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Chapter 371

“Come on, man. She’s annoying,” he said again, weaker this time. “She questions everything.

Pushes back. Acts like she doesn’t care who I am.”

Damien studied him. “That’s what bothers you?”

Ashcroft didn’t respond.

Because that-unfortunately-was exactly it.

Damien broke the silence first.

“Well, brother,” he said calmly, “you might want to get your emotions straight.”

Ashcroft frowned. “And why’s that?”

Damien met his gaze, unflinching. “Because at this rate, you’re more likely to attend her wedding as a guest-rather than as the groom.”

Ashcroft straightened. “What the hell?” He scoffed. “And what about you?”

Damien only shrugged. “Just saying.” He leaned back slightly. “As for me? Maya and I are already together. There are things I need to fix-things I will fix-but she’s already chosen me.”

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened.

“But you and Harper?” Damien continued, voice steady. “That’s a different story. You’re nowhere near there.” He paused deliberately. “Last I checked, she already has a pre-selected groom lined up.”

Ashcroft’s eyes snapped up.

“So if you’re not planning to do something,” Damien added lightly, “you might as well wait for the invitation.”

A beat.

“…That is,” he said, glancing back at his plate, “if you’re even invited.”

Ashcroft let out a sharp laugh, more defensive than amused. “You’re really such a vicious person.”

Damien didn’t even flinch. He picked up his coffee, unfazed. “Nope. Just being honest.”

Ashcroft shook his head, lips pressed tight, but the tension in his shoulders betrayed him.

Honest or not, Damien’s words had landed exactly where it hurt most, sending a sharp wave of panic through his chest.

The image flashed unbidden-him standing in a crowd, watching her walk down the aisle, nothing more than a guest.

The thought landed like a blow to the chest.

He wouldn’t allow it.

He exhaled slowly, fingers curling against his palm. He didn’t know when it happened. Didn’t know if what he felt was love, pride, possession-or something tangled and dangerous in

between.

But he knew this much with terrifying clarity-

He would not watch her give herself to another man.

Whatever this was… he wasn't finished yet.

The silence returned to the table-lighter now, but threaded with something unsettled.

Unfinished.

Damien stared down at his cooling coffee, Dominic's words looping in his mind.

Fix it. Not out of obligation-but because you understand where you went wrong.

He exhaled slowly.

I will, he thought. Not because I have to. Because I can't afford to lose her.

Across from him, Ashcroft cleared his throat, breaking the quiet.

"So," he said, voice deliberately neutral, "what's the next move?"

Damien looked up. “On what?”

Ashcroft leaned back slightly, slipping back into familiar territory. Business. Control. Safer ground.

“Marco Greco’s ‘claim’ buys us maybe forty-eight hours,” he said. “After that, Volkov’s going to start looking past smoke and mirrors.”

Damien’s expression didn’t change. “Let him look.”

Ashcroft’s brow lifted.

“He won’t see anything,” Damien continued calmly. “The execution was clean. By the time he starts connecting dots, there won’t be anything left to pin on us.”

A brief pause.

“When do you want to move forward with Phase Two?” Ashcroft asked.

Damien didn’t answer immediately.

He glanced down again, fingers tightening around the mug.

“After Jaime’s operation,” he said finally. “I want to be there for Maya. She’s going to need support-and I don’t want distractions.”

Ashcroft studied him for a moment, then nodded once.

“Understood.”

The decision settled between them, solid and final.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the estate, the atmosphere was very different.

Dahlia’s study was bathed in warm morning light, sunlight spilling across shelves lined with books and framed memories. The room carried a quiet strength-calm, controlled,

intentional.

Maya sat across from Dahlia, hands wrapped around a porcelain cup, steam rising between

them.

If the men had just been served a lesson in love over breakfast, the women were already several chapters ahead.

Dahlia rose and moved toward the bookshelf. She ran her fingers along the spines before pulling a single volume free. A soft mechanical click followed.

Part of the shelf shifted.

Behind it, a wall safe was revealed.

Maya's eyes widened slightly.

Without hesitation, Dahlia entered the code, her movements practiced, confident. She didn't

lower her voice when she spoke.

"The code is Damien's date of birth."

Maya nearly choked on her sip.

“U-um-Aunt Dahlia,” she said quickly, cheeks warming. “I-I didn’t need to know that. That’s… that’s private.”

Dahlia turned, a gentle smile curving her lips.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said warmly. “I trust you-not because you’re Malia’s daughter, and certainly not just because you’re with my son.” She met Maya’s eyes. “I trust you because of who you are.”

Maya lowered her gaze, fingers tightening around the cup, touched and flustered all at once.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

The safe opened with a soft click. Dahlia reached inside and removed a sleek black box before closing it again. She returned to the table and placed the box gently in front of Maya.

“Here,” Dahlia said softly. “It’s yours.”

Maya hesitated. “Mine?”

Dahlia nodded. “Go on. Open it.”

Maya gently set her cup aside and lifted the lid of the box.

Nestled inside, cushioned in dark velvet, was a sleek handgun-compact, refined, unmistakably deliberate in its design. The brushed stainless-steel slide caught the light subtly, paired with a black walnut grip that had been smoothed by time and care rather than

wear.

Classic. Discreet. Reliable. A woman’s choice-not because it was small, but because it was precise.

Maya’s breath caught as she gently traced her finger along the grip, stopping at the base where a single letter was engraved cleanly and simply: M

Maya looked from the gun to the box, then back again, as if afraid it might disappear.

“Aunt Dahlia…” Her voice softened. “This is… this is beautiful.”

Dahlia smiled, pride and something far more tender flickering in her eyes.

“I think so too.” She paused, then added gently, “It was your mother’s.”

Maya froze.

“My-” She swallowed. “This is Mom’s gun?”

Dahlia nodded, her smile warming as memory softened her features.

Maya’s chest tightened as her fingers brushed over the M. This wasn’t just a weapon-it was a fragment of her mother’s world, a life she had left behind to love, to protect, to choose.

Holding it now, Maya felt that courage settle over her own heart, its gravity pressing softly against her chest.

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The room held its breath, suspended in sunlight and quiet anticipation.

Sunlight filtered through the tall windows, catching dust in slow, drifting patterns, as if time itself had decided to linger. Something unspoken settled gently between them-not heavy,

not urgent, but waiting.

Dahlia’s fingers rested lightly on the table as she looked at Maya, memory softening her gaze -and then she spoke.

“Yes.” Dahlia smiled, her gaze drifting briefly down memory’s quieter corridors.

“You know, we used to go to the range together-regularly.”

She leaned back slightly, fingers folding with practiced ease.

“Being born into the family we were born into comes with privileges-luxury, elegance, influence.” Her lips curved faintly. “But it also comes with responsibilities. With duties. With enemies you don’t always see coming.”

Her gaze found Maya again, steady and unflinching.

“Preparation is part of that life,” she continued calmly. “Not paranoia. Just awareness. So while other teenagers were off at summer camps or planning spring breaks…” She gave a soft, knowing smile. “Ours looked a little different.”

She gestured lightly toward the box.

“Firearms. Self-defense. Strategy. Control.”

Dahlia exhaled softly, the words sounding almost ceremonial.

“Extracurriculars with consequences.”

She glanced at the quiet estate beyond the window.

“That was the world we were raised in,” she continued evenly. “Privilege and elegance on the surface… responsibility and danger underneath.” A faint, wry smile touched her lips.” Preparedness wasn’t optional. It was expected.”

Her eyes returned to Maya.

“And it’s exactly the life your mother didn’t want for you and Jaime.”

She let the sentence settle between them.

Then her expression softened, fondness threading gently into her voice.

“Your mother was a daredevil,” Dahlia added, a quiet chuckle escaping her. “A thrill-seeker, through and through.” She shook her head gently. “But never careless. She was disciplined.

Precise.”

Her smile warmed.

“She bought one for me, too,” Dahlia continued. “Gave it to me on my sixteenth birthday.”

Maya blinked. “Sixteen?”

Dahlia laughed, the sound light but unmistakably fond. “Can you imagine? Most girls our age were trading clothes, makeup, perfume, handbags…” She shook her head, amusement softening her smile. “Your mother handed me a firearm and said, ‘Now you’ll never feel helpless.”

Her gaze grew distant for a moment, then returned to Maya.

“She believed in being prepared,” Dahlia said softly. “Not paranoid. Not afraid. Just… ready.”

She paused, fingertips resting lightly against the edge of the box.

“This,” she continued, “is the one thing she chose not to leave behind.” Her gaze lowered to the gun. “It was the first firearm she ever bought for herself. Not from the family’s collection. She selected it personally. Had it engraved.” A quiet breath followed. “It was the only one she ever used after that.”

Dahlia looked back at Maya, her expression steady but gentle.

“When she left, she left everything that tied her to that life.” A beat. “Everything-except this.”

Her voice softened further. “She asked me to keep it. Said that one day… she wanted to hand it down to her daughter.”

Maya lowered her eyes to the gun again, her fingers brushing the engraved letter.

It wasn’t just a weapon-it was trust. Legacy. Protection, passed from mother to daughter.

And for the first time that morning, something settled firmly in Maya’s chest.

Not fear.

Strength.

Maya lifted her gaze, throat tight, and said “Thank you, Aunt Dahlia.”

Dahlia smiled softly. “Of course, sweetheart. It’s yours.”

Then she paused.

“Maya,” she said gently, placing a hand on her shoulder, her grip warm and steady. She waited until Maya met her eyes. “May I ask you a favor?”

Maya nodded without hesitation. “Of course, Aunt Dahlia. Anything.”

Dahlia’s expression softened further, layered with both honesty and quiet concern. “Please… be patient with Damien.” She searched Maya’s face, choosing her words with care. “He loves deeply, even when he doesn’t always know how to show it. He was raised to protect, to control outcomes, to carry burdens alone-and unlearning that doesn’t happen overnight.”

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Her thumb pressed lightly, reassuring. “He’s trying, even when it looks like he’s stumbling. And he will stumble. But his heart is in the right place.” A faint smile curved her lips. “Just… don’t give up on him too quickly.”

She squeezed Maya’s shoulder once more. “He needs time. And he needs someone who sees the man beneath the armor.”

A small smile curved her lips. “The way you handled things earlier?” A quiet chuckle followed. “That’s exactly how your mother handled your father.”

Maya blinked, surprised.

“Oh yes,” Dahlia continued, amusement softening her tone. “Malia was never confrontational. She hated arguments-raised voices, dramatic scenes, all of it. But don’t mistake that for weakness.” She withdrew her hand from Maya’s shoulder, folding it loosely at her side. “When Julian went too far with his so-called protection-when his possessiveness crossed the line and started hurting her because it questioned her judgment, her loyalty…” Dahlia shook her head gently.

“She would shut down completely.”

Maya listened, rapt.

“No shouting. No ultimatums,” Dahlia said. “Just distance. Silence. A coldness that made Julian realize something was very, very wrong.” Her eyes glinted knowingly. “She gave him space to sit with his mistake until he came to his senses on his own.”

A beat.

“And he always did,” Dahlia added softly. “Because Malia didn’t fight him-she let him see the consequences of not trusting her.”

Her gaze returned to Maya, steady and sincere. “What you did today wasn’t avoidance. It was restraint. It was strength.” A faint smile touched her lips. “You gave Damien room to reflect instead of giving him something to push against.”

She tilted her head slightly. “That takes patience. And courage.”

A pause.

“And apparently,” Dahlia said lightly, “it runs in the family.”

A soft laugh followed-quiet, genuine-and it drew a small laugh from Maya as well, the

tension easing between them.

Dahlia lifted her hand then, fingers warm as they brushed Maya’s cheek, guiding her gaze up

gently until their eyes met.

“Damien is still learning how to love,” she said softly. “Just as you are, sweetheart.” Her thumb rested there, steady, grounding.

Her expression softened further, maternal and knowing.

“Be patient with him,” Dahlia continued. “Not endlessly, not at the cost of yourself-but patiently enough to let him grow.” A small smile returned. “He needs someone who won’t meet his walls with force, but with clarity. Someone who can stand firm without hardening.”

She lowered her hand slowly.

“And you,” she added gently, “need someone who learns to meet you halfway.”

Her gaze lingered on Maya, certain and sincere.

“And he will,” Dahlia said quietly. “Because love-real love-is learned. Sometimes late. Sometimes clumsily.” A pause. “But when it’s worth it… it changes everything.”

Maya swallowed, emotion tightening her throat, but she didn’t look away.

“I know,” she said softly. “I just want him to trust me… the way I trust him.”

Her fingers curled slightly, grounding herself.

“I’m not afraid of his armor,” Maya continued, her gaze steady now. “I just don’t want to feel like I’m fighting it alone.” She paused, then added with quiet resolve, “I’m willing to be patient. I just need him to meet me there-eventually.”

She looked up at Dahlia again, a faint smile touching her lips.

“And I believe he will.”

Dahlia held Maya’s gaze for a moment longer, something steady and assured settling behind her eyes.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said gently. “Because yes-you’re right, he will.” A small, knowing smile curved her lips. “Damien may be slow when it comes to matters of the heart, but when he learns… he learns completely. And when he chooses, he doesn’t let go.”

She squeezed Maya’s hand once, firm and reassuring. “Trust that. Trust him-just enough to let him grow.”

Then her attention shifted, eyes flicking briefly to the antique clock mounted above the shelves. Her brows lifted.

“Well,” she said, straightening, “it’s nearly ten. We’d better get going.”

Maya nodded, carefully closing the lid of the gun case. The soft click echoed faintly as she set it back on the table, fingers lingering for half a second longer than necessary.

Dahlia turned away-then stopped mid-step.

“… You know what?” she said suddenly, a spark of inspiration lighting her expression. “I have an idea.”

Maya looked up, curiosity piqued. “An idea?”

Dahlia was already reaching for her phone. She dialed without hesitation, the call connecting almost immediately.

“Please have the vehicle ready at the back,” she said evenly. “We’ll be leaving through the rear gates.”

She ended the call and turned back to Maya, eyes gleaming with quiet purpose.

“Ready?” Dahlia asked.

Maya hesitated-just a breath-then nodded, a small smile forming. “I think so.”

“Good,” Dahlia replied, reaching for her coat. “Because sometimes, sweetheart, the most effective lessons aren’t taught through patience or reassurance.”

She gestured toward the hallway that led deeper into the estate, pointedly away from the breakfast room.

“They’re taught through absence,” she added lightly. “Through space. Through letting a man realize what changes when you’re no longer right where he left you.”

“We’ll spare the men the goodbyes,” she added lightly. “Let them wonder.”

And together, they slipped quietly toward the rear of the estate-leaving behind unanswered questions and unguarded assumptions.

One very important man was about to learn what it truly felt like to be caught off guard.

Someone who thought he was in control, only to discover for the first time that patience- and a little surprise-could teach him a lesson.

A lesson he wouldn’t forget.

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Damien felt it before he understood it.

The estate was too still.

Not the calm, controlled stillness he was accustomed to-but the kind left behind by an absence that didn’t belong. The kind that sharpened instinct and unsettled certainty.

He checked the time.

His jaw tightened.

They should have been back.

Across the table, Ashcroft caught the shift almost immediately. His gaze drifting toward the corridor that led deeper into the house-then toward the front doors.

“Something wrong?” he asked casually, though his eyes were anything but idle.

Before Damien could respond, James entered the breakfast hall.

Impeccably dressed, as always-tailored suit, precise posture, professionalism worn like armor. A tablet rested in one hand, his attention split between the screen and the room.

He stopped just inside, inclining his head.

“Good morning, sir,” he said to Damien.

Then, turning slightly, “Mr. Ashcroft.”

Ashcroft acknowledged him with a lazy nod, already settling back into his chair.

James redirected his focus to Damien, slipping seamlessly into his practiced cadence.

“Sir, the concert tickets have been confirmed, and the full report you requested will be ready by noon.”

“No need,” Damien said flatly.

James paused. Blinked once.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Ashcroft leaned back, a faint smirk playing at his lips. “You heard him, Horton. He doesn’t

need it anymore-unless he’s planning on completely upsetting the future Mrs.”

James froze. His gaze moved between the two men, recalibrating.

“Oh’ he said after a moment. That explains it.”

He glanced down at his tablet, scrolling.

Ms. Maya is a fan of the group. And if I'm reading this correctly." He hesitated. "Jin is her bi

That got their attention.

Damen locked up sharply.

Ashcroft lifted a brow. "Her what?"

James rubbed the back of his neck-an uncharacteristic break in composure.

My niece is a K-pop fan," he explained. "A 'bias' is the term used for a fan's favorite member

within the group

Ashcroft studied him. "So this K-pop thing is actually real."

James nodded. “Very much so. It’s a global phenomenon at this point. Many fans learn Korean just to understand the lyrics and interviews.” He paused. “Some travel internationally just to see them perform. Their following is… exceptionally devoted.”

Ashcroft let out a low whistle.

“Damn That sounds borderline cultish.”

Then he chuckled softly, shaking his head.

“Looks like you seriously overreacted this time, D. Maya was just fan-girling. You went a little

overboard

Damien’s gaze snapped to him-sharp, unyielding. “You were seconds away from flipping the table after what Harper said”

Ashcroft scoffed “You’re exaggerating

Damien didn’t blink. “Am 17”

James cleared his throat and wisely stayed silent.

Ashcroft checked his watch, brows lifting.

“Hell. Look at the time. We need to move, or we’ll be late for that meeting.”

Damien didn’t move.

“They need us more than we need them,” he said coolly. “They can wait.”

Ashcroft snorted. “Fair.” Then something clicked. “Wait-weren’t they supposed to go to the range today?”

Damien’s jaw tightened, the muscle ticking once beneath the skin.

“I thought your mother was just showing Maya something,” Ashcroft continued. “It’s been, what-almost an hour?”

Damien said nothing.

The silence stretched-tight, uneasy.

Alfred entered the breakfast hall, pausing just long enough to take in the scene before bowing.

“Pardon the intrusion, gentlemen. I had assumed everyone had already left.”

Damien looked up immediately.

“Alfred,” he said, voice clipped, “where’s everyone?”

Alfred stopped beside the table, hands folded neatly behind his back.

“Madam is in the greenhouse, sir-checking on her flowers. Sir Charles is with Mr. Dominic and Jaime in the study. They’re playing chess.”

Something cold settled in Damien’s chest.

“And my mother?” he asked. A beat. “Maya?”

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Alfred answered without hesitation, tone perfectly neutral.

“Ms. Dahlia and Ms. Maya have already left, sir.”

The words hit like a gunshot.

Damien stood abruptly, the chair scraping hard against the floor.

“What?!”

“Yes, sir,” Alfred said calmly. “They departed approximately twenty minutes ago.”

Damien’s fist clenched at his side, knuckles whitening, pulse suddenly loud in his ears.

Twenty minutes.

Ashcroft straightened, all humor gone.

“Left?” he echoed. “Together?”

Alfred inclined his head.

“Yes, Mr. Ashcroft. They exited through the rear gates.”

Damien reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

Maya’s name filled the screen as he hit call.

One ring.

Then two.

Straight to voicemail.

His thumb hovered for half a second before he ended the call, jaw tightening.

“Damn it.”

He didn’t waste time. He dialed again-this time his mother.

The line rang once before cutting off.

Voicemail.

The silence afterward felt louder than any unanswered call.

“Call Kim. Now!” His voice cut through the silence.

He didn’t wait for permission. James was already pulling out his phone, thumb moving fast across the screen. He turned slightly away, pacing once as the line rang.

A pause.

Then his expression shifted.

“…Sir,” James said carefully, lowering the phone. “She’s not picking up.”

That was enough.

Damien’s fist came down on the table with a sharp crack, the sound slicing through the room. The porcelain rattled. No one spoke.

The timing couldn’t have been worse-or more precise.

“Damien!”

Eleonor swept into the breakfast hall, Lee just behind her, arms occupied with a basket of freshly cut flowers-lavender and white roses spilling over the edge. She took one look at Damien’s expression and stopped short.

“What on earth is going on?” she demanded. “Why are you so angry?”

Damien didn’t answer her.

His gaze locked onto Lee.

“Why are you here?” Damien asked coldly. “Didn’t I tell you to accompany them to the firing range?”

Lee froze, clearly unprepared for the question. “S-sir-” He swallowed. “They… they canceled.”

Damien’s eyes darkened. “What do you mean they canceled?”

Lee straightened immediately, snapping into formality. “Kim contacted me earlier, sir. She instructed me to call the range and stand everyone down. Said Madam changed her mind and decided not to go.”

Damien took a step closer. “And you didn’t think to question that?”

“I did, sir,” Lee replied quickly. “I asked if they were heading somewhere else. Kim said no- that they’d decided to stay in today.”

Silence fell again. Thicker this time.

Damien’s jaw clenched, the pieces falling into place far too neatly.

Eleonor studied Damien for a long moment, the tension in the room slowly giving way to understanding. Then, as the pieces finally aligned, a gentle-almost knowing-smile curved her lips.

“Your mother doesn’t cancel plans without reason,” she said calmly. “You know her.” A beat.” There’s no use pushing it.”

Damien exhaled sharply. “But the Volkovs-”

“Oh, Damien.” Eleonor lifted a hand, silencing him with a single, effortless gesture. “Do you truly think your mother hasn’t considered that already?”

Her hand lowered, dismissive yet reassuring. “Go on with your day, son. Your mother knows what she’s doing.”

Damien tried again, frustration edging into his voice. “But, Grandma… Maya is—”

“What about her?” Eleonor interrupted gently, almost amused. “She’s with your mother. There is nothing to worry about.”

She turned as if to leave, then stopped directly in front of him. Her voice softened-but the

words did not.

“You made a mistake, son,” she said quietly. “Now you must face the consequences.”

She stepped past him, already done with the matter.

“Come along, young man,” she added, gesturing to Lee.

Then, without breaking stride, she called over her shoulder, “Alfred-have them bring my vase to the study. I have flowers to arrange.”

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And with that, Eleonor walked away-Lee following closely behind-leaving Damien standing in the wake of her certainty, with nothing left to do but wait.

The city rolled past the tinted windows in a blur of muted color and motion.

Inside the vehicle, the air was calm-deliberately so.

Dahlia sat composed in the back seat, posture relaxed, gaze fixed ahead as if nothing at all

had been disrupted. Kim occupied the front passenger seat, focused on the road, her attention steady and forward.

Beside Dahlia, Maya sat still.

Too still.

Her phone rested in her hands, fingers wrapped a little too tightly. The screen remained dark, but she didn’t need to turn it on to know what waited there.

Missed calls. More than one.

She swallowed, her thumb hovering just above the glass, uncertainty flickering across her

face.

Had she gone too far?

A faint crease formed between her brows as she shifted in her seat, the earlier resolve now at odds with a creeping sense of guilt. Ignoring Damien's call hadn't been easy-it hadn't been impulsive either-but with distance stretching between them, the silence felt heavier than she'd expected.

She exhaled slowly, forcing herself to breathe.

Beside her, Dahlia noticed.

She didn't look over right away. She didn't need to.

"Second thoughts?" Dahlia asked gently, her voice calm but perceptive.

Maya hesitated, then nodded once. “He’s probably worried,” she said quietly. “And mad.”

Dahlia finally turned, a knowing smile curving at the corner of her lips.

“Oh, absolutely,” she said lightly, but with certainty. A soft chuckle followed.

“A little consequence builds character-especially for men like him.”

Maya lowered her gaze to her phone again, fingers loosening slightly.

“Aunt Dahlia… maybe I went too far?” she asked softly, uncertainty threading through her

voice.

Dahlia reached over, resting a warm hand over hers. Her smile was gentle but firm.

“Sweetheart,” she said, “this is how tough love works. Damien’s actions hurt you. Creating space between you two isn’t pulling away-it’s giving yourself room to feel, to process, and giving him the chance to understand what he did. It’s a multi-stage process.”

She let her words settle for a moment before continuing, calm and deliberate.

“First, he’ll be angry. Frustrated. On edge, unsure-but pride and denial will make him think he’s still in control. As the silence stretches, he’ll realize he’s not. Panic, intimidation, frustration will follow. Slowly, pride clears, and realization hits. Remorse, guilt… maybe even fear. Only then does he begin to truly understand.”

Dahlia squeezed Maya’s hand lightly.

“So don’t be hard on yourself. Let’s enjoy our day-while my son sits somewhere, dealing with

his mistakes.”

She let out a soft, amused snort, shaking her head. “Trust me, I know him. He’s exactly like his father.”

Then, with a playful, sheepish grin, she added, “Too much pride, too much ego… they forget they can’t always win.”

Outside, the vehicle slipped into traffic, the estate fading behind them.

The silence between them stretched-not accidental, but chosen.

Maya exhaled, letting herself settle into the space she'd carved, doubt nibbling at the edges.

Behind them, in a house too quiet for control, Damien was beginning to feel the cost of

absence.

Chapter 377

By the time the clock crept past one, the illusion of control had begun to fray.

The top floor of Blackwood Enterprises was quiet, almost reverent, the kind of silence that made the city's hum feel distant and inconsequential. Sunlight spilled across the polished marble floors and steel-and-glass expanse, striking the sharp angles of Damien's face, carving shadows along his jaw, highlighting the tension he didn't bother to hide.

He stood tall at the window, one hand tucked into his pocket, gaze fixed on the city far below. The streets moved with practiced rhythm-cars threading through traffic, people weaving past one another, the afternoon sun catching on glass and steel. From this height, everything appeared calm. Peaceful. Controlled.

But the calm outside only deepened the storm inside him.

His eyes, dark and restless, betrayed it all. Every measured breath, every slight tilt of his head, carried the weight of uncertainty. He wasn't just annoyed-he was unsettled. Vulnerable in a way he hated to admit, even to himself.

Nearly four hours had passed since they left, and still neither James nor Monroe could give him a concrete update on their whereabouts. Not a word. Nothing.

A small, petty reaction-over a concert, no less-had spiraled into this. And now he couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that such a trivial spark had ignited consequences so precise

and infuriating.

He hated this feeling.

The ick inside him was relentless-a crawling, suffocating reminder that for once, control had slipped. That for once, he couldn't dictate outcomes, couldn't predict the moves of those around him, couldn't bend reality to his will.

Damien's eyes drifted to the horizon, scanning the distant rooftops as if sheer force of will could locate them. He could feel the quiet anger coiling beneath his skin, the careful edge of frustration that only sharpens in silence.

His jaw tightened further, muscles working beneath the skin, catching the afternoon light like chiseled steel. Every thought collided with the next-questions, possibilities, worst-case scenarios-but all ended at the same painful truth: he didn't know. He couldn't know.

And that, more than anything, was what gnawed at him.

The city moved on below him, unaware of the storm he carried in its reflection, while Damien

remained at the glass, a figure cut from pride, tension, and a rare, quiet vulnerability he loathed to feel.

Ashcroft appeared in the doorway, leaning casually against the frame. “You’re simmering nicely, D. Should I fetch a bucket, or do you want to cool yourself with dignity first?”

Damien didn’t look at him. “You think this is a joke?”

Ashcroft’s grin widened, entirely unfazed.

“Not at all. It’s… enlightening. Seeing you lose control over something you can’t buy, threaten, or command? Refreshing. Beats watching executives-or some assholes-beg for mercy.”

Damien didn’t turn from the window.

“So my predicament gives you enlightenment, huh?” he said calmly. “Good. You’ll need it.”

Ashcroft scoffed-but Damien continued, voice steady, deliberate.

“Last I checked, you’re not exactly thriving in the control department either. Harper’s been keeping you at arm’s length since our last night at the resort.” A beat. “And you’re not fooling anyone by pretending it doesn’t bother you.”

He finally glanced over his shoulder, eyes dark and unreadable-save for the faint, knowing smirk at the corner of his lips.

“The difference is,” Damien added coolly, “I know exactly why she walked away.”

His gaze held, unblinking.

“You’re still telling yourself she hasn’t.”

Damien’s words landed cleanly.

Ashcroft’s smirk faltered-just enough to notice.

Before he could respond, a knock cut through the air.

Both men turned.

James stood at the door, composed as ever. He inclined his head once before stepping inside, the door closing softly behind him.

“Sir,” James began, voice measured, “there’s still no answer.”

Damien didn’t move.

“We’ve checked all firing ranges within the city,” James continued. “None of them have

records of today’s visit. We also confirmed they are not at the Moretti manor. Monroe dispatched someone to Ms. Maya’s residence-negative as well. All flights and ferries have been checked. No activity.”

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The silence that followed was sharp.

Damien closed his eyes and drew in a slow breath-then exhaled hard.

“Look harder.”

James hesitated.

A fraction too long.

He cleared his throat carefully. “Sir, I-”

“Well?” Ashcroft cut in, unimpressed. “Spill it, Horton.”

James straightened, choosing his words with precision.

“Your father called,” he said. “He believes we’re wasting resources. His exact words were that if Madam Dahlia doesn’t want to be found, she won’t be. He said she has… ways.”

Damien’s jaw tightened.

“He also mentioned,” James added, “that he has attempted this before. Multiple times. And failed. His advice was to be patient. They’ll return when they’re ready.”

Ashcroft let out a low whistle, slow and impressed. “Damn. Even your parents are betting against you.”

James shifted slightly. “There is… one more thing.”

Damien opened his eyes.

James met his gaze. “Your father also said that, per Madam Eleonor’s direct instruction, they

are keeping an eye on Jaime to ensure he does not attempt to contact Ms. Maya.”

He hesitated, then added, clearing his throat, “And… he also said, ‘good luck.”

He coughed lightly.

“Damn it!” Damien snapped. “What about Harper? Have you tried calling her-asking if she knows anything?”

James nodded. “About that… Ms. Lin keeps rejecting our calls.” A pause. “But… she did send me a message.”

Damien’s eyes sharpened. “What message?”

James hesitated again, clearly uncomfortable with the position he was in.

“She said… that women stick together. That her loyalty lies with Ms. Maya. And that we won’t get anything from her-so to stop calling.”

Damien’s jaw tightened-then he slammed both hands onto the table.

“Fuck!”

The sound cracked through the room.

“Fuck-fuck!”

His head snapped up, eyes locking onto James. “Keep looking.”

James didn’t hesitate. “Yes, sir.”

He bowed once, sharp and efficient, then turned and exited, the door closing softly behind

him.

Silence rushed in to fill the space.

Damien remained where he was, shoulders tense, hands braced against the table, fingers curled hard enough to blanch the knuckles. His head dipped, breath heavy, controlled only by force of will.

“Maya…” he murmured, the name rough in his throat. A beat. “… where are you?”

Damien had built an empire on precision-on knowing where every piece stood, when it moved, and why. But unanswered calls and empty updates carved out a gap he couldn’t close, a silence that refused to be commanded.

For the first time, he was forced to confront an unsettling truth: control meant nothing when the one person he couldn’t reach had chosen to disappear.

Somewhere miles away, the vehicle slowed, then came to a stop before an old manor tucked deep within the woods.

Time clung to the place.

Stone and timber rose with quiet dignity, the structure neither grand nor imposing-yet unmistakably enduring. Ivy traced the edges of weathered walls, iron lanterns stood watch along the path, and tall windows reflected the forest like dark, watchful eyes. The manor had seen decades pass, seasons turn, histories written and rewritten-and still it stood, unwavering, protected by towering pines and distance from the world beyond.

Maya stared, momentarily speechless.

The seclusion. The way the house seemed to breathe with the forest itself, rooted and unshakable.

Dahlia spoke first, already smiling.

“We’re here,” she said warmly.

Kim stepped out of the vehicle, moving around to open Dahlia’s door. She gently squeezed Maya’s hand before stepping out herself.

“Come on, dear. I’ll show you around,” Dahlia added, calm and inviting-the kind of voice that made it easy to believe there was nowhere else Maya needed to be.

The drive had taken nearly four hours, the city giving way to winding roads and dense woodland. When Maya stepped out, the sun filtered through the tall pines, painting the manor’s stone walls in soft gold and shadow. The air smelled of pine, earth, and something timeless, grounding.

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She inhaled deeply, the scent settling in her chest-and for the first time since breakfast, the weight on her shoulders eased.

Dahlia stood beside Maya at the entrance of the manor, the stone steps cool beneath their feet. The towering facade seemed to rise effortlessly from the forest floor, flanked by pines that swayed gently in the afternoon sun.

Maya's eyes widened, taking in the intricate carvings along the wooden doors, the ivy creeping across the stone walls, the quiet grandeur of the place.

"Aunt Dahlia… this place is… beautiful," she whispered, almost breathless. "Where… where are we?"

Dahlia's gaze softened, a warm smile spreading across her face.

"It is my great-grandmother's home," she said gently, voice carrying the weight of memory. "A place where your mother and I would always come when we needed time away for ourselves.

Maya blinked, awe and emotion mingling. Her voice caught as she spoke.

"My mom… she used to come here?"

"Yes, dear," Dahlia replied, her tone tender, almost reverent. She wrapped an arm around Maya's shoulders and gave her hand a reassuring pat. "Come. Let's go inside."

The doors creaked open smoothly, and the interior revealed a warm, timeless elegance- wood beams, soft rugs, and sunlight pooling on the polished floors. Maya's breath hitched again, overwhelmed by the quiet grandeur and the sense of history that seemed to hum through the house.

Dahlia led the way, moving with ease as if the manor itself welcomed her. Maya followed, hesitant at first, then slowly letting the calm seep in, her earlier tension softening with every step.

The entry hall opened before them like a preserved moment in time.

High ceilings arched overhead, supported by dark wooden beams polished to a quiet sheen. Sunlight streamed in through tall, narrow windows, filtering softly across marble floors veined with subtle gray, worn smooth by generations of footsteps. An ornate chandelier hung above-antique, restrained, its crystal catching the light without demanding attention.

Everything about the space spoke of old wealth done properly.

The walls were lined with oil portraits in gilded frames-faces long gone, eyes sharp with legacy. Shelves held carefully curated antiques: heirloom vases, leather-bound books, a silver clock that ticked steadily, as if keeping time for the house itself. Even the air felt different- clean, faintly scented with aged wood and history.

Maya's eyes couldn't help but wander.

She took in the floors, the walls, the ceiling-every detail pulling her deeper into quiet awe. Her gaze lingered on the antiques, the way each object seemed chosen not for display, but for remembrance. This wasn't a house meant to impress outsiders.

It was a house meant to endure.

Dahlia watched her reaction with a fond, knowing smile.

“This is where I go when I need silence.”

Maya lifted her gaze to the manor again, awe flickering in her eyes. Its stone and timber seemed to hum with history, standing serene and untouched by the chaos she had left

behind.

Unaware that the storm she’d sparked was already gathering miles away, growing louder with every unanswered call.

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Maya stood at the center of the entry hall, the quiet pressing in as Dahlia’s words settled slowly into her chest.

This is where I go when I need silence.

The meaning lingered, heavier than the sentence itself. It wrapped around her, unfamiliar and unexpectedly intimate.

“Aunt Dahlia…” Maya hesitated, fingers curling slightly at her sides. “You… you mean you…”

Dahlia’s expression softened. She gave a low, gentle chuckle-not dismissive, not amused, just honest. “Need silence too?” she said. “Of course I do.”

Her gaze drifted briefly around the hall, as though the walls themselves held memories.

“Commitment isn’t easy, Maya. It’s two completely different people choosing-again and again-to live alongside each other. To understand, to endure.” A small pause. “It isn’t sparkles and cheers all the time.”

Then her eyes returned to Maya, warmth threaded with knowing humor.

“And you think my son’s possessiveness is excessive?” She smiled faintly. “Oh, dear. His father was far worse.”

The words were light-but the truth beneath them was not.

Dahlia’s expression shifted, the humor softening into something more reflective.

“Dominic has always been prideful,” she said quietly. “He is a Blackwood, after all. That name carries weight.” A brief pause. “It comes with expectation-power, success, influence. And being the only son…” She exhaled softly. “He understood what that meant from a very young age.”

Maya listened, unmoving.

“He was driven by ego. By pride,” Dahlia continued. “He acted first and thought later-far too often.” A faint smile touched her lips. “Too impulsive. Just like his son.”

She glanced at Maya then, eyes sharp but warm.

“The difference between me and your mother,” Dahlia said, “is how we fight.”

Maya’s brows knit together.

“I am confrontational,” Dahlia admitted without shame. “Silence has never been my strength. I argue. I demand answers. I want results-and I want them immediately.” She gave a small shrug. “If you can’t handle that, if you can’t meet me where I stand, then we were never meant

to work.”

Her gaze drifted again, thoughtful.

“Malia was different,” she said softly. “She was patient. She didn’t push-you barely felt her move at all.” A small, knowing smile touched her lips. “Her way of getting her point across was quiet. Psychological. She let people think they’d come to their own conclusions.”

Dahlia paused, then shook her head slowly.

“And that,” she added, “is why I’ve always thought her way was far more brutal.”

Maya’s brows drew together.

“When I argue,” Dahlia continued, “you know exactly where I stand. I raise my voice. I demand answers. I tell you what hurts me and why.” She exhaled. “It’s messy, yes-but it’s honest. The other person isn’t guessing. They aren’t left alone with their thoughts, wondering what they did wrong.”

Her gaze softened, but her voice remained firm.

“Malia’s silence did the opposite. She wouldn’t fight-you felt her absence instead. And silence forces people to turn inward.” A faint smile, almost rueful. “They replay every word, ev ery moment, searching for the mistake. It feels calm on the surface, but inside?” She tapped lightly against her chest. “It’s war.”

Dahlia met Maya’s eyes.

“That kind of patience isn’t mercy. It’s strategy. It removes control without ever raising its voice.” A beat. “And in my opinion, that’s far crueler than any argument.”

Maya shifted slightly, heat creeping up her neck. The realization settled uncomfortably in her chest-too close to her own habits, her own silences. She looked down, suddenly aware of how much of herself had just been laid bare.

Dahlia noticed immediately.

She always did.

Her voice softened. “No-don’t look at me like that.” A small, reassuring smile followed. “I’m not saying you’re cruel, Maya. You’re not.”