Intern 321

Chapter 321

light.

“You okay?”

She nodded, though the knot in her chest said otherwise. “Yeah… I’m going to miss this calm. Not quite ready to face real life yet.”

A low chuckle escaped him, rough and genuine. “Real life can wait another day,” he murmured, leaning closer. Then, with a quiet, almost conspiratorial smile, he added, “Maybe two… so, why don’t you come home with me tonight, hmm?”

Maya laughed softly, shaking her head. “I’m sorry… I can’t. I need to be with Jaime. You know… help him process what he’s about to find out.”

Damien brushed a gentle kiss across her cheek, his lips lingering for just a heartbeat. “I

understand, love,” he murmured, his voice tender and steady.

For a moment, they simply stood there, letting the sea breeze wrap around them, the quiet hum of the yacht beneath their feet a soft reminder that the world outside could wait.

His hand found the small of her back as they stepped off the deck, guiding her toward the ramp. The gesture was simple, almost instinctive-but grounding in a way that made her heart steady

again.

Behind them, Ashcroft finally emerged. His shirt hung untucked, sleeves rolled to the elbow, hair tousled by the wind. He looked like hell-like a man who'd spent the last two hours wrestling ghosts he couldn't outdrink. The glass dangled loosely from his fingers, nearly empty, his knuckles pale against the rim. The sharp, calculating edge in his eyes was gone, dulled now by exhaustion- and something heavier. Regret, maybe. Or heartache.

When the yacht finally docked, three black SUVS waited at the pier, polished and precise beneath the late-afternoon sun. One was Ashcroft's, his driver already standing by the open door.

Without a word, he grabbed his jacket from a chair, slipped on his sunglasses, and muttered, " Dinner. I'll come by later." Then he descended the ramp, footsteps heavy against the metal.

He didn't look back.

Maya caught the flicker of something in Damien's expression-amusement, maybe, or recognition.

Either way, it said he saw it all.

Damien's gaze followed him, jaw tightening ever so slightly. "He'll be fine," he murmured, voice low and unreadable, carrying both patience and a hint of quiet exasperation.

Maya's eyes lingered on Ashcroft's retreating form, a flicker of worry passing through her before

she felt Damien's hand at the small of her back again-a silent let him be.

They didn't linger. Damien, Maya, and Dahlia headed straight to the waiting SUV while James and Lee stayed behind to oversee the crew and the rest of the unloading.

The transition from sea to shore felt almost jarring, the soft sway of the yacht giving way to the steady hum of the SUVS as they headed toward home.

Before they docked, Maya had already called Jaime-her voice bright, her words spilling in quick bursts as she gave him a rundown of everything that had happened: the island, the revelations, the dinner that awaited them. She kept the heavier truths quiet, offering just enough for him to understand without worry. Monroe had arranged to bring him to the manor, and, as expected, Ms. Janice had insisted on staying behind to "keep things from falling apart."

The drive to the manor took just under an hour. The world outside the tinted windows shifted from the gleam of the harbor to rolling stretches of emerald fields and narrow roads lined with whispering pines. The golden light of dusk poured across the horizon, painting everything in warm, honeyed tones.

By the time they turned onto the long, cobblestone drive of the Blackwood estate, the day was folding into twilight. The manor rose from the mist like something out of memory-grand, timeless, and glowing softly beneath the lanterns that lined the courtyard.

Even as the manor rose before them, glowing and familiar, Maya couldn't shake the feeling that the

calm was only temporary.

It felt like homecoming and reckoning all at once.

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The moment the car slowed to a stop, Maya's pulse began to race. Her palms grew clammy

against her dress as her fingers twisted together in her lap.

It hit her all at once-how much her life had changed in less than three months.

Not long ago, she'd been just another working student-pouring coffee by day, cramming for exams by night, counting coins each week just to get by. Then came the internship that was supposed to change everything-until it almost destroyed her.

She could still feel the echo of that fear sometimes-the suffocating moment when she was trapped, powerless, certain she wouldn't make it out. But somehow, through chaos, pain, and a

twist of fate, she ended up here.

A week ago, she was a normal employee tagging along for an ocular visit and PR shoot.

Today, she was returning as Damien Blackwood's girlfriend-the man whose name carried both power and danger, the man who had claimed her as his future wife-while carrying the weight of her newly discovered identity as the Lockwood heir.

And now… she was about to meet the Matriarch of the Blackwood family. About to share the same space with people who lived at the very top-people she never imagined she'd stand beside. Names she'd only ever seen printed on magazine covers, lit up on billboards, etched across

skyscrapers.

Her throat tightened. It didn't matter that Damien sat beside her, his hand warm and steady over

hers. The thought alone made her heart stumble, nerves clawing their way up her chest.

Outside, the manor loomed nearer, its golden lights flickering through the dusk like watchful eyes.

A poised, elegant older gentleman stood framed by the open doors ahead-his sharp features and

quiet command bearing a striking resemblance to Damien's.

Maya drew in a slow breath, willing her heart to calm. You can do this, she told herself. You have to.

"Are you okay, love?" Damien's voice broke gently through her thoughts, low and steady. His hand tightened around hers, thumb brushing over her chilled fingers. "Your hands are cold. Are you not feeling well?"

She exhaled the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, the sound trembling faintly as it left her. Her pulse thudded in her ears, and she gave a shaky smile. "I'm fine," she murmured softly." Just… nervous."

Damien chuckled quietly, the sound warm and low. He leaned closer, the faint scent of cedar and

sea salt surrounding her as his lips brushed her cheek. "Relax, love," he murmured against her skin,

his tone threaded with gentle amusement. "They won't bite."

The convoy rolled to a stop in the courtyard. Ahead of them, Dahlia's car came to a halt first, sleek beneath the fading glow of the lanterns. The driver quickly stepped out and rounded the car to open her door, the movement smooth and practiced.

A second later, Damien pushed his door open and stepped out into the cool evening air. He circled to Maya's side, his movements unhurried but purposeful. When he opened her door, she looked up at him-at the quiet steadiness in his eyes-and for a moment, the weight in her chest eased.

"Come on," he said softly, offering his hand. "Let's go meet the family."

Dominic Blackwood stood at the grand entrance, framed by the soft amber glow spilling from the manor's open doors. His tall frame carried the kind of presence that commanded a room even before he spoke-sharp suit, salt-and-pepper hair, and an expression caught somewhere between impatience and excitement.

As soon as Dahlia stepped out of her car, his face broke into a smile. "You took your time," he teased lightly, his tone rich with affection as he closed the distance between them. He bent to press a kiss to her cheek, his hand lingering on her arm in a gesture that spoke of decades of quiet

devotion.

"I told you the sea was calm," Dahlia replied with a knowing smile, her voice carrying that soft, unshakable grace that always seemed to steady him.

Dominic's response was a low hum-part relief, part pride-but then his gaze shifted, drawn past

her shoulder.

It landed on Damien first, and then… on Maya.

For a heartbeat, the air seemed to still. His brows lifted slightly, the faintest flicker of surprise

crossing his face before recognition sank in-an almost imperceptible softening around his eyes,

the kind that spoke of memory more than thought.

He studied her, his gaze tracing the curve of her face, the quiet composure she tried to hold, and something in his expression faltered-like a ghost from the past had just stepped into the light.

Damien's hand found the small of Maya's back, his touch both reassuring and grounding as he guided her forward. The weight of the moment pressed gently between them as they approached

the steps.

"Dad," Damien greeted, his voice even but touched with respect.

Dominic blinked, seeming to shake himself from the haze. His features warmed instantly, pride flashing in his eyes as he clasped his son by the shoulders and pulled him into a brief, firm embrace. "Son," he said simply, his voice low and full, a quiet smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "It's good to have you home."

When they stepped apart, Damien turned slightly, the soft evening light catching his profile. “Dad,” he said, his tone gentling as he drew Maya a little closer. “This is Maya.”

For a moment, Dominic just looked at her-really looked. Then a slow, almost reverent breath escaped him, and his lips curved into something between disbelief and awe.

“Finally,” he murmured, eyes flicking between them before settling fully on her. “Good God…” His voice faltered slightly, thick with something that sounded a lot like emotion. “You look just like your

mother.”

The words hung in the air-soft, heavy, and unmissable,

Maya’s breath caught at the mention of her mom, a warmth blooming in her chest. She could see it

clearly-mirroring how Dahlia had reacted the first time they met-the acknowledgment, the

recognition, the fondness they held for her mother, the genuine friendship that shone through. For a fleeting moment, she felt her mother’s presence radiating from them.

She forced a small, shy smile and dipped her head slightly. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Blackwood.”

Dominic’s face softened instantly. The faintest shadow of surprise in his eyes gave way to

something tender, almost familiar. “Oh dear,” he said, voice low and warm. “Please… call me Uncle

Dominic-” he paused, a teasing lift at the corner of his lips, “-or Dad is even better.”

Maya’s cheeks flushed, but the warmth wasn’t embarrassment-it was comfort. The quiet

reassurance that the family she once thought unreachable was accepting her fully and genuinely,

just as she’d hoped. Damien’s hand stayed steady at the small of her back, grounding her, but she

allowed herself to savor the gentle connection, the echo of her mother’s presence woven through

the warmth surrounding her.

Maya shifted slightly, shyly. “Ok… Uncle Dominic.”

Dominic's eyes softened even further as he gestured toward the manor's open doors. "That's more

like it. Well… come on in," he said, warm but firm. "It's getting cold out here, and the two elders are

waiting inside."

He moved toward Dahlia first, offering his arm with a polite, practiced grace. "Shall we?" he asked,

a teasing sparkle in his gaze. She accepted with a gentle smile, allowing him to guide her toward

the grand entrance.

Then his attention shifted to Maya. He watched as Damien extended his hand, giving hers a reassuring squeeze. She let him steer her forward. With each step, the marble beneath their feet echoed softly in the quiet late afternoon, and Maya felt the weight of the moment-the anticipation, the nerves, and the undeniable thrill of finally stepping fully into a world she had never

imagined she'd be part of.

Dominic glanced down at her once more, a faint, affectionate smile tugging at his lips. "I hope

you’re ready,” he murmured, half to himself. “The two elders are eager to meet the young woman

who captured their grandson’s heart.”

Maya’s chest fluttered, nervous excitement mingling with the lingering warmth of Dominic’s words.

She followed Damien inside, drawn by his steady presence and the unmistakable sense of family

waiting beyond the threshold-a warmth that seemed to radiate from the very walls.

As they stepped into the foyer, the soft scent of fresh flowers wrapped around them like a welcome embrace. Dominic’s eyes flicked toward Damien, curiosity and amusement mingling in his gaze.

“I thought you were with Nicholas too?” he asked, a teasing lilt in his voice. “Where is he?”

Damien’s expression remained calm. “He’ll come over later.”

Dahlia let out a soft, indulgent sigh. “Oh, darling… that poor boy. He’s going through some sort of m idlife crisis.”

Dominic raised a brow, the corner of his mouth twitching with amusement. “Midlife crisis? What happened now?”

Dahlia leaned in slightly, her voice low and knowing. “It looks like he’s in love with Harper… but he hasn’t quite figured it out yet.”

Dominic blinked, a spark of recognition lighting his eyes. “Harper? Takahashi’s daughter?”

“Mmhmm,” Dahlia confirmed with a soft nod, a smile tugging at her lips.

Dominic leaned back slightly, laughter warming his voice. “I see… well, that certainly qualifies as a midlife crisis.” Then, lowering his tone in mock discretion-but perfectly audible to Damien-he

added, “Fortunately, our son’s already past his. Now he can put that energy to better use… perhaps by giving us some grandchildren.”

Damien cleared his throat. “We can hear you, Father.”

Maya’s cheeks flushed instantly, warmth creeping up her neck before she could stop it. She bit the

inside of her cheek, trying to hide her smile, but the faint pink coloring her face gave her away

completely-much to Dominic's quiet amusement.

Dominic's eyes twinkled. "Good! I'm glad!"

Dahlia elbowed him lightly. "Dominic, don't pressure the children."

He chuckled softly, entirely at ease. "I don't think your son feels pressured, darling. If anything, he

seems quietly pleased with himself."

Damien merely shook his head, letting the conversation pass without further comment. His

attention remained quietly on Maya, guiding her further into the grand estate.

Maya felt the weight of Dominic's gaze, but instead of judgment, she sensed warmth-a quiet

amusement that made the space feel less intimidating and more like… home.

The soft clatter of their footsteps on the marble echoed lightly as they moved deeper inside, the anticipation of meeting the elders ahead mingling with the playful undercurrent of Dominic and Dahlia's banter, Maya's nerves fluttered, but she felt a gentle steadiness from Damien at her side, grounding her in the moment.

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Inside the grand living room of the Blackwood estate, the faint clinking of porcelain cups filled the quiet. The scent of freshly steeped jasmine tea mingled with the crisp undertone of polished wood and old books-a timeless blend that spoke of tradition and quiet power.

At the center sat Eleanor Blackwood, the family's formidable matriarch, her silver hair swept neatly into a chignon that defied her years. Even seated, she exuded the kind of quiet authority that could command a boardroom-or silence an entire dinner table with a single look. Across from her, Charles Blackwood lounged in his armchair, half-hidden behind a folded newspaper he'd long

since stopped reading.

Eleanor's sharp gaze flicked toward the tall antique clock near the fireplace, its rhythmic ticking now an irritation rather than comfort.

Her fingers drummed once against her teacup before she spoke.

"They should have been here ten minutes ago," she said crisply, though a note of anticipation slipped through her tone. "What's taking them so long?"

Charles didn't look up, though the corner of his mouth twitched in faint amusement. "They're coming from the pier, my dear. Not everyone drives like you're late for a royal summons."

Eleanor shot him a look over the rim of her cup. “When one invites guests for tea, one should arrive

before the tea turns cold.”

“Ah,” he drawled, finally folding the newspaper with deliberate slowness. “So this isn’t about the tea, then. You’re just impatient to meet the girl.”

Her chin lifted ever so slightly. “Impatient implies a lack of composure.”

“Mm.” Charles’s eyes gleamed with mischief. “Then perhaps we’ll call it… curiosity?”

Eleanor’s lips curved, though she hid it quickly behind her cup. “She’s the Lockwood girl, Charles.

I’m entitled to a little curiosity. Her mother was remarkable.”

“Remarkable and stubborn,” he reminded her, leaning back with a soft chuckle. “If the daughter’s

anything like her, Damien will have his hands full.” He hesitated then, his tone softening as a hint of

worry crept into his expression. “But from what I’ve heard, she didn’t grow up living like a Lockwood. That poor girl’s been through far too much for someone her age.”

Eleanor stilled, her hand resting lightly on the rim of her cup. The faintest sigh escaped her. “That’s what worries me,” she admitted quietly. “She’s walking into a world she was never raised for. The

expectations, the name, the attention that comes with it… What if it’s too much for her?”

Charles regarded her thoughtfully. “Or what if she surprises us? The Lockwood blood runs strong, you know that.”

“Blood is one thing,” Eleanor countered, her voice turning pensive. “But this family-our world-it isn’t kind. It takes strength to stand beside a Blackwood, especially that one.” Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Damien can be… intense.”

Charles chuckled softly. “That’s one word for it.”

She ignored him, lost in thought now. “What if she doesn’t want any of this? The power, the attention, the weight of the name? What if she’s not strong enough to handle him… or this family?”

Charles set his teacup down and leaned forward, his expression softening into something warm- almost proud. “Then we’ll help her,” he said simply. “We’ll guide her, stand by her, and make sure

she never feels alone in this." His gaze met Eleanor's, steady and sure. "And above all, we trust our

grandson's judgment. Damien wouldn't cross lines without reason. He's many things, but reckless - especially in matters of the heart? Never."

Eleanor sighed, but a faint smile tugged at her lips. "You have too much faith in him."

"And you have too much fear in her," Charles countered gently.

For a moment, silence settled between them-comfortable, thoughtful, filled with years of shared

understanding. Then Charles's eyes gleamed with quiet mischief. "Admit it, darling. You're excited."

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Eleanor arched a perfectly shaped brow. "Excited implies a lack of restraint."

He chuckled under his breath. "Fine, then. You're… eagerly composed."

Her lips curved despite herself, a hint of warmth softening her regal composure. "Maybe I am," she

conceded softly. "I can't wait for the day we hear little footsteps running around these halls again."

Charles laughed, rich and affectionate. “This is the first time we’re meeting the girl, my dear-don’t get ahead of yourself.” He leaned back, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to see our great-grandchildren one day. But what I’m truly eager for…”-his voice softened, fond-“is to see how our grandson looks when he’s in love. From what Dominic said-and what Dahlia told him-our boy’s completely smitten. Head over heels. Apparently, he’s wrapped around this young lady’s little finger without her even trying.”

“Good,” Eleanor said briskly, smoothing the silk of her sleeve. “A Blackwood man deserves a woman who can keep him in line.”

Charles chuckled, shaking his head. “God help our grandson, then.”

Before Eleanor could retort, the faint echo of footsteps drifted from the foyer. She straightened

instantly, every trace of teasing gone from her posture-replaced by that poised, regal composure

that came as naturally as breathing.

“Ah,” Charles murmured, rising from his chair with a slow smile. “Saved by the bell.”

Eleanor’s eyes gleamed, anticipation finally winning over restraint. “At last,” she said, setting down

her cup with quiet precision. “Let’s meet the girl who captured our grandson’s impossible heart.”

Dominic stepped in first, his posture straight, exuding that calm, confident authority he always

carried. Dahlia’s hand rested lightly on his arm, a graceful anchor beside him as she followed, her

presence radiating warmth and quiet elegance.

Behind them, Damien guided Maya with a gentle hand at her back, his other hand brushing hers

occasionally as if to remind her she wasn’t alone. Maya’s steps were measured, heart still fluttering, eyes taking in the opulence of the room and the poised figures before her.

The two pairs moved forward in tandem, the matriarch's gaze fixed on the newcomer, a spark of curiosity and delight in Eleanor's sharp eyes. Maya felt a flicker of nerves-but also something else: a strange, grounding reassurance in Damien's steady presence beside her.

Eleanor's sharp gaze softened into a warm, assessing smile as the group drew closer. Charles, seated comfortably in his armchair, allowed a small, approving nod to escape him, his eyes

twinkling with curiosity and quiet amusement.

"Ah, there they are at last," Eleanor said, her voice smooth yet carrying that gentle authority that

naturally commanded attention. She stepped forward, her concern evident as she reached for

Dahlia. "Dahlia… sweetheart, Dominic told us what happened. How are you feeling now?" She drew her into a tender, reassuring hug.

"Thank you, Eleanor," Dahlia murmured as she leaned into the embrace, allowing herself a brief

moment of comfort before gently pulling back. "I'm feeling much better now-just a little tired, a

little overwhelmed by it all, but truly, I'm fine."

Her gaze drifted toward Maya, softening as emotion welled in her eyes. She gave a faint,

self-conscious laugh, blinking back the threat of tears. “I hope Dominic didn’t exaggerate things

again.”

Eleanor pulled back slightly, her gaze softening as it traced over Dahlia’s face. “Oh, my dear…” she

murmured, her tone rich with warmth and understanding. “I know how hard you’ve searched, all

these years-how you refused to give up, even when hope must have felt so far away.”

Her voice caught gently as she exhaled, memories flickering behind her eyes. “Malia would have

been proud of you, you know. She was a remarkable woman… strong-willed, stubborn, and full of

heart.”

Eleanor’s eyes softened as she remembered her friend. “I still remember how she used to look at

you and Dominic-always teasing that you two were the sensible ones.” A faint, wistful smile

curved her lips before it softened into something more tender.

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“May her soul rest in peace,” she added quietly. “I have no doubt she’s smiling down right now- knowing her daughter has finally found her way home, surrounded by people who will never let her stand alone again.”

She

gave Dahlia’s hands one last squeeze, a gesture both grounding and comforting. Then her gaze drifted-inevitably-to Damien, her expression shifting from empathy to fond affection.

“Damien,” Eleanor said softly, her features warming with unmistakable affection. “It’s so good to have you home, darling. It feels like ages since we’ve seen you.”

A playful glint sparked in her eyes as she added, “You haven’t been getting yourself into too much

trouble, I hope?”

Damien stepped forward, a genuine smile softening his usually composed features as he wrapped his grandmother in a warm embrace. “Grandma… you look wonderful,” he murmured, his tone low but affectionate. “I’m sorry it’s been so long since my last visit-work’s been keeping me far too

busy.”

Pulling back, he turned toward Charles, a hint of playful respect in his voice. “Grandpa.”

Eleanor’s eyes flicked past Damien, finally settling on Maya. Her expression softened from curiosity to gentle scrutiny, a teasing warmth in her gaze. “And you must be the young lady who’s captured my grandson’s attention,” she said, her voice playful yet kind.

Damien pulled back after giving Charles a brief, affectionate hug, then stepped back to stand beside Maya. He cleared his throat softly, offering a reassuring glance at her before guiding her a

step forward. “Grandma, Grandpa… this is Maya.”

Maya’s heart fluttered under their gaze. She drew a steadying breath, forcing a small, respectful

smile. Her voice was barely above a whisper. “It’s… an honor to meet you, Mrs. Blackwood, Mr.

Blackwood."

Eleanor's lips lifted in a teasing half-smile, her eyes sparkling with warmth. "Oh, please-call me

Grandma, dear. We can skip the formalities." She reached out, her hands gentle yet firm, and clasped Maya's warmly.

Maya felt her cheeks flush instantly. Damien's hand gave a reassuring squeeze at her back, and she nodded slightly, returning the warmth in Eleanor's teasing, affectionate gaze.

Eleanor's eyes lingered on Maya, shifting from playful curiosity to quiet, heartfelt admiration. Her voice softened, rich with warmth and reverence. "You are truly beautiful, my dear-and those eyes … they carry your mother's light. There's so much of her in you; it's impossible not to see it." A

tender smile graced her lips, a quiet, adoring acknowledgment of the young woman standing before her.

Maya blinked, caught off guard by the intensity and sincerity of Eleanor's words. Shock softened

into emotion, her lips parting slightly as tears glimmered at the edges of her eyes. "Th… thank you…

she stammered, her voice trembling. She hesitated a moment, then found the courage to add

softly, “Grandma.”

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Charles, sensing the weight of the moment, let out a soft, gentle chuckle, his eyes crinkling with

warmth. “Darling, don’t keep her all to yourself,” he said, his tone measured but affectionate. “Allow

me the honor of welcoming our future granddaughter-in-law.”

Eleanor gently let go of Maya, and Charles stepped forward, a warm, playful smile tugging at his

lips. He gave her a gentle, reassuring hug. “Ah… finally! The face behind the name. Welcome to the family, dear,” he said, his voice full of cheerful warmth.

Maya’s voice was shy but steady. “Hello, Mr. Blackwood… it’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Charles waved his hand dismissively, a soft smile tugging at his lips. “Oh, no-I retired a long time ago, dear, so you can reserve ‘Mr. Blackwood’ for my son Dominic-or for Damien. That sounds far

too formal.” He leaned in slightly, lowering his voice with a wink. “I’m just Grandpa now. Call me Grandpa.”

He gently took Maya's hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "When I heard he'd taken some time off, I thought the world might end. That boy has never taken a day off, even when he was sick. The company has always been his life. I'm glad someone finally capable has come along to soften this

brat."

For a moment, the air was light and warm, filled with laughter, introductions, and the gentle hum of

familial connection.

They all settled into the living room, the soft clinking of porcelain cups resuming as tea was

poured and gentle conversation flowed. The warm, fragrant steam of jasmine filled the air,

mingling with the subtle crackle of the fireplace. Laughter bubbled now and then, punctuated by

quiet observations, as if the Blackwood home itself were embracing the newcomers with its

timeless grace.

Dahlia, mid-sip, suddenly straightened, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. “By the way, Maya,” she said, her voice curious and slightly eager, “have you heard from Jaime? Are they on their way here?”

Damien glanced at his mother with a small smile. “Monroe sent me a message over half an hour ago,” he said, voice calm but carrying a spark of excitement. “They’re on their way. Should be here

any minute now.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the faint roar of a vehicle reached the driveway, tires crunching against the gravel in a familiar rhythm.

Dahlia’s hands tightened slightly around her teacup, her eyes shining with anticipation. “Finally,” she

murmured under her breath, a mixture of excitement and nervousness in her tone.

Eleanor’s gaze softened at her daughter-in-law’s eagerness, a gentle, knowing smile curving her lips. “Patience, dear,” she said quietly. “Moments like this are best savored.”

Dominic, leaning slightly toward the window, chuckled softly. “Well, savoring can wait-sounds like they’ve arrived.” His eyes lit up with amusement as he straightened, already moving toward the

entryway.

Maya, sitting beside Damien, felt a wave of excitement and curiosity ripple through her. It had been a week since she'd last seen her brother, and although they had kept in touch through their regular video calls, she missed him more than she realized. Her heart skipped at the thought of finally seeing him in person-and a flicker of worry crept in too.

How would he react when he learned the truth about their mother's identity? The weight of her legacy, the responsibility she carried, and the danger that lingered in their lives… could he

understand it all?

Jaime arrived shortly after, escorted by Monroe. He moved with a careful, slightly shy gait, but there was an easy confidence in how he carried himself. The moment his eyes landed on Maya,

they brightened immediately.

"May!" he called out, hurrying forward, arms outstretched.

Maya rose quickly, a smile spreading across her face, and met him halfway, wrapping him in a tight, eager embrace. "Jaime! How have you been? I hope you didn't give Ms. Janice and Monroe a hard

time," she teased lightly.

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Jaime grinned, laughter in his eyes. “I’ve been good, May! I swear!” He glanced nervously at Monroe for backup.

Monroe gave him a quick, approving nod. “Yeah, bud.” Then turning to Maya, he bowed slightly

with his usual polite demeanor. “Nice to see you again, Ms. Thompson.”

Maya raised an eyebrow, smirking. “What happened to our deal? I thought no more formalities?”

Monroe scratched the back of his neck, chuckling softly. “Right! Well… welcome back, Ms. Maya.”

Maya laughed, shaking her head playfully. “Thank you… Mr. Monroe,” she added, her tone teasing.

Jaime’s gaze then shifted, landing on Damien, who was standing a short distance behind Maya. ”

Hello, Mr. Blackwood,” he said, a mixture of politeness and curiosity in his voice. “Nice to see you

again.”

Damien stepped forward smoothly, offering a nod. “Jaime. Good to see you again. You look well.”

He paused, giving a small, teasing smile. “And please-don’t call me Mr. Blackwood. We’ll be brothers-in-law soon.”

His hand found Maya’s lower back, a gentle, protective touch that made her blush lightly. Jaime’s eyebrows shot up, a flicker of surprise crossing his face.

“Wait…” Jaime started, glancing between them, his voice caught somewhere between disbelief

and amusement. “Are you two…?”

Maya’s cheeks flamed, and she looked down for a moment before shyly nodding.

Jaime let out a low whistle, shaking his head, a mixture of exasperation and relief on his face.” Finally… May. About time, huh?”

Maya’s eyes widened, and her voice wobbled, half-laughing, half-embarrassed. “Jaime! Stop-it’s embarrassing!”

“What?” he said, stepping closer, eyes bright with sincerity. “I’ve been waiting for this… waiting for you to finally think about your own happiness. You deserve it, May. I’m really happy for you.”

His grin faded, replaced by a gravity that made the air feel heavier. He turned to Damien, his gaze unwavering. “Damien… I may be younger and not know the world well enough yet, but I love my sister. I would protect her with everything I have. Please… don’t ever hurt her. If one day you feel differently-if she’s not what you want anymore-then just tell her. But don’t do anything that will break her heart, don’t treat her like she’s disposable, because she’s not. She’s everything to me.”

Damien blinked, caught off guard, the corner of his mouth twitching with an amused, soft smile. His voice was low, steady, and filled with unmistakable sincerity. “Jaime… don’t worry. That will nev er happen. Maya means too much to me. I’ll do everything to protect her, to protect both of you. I love your sister, and I’d give my life to make sure she’s safe. You have my word.”

Jaime studied him for a long moment, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. A faint, approving smile crept across his face, pride and relief mixing in his gaze. Then he extended his

hand toward Damien.

Damien took it, and the two men shook firmly, a silent agreement passing between them.

Turning back to Maya, Jaime’s expression softened, tender and protective. “Remember, no matter what, I will always be here for you, okay? You deserve all the love in the world, May. Don’t ever

settle for less.”

Maya’s chest tightened, a warmth spreading through her as the enormity of the moment settled around her like a protective cloak. Between the love of her brother and the quiet assurance of Damien, she felt a pulse of belonging, of family, of being seen in a way she never had before.

Behind them, the four matriarchs stood quietly, observing the exchange. Their eyes softened, taking in the sincerity and love radiating from Jaime, Maya, and Damien. Dahlia, ever emotional, felt her throat tighten, a glimmer of tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

Dominic noticed immediately. Before her tears could spill, he cleared his throat, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. “Don’t worry, son,” he said, his tone steady but warm. “We’re with you on that one. If this brat ever hurts Maya,”-he nodded at Damien-“we won’t let it go. We’ll be

the first to teach him a lesson.”

Jaime straightened and bowed respectfully. “I… I’m sorry, sir. How rude of me.” His gaze swept briefly to the four matriarchs standing just a few steps behind Maya and Damien. “Good evening,

Ma’ams… Sir. I am Jaime-Maya’s brother.”

Dominic let out a hearty laugh, the sound filling the room. “That scamp won again! Well son, I

guess I owe you a million dollars!”

Jaime and Maya froze, eyes wide with shock. The matriarchs watched silently, sensing the weight

of the moment.

“Excuse me, sir?” Jaime asked, bewildered.

Dominic stepped forward, his hands resting firmly yet tenderly on Jaime’s shoulders. He studied

the boy’s face as if the years had collapsed, revealing a living echo of the past. His throat

tightened, a lump rising as memories surged unbidden. Julian… you damn fool… how could you

leave us so soon? He swallowed hard, voice catching even in silence. I wish you were here…

standing beside your son, seeing him grow, seeing him now…

Without thinking, he pulled Jaime into a firm hug, one hand patting his back, the other lingering on his shoulder, as if trying to carve the moment into memory. The room held its breath-the matriarchs, Maya, Damien-everyone sensing the depth of the connection.

Pulling back just enough to keep his hands on Jaime’s shoulders, Dominic’s eyes glistened. “Your father and I had a bet years ago. Whoever’s gene was stronger would win a million. He was so confident he’d take it. Then came Damien. My son here takes after me, but mostly from his mother. So all these years, i thought I’ve won. But you… you’re a spitting image of your dad!”

His throat tightened, a lump forming as memories surged. The boy's bright eyes, the familiar tilt of his chin, the warmth in his smile-it was all so achingly familiar, and yet entirely new.

"You look exactly like Julian." Dominic whispered, voice low and husky, almost breaking. His hands pressed a little firmer on Jaime's shoulders, grounding both himself and the boy. "Every bit of him… all that confidence, all that heart… it's here in you."

Jaime blinked, overwhelmed, not fully expecting such raw emotion from this man he had only just

met.

Dominic's eyes glossed, but his smile remained steady, a mixture of pride and awe. He took a slow, deep breath, letting the weight of unspoken grief and joy wash over him. "You carry him… every part. And… it's more than I could have ever imagined."

For a moment, the room seemed to still-the world outside falling away until only the quiet hum of belonging remained. Between past and present, grief and healing, two generations stood bound by

something neither time nor loss could sever.

Chapter 329

Silence lingered like a held breath-fragile, full, and trembling with meaning. In that hush, it wasn't

grief that filled the room anymore-it was the quiet ache of understanding, of something lost finally finding its way home.

Dominic stepped closer. His voice cracked, soft but unwavering. “I’m sorry we weren’t there when

your parents passed… but I promise you this-we’re here now. Whatever you need, whatever you and your sister need… we’ll stand by you both. If you’ll allow me, I want to be your Godfather. Not

just in name… in every way that matters.”

A soft, shaky laugh slipped past him, threaded with the edge of unshed tears. “And… maybe I can teach you a thing or two about shaving, or tying a tie-things your dad would’ve loved to do with you.” He leaned in slightly, his voice lowering into a tender whisper. “Don’t go to Damien for the first one-he didn’t figure out how to shave properly until he was twenty.”

A ripple of laughter broke the tension-quiet, genuine, a sound that seemed to mend the air.

Jaime’s chest tightened, his eyes glossy. He laughed softly, part awe, part relief. Maya’s hand found his, her thumb tracing small, steady circles as if anchoring him to the moment. The warmth of family, history, and love wrapped around them, gentle and unyielding.

For a heartbeat, the room seemed suspended in quiet awe-the weight of generations and unspoken bonds threading through the air. Dominic felt it too-an unbroken line of love, friendship, and family pulsing, alive, and profoundly real in the boy before him.

Dahlia stepped forward, her eyes glistening, lips trembling with the kind of tenderness only time and love could shape. “Jaime…” she breathed, his name breaking softly from her lips, fragile and

full of meaning.

Dominic blinked rapidly, clearing his throat, forcing himself to steady the emotion threatening to

crack his composure. He gave a small, heartfelt laugh and stepped aside, gesturing between

them.

“Ah! Jaime, son-this is your Aunt Dahlia.”

Jaime straightened instinctively, bowing his head with quiet respect. “Hello, Aunt Dahlia,” he said softly, his voice calm but laced with uncertainty.

Before he could say more, Dahlia’s hands found his face-gentle, trembling, reverent. For a long, breathless heartbeat, she just stared, her thumbs brushing the edges of his jaw as if memorizing him, tracing the ghost of a face she once knew. Then, the floodgates opened.

“Oh, Jaime…” Her voice cracked, and tears spilled freely. She pulled him into her arms, holding him

tightly as though afraid he might vanish if she let go.

Jaime froze for a second, stunned by the sudden outpouring. His eyes darted to Maya. She met his gaze and gave a single, silent nod-small, reassuring, full of understanding. That was all he needed. He exhaled shakily, then lifted his arms and hugged Dahlia back-awkwardly at first, then

tighter, surer, as the warmth of her embrace sank into him.

Dahlia sobbed softly against his shoulder. “Oh, sweet boy… I’m so sorry we were too late.”

Jaime’s throat worked as he swallowed the lump of emotion rising within him. His voice was steady, quiet, but carried the weight of his years. “Please… don’t be sorry,” he murmured. “Mom and Dad always said everything happens for a reason.”

Those words-so simple, so familiar-hit something deep. Dahlia’s breath hitched, the meaning slicing straight through her grief. Behind her, Eleanor pressed a trembling hand to her lips, tears glimmering in her eyes. The other matriarchs stood still, silent witnesses to the ache and beauty of

reunion.

Charles’s jaw flexed as he blinked rapidly, his composure finally faltering. He slipped an arm around Eleanor’s shoulders, grounding her against the swell of memory. Dominic looked away briefly, blinking hard as he fought to hold himself together.

And beside them, Damien’s hand found Maya’s waist, drawing her close when he saw her shoulders tremble. Maya couldn’t stop the tears this time-they came freely, quietly, her heart breaking open with empathy and love.

Chapter 330

Dahlia finally pulled back, her hands lingering on Jaime's cheeks, trembling slightly. Her eyes were red, glossy… but shining with something fierce and tender all at once.

"You… you definitely look like Julian," she whispered, voice breaking, catching on each word. She

took a shaky breath, as if trying to hold herself together. "Maya… she showed me your photo… but

seeing you-here, in person-it's… it's something else."

Her hands tightened just a fraction, and her gaze softened, searching his face as if memorizing

every line. "And… you have your mother's eyes." Her voice faltered, then steadied again, quivering

with raw emotion. "You're a brave young man… braver than you know. Your parents… they would be

so proud of you… both of you."

She blinked rapidly, swallowed hard, and just for a moment, let herself be overwhelmed-her chest

rising and falling, tears threatening to spill again-but there was pride, love, and awe mixed into

every quiet, shuddering pause.

The introductions continued with a gentle ease. Dominic led Jaime toward his parents, pride and

nostalgia glimmering in his eyes.

“Son,” Dominic said, resting a hand on the boy’s shoulder, “these are my parents-Charles and

Eleanor Blackwood.”

Charles’s face softened immediately, the familiar spark of recognition lighting in his eyes. “Ah…

Julian’s boy,” he said warmly, stepping forward to shake Jaime’s hand. “You have his manner, you

know. That calm way of speaking-steady but sharp.”

Eleanor smiled tenderly beside him. “And those eyes,” she added softly. “Just like Malia’s.”

The siblings bowed their heads politely, both touched by the quiet fondness in the elder couple's

tone. The moment hummed with warmth-bittersweet, but healing.

Just then, the butler appeared at the edge of the room, bowing slightly. "Pardon the interruption, dinner is ready."

Dominic clapped his hands lightly, a playful grin breaking through the lingering emotion. "Perfect

timing. Come on, everyone-let's eat before the food gets cold. I'd rather not witness the old man's wrath if he's left waiting."

Charles let out a low, mock-scolding scoff, a smile tugging at his lips. "Don't tempt me, boy."

Laughter rippled through the room as they all made their way toward the grand dining hall.

The long mahogany table gleamed under the soft chandelier light, silverware neatly aligned, the

aroma of roasted herbs and wine sauce filling the air. As the family began to take their seats, the atmosphere shifted from formality to warmth-stories spilling into the air like the soft hum of music.

Halfway through the first course, Nicholas Ashcroft arrived, noticeably more composed than he had been at the pier earlier that day. His hair was still a touch tousled, but there was a newfound clarity in his eyes, a quiet steadiness replacing the earlier chaos.

“Ah, look who decided to join us,” Dominic said with a wide grin, breaking the gentle lull that had settled over the table.

Nick offered a small, relaxed smile as he acknowledged everyone at the table. “Uncle Dominic. Aunt Dahlia. Gramps. Grams.” His voice was easy, warm, and carried no trace of the earlier

tension. He passed Damien with a friendly nod, lightly patting his shoulder. “Hey, D.”

He turned to Maya, a grin spreading naturally across his face. “Sis.” And then his gaze softened as

it landed on Jaime. “And you-looking good, bud. Really good.”

“I thought you’d reek of alcohol,” Damien teased, raising an eyebrow.

Nick laughed, tossing his head back slightly. “You kidding me? Your grandma might kick me out on

the spot if I came smelling like a brewery.”

Eleanor, her voice soft but amused, chimed in. “Hmm… I’m glad you didn’t. Otherwise, I’d have no problem chatting with Margaret.” She paused thoughtfully, then asked, “By the way, how are your grandparents doing?”

Nick sank into his chair with an exaggerated sigh, letting his shoulders slump just enough to show his mild exasperation. He shot a glance around the table, a wry smile tugging at his lips.