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Chapter 381

Maya lifted her gaze, uncertain.

“That’s simply how you cope,” Dahlia continued gently. “How you protect yourself. Silence is where you sort your thoughts, where you regain your footing. There is nothing wrong with that.” A pause. “It becomes dangerous only when the other person doesn’t know why the silence exists.”

She reached out, briefly squeezing Maya’s hand.

“And that,” she said quietly, “is why I am genuinely glad you and Damien crossed paths.”

Maya blinked.

“I didn’t need to intervene. I didn’t need to interfere.” Dahlia’s smile deepened, something almost amused flickering beneath it. “The universe did that part for me.”

Maya let out a small, breathless laugh. “You believe that?”

“I do,” Dahlia replied without hesitation. “Because fate has a way of balancing extremes.”

Her eyes sharpened-not unkindly.

“Damien doesn’t respond to force. He doesn’t respond to confrontation. He’s spent his entire life surrounded by it.” A beat. “What he has never known… is restraint. Absence. Someone who doesn’t bend, doesn’t chase, doesn’t try to overpower him.”

She tilted her head slightly.

“Your way,” Dahlia said softly, “is the only way to reach him. The only way to make him feel instead of control.”

Maya swallowed.

“What do you mean, Aunt Dahlia?” she asked quietly.

Dahlia didn’t answer right away.

She studied Maya for a long moment, as if weighing how much truth she was willing to place in her hands. Then she spoke, voice low, unhurried.

“Damien was raised to dominate every room he walks into,” she said. “Decisions. People. Outcomes. He’s been taught that control is safety-and that losing it is weakness.”

She stepped closer, her tone gentle but unflinching.

“When you go silent, you don’t challenge him head-on. You don’t threaten his pride.” A pause. “You remove yourself from the board.”

Maya’s breath caught.

“That terrifies him,” Dahlia continued softly. “Because suddenly there’s nothing to push against. Nothing to win. Nothing to conquer.” Her lips curved faintly. “Only himself.”

She reached out, lifting Maya’s chin just enough to meet her eyes.

“You don’t punish him,” Dahlia said. “You make him feel the absence of you. And for a man

like Damien…”

A beat.

“That absence is unbearable.”

Her hand fell away.

“So no,” she added gently, “your silence isn’t cruelty. It’s honesty. You don’t pretend. You don’t perform. You step back until you’re ready to speak-and when you do, it means something.”

Dahlia smiled then, warm and certain.

“That’s why it works,” she said. “And that’s why fate didn’t misstep when it brought you

together.”

The air between them felt heavier now-not tense, but charged.

Maya stood very still, realizing something she wasn’t sure she was ready to accept.

She had never meant to wield power.

But somehow… she already did.

“When Dominic and I argued,” Dahlia finished, her voice steady, “it always came down to one thing.”

She met Maya’s eyes fully now, unflinching.

“Which of us was willing to set our pride aside first.”

A beat.

“And that, my dear, takes time.”

Her voice softened, losing its edge.

“I need space to breathe. To think. Away from noise.”

Her gaze drifted around the entry hall-the stone, the stillness, the history held in silence.

“And this,” she said quietly, “is where I go.”

The silence that followed was heavy-but not uncomfortable. It felt honest.

Dahlia turned first, her hand resting lightly at Maya's back.

"Come," she said gently. "Walk with me."

They moved past the entry hall and through a pair of tall glass doors at the far end, the transition almost seamless-as if the house itself were releasing them. Cool stone gave way to warmth and light, the quiet indoors unfolding into something wider, deeper.

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The garden opened before them.

Manicured hedges traced winding paths of pale gravel, their symmetry softened by time. Old oaks stood along the perimeter, branches arching overhead, leaves whispering with the breeze. Stone benches rested beneath climbing vines, untouched, patient. Farther out, the land rolled gently, dissolving into forest, green bleeding into green until the boundary disappeared altogether.

Maya slowed without meaning to.

The air here felt different-warmer, lighter-carrying the scent of jasmine, grass, and earth. Somewhere nearby, water murmured, steady and unhurried, as if the place itself breathed at its own pace.

Dahlia walked beside her, steps unhurried, her presence calm and assured.

“This place,” she said quietly, eyes forward, “reminds you that silence isn’t empty.”

Maya followed the garden’s curve, noticing how it didn’t fight the forest but lived alongside it -balanced, intentional.

They stopped at a small gazebo built around a massive tree at its center. The trunk rose through the wooden floor, ancient and thick, its bark carved with faint markings softened by

time.

Dahlia stepped closer. Her hand lifted, fingers settling into one of the carvings as if it belonged there.

Maya noticed.

Her breath caught as her eyes followed the lines etched into the bark. Two letters. Simple.

Intentional.

Something shifted inside her-quiet, sudden-pieces snapping together before she could stop them.

“DM?” Maya whispered.

Dahlia smiled, but her eyes shone with emotion.

“Dahlia and Malia.”

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She kept her hand against the tree. “Your mother and I used to come here all the time. Especially when we didn’t want the men to find us.” A soft laugh escaped her. “This was our favorite spot.”

She brushed her palm along the trunk.

“This is where we spoke freely. Where we said everything we couldn’t say anywhere else-no filters, no expectations.” Her voice lowered. “And this tree…” She patted the bark gently. “It witnessed it all. The laughter. The tears. The anger. The sadness. Everything.”

Maya swallowed hard.

“Uncle Dominic… he doesn’t know about this place?” she asked quietly.

Dahlia shook her head.

“No. Neither does Damien.”

Maya frowned, confusion threading through her emotions.

“But… you said this is your great-grandmother’s home.”

“It is,” Dahlia said. Then, after a pause, she turned toward the bench beneath the gazebo.

“Come. Let’s sit.”

They did.

Dahlia faced her fully now, expression serious in a way Maya hadn’t seen before.

“Maya… there’s something I want to share with you.” She inhaled slowly. “Something I chose to keep to myself.”

Maya stiffened.

“It’s a secret my husband and my son don’t know,” Dahlia continued. “Not Charles. Not Eleonor. Not even the Morettis.” Her gaze held Maya’s. “I’m trusting you with it.”

Maya’s heart began to race.

Dahlia took a steady breath.

“My mother’s side of the family,” she said quietly, “are the Harringtons.”

Maya froze, the words sinking into her chest like stones.

The world seemed to pause around her-leaves rustled, the wind whispered, even the distant water fell silent.

And in that silence, Maya realized there was so much more to the story than what she had

ever known.

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“My grandmother was the one who orchestrated it,” Dahlia said softly, her gaze steady. “She wove the first threads between the Spencers and the Lockwoods-careful, deliberate. It was a connection entirely

separate from the centuries-old ties the two families had maintained. And through marriage, that bond eventually reached the Morettis as well, quietly threading our lives together across generations."

Dahlia's gaze remained steady.

"By my grandmother's wishes, the Lockwoods never spoke of our Harrington blood. Not openly. Not to anyone-especially not in front of the Spencers or the Morettis." She let the words hang for a moment, letting their weight settle. "It was never denial. It was protection."

Slowly, she sat beside Maya, folding her hands loosely in her lap. The movement was quiet, measured, as if to remind her that some truths needed to be handled gently.

"As far as the world is concerned, for decades the relationship between our families has been presented as opportunity," Dahlia said. "As mutual respect. As alliances shaped by time and shared history."

A faint, knowing smile touched her lips-not amused, but measured.

Her eyes lifted to Maya's.

"And that," she said quietly, "is the only story Dominic and Damien have ever known."

Dahlia rose slowly, resting her hand against the tree's trunk as if drawing something steady

from it.

“It’s remarkable, isn’t it?” she said quietly. “How some people can be given everything-and still choose something entirely different.”

Her fingers brushed the bark, thoughtful.

“How strength can be inherited,” she continued, “not as an expectation, but as a choice.”

She looked back at Maya then, her voice calm but sure.

“That’s what my great-grandmother did. And that,” she said softly, “is what made this place ours.”

Maya swallowed. The garden felt alive around her-the rustle of leaves, the whisper of the breeze-each sound heavy with memory and intention.

Dahlia’s expression shifted, something tightening beneath her calm. She moved closer and sat beside Maya.

“But your mother’s path was different,” she said softly.

Maya felt the shift before the words landed.

“The Lockwoods are a monarchy through and through.” Her voice lowered, steadier now, edged with something harder. “For them, tradition isn’t simply honored-it’s law. It governs how they live, how they breathe, how they choose.”

A shadow crossed Dahlia’s eyes.

“And because of those traditions… those old beliefs…”

Maya spoke before the thought could fade, her voice low, steadier than she felt.

“My mother chose to follow her heart,” she said. “It cost them an heir. A queen.” Her breath caught briefly. “And more than anything, it cost them a daughter.”

Dahlia held her gaze, something heavy settling behind her expression-pride threaded through loss.

“Yes,” she said softly.

The garden seemed to quiet around them. Leaves stirred overhead, the air thick with history that no longer felt distant, but close enough to touch.

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For a while, neither of them spoke.

The garden held its breath, as if the truth that had just been spoken needed time to settle- into the roots of the earth, into the space between them, into Maya herself.

After a moment, Dahlia continued.

“Now that you know this much,” she said, “you’ve likely already seen what it means.”

Maya didn’t speak, but she didn’t look away.

“Your relationship with Damien was never the issue,” Dahlia said. “It never was.” She paused briefly. “Especially when Damien himself carries Harrington blood.”

Maya’s chest tightened.

“The Lockwoods won’t stand in the way,” Dahlia added. “Not on those grounds.”

Dahlia didn’t continue. Her gaze drifted past Maya, toward the trees, toward the stillness beyond them- giving the words room to breathe.

Maya followed that silence, felt the shape of what remained unsaid settle into place.

She exhaled slowly. “It’s how my life will completely change.”

Her gaze dropped, fingers curling lightly against her palm.

“Because claiming my lineage,” she said, choosing her words carefully, “comes with obligations. Traditions. Expectations.”

Dahlia inclined her head once. “It does.”

Her voice held its composure, but the compassion beneath it was unmistakable.

“And that,” she said, “is why your mother chose a different life.”

Maya’s throat tightened.

“It wasn’t fear,” Dahlia said. “And it wasn’t defiance.” Her gaze dipped briefly before lifting to Maya again. “It was love.”

She reached out, resting her hand over Maya's-warm, steady, anchoring.

"She didn't want that world for you or for Jaime," Dahlia continued. "She wanted you free." Her thumb brushed lightly against Maya's skin. "Free to choose your life. Your path. The

person you stand beside."

Dahlia met her eyes, calm and certain.

"To be who you choose to be," she said softly, "and to share your life with someone because you chose them-not because history decided for you."

As Dahlia's words lingered in the quiet, soft footsteps stirred the gravel. Kim appeared, pausing a respectful distance away.

"Excuse me, Madam," she said gently. "Everything has been set up."

Dahlia didn't turn right away. Her hand remained over Maya's for a brief moment longer, grounding-intentional.

Then she nodded once.

“Thank you, Kim,” she replied calmly.

She looked back at Maya, her expression gentle yet contained, as if she were consciously setting the weight of everything they’d spoken about aside-just for a moment.

“Come,” Dahlia said quietly. “There’s something I want to show you.”

Maya nodded, and they rose together.

The narrow path curved away from the garden, the manicured edges slowly giving way to something wilder, more natural. Gravel softened into earth. Trimmed hedges thinned, then disappeared altogether.

The trees grew closer as they walked, branches stretching overhead until they formed a loose canopy, filtering the light.

With every step, the manor felt farther away.

Its presence faded-first into silence, then into absence-until all that remained was the quiet shift of leaves beneath their feet and the steady rhythm of their footsteps moving deeper into

the woods.

The path opened into a small clearing.

A treehouse stood at its center-modest, timeworn. The wood had darkened with age, the steps uneven yet solid, as if it had learned to endure rather than fight the years. It wasn't grand or polished.

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"Let's just say," she replied, "he wasn't in the best mood."

Maya stared at her.

"He deployed quite a number of resources trying to find us," Dahlia went on casually. "Even after his father told him he was wasting his time." She took a slow sip of her coffee. "After years of marriage, Dominic knows better."

She glanced toward the trees, serene.

"When I want to be left alone," Dahlia said calmly, "I will be."

Maya felt warmth bloom in her chest-an ache somewhere between awe and sudden understanding.

Being away from Damien left a subtle emptiness, a quiet tug she couldn't ignore-but it was tempered by the rare, necessary space to breathe, to simply exist without weight pressing down.

Then a sudden thought struck her, and her eyes widened.

"Wait," she said, straightening. "Isn't Mrs. Lin coming over tonight? To finalize our travel plans?"

Dahlia gave her a gentle nod, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"You're right," she said gently. "But there's nothing to worry about. Eleonor already has dinner preparations well in hand." A faint smile touched her lips. "All we need to do is show up."

Dahlia rose smoothly, brushing her hands together as if closing a chapter.

"It's a long drive back," she added calmly. "We should head out."

Maya paused, taking one last look at the targets, the quiet woods, the place that had given her more than she ever expected.

She nodded. "Okay."

Dahlia’s smile warmed, satisfied, as she gestured toward the path leading out of the trees.

“Come,” she said softly, her hand brushing against Maya’s as she gestured to the path. “Let’s go home.”

The drive back was quiet. Maya leaned against the seat, watching the sky bleed from amber

and rose into deep violet as the sun sank behind the distant hills.

The gentle sway of the car, the hum of the engine, the lingering scent of the forest-it all felt like a rare pause, a bubble of calm suspended far from the obligations waiting just beyond the manor gates.

Somewhere, far from this bubble of calm, Damien raged-unseen, relentless, each passing second sharpening the tension she was blissfully removed from. Hour by hour, frustration had built like a storm contained only by his will. Every report, every call, every briefing fanned the embers of his temper, until it burned with barely restrained intensity.

The rules were simple.

When Damien Blackwood was like this, silence wasn’t courtesy-it was survival. Move carefully. Speak only when necessary. Never meet his eyes.

At Blackwood Enterprises, the office moved on eggshells, every step calculated, every word measured. Even the most seasoned executives-masters of strategy, negotiation, power- tread lightly, fully aware that a single misstep could draw his attention.

Today, no one dared.

Every call, every question, every tiny mistake risked the full force of his wrath. The tension radiated outward like gravity-dense, inescapable-and even the walls seemed to hold their

breath beneath it.

Chapter 389

He sat alone in his office.

The floor-to-ceiling windows were darkened, the city beyond them muted and distant. The only sounds were the soft tap of keys, the quiet scratch of pen against paper, the steady rhythm of his breathing as documents passed beneath his hands.

Sign. Turn. Review. Sign again.

Each

page was handled with controlled precision, as if routine alone could keep the day

contained.

None of it pleased him.

It wasn’t the numbers. The projections were solid. The acquisitions had closed without resistance. Every strategic move had landed exactly where it was meant to.

None of it mattered.

What gnawed at him had nothing to do with business.

She hadn’t answered.

Every update he’d received-every “sighting,” every trail that dissolved just before he reached it-had sharpened his mood further. By midday, even Dominic had stopped offering commentary, recognizing the particular edge in his son that meant reason would not land.

While Maya spent the afternoon wrapped in quiet clarity-learning, breathing, finding a stillness she hadn’t known she needed-Damien was having the opposite kind of day.

A day shaped by pressure, impatience, and restraint stretched thin.

That morning, the plan had been simple.

Clear his calendar.

Everything was stripped away except a single meeting-one that mattered just enough to be useful. Damien and Ashcroft were scheduled to meet the French investors before noon. Old money. Generational wealth. Men who mistook predictability for power and appetite for leverage.

They would leave satisfied.

On paper, it was a legitimate acquisition discussion-cross-border holdings, future expansions, polite negotiations wrapped in polished smiles. In reality, it was a front. A

carefully staged diversion meant to occupy attention, generate noise, and sell the illusion

that Damien Blackwood's focus had shifted elsewhere.

Volkov was watching.

And Volkov needed to believe Damien's hands were full-too full to be orchestrating anything beyond stock markets, boardrooms, and balance sheets. Too occupied to have had any involvement in what had happened to him. An "accident," as it had been reported. An unfortunate chain of events no one could trace back to Blackwood.

The deal would also justify travel. Business travel. The kind that left paper trails and public appearances. A clean excuse for Damien and Nicholas to move across borders without raising suspicion-Japan included.

Every detail had been calculated.

All other meetings were canceled. No calls. No interruptions. Once the French delegation departed, Damien intended to head straight to the firing range-to Maya and his mother.

That had been the plan.

Then something shifted.

One moment, the day was contained-structured, obedient. The next, it tilted on its axis, as if an unseen hand had reached in and turned everything sideways.

Damien felt it before he could name it.

The tight coil in his chest.

The sense that something had slipped just beyond his grasp.

The firing range was forgotten.

The calendar no longer mattered.

Damien lifted his wrist and checked his watch.

Still nothing.

No updates. No sightings. No trace of where they'd gone-or how long they intended to stay

gone.

He lowered his arm slowly, jaw tightening.

His father had told him to let it be. To wait. To trust that his mother would resurface on her own terms. Damien had dismissed it outright-pride, ego, certainty all conspiring in his favor He had been confident he'd find them. Confident that resources, reach, and persistence would close the gap.

He had deployed everything.

Private security. Discreet trackers. Calls placed where calls weren't supposed to go. Quiet inquiries through channels that rarely came back empty.

All of it returned the same answer.

Nothing.

That was when reality began to settle in-slow, unwelcome, undeniable.

His father had been right.

Dahlia Moretti Blackwood was not someone to be cornered. If she wanted to disappear, she could-cleanly, completely. No trails. No tells. Just absence. She had never relied on anyone to move through the world, least of all men. Not his father. Not him.

And she hadn't been alone.

That realization landed harder than he expected.

Women like his mother didn’t act without intention. And women like Maya-quietly observant, absorbing more than she ever revealed-learned quickly. Even Harper, thousands of miles away, was not to be underestimated. Her laughter, her brightness, her careless ease were a smokescreen. You couldn’t pry answers from her. You couldn’t pressure her. If she said no,

that was the end of it.

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And his grandmother Eleonor was no different.

Polite. Gracious. Always perfectly placed. But beneath the warmth was steel. She chose carefully what to offer and what to withhold.

Together, they were insulated. Aligned. Quietly formidable.

They protected their own. And what he had dismissed as a petty misstep had, without him realizing it, drawn an invisible line-one that split the space around him into men on one side, women on the other.

Now he understood what his father and grandfather had meant.

This was a kind of war he could not win.

Damien exhaled sharply, only then realizing how long he’d been holding his breath.

Waiting had never been his strength.

Losing control had never been acceptable.

Yet here he was-boxed in by silence, forced into stillness, aware for the first time that the

absence wasn't accidental.

It was chosen.

And that unsettled him more than any confrontation ever could.

The sound of the door opening cut through the silence.

Ashcroft swaggered in like he owned the place, striding straight to the mini bar. Behind him, James trailed quietly, keeping pace.

"You lost your manners?" Damien's voice was sharp, eyes not leaving the papers in front of

him.

“Nah… I was just-” Ashcroft began, reaching for a bottle, but Damien’s next words cut him off.

“Are you sure you want to reek of whiskey when you face your future mother-in-law?”

Ashcroft froze mid-pour, amber liquid suspended in the glass. He smirked, pretending indifference. “What future mother-in-law are you talking about?”

Damien didn’t look up. “Mm… still in denial, I see.”

Ashcroft walked toward the leather couch and made himself comfortable, then swallowed the drink in one motion, smirking wider. “Nope. Just realistic. That dinner’s probably already been rescheduled. Have you forgotten? They’re still missing. Who knows when-if-they’ll come home tonight. I bet your mom’s already canceled it and made other plans.”

Damien’s pen paused mid-sign. The sudden thought of Maya not coming home tonight sent a shiver down his spine-a strange palpitating feeling he hadn’t expected.

Before he could fully process it, James cleared his throat.

“Sir, we have an update.”

Damien’s eyes snapped to him. Nicholas, lounging on the couch, straightened instantly, smirk fading.

“Speak.”

“Madam Dahlia’s vehicle has been spotted on North Avenue, heading toward the Manor.”

Damien dropped his pen and rose immediately. “When?!”

“Five minutes ago,” James replied.

“Are you sure they’re heading home?”

James nodded. “Yes, sir. Alfred confirmed Madam Eleonor is overseeing dinner preparations, and Mrs. Lin is already en route-approximately thirty minutes away.”

Ashcroft slammed his glass down on the coffee table and stood. “Damn it, Horton! Why didn’t you tell me before I gulped that?”

James offered a neutral shrug. “Apologies, Mr. Ashcroft. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Oh, you…” Ashcroft’s glare shifted to Damien. “Hey, D! I’ll take a shower in your private suite.”

Damien stopped him, voice flat. “Absolutely not. Go take a shower in your own house.”

“But I’ll be late!”

Damien shrugged, smirking. “Not my problem. I warned you.” He paused, then added, ” Besides… I don’t think how you smell matters.”

Ashcroft crossed his arms, one eyebrow raised. “And what exactly do you mean by that?”

Damien’s smirk deepened. “Have you forgotten? They already have their eyes on Hiro-their

future son-in-law.”

Ashcroft’s expression darkened. “Bullshit! He can kiss my ass!” He yanked out his phone and dialed a number. “Get the vehicle ready. I’ll be down in five.”

He ended the call, pocketed the phone, and grabbed his coat from the couch. “Reserve a plate for me. I’ll be there in less than an hour-tops.”

He paused at the door, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Oh… and say hi to Maya for me. That is… if she’ll talk to you.”

With a final smirk over his shoulder, he pulled the door open and disappeared.