried his unrest. He cleared his throat, forcing a lazy smirk back onto his face, masking the storm underneath. "Tch. It wasn't intentional. What happened, happened. She already said it herself earlier-it's nothing. No big deal."

He waved dismissively, though his grip on the glass tightened just a little. "Nothing worth talking about."

But even as the words left his mouth, guilt coiled in his gut. Because deep down, he knew- Harper was far from “nothing.”

Maya tilted her head, her brows knitting as she glanced between them. She could feel the

tension slicing through the air. “Nothing?” she echoed softly, suspicion creeping in.

Damien’s eyes narrowed further, his voice low, dangerous. “Are you lying to me, Nick?”

Ashcroft chuckled, but it was sharp, edged-the kind that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Why would I lie? Look, I know I crossed a line-she’s your employee, and I’m not proud of it. I apologize for that. But… we’re both adults, bored, had too much to drink, and yes… we had sex. Consensually. Nothing more, nothing less.”

A flicker of warning passed through Damien’s eyes, his voice low and controlled, but edged with barely restrained anger. “Forget that she works for me-you knew she’s Maya’s friend. You should’ve controlled yourself… kept your distance from the situation.”

Ashcroft’s grin wavered, just for a moment, as the room’s tension thickened. The air between them felt heavier, charged with unspoken consequences.

Maya hesitated, her voice quiet but curious. “Nick… do you… do you like Harper?”

Ashcroft blinked, flustered and overly dramatic. “What? No! No way! Absolutely not!” He paused, then cocked his head with feigned arrogance, masking a hint of hesitation. “Wait… why? Did she say she likes me? She better not…”

Maya blinked, caught off guard by his over-the-top reaction.

Damien’s stare sharpened, his gaze calculating. Really, Nick? That’s your answer? he thought, the corner of his mouth tightening. He’s either lying-or more involved than he’s willing to admit. That smirk doesn’t fool me.

His jaw clenched as he leaned back slightly, studying Ashcroft like a predator sizing up a potential threat, unwilling to let the matter go so easily.

Maya shook her head gently, a soft blush creeping up her cheeks. “No… she didn’t say anything like that… I’m just… curious.”

Ashcroft raised an eyebrow, his tone teasing yet suspicious. “Curious about what?”

Maya hesitated, swallowing lightly before clearing her throat. “About… why. Why did you two… do it if… if you didn’t like each other?”

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Both Ashcroft and Damien snapped their heads toward her, caught off guard, eyes widening slightly at the innocence in her question.

Ashcroft let out an awkward, almost nervous laugh. “W-We… we had sex, Maya. We didn’t… make love or anything. Just… a one-night stand, technically. No strings attached.”

Maya’s gaze stayed on him, thoughtful, still tinged with that quiet, unassuming innocence. “I get that,” she murmured, “but I believe… even one night stands require… some sort of attraction, right?”

Ashcroft and Damien exchanged a sharp glance, a silent conversation passing between them. Ashcroft’s eyes widened slightly, almost pleading, as if silently begging Damien to save him from this conversation. He looked helpless, uncertain, and slightly panicked-clearly not used to being put on the spot like this.

Maya blinked, tilting her head slightly, her innocence cutting sharply through the heavy tension in the room. Her voice was soft, curious, and unguarded. “Like Damien…” she started, glancing between the two men. Her eyes landed on Damien, then flicked to Ashcroft. “You said you’ve been with women before. What you told me… those were different, right? Those moments weren’t one-night stands-they were… a service. Something paid for. So of course there were no strings attached.”

Her gaze turned back to Ashcroft, warm yet probing. “But Harper… she’s not an escort, or anything like that. You knew each other. Maybe not friends, but at least acquaintances. There’s… a relationship, a connection between the two of you.”

She paused, letting the words sink in, then looked at both of them directly. Her voice softened, curious yet thoughtful. “Is it just… lust? Satisfying each other’s needs, even if you don’t like each other, or aren’t even attracted to each other?”

She let the words hang, vulnerable yet insistent, giving them both a silent challenge: be

honest.

Maya tilted her head, soft blush rising on her cheeks as she tried to make sense of the awkward tension. “I mean… don’t get me wrong. If I got drunk-so drunk-I don’t think I’d do it with you. Not because I’m not attracted to you, but because I… know you. We have a relationship. You’re Damien’s friend, and… you’re mine too. So…”

Damien’s jaw tightened instantly, his dark eyes narrowing, and his possessiveness flared like wildfire. His hand squeezed hers gently but firmly, pulling her closer. “First of all,” he said, voice low, clipped with warning, “you will never… ever get drunk… too drunk… especially if

you’re not with me.”

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in, before continuing, his tone hardening yet still laced with warmth and care. “Second… I’m glad you’re not interested in this asshole. And lastly… do you really think I’d allow a situation like that to happen? No way!!”

Damien’s fingers tightened slightly around hers again, dark eyes softening just enough as he added, almost in a growl, “You’re mine… and I don’t share what’s mine.”

Maya blinked, wide-eyed at the intensity, then a nervous laugh escaped her lips. “Damien…” she whispered, a mix of awe, amusement, and a little embarrassment fluttering in her chest. Ashcroft swallowed hard, the color rising in his neck. He opened his mouth, then hesitated, his usual bravado nowhere to be found.

Finally, Ashcroft let out an awkward, nervous laugh, scratching the back of his neck. “I… uh… no, it’s not like that,” he admitted, his voice rough around the edges. “It was… just a moment. Heat, alcohol… mistakes. I didn’t mean anything by it. There weren’t feelings… really.”

Maya's brow furrowed slightly, curiosity unquenched.

"You're saying it was just lust?" she pressed gently, tilting her head.

Ashcroft shifted under the intensity of her gaze, fidgeting slightly. "Yeah… I mean, it was physical. That's it. No strings, no love, no… emotional attachment."

Maya studied him for a long moment, the soft blush still on her cheeks. "Hmm," she murmured, tilting her head as if piecing together some puzzle. "I guess… I understand that. But… even lust needs some kind of attraction, doesn't it? Or some spark?"

Ashcroft let out a low, awkward chuckle, running a hand down his face as if trying to erase the moment entirely. "You're making it sound… way more complicated than it actually is," he muttered, eyes darting between Maya and Damien.

Both of them stayed silent, waiting, their patience deliberate and sharp, and Ashcroft's grin faltered slightly under their scrutiny. He scratched the back of his neck, brow furrowed, as though trying to buy time. Then a sudden, almost mischievous idea lit up his expression.

"Wait-why am I the only one getting grilled here?" he said, his tone trying to sound light but failing to mask the tension. "Maybe you should grill her instead."

Before either of them could react, he tipped back the rest of his amber-gold drink in one swift motion, the burn of alcohol scorching his throat. He set the empty glass down with a dramatic thud. “You heard her earlier, right? She said it too. No big deal-it was just sex. And that crazy woman even had the audacity to insult me!”

Damien leaned back slightly, a sly smirk tugging at his lips, eyes narrowing with a teasing glint. His voice dropped, low and controlled, yet laced with mischief. “Is it, though?”

Ashcroft froze. “Is it… what?”

“Just sex?” Damien repeated, stretching the words, letting the silence hang heavy in the room. His gaze didn’t waver from Ashcroft, dark and sharp, challenging.

Maya, caught between amusement and curiosity, blinked at him, unsure whether to laugh or

gasp.

Before Ashcroft could respond, the bedroom door creaked open, and Kim’s voice called out, slightly breathless.

“Madam… Madam… wait.”

All three heads snapped toward the door, the teasing tension between Damien and Ashcroft instantly suspended. Maya’s heart skipped, a mix of curiosity and apprehension twisting in

her chest.

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And then-she appeared.

Dahlia.

Shaky but determined, she stepped out of the room, one hand trailing the wall for balance. Her face was pale, her body frail, but her eyes… her eyes were burning with desperation as they searched, scanned, reached.

“Maya,” she whispered, voice trembling, heavy with an ache that filled the room.

Damien shot to his feet in an instant, closing the space between them, his hands grasping her arms to steady her fragile frame. Panic flared in his eyes. “Mother! You need to rest.”

But Dahlia shook her head fiercely, even as her body swayed against his hold. “No… no, son. I’ve rested enough. I’m fine.” Her lips quivered, her voice cracking as her gaze swept over the room, frantic and unrelenting. “I need to see her. Where… where is she? Where’s Maya?”

Maya stood frozen behind Damien, his tall frame instinctively shielding her as though he could protect her from the intensity of Dahlia’s grief. But Maya’s heart ached, tugging her forward. Slowly, she stepped out from behind him.

“Madam…” her voice was soft, almost unsure.

The moment Dahlia’s eyes found her, fresh tears spilled over, turning them red and glassy. With trembling steps, she closed the distance between them, her frail hands lifting to cradle Maya’s face.

“Oh… sweetheart…” Dahlia whispered, her voice breaking as a shaky smile curved her lips.

Maya’s chest tightened, the sheer weight of Dahlia’s emotion pressing down on her. When Dahlia pulled her into an embrace, the warmth and sorrow tangled so thickly that Maya’s own tears began to fall.

She hesitated for a moment-then, gently, slowly, she raised her hands and returned the hug, holding Dahlia lightly, as though afraid she might break her.

“Madam…” Maya breathed, her voice cracking.

Dahlia only held her tighter, burying her face against Maya’s shoulder as sobs wracked her fragile frame. Her voice broke, the words tumbling out between gasps of breath.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart… I’m so sorry… I was too late.” Her tears soaked through Maya’s blouse as her trembling hands gripped her as if afraid to let go. “I’m sorry… I should’ve been there. I

should've found you sooner. I'm so, so sorry…"

Each apology was heavier than the last, dripping with years of regret. The weight of her sorrow pressed against Maya's chest, leaving her breathless.

Maya's own tears slid down her cheeks as she tried to steady her voice. "Madam… please… don't…"

But Dahlia only shook her head against her, the words spilling endlessly like a broken prayer. I'm sorry, sweetheart. I failed you. I failed her. Forgive me… forgive me…"

The room seemed to hold its breath, the weight of her grief pressing down on everyone present. Kim-hardened by years of service at Dahlia's side-felt her throat tighten. She had seen her madam weather storms, command with an iron fist, never once faltering. Yet now, for the first time, she was crumbling.

Even Damien, who had grown up believing his mother unshakable, stood frozen. In all his life, he had never seen her shed a tear-let alone break so completely.

And Ashcroft… he could only stare. The woman before him was not the Aunt Dahlia he had known-the formidable, untouchable force of his childhood. No, this was someone else entirely. Someone human. Fragile. Broken.

Damien stepped forward, his voice firm yet steady. "Mother… please, calm yourself."

His gaze flicked to Kim, sharp and commanding. “Her medicine-now.”

Dahlia shook her head, pulling back slightly from Maya as her trembling hands clutched Damien’s arms for support. “No, no… I don’t need it, son. I’m fine,” she murmured, her voice tight, still trembling from lingering emotion. “I’m just… I’m just overwhelmed with everything right now. I just…”

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she finally looked back at Maya, her voice softening. “I just want to spend time with Maya…”

Then, almost hesitantly, she added, her hand reaching out just slightly, “Maya… sweetheart… can we talk?”

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Maya’s heart tightened at the vulnerability in Dahlia’s voice. For the first time, the formidable woman before her seemed less a matriarch and more… human. She nodded gently, taking a tentative step forward, ready to bridge the gap that years of absence had carved between them.

She reached out and gently placed her hand over hers, offering a soft, reassuring smile. “I’d love to.”

Her eyes then flicked to Damien. Their gazes locked, an unspoken conversation passing between them- Maya silently telling him it was okay, that she could handle this, that she wanted this moment too.

Damien’s lips pressed into a thin line as he surrendered, nodding slowly.

Maya eased closer, slipping an arm gently around Dahlia's shoulders, guiding her toward the couch with quiet care. "Come… let's sit down for a moment," she said, her voice soft and steady. Once Dahlia was settled, Maya lingered beside her, concern etched in her gaze. "I'll bring you some water," she whispered, her tone warm and tender.

Dahlia's hand tightened gently around Maya's, her voice trembling but filled with warmth. " Please… don't call me Madam anymore. Call me Aunt Dahlia, alright?"

Damien leaned in, his tone softer than usual, almost teasing but with an edge of longing. "Or

you could call her Mom."

Maya blinked, caught off guard, her eyes darting between the two. A small, surprised laugh slipped out as her cheeks flushed with a soft blush. She shook her head gently, chuckling at Damien's remark, then turned back to Dahlia. Her lips curved into a shy yet genuine smile, her voice tender. "Okay… Aunt Dahlia."

She stood and walked toward the kitchen area to fetch the water, Damien close behind.

In the privacy of the kitchen, Damien's voice was low, tinged with concern. "Love… you don't-

"

Maya looked up at him, their eyes locking as they stood face to face. She smiled softly. “I’m fine, love. Don’t worry.”

Damien’s thumb brushed away the tears streaking her cheeks. “Are you sure?”

Maya leaned her face into his hand, whispering, “Yes…”

Satisfied, Damien pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly-holding her a moment longer

than necessary. His voice dropped, warm but insistent. “I still say you should call her Mom.”

Maya let out a hearty laugh, swatting lightly at his chest. “Stop it, Damien. Be serious.” His gaze didn’t waver. “I am serious, love.”

When they returned to the living room, Maya carried the glass of water with both hands, approaching Dahlia with quiet care. She sat beside her, offering it gently. “Please… have a drink first, Ma-” she caught herself, cheeks coloring, “I mean… Aunt Dahlia.”

Dahlia accepted it, raising the glass to her lips and taking a small, steady sip.

She set the glass down, her hands lingering slightly on it, as if the act grounded her. Her voice was soft, trembling just enough to betray the worry she tried to hide, and her eyes searched Maya’s face with earnest intensity. “Tell me about yourself, sweetheart… How have you been? Where are you living now? Are you… doing well? And your brother-where is he? How is he holding up? And your father… how is he managing everything?”

Maya offered a gentle smile, her eyes warm and steady. A soft, reassuring sigh escaped her lips as she reached out, lightly brushing Dahlia's hand. "Aunt Dahlia… please, calm down," she murmured, her voice tender but firm. "I'm not going anywhere. We have all the time in the world… we can talk for as long as you need, all night if we must."

Dahlia's gaze fell for a moment, her shoulders sagging as if carrying the weight of all she'd missed. When she looked back at Maya, her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "I… I'm sorry, she whispered, her voice trembling. "I'm just… I don't know how to… I've missed so much."

Maya reached out, covering Dahlia's trembling hand with her own, holding it gently but firmly. "I understand…" she murmured, her voice soft yet steady. "It's alright. We're here now-that's what matters."

Dahlia's lips trembled, and she let a small, shaky smile grace her face, leaning just a fraction toward Maya. The tension in the room eased slightly, the weight of years apart and unspoken grief lingering but softened by their closeness.

Maya drew in a slow, steady breath, her voice gentle as she said, "How about… we start with

me?"

Dahlia nodded, her eyes fixed on Maya, eager to absorb every word.

Maya began, her voice steady yet gentle. “Maya Serene Thompson-that’s the name my parents gave me. I’m twenty-five now. My brother, Jaime… he’s fifteen.”

Dahlia’s eyes glistened, a soft, teary smile tugging at her lips. “That’s a very beautiful name.” She let out a small, wistful chuckle. “Your mother and I… we had this thing back then. We

made a promise that our firstborns’ names would reflect a piece of ourselves.” Her gaze lingered on Damien for a moment, filled with quiet fondness.

Ashcroft’s eyes lit up with sudden realization. “Ohhh… Dahlia, Damien… Malia, Maya. Makes sense!”

Dahlia laughed softly, a warm, affectionate sound. “Yes… it all comes full circle, doesn’t it? Even in the smallest things, the bonds remain.” Her gaze softened as she reached out slightly. “Go on, sweetheart… tell me more.”

Maya nodded, a faint, reflective smile tugging at her lips.

“We used to live in a quiet suburb just outside the city. Life was simple… easy. We were happy.”

She paused, eyes distant. “Mom took care of Jaime and me… and the household. She loved to cook, and her garden… she tended it with so much care. And Dad… he’s funny, always the ‘ good cop’, and he worked at a local tech company.”

She swallowed, the weight of memory pressing in. “But after they passed away, Jaime and I had to move. We ended up in low-cost housing near downtown, far from everything we knew.”

Maya glanced at Damien, her voice softening. “And I… I became a working student. Mornings at a small coffee shop, nights in class… until I landed an internship at Blackwood Enterprises.

Dahlia’s eyes widened, and she shot a sharp, searching glance at Damien.

Her voice softened, tinged with both curiosity and concern. “They… passed? What do you mean by ‘they’?”

Maya drew in a slow, steady breath, her fingers twisting nervously in her lap. She let it out in a quiet exhale, her voice trembling slightly.

“Both of my parents… they passed away seven years ago. It was the day after my eighteenth birthday. They… were in a car accident.”

Dahlia’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes widening in shock.

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Maya’s voice wavered, but she pressed on. “It was only supposed to be a quick grocery run… but that night changed everything. No relatives stepped in from my dad’s side, and as for my mom… we never met anyone. She never wanted to talk about it, and I never asked.”

She swallowed hard, pausing, hands clenched in her lap. “Since I was of legal age, I took full custody of Jaime. Thankfully, my parents had a good insurance policy, which kept us afloat… until Jaime got sick. He was diagnosed with a heart condition. The hospital bills piled up, and I had to drop out of school to work full time. Eventually, I had no choice but to sell our home.”

Maya's gaze drifted briefly, distant, before returning to Dahlia. "Two years ago, I got another scholarship. I took it, even though balancing everything was hard. But I had to-for our future.

Maya continued, a small, bittersweet smile tugging at her lips. "The truth is… two months ago, when I got the news that I'd been accepted as an intern at Blackwood Enterprises, I was over the moon. I thought-finally. Finally, a chance to build something stable, a chance to breathe. All I could think about was completing the internship, graduating, finding a steady job… and saving enough to give Jaime the surgery he needs."

Her voice catching as she continued, her hands curling slightly in her lap. "That was the only dream I allowed myself. Nothing more."

She turned her gaze to Damien then, soft and tender, letting the unspoken warmth in her eyes fill the silence. For a moment, it seemed as if the whole room had fallen away.

"But…" She drew in a shaky breath, a flicker of wonder breaking through her composure. "…the universe had a different plan."

Her eyes returned to Dahlia, brimming with quiet emotion. "Damien and I crossed paths. And since then… everything has changed. He's given me more than I ever thought I deserved. More than I could ever put into words."

Maya's words hung in the air, fragile yet powerful, her voice still trembling with emotion.

Dahlia sat frozen, her chest tightening as each piece of Maya's story sank in. Shock flickered across her face, followed quickly by a storm of emotions-grief, worry, and a fierce protectiveness that had been buried for too long.

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she reached for Maya's hand, clutching it tightly between both of hers. "Sweetheart… I had no idea you carried so much on your own." Her voice cracked, heavy with guilt and sorrow. "You should never have had to go through that-

especially not at eighteen. Losing your parents, fighting for Jaime's life… all while trying to keep yourself standing."

She shook her head, struggling to steady her voice as she blinked back tears. "Tell me what Jaime needs. Please. Whatever it is-treatments, medications, expenses-let me help. You shouldn't have to do this alone anymore."

Her fingers squeezed around Maya's trembling ones, as if she could anchor her through sheer determination. "You and Jaime… you're family. And I won't stand by and do nothing. Not when you've suffered this much already."

Maya squeezed Dahlia's hands gently, a small, reassuring smile breaking through. "It's okay… Aunt Dahlia. Jaime and I… we found a way to manage." Her voice wavered, trembling at the edges, but her gaze stayed steady. "And now… things are finally better. We have stability, security… all because of Damien."

Her voice steadied, carrying both relief and quiet pride. "We've recently moved into a four-bedroom unit at the Aurora Residences. Jaime's condition has improved so much-he's finally getting his regular checkups, the right medications, and soon, he'll be ready for surgery."

Her eyes shifted to Ashcroft, gratitude shining through. “That’s thanks to Nick, too. Jaime’s under the care of the specialists at Ashcroft Pavilion.”

Dahlia’s eyes brimmed once more, tears shimmering as the reality of all Maya had endured sank in-the years of loss, the struggles she had borne alone.

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She held her hand a little tighter, as if anchoring herself in the moment, her gaze lingering on Maya as though she were something precious she was afraid to lose again.

Then, through the veil of tears, a soft, trembling smile broke across her lips.

“You and Damien…” she whispered, her voice fragile, trembling yet edged with hope. “You’re together?”

Maya nodded, a shy blush coloring her cheeks as a warm smile slowly spread across her face. “Yes… just a few days ago, actually.” She let out a light, slightly nervous chuckle, her eyes glimmering with both happiness and the hint of newness in their relationship.

Ashcroft leaned back with a sly smirk. “Honestly… you should ask her how hopeless Damien is at romance. Took him forever just to get a ‘yes.’

”

Maya let out a soft laugh at the jab, her cheeks warming, while Damien shot Ashcroft a sharp, exasperated look, eyes narrowing as he tried-and failed-to hide his irritation.

Dahlia leaned forward, curiosity mingled with concern. “Is my son treating you well? Has he been giving you any trouble?”

“Mom!” Damien interjected, the exasperation in his voice softened by the faintest trace of amusement.

Maya shook her head, a gentle laugh escaping her lips. “No… actually, he’s been really good to me.”

Dahlia’s eyes softened, a faint, relieved smile tugging at her lips. “I’m glad to hear that. But… if he ever gets stubborn, promise me you’ll tell me. I’ll know exactly how to straighten him

out.”

Ashcroft chuckled, shaking his head. “Honestly, Aunt Dahlia, no need to intervene. Damien’s completely different with Maya-he hangs on her every word. She’s got him wrapped around h er little finger.”

Damien’s glare was sharp, pointed-but not entirely serious. “Shut up, or I’ll throw you out.”

Ashcroft only grinned cheekily, holding up his hands in mock surrender and making a playful “zip it” gesture.

Maya chuckled softly, shaking her head, a gentle warmth spreading through her chest as she met Damien's gaze. "He's given me the kind of attention I never asked for-or even dared to dream of. He's given us a life I never imagined was possible. He's not perfect… and neither

am I. Yet he's accepted me for who I am and let me into parts of his life no one else has ever reached. Being part of his world scares me, but… I don't care about his world. I care about our

S."

Her gaze softened, lingering on him, warmth and vulnerability shining in her eyes. "He's my person… and I love him. All of him."

Damien's chest tightened, a wave of pride, love, and fierce protectiveness rolling over him. His lips curved into a small, tender smile, and his eyes-deep, unwavering-locked onto hers with a quiet intensity that made her breath catch.

He reached out slowly, his fingers brushing a stray lock of hair from her face, lingering just a moment longer than necessary. His voice was low, warm, and steady, carrying the weight of everything he felt.

"And I love you, Maya," he murmured, each word deliberate, each syllable heavy with meaning. "All of you… every piece, every flaw. I wouldn't change a single thing."

The room seemed to pause, as if holding its breath, the space between them thick with unspoken promises and raw, shared emotion.

Outside, the sun dipped low, casting a warm amber glow that spilled across the walls, painting the moment in gold. The soft hum of the evening was the only sound, gentle and intimate, as if the world itself had quieted to witness this.

Dahlia's eyes shimmered with tears, catching the last light of the day. Her hands trembled slightly as she reached out, gently clasping theirs. "Oh… my sweet girl," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion, fragile yet overflowing. "I see why my son loves you… I'm so glad you found each other. I'm so happy… please, take care of one another. Love each other with everything you have. I am so proud of you both."

Maya's lips curved into a small, grateful smile. "Thank you, Aunt Dahlia," she whispered, her voice soft, tinged with relief.

She took a slow breath, her eyes meeting Dahlia's with quiet sorrow. "I can tell you were really close to my mom," she continued, her words gentle, threaded with regret. "I'm sorry if it seems like I don't remember you… I never had the chance to know her side of the family. She never talked about them, and I don't have any memories or stories to share. I… I'm sorry." Dahlia closed her eyes, shaking her head gently, a small, understanding smile touching her lips. "Oh… no, sweetheart. That's exactly how it should be."

Maya blinked, startled, her brow furrowing slightly. "What do you mean?"

Dahlia swallowed hard, letting out a long, quiet sigh. "Your mother and I… we grew up

together, like sisters. We shared everything, no secrets between us. Until one day, in college… she fell in love with a man-Julian, your father. And that changed everything."

Maya’s lips parted slightly, her voice barely above a whisper. “Changed everything… how? Did something happen? Were they… happy?”

Her eyes searched Dahlia’s face, a mixture of curiosity and the fragile hope of understanding her mother a little better.

Dahlia smiled softly. “Oh yes, they were very happy… deeply in love. But your father… he’s a simple, kind man. And your mother’s family…” She paused, taking a deep breath, then gently clasped both of Maya’s hands, her gaze locking onto hers.

“Your mother’s family, Maya… they are not simple. They would never accept your father, no matter how much your mom begged. So your mother… she made a choice.”

Maya’s brows furrowed, her lips slightly parted. Confusion and a flicker of fear danced in her eyes as she tried to piece together the fragments of a past she had never known. Her fingers twisted nervously in her lap, and her gaze fell to the floor for a heartbeat, the room feeling suddenly too heavy, too full of secrets.

“I… I don’t understand, Aunt Dahlia,” she whispered, her voice trembling, barely carrying across the quiet space between them.

Chapter 278

The air thickened, heavy with the weight of secrets on the verge of breaking free. Dahlia’s voice had softened, but the hesitation in her words only made Maya’s chest tighten, unease gnawing at her with every heartbeat. The silence between them stretched, fragile and dangerous, as if the truth waiting to be spoken could shatter the fragile pieces of her world in an instant.

Dahlia’s gaze softened, her eyes glistening with unshed tears as her fingers curled together in her lap, trembling slightly. For a long moment, she seemed to struggle with the words, her chest rising and falling as if every breath weighed her down.

“There’s a reason your mother never spoke about her family… or anyone from her old life,” she said at last, her voice breaking gently, fragile but certain.

Her lips quivered into a bittersweet smile, the kind that held both love and regret. “Malia’s decision to leave everything behind wasn’t easy. It broke her heart… but it was the only choice she had left.”

Dahlia’s eyes grew distant, her voice softening as if she were speaking to both Maya and the ghosts of her past. “Back in college, we had our own little circle-me, Malia, and Dominic, Damien’s father. The three of us were inseparable, always together. Dominic and I already knew our fates were tied; our families had bound us to each other in an alliance long before we understood what marriage truly meant. But we accepted it, and in time, we were fortunate enough to find real love in each other.”

“Then, in the middle of our first year, Julian transferred in. He wasn’t like the rest of us-he came from a modest background, quiet and unassuming, yet there was something about him that drew people in. Handsome, yes, but it was his kindness, his brilliance, and the effortless way he carried himself that made him unforgettable.

Dominic and Julian hit it off immediately, bonding over their shared love of science, technology, and all the little curiosities that connected them. Before long, Julian was always around, and that’s when Malia started noticing him.

He was charming, caring, and completely genuine-everything Malia had never realized she needed. For all the weight of the world she carried on her shoulders, Julian offered something new: something real, unpolished, and honest.

It was impossible to ignore. From the moment their eyes met, you could feel it in the air-as

if the universe had conspired to bring them together. And once it happened, there was no turning back. Malia's life, her choices, her destiny… everything began to shift."

Their relationship grew quietly, tenderly, through the years of college. They studied together, laughed together, argued playfully over small things, and leaned on each other during exams and late-night assignments. Each moment, though ordinary to the outside world, built something extraordinary between them-a bond rooted in trust, laughter, and an

understanding deeper than words could capture.

But their happiness, fragile as it was, faced its first real storm after graduation.

Your grandparents found out about their relationship. And so, they moved to separate them. They tried everything to pry Malia away from Julian.

But Malia… she refused.

She stood her ground, for the first time, perhaps in her life, she chose not the safe path, not the expected path-but the one that felt real, that felt honest. Julian, too, refused to step back. Together, they faced the storm."

Dahlia drew in a shaky breath, steadying herself before continuing. "Dominic was the one who helped them disappear. If I had stepped in, it would have been too easy to trace them. Everyone knew how close I was to your mother, and they would have looked at me first."

Her voice faltered, thick with memories she could never forget. "So Dominic arranged everything they needed to get away.'

e paused, hands trembling slightly as she clasped Maya's. "Our knowledge of their whereabouts was always limited. Just the initial location… after that, they had to move further away. Somewhere even Dominic and I didn't know. The less we knew, the better… for their safety."

Chapter 279

Her voice grew softer, heavy with loss. "Malia promised she would keep in touch, and she did -through milestones, birthdays, your birth, Jaime's birth… But there were no photographs. And then… it all stopped."

Tears shimmered in Dahlia's eyes as her voice cracked. "Seven years ago."

Maya's brows furrowed, voice small but urgent. "But… why? Why all the secrecy… all the moving, all the hiding?"

Her eyes searched Dahlia's face, desperate for answers, for something that could make sense of the mystery surrounding her mother.

Dahlia sighed, brushing a stray tear from her cheek. “Your mother… she loved fiercely. But her family… they would never have accepted your father. They would have done everything to tear them apart. She chose to fight for the life she wanted, for the love she believed in. And to protect that… she had to leave everything behind.”

Maya’s lips parted, shock and sorrow mingling on her face. “Even her own family?”

Dahlia nodded slowly, eyes glistening. “Even family, sweetheart… sometimes love demands sacrifices we can’t imagine.”

Maya’s voice trembled, disbelief and desperation lacing each word. “Can’t they fight for it? Without leaving?”

Dahlia’s lips pressed into a thin line, shaking her head. “No… because the only way to tear them apart completely would be to get rid of your father… for good.”

Maya’s eyes widened, shock etched in every line of her face. “What? But… you’re a Moretti, right? And Damien’s dad is a Blackwood. Your families are powerful! They… they wouldn’t dare-”

Dahlia’s expression darkened, shaking her head. “No, sweetheart… that’s where you’re wrong. Your mother’s family… they are very powerful. More powerful than the Morettis or the

Blackwoods… even with the five families combined.”

Maya's hands gripped the edge of the couch, her body tensing as her eyes went wide. "What?!

Dahlia closed her eyes, tilting her face upward, her lips moving in a soft, almost inaudible whisper-a quiet plea carried on the weight of years. "Please forgive me, Malia… I know this is what you wanted to protect her from. But your daughter… she needs to know."

When she opened her eyes, they were steady, somber, and heavy with truth. She fixed Maya with an intensity that made the room feel smaller, every word pressing against the air. "Your mother… is a Lockwood."

Maya's breath caught in her throat. Her hands clenched tightly in her lap, knuckles white, as if gripping something could anchor her in reality.

Damien and Ashcroft froze, their expressions betraying shock. Damien's jaw tightened, eyes darkening with a mixture of disbelief and barely contained anger.

Maya's voice trembled, barely above a whisper. "Lockwood?"

Dahlia's nod was slow, deliberate, almost ceremonial in its weight. "Yes, sweetheart. The Royal Family. Malia Lockwood… your mother… she is their only daughter, the sole heir to the Lockwood throne."

The words hung in the air like a storm refusing to break. "Heir of the Lockwood throne…" Maya repeated, disbelief thick in her voice. Her mind spun, trying to reconcile the quiet, kind, loving,

unassuming mother she knew with the legacy Dahlia had just unveiled. How could someone so gentle bear the weight of a dynasty that could so easily shape-or shatter-countless lives with its power, its control, with just a snap of a finger or a single word.

Dahlia's eyes were sharp, unwavering. "Yes," she said softly, though the steel beneath her voice was unmistakable. "And that is exactly why she did what she did."

She leaned back slightly, her gaze never leaving Maya. "Every decision Malia made could tip the balance of power, and the Lockwoods have been fractured ever since she walked away."

Her voice lowered, cold and precise. "As a royal, she was expected to marry another of her kind-to strengthen alliances, to preserve the purity of the bloodline. That was her duty. That was her cage. But she refused.

For so long, Malia lived by their rules, obeyed every expectation, carried every burden. And then… she fell in love with your father. For the first time, we saw her truly alive. That was the one choice she made for herself, and she was willing to risk everything for it. Even if it meant turning her back on her title, her family… her throne."

Maya felt her chest tighten. Dahlia's words painted a life of sacrifice and defiance, a woman torn between the world she was born into and the love she chose.

"When they discovered her relationship with Julian," Dahlia went on, her voice tightening, they locked her away. They tried to break her spirit, to separate them. Dominic and I… we tried to intervene, but the walls of that dynasty are unforgiving. In the end, Malia made her choice. She eloped with your father."-

Silence stretched, heavy and suffocating. Maya's thoughts swirled, pulling her back to memories of Malia's warmth, her gentle hands brushing hair from her face, the laughter that had always been enough to banish shadows. How could someone so tender, so selfless, have carried the weight of a crown stained with ambition, betrayal, and blood?

Dahlia's face softened for a fraction of a second, like someone folding an old photograph back into a pocket. "And now that she's gone," she said quietly, "the throne is yours to bear"

Maya stared. "Me?"

"Yes-you, sweetheart." Dahlia's voice was gentle, yet carried the weight of certainty. "Even before you were born, your path was already set. It's how the cycle of the royal families works: the firstborn of one family is traditionally bound to marry the firstborn of the other, to preserve alliances and lineage. Since your mother is an only child, she inherits the crown. And from the moment of her birth, it was expected that she would marry the firstborn of the Hamiltons. That means her firstborn-you-is already tied to this legacy, bound by tradition to continue the union between the two royal lines."

Maya's mouth went dry, her hands tightening in her lap as the weight of Dahlia's words settled over her. Her mind raced, trying to grasp the magnitude of what she'd just heard. She was royalty. Bound by a cycle she had never asked for, a destiny laid out long before she

existed.

Dahlia's eyes shadowed with warning, her voice barely above a whisper. "If the Lockwoods discover you exist… and that Malia is gone, they will come for you. You are the key that can tip the balance. They will tear everything apart to place a Lockwood back on that throne."

Damien shot to his feet like a storm breaking free, chest heaving, fists tightening at his sides. His entire body radiated protectiveness, a low, dangerous energy that seemed to fill the room.

“No. I will never allow it!”

Maya froze beside Dahlia, heart hammering in her chest, the crushing weight of her inheritance pressing down like a storm ready to shatter everything.

Chapter 280

The room hung heavy with tension, each breath feeling thick, as if the walls themselves were

holding back a storm.

Damien stood rigid, fists tightening at his sides. His eyes, dark and unyielding, burned with a fierce, protective intensity. Every muscle in his body radiated danger, a silent promise that he would defend what was his at any cost.

Maya remained frozen beside Dahlia, her heart hammering, chest tight. Her hands clenched instinctively in her lap, nails biting into her palms as waves of fear and disbelief coursed through her.

Dahlia’s eyes flicked between them, sharp, unflinching. Beneath the calculation, though, something gentler trembled-a flicker of worry, a silent acknowledgment of the storm raging

in both their hearts.

Finally, she spoke, her voice low, deliberate, almost breaking the taut air:

“Son…”

“I will not allow it, Mother!” Damien’s voice tore through the room, raw and unrestrained. His jaw clenched, veins visible at his temples, and his eyes burned with a fierce, almost predatory intensity.

He stepped forward, fists tightening, every inch of his body coiled with protective energy, radiating a silent warning: anyone who dared lay a hand on Maya would answer to him.

“They will never find her,” he growled, voice low, dangerous, trembling only with the force of his conviction. “No… I will not allow them to take her from me!”

Dahlia’s shoulders sagged, a weary sigh slipping past her lips. “I know, son… and you know I’ll stand with you. Your father and I-we will always support you.” Her eyes shimmered, the glint of unspoken fears flickering in their depths.

Ashcroft leaned forward slightly, his steady gaze locking on Damien. “And you can always count on me, brother. I’ve got your back-always.” The words weren’t just loyalty-they carried the weight of the Ashcroft name, a quiet warning to anyone foolish enough to stand against

them.

Maya's chest tightened, a small shiver running through her as she realized just how much power sat in the room-not just Damien's unyielding presence, but the unwavering strength of those who stood with him. Dahlia's eyes softened briefly at the sight, pride and fear warring silently in her gaze.

For a moment, she faltered, her gaze drifting as if pulled into shadows only she could see. Then, with a steady inhale, she forced her focus back, her expression sharpening with quiet

resolve

"When I first learned about the Volkov, I was worried," she admitted, her tone calm but laced with memory. "But once I understood the reason behind their movements… I wasn't afraid. It

felt like a war we could win."

She hesitated, her breath catching, the silence heavy with dread. "Now-" her voice lowered, brittle and unflinching, "-everything changes."

Damien's head snapped toward her, eyes narrowing. "What do you mean, Mother?"

"If the Volkov discover who Maya is," Dahlia began, her voice trembling just enough to betray the steel beneath it, "they'll hesitate. Their power may be only a fraction of ours, but they are ruthless-brutal beyond reason. Yet even they follow certain codes. They are not fools. The moment they touch Maya, they would be erased. Every trace-obliterated. Knowledge… can be a deterrent."

She drew in a sharp breath, eyes flicking between Damien and Maya, glistening with worry. The room felt smaller, the air heavy, suffocating under the weight of her words.

“But the danger isn’t just them,” she continued, her voice dropping, thick with fear and certainty. “If the Volkov know, the Lockwoods will know too. And the Lockwoods… they would not hesitate. They’d tear her from us, force her into a life she never chose-a crown she never wanted, responsibilities she shouldn’t bear. I cannot… I will not let that happen.”

Her hands curled slightly, knuckles whitening as the weight of her fear pressed against her chest, the very act of speaking it making the threat feel terrifyingly real.

Maya’s stomach lurched, the weight of the truth pressing down like a storm. The air around her thickened, every corner of the room seeming to shrink under the burden of unspoken truths. “But… but I’m not a Lockwood,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “I’m a Thompson. I don’t carry a pure bloodline. I don’t want their name… or their crown. I… I just want a simple life… with Jaime… with Damien.”