Intern 391

Chapter 391

The door shut softly behind him.

For a brief moment, the room fell into an awkward, unsettled silence-the kind that lingered too long, stretching thin.

Damien’s jaw tightened.

Ashcroft’s words echoed in the space he’d left behind.

If she’ll talk to you.

The thought lodged in his chest-sharp, unwelcome.

Then he spoke.

“Get the vehicle ready,” he said, voice low and controlled, the command cutting cleanly through the quiet. “We’re leaving. Now.”

James inclined his head, expression calm and precise. “Yes, sir.” He turned on his heel, moving with quiet efficiency toward the door.

Damien remained alone in his office. The sudden quiet felt heavier now, the absence of movement outside the door amplifying every thought, every pulse of tension in his chest. Relief surged first-finally, an update. They were heading home.

But alongside it came a tangle of other emotions: worry, sharp and persistent, for their safety; curiosity, gnawing at how their day had gone; and above all, apprehension for the conversation he knew awaited him with Maya.

His fist clenched, jaw tightening. He moved to the window and stared out, the city stretching endlessly below him. From here, atop the tallest building in the skyline, he looked powerful, untouchable-a figure of command, control, and stature.

But beneath the polished stillness, something else stirred.

A nervous energy coiled tight in his chest, unfamiliar and unwelcome. A quiet recognition that control-his most trusted weapon-did not extend to every arena. That despite the world bending to his will, despite the reach of his name and the weight of his power, there were still moments-people-that could unseat him entirely.

And this-Maya’s quiet confidence, was one of them.

The city lights flickered beyond the glass like distant stars, indifferent to the shift inside him.

Damien stared out over the skyline, towering above it all, and felt his chest tighten with anticipation he couldn't suppress.

So this is what it is.

Love-if that was what this was-wasn't just heat and hunger, possession and protection. It wasn't only the satisfaction of having, of claiming. It was this loss of footing. This reliance on another person's next step. This waiting.

He had made enemies without hesitation, crushed opposition without a second thought. He knew his power. He wielded it effortlessly. Anyone who challenged him learned quickly what

it cost.

But with Maya-

There was no leverage. No dominance. No force he could apply without risking the very thing he wanted to protect.

His reactions weren't born of distrust. They came from something far more dangerous: the idea of sharing what he'd already claimed in his heart-her time, her attention, her affection. He wanted it all. For himself. Selfish, possessive-he didn't deny it.

But this was different.

He would destroy anyone who tried to take her from him.

Yet now, the threat wasn't external.

It was the possibility that he might be the one to push her away.

That his need, his control, had frightened her. That she'd look at him differently. That she'd leave.

The thought twisted deep, sharp enough to draw breath from his lungs.

Damien Blackwood had never feared confrontation. Never hesitated to meet danger head-on.

But this-Facing her, He didn't want to.

Because this scared him.

And nothing had ever scared Damien Blackwood before-until Maya Thompson.

Chapter 392

The vehicle rolled to a smooth stop beneath the warm lights of Blackwood Manor.

Maya didn't move right away.

Through the tinted window, she could already see it-Damien's car parked near the entrance, unmistakable in its presence. Her pulse stuttered at the sight, nerves tightening low in her chest.

So he's home.

Beside her, Dahlia noticed the change at once.

She glanced toward where Maya was looking, then back at her, taking in the tension in her expression. A quiet, knowing smile touched her lips as she reached out and gently covered Maya's hand with her own.

"Maya," Dahlia said gently, her voice steady enough to anchor her. "Is something wrong?"

Maya's breath caught-just a fraction. She looked down at her lap, fingers curling together. " Oh… um… nothing. I just-" She hesitated. "I noticed that…"

“Damien’s home?” Dahlia supplied softly.

Maya exhaled, then nodded, a shy, uneasy motion.

“And you’re worried about facing him,” Dahlia said.

Another nod. Slower this time.

“I see.” Dahlia paused, her expression thoughtful. Then, gently, “What you’re feeling right now is normal. Especially considering this is your first real misunderstanding as a couple.”

Her thumb brushed lightly over Maya’s knuckles, grounding her.

“Remember, love should never require you to lose yourself,” Dahlia continued. “Not your voice. Not your boundaries. Not who you are.” She chose her words with care. “It was never meant to be one person giving while the other takes. It’s a balance. A conversation. You give, you receive. You stand your ground-and so should he.”

She glanced ahead briefly, then back to Maya.

“He hurt you without meaning to. That doesn’t make him cruel-but it also doesn’t make your feelings any less valid.” A small smile touched her lips. “Damien is still learning. So are you. You’re each other’s first love, after all.”

Maya swallowed and nodded. She kept her head down, but a faint smile broke through.

“When I was sixteen,” she murmured, a soft chuckle slipping out, “there was a guy in high school who wanted to pursue me. Mom wasn’t happy about it.”

Dahlia chuckled. “You mean the young man who almost turned your mother into a criminal?”

Maya’s eyes widened before she laughed. “Yeah. Him.”

She continued, voice softer now.

“One night, Mom came into my room and said, ‘It’s time to have a mature conversation.’ Then she told me-very directly-that she didn’t like him for me. I wasn’t interested either, so it didn’t bother me.” Maya smiled at the memory. “But she kept talking. She said that one day I’d fall in love, and it would feel… colorful. Like everything finally made sense. Unicorns and

rainbows.”

She let out a quiet breath.

“But she also said it wouldn’t stay that way all the time. There’d be misunderstandings. Tears. Heartbreak. And that it didn’t mean the love was wrong-just that it was real.”

Her fingers tightened briefly in Dahlia’s grasp.

“She said the important part was learning how to navigate it. And that at the end of the day, I had to love myself first. To speak. To not just accept-but choose.”

Dahlia’s smile warmed, pride and tenderness woven together.

“Malia is a very wise woman,” she said softly. “And she raised someone just as wise.”

Maya felt it-not just the words, but the weight behind them.

The quiet warning.

The reassurance.

The permission to exist fully, without apology.

For a fleeting moment, a thought slipped in-unexpected and tender.

What if my mom is still here?

How different this might feel if she could talk to her about it. About love. About navigating something this intense, this unfamiliar. About the way it both thrilled and frightened her all at

Chapter 393

“Thank you… Aunt Dahlia.”

Dahlia squeezed her hand once more, warm and sure.

“Of course, sweetheart,” she said gently. “I’m here for you. Always. Don’t ever hesitate to

come to me.”

Maya returned the squeeze, a small, genuine smile breaking through as she nodded.

Then Kim’s voice came from the front seat.

“Excuse me, Madam,” she said, one hand brushing her earpiece. “Confirmation just came in- Mrs. Takahashi arrived approximately fifteen minutes ago. She’s already inside.”

Dahlia inclined her head in acknowledgment.

“Alright,” she said calmly. Then, turning to Maya, her smile softened. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s not keep our guest waiting.”

Kim stepped out and opened the door.

As they exited the vehicle, the manor greeted them in a wash of warm, golden light. From somewhere deeper inside, the faint hum of conversation drifted out-soft laughter threading through the air, deceptively light.

They entered the manor.

The living room revealed itself gradually-warm and expansive, alive with soft light and muted conversation.

Dominic occupied one side of the seating area, a proud, unmistakable smile on his face. James sat beside him, relaxed, wearing an easy grin. Nearby, Charles rested in an armchair, speaking in low tones with Eleanor, who listened with composed grace, a porcelain teacup cradled delicately in her hands.

And then there was Damien.

Seated across from them, his presence was unmistakable even in stillness. His posture was controlled, his expression serious-yet beneath it, a subtle tension lingered, an edge of unease he hadn't quite managed to mask.

Opposite him sat Mrs. Takahashi, calm and elegant, engaged in polite conversation over tea. Her posture was relaxed, her expression open, every bit the picture of composed confidence.

The room felt… balanced.

Civil. Carefully polite.

The moment Maya and Dahlia stepped fully into view, it was Jamie who noticed first.

His voice lit up instantly.

"May! You're back!"

Jaime was on his feet right away. He crossed the room in seconds and wrapped his arms around her.

Maya laughed softly and hugged him back. "Hey, bud.""

Jaime pulled away, already pivoting toward Dahlia, and hugged her just as enthusiastically.

“Hi, Aunt Dahlia!”

Dahlia smiled, ruffling his hair. “Hello, young man. I hope the old men didn’t bore you with chess all day.”

Dominic scoffed. “Hey, sweetheart-Father’s the only old man around here.”

Charles shot him a look. “You have more white hair than I do.””

“That’s because you dye yours,” Dominic shot back.

Charles pointed at him. “You-”

The exchange earned a ripple of laughter through the room.

Then an unfamiliar voice cut gently through it.

“Dahlia…”

Dahlia turned instantly, her smile widening as she opened her arms.

“Alice,” she said warmly. “It’s so good to see you again.”

They embraced, laughter soft and genuine as years of distance dissolved in an instant.

While greetings were exchanged, Damien rose from his seat.

His gaze found Maya-and stayed there.

She felt it immediately.

When she looked up, their eyes met. For a brief, suspended moment, the rest of the room

faded away. His expression was unreadable-intense, searching, stripped of its usual armor.

Maya’s chest tightened.

The awkwardness crept in quietly, and she turned her attention toward the two elegant women beside her.

The hug ended, and Mrs. Lin's gaze shifted to her.

"Maya," she said kindly, standing. "It's finally nice to meet you."

Maya smiled and inclined her head respectfully.

"Good evening, Mrs. Takahashi."

Alice chuckled. "Oh, dear. I'm only Mrs. Takahashi back home. Here, I use my maiden name- Lin." She waved a hand lightly. "And please, let's drop the formalities. Call me Alice."

Maya nodded as realization dawned. "Oh-so that's why Harper uses Lin." She paused, then smiled. "It's nice to finally meet you, Aunt Alice."

Alice stepped forward and pulled her into a gentle hug. When she pulled back, she studied Maya's face with fond approval.

Chapter 394

“The pleasure is mine. It’s wonderful to finally put a face to the name.” She glanced at Dahlia. “You were right-she looks exactly like Malia.”

Maya blushed. “You knew my mom?”

Dahlia answered smoothly. “Alice was one of your mother’s closest friends. We all met in college-before Alice moved to Japan.”

Alice’s smile softened. “Your mom was even supposed to be one of my bridesmaids. But by the time the wedding came around…” She laughed lightly. “She’d already eloped with your father. I still kept her name on the invitation, though.”

She shot Dahlia a mischievous glance-one that carried unspoken memories. Dahlia chuckled in response.

Dominic noticed immediately.

“I knew it,” he said, pointing between them. “That look-you two definitely got into trouble at the bachelorette party, didn’t you?”

Both women rolled their eyes in unison.

Eleanor’s voice drifted gently through the room.

“Come now. You must be tired. Have some tea-supper will be served shortly.”

They returned to the seating area, Maya and Dahlia offering greetings as they took their places.

Even as Maya settled in, she could still feel it.

Damien’s gaze.

Hard. Deep. Burning.

Then Dahlia spoke, her tone casual, almost offhand.

“Damien, where’s Nicholas? I thought he’d be joining us tonight.”

Damien didn’t look away from Maya as he answered, his voice steady.

“He’s running a little late. He’ll be here soon.”

Jaime leaned forward in his seat, eyes bright as he looked at Maya.

“So, May,” he asked eagerly, “how was your day? Did you learn how to shoot?”

Maya smiled, the nerves easing just a little, and nodded. “I did. And I used Mom’s pistol too.”

Jaime’s eyes went wide.

“What? Mom’s gun? But how?”

“Aunt Dahlia gave it to me,” Maya said simply.

Jaime nearly bounced out of his chair.

“That’s amazing, May!” He leaned closer, words tumbling over each other. “What was it like?

teach Were you scared? Did you hit the target? Oh-can I borrow it sometime? And can you me too? Please?”

His excitement was infectious, cutting cleanly through the earlier tension. Laughter flickered around, the atmosphere lifting, lighter-easier.

Maya laughed, about to answer, when Alfred appeared at the doorway.

“Pardon the interruption,” he said politely. “Dinner is served.”

Eleanor inclined her head. “Thank you, Alfred.”

Chairs shifted as everyone rose. Eleanor and Charles led the way toward the dining hall, their steps unhurried. Alice and Dahlia followed closely behind, already deep in conversation. Dominic caught up with Jaime, draping an arm around his shoulders as he launched into a story about Julian-and a spectacularly failed programming project from his college days.

Maya walked just behind them, listening, smiling faintly.

Damien was the last to stand.

He followed a few steps behind her, the distance deliberate.

Just before they reached the dining hall, Maya’s steps faltered.

Her pulse jumped, a sudden awareness crawling up her spine, as though she’s been bracing for something she couldn’t yet see.

Then a warm hand closed around hers.

She stopped.

Damien’s voice came low, close, stripped of command and edge.

“Can we please talk?”

Chapter 395

“Can we please talk?”

Maya didn’t answer right away.

She searched his face, her breath hitching-caught between the urgency in his eyes and the warmth of his hand still anchored to hers. Not tight. Not demanding. Just there.

The hallway beyond them hummed softly with movement-chairs scraping, distant voices blending into polite laughter-but right here, time felt suspended.

Grounding.

“Please, love.”

The word slipped out like a plea, soft but devastating. It threatened to pull her under.

Maya glanced toward the dining hall. The muted clatter of silverware, the low murmur of conversation- it all felt impossibly far away from this fragile, suspended moment.

She drew a slow breath and nodded once. “Okay.”

Relief flickered across his face. Damien gestured subtly toward the side corridor branching off before the dining hall.

She was about to follow-

When a voice cut sharply through the stillness.

“Where are Maya and Damien?” Eleanor’s voice carried down the hall, crisp and unmistakable. “Alfred, please check on them. Dinner is served, and everyone is waiting.”

“Yes, Madam,” Alfred replied promptly, his voice already approaching.

Maya’s heart slammed against her ribs.

“Damien,” she whispered, panic threading through her voice. “I-I think we should join them first. We can talk later.” She tried to pull away.

His fingers tightened around hers-not rough, but urgent. A reflex. A desperate anchor.

“Maya-”

The word barely left his mouth before Alfred stepped into view.

The moment he saw them, Alfred understood. His gaze flicked briefly between their joined

hands and their faces, comprehension settling quietly in his eyes. He bowed his head politely.

“Pardon my interruption,” he said, tone perfectly neutral. “Sir Damien. Ms. Maya. Madam is looking for you both.”

Damien’s expression darkened, irritation flashing across his features before he masked it.

Maya, in contrast, shifted instantly. A practiced composure slid into place, her lips curving into a fragile, polite smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Thank you, Alfred," she said softly. "We'll be right there."

Alfred bowed once more and retreated, his footsteps fading down the corridor.

The hallway felt smaller now. Heavier. Thick with everything they hadn't said.

"Later," Maya murmured, her gaze lifting to his-searching, promising.

Damien hesitated, jaw tight. Then, reluctantly, his hand uncurled from hers. He released her immediately, as if afraid to hold on longer than she allowed.

Side by side, they stepped into the dining hall.

The bright lights, the clink of crystal and cutlery, the hum of conversation-it all crashed over her like a jagged intrusion. They took their seats-the same ones they'd occupied that morning-and the familiarity felt hollow, almost deceptive.

Across the table, the family waited. Conversation resumed.

But between Maya and Damien, the silence was thunderous-impossible to ignore.

Dinner was served, plates placed with quiet precision as the low murmur of conversation slowly returned to the table. Cutlery clinked softly against porcelain, the atmosphere easing into something almost normal-almost.

Alice dabbed her lips with her napkin before turning her attention toward Damien, her expression warm and openly curious.

“Damien,” she said pleasantly, “it’s nice to see you again-in the same room this time. It’s been so long.” She smiled. “I mostly read about you these days. The papers, the news… and of course, your mother never misses a chance to mention you.”

She lifted her glass slightly. “You’re doing remarkably well. Running the business, your accomplishments-they’re genuinely impressive.”

Damien inclined his head politely.

“Thank you for the kind words, Mrs. Takahashi.”

Alice blinked, then laughed softly.

“Oh my,” she said, amused. “That sounded like we just stepped into a business meeting.”

A few smiles surfaced around the table.

“Like I told Maya earlier,” Alice continued lightly, “I’m only Mrs. Takahashi back home. To the rest of the world, I’m Mrs. Lin-and to the people dear to me…” She tilted her head, her eyes warm and knowing. “Just Alice.”

Chapter 396

She paused, then added with a teasing smile, “And you, young man, are practically a nephew

to me.”

After a beat, she chuckled again. “Besides, I don’t recall my children ever calling your mother Mrs. Blackwood, do they?”

Something in her tone-easy, familiar, sincere-cut through the formality.

Damien felt it.

He inclined his head once, the gesture unguarded. “Thank you… Aunt Alice.”

Her face lit up. “Ah! See? That already sounds much better.” Then her expression shifted, turning thoughtful. “Speaking of which… I believe I owe you an apology.”

Damien frowned slightly.

“Pardon?”

Alice gently set her cutlery down, smoothing her napkin with deliberate calm.

“An apology,” she said evenly, “on behalf of my daughter.”

Understanding flickered across Damien’s face-but before Alice could continue, the sound of approaching footsteps drew everyone’s attention.

A moment later, Nicholas Ashcroft came into view.

He looked… put together. Clean-shaven, hair neatly styled, every trace of the earlier chaos erased. He wore cream-colored trousers paired with dark brown loafers, a crisp white button-down beneath a soft wool sweater in a muted cream tone-effortless, understated, unmistakably old money. The kind of polish that suggested he hadn’t rushed, even if he had.

“Good evening,” Ashcroft said smoothly, offering a polite bow of his head. “My apologies for being late.”

A few heads turned. Eleanor acknowledged him with a nod, while Dominic arched a brow, clearly taking note.

Damien, unsurprised, simply shook his head once, a silent of course.

Maya noticed immediately.

Understanding dawned-and she had to bite back a smile.

Beside her, Jaime made no such effort.

“Wow,” Jaime blurted, eyes wide. “You look like a model straight out of a magazine!”

The comment caught Ashcroft off guard. A faint flush crept up his neck-subtle, but unmistakable-and that alone sent another ripple of laughter around the table.

Dahlia shook her head fondly. “Glad you could make it, Nicholas. Sit down and join us for

dinner.”

Across the table, however, Alice's gaze lingered on him-measured, curious… and quietly assessing.

Ashcroft smiled, recovering as he moved closer to the table. "Thank you. And-before I do-"

As if on cue, Alfred entered, followed by Nicholas's driver carrying a wooden crate.

"I brought some wine," Ashcroft added casually.

Charles leaned forward the moment he caught sight of the label. "Ah-Leroy Musigny Grand Cru." His eyes lit up. "You shouldn't have. Truly. But I certainly won't say no." He glanced toward Alfred. "Please have a few bottles chilled. That will pair beautifully with tonight's dish.

"

"Yes, sir," Alfred replied, gesturing for the driver to follow as they exited together.

Before taking his seat, Ashcroft turned toward Alice. He bowed respectfully.

"Good evening, Mrs. Takahashi. It's a pleasure to finally meet you." He presented a carefully wrapped bottle. "A small welcome gift. I hope you'll enjoy it."

Alice accepted it, her brows lifting slightly as she read the label. Then she stilled.

"…1945 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti," she murmured, impressed. "Romanée-Conti."

A hush fell-subtle, but real.

She let out a soft, incredulous laugh. "You do realize this is one of the rarest wines in existence?" She glanced up at him, amused. "Only about six hundred bottles were produced- right after the war, just before the vines were uprooted."

Her smile sharpened with recognition.

"This was the bottle sold in 2018-the most expensive wine ever auctioned at the time. I tried to acquire it myself, but even before the bidding began, they announced it had already been sold to a private buyer."

She gave a soft, knowing shake of her head, amusement dancing in her gaze.

"Turns out, that was you."

“I-I… no,” Ashcroft said quickly, then stopped, clearly flustered. “It wasn’t like that. I didn’t know you were interested-if I had, I wouldn’t have dared compete with you.”

Chapter 397

A few quiet chuckles surfaced around the table.

Alice raised a brow, her tone light-but unmistakably probing.

“Hm. Is that so?” she said. “And why is that? You think I can’t take a fair loss?”

Ashcroft froze.

“No-no, that’s not what I meant,” he said quickly, hands lifting as if to physically stop the misunderstanding. “I-I didn’t mean it like that at all. I just-”

His words tangled, panic setting in.

Jaime, who had been watching the exchange with growing anguish, finally cracked. With a resigned sigh, he leaned forward.

“It’s because he likes Harper,” Jaime said plainly. “That’s why he didn’t want to offend you,

Aunt Alice.”

The table went dead silent.

Ashcroft turned beet red, his jaw slack as he stared at Jaime-utter disbelief written all over his face. Being publicly exposed by a teenager had clearly not been part of his evening plans.

“JAIME!” Maya hissed, mortified.

Jaime blinked, then shrugged, completely unbothered.

“What? Grandpa Charles and Uncle Dominic told me earlier that Harper’s going to be the next leader of their family, so she needs to marry.” He paused, thinking. “They already matched her

with someone, but since their traditions are different, she can choose someone else if she

wants.” He glanced at Ashcroft, helpful as ever. “So Mr. Ashcroft still has a chance. Well… ma ybe.”

Across the table, Eleanor and Dahlia slowly turned their heads toward their husbands, eyes narrowing in perfect, synchronized disbelief.

You are in trouble, the look said.

Charles and Dominic suddenly found the table far more interesting than anyone else's gaze. Both men avoided eye contact entirely-guilty, caught, and very aware that this would be discussed later.

Alice's smile lingered, her curiosity clearly piqued. "And why do you say maybe, Jaime?"

Jaime tilted his head, thinking.

"Oh… because they bicker a lot." He shrugged, then let out a dramatic little sigh. "Honestly, I'm confused too. They say they don't like each other, but I think they do."

He paused, glancing around the table, then added thoughtfully, "Mr. Ashcroft and Harper just

don't want to admit it."

His gaze shifted to Maya for a brief second before he continued, his voice softer but no less

sincere.

"I don't get it. Why is it so hard for people to just say what they really feel?" Jaime asked, frowning slightly. "Wouldn't it be easier that way?"

He let out another sigh-dramatic and heavy for someone his age.

“Relationships are really complicated.”

Then, with the solemn conviction only a child could muster, he concluded,

“I don’t think I want a girlfriend. Ever.”

Maya nearly choked.

“What?” She stared at him, stunned. “You’re way too young to even think about that. Just-

eat.”

Jaime obediently reached for his fork, unfazed.

Maya turned to Alice and Ashcroft, mortification coloring her tone.

“I’m sorry about my brother.”

Alice laughed softly and shook her head.

“Oh, dear-no apologies necessary.” Her smile lingered, thoughtful. “Besides, he isn’t wrong. Relationships are indeed complicated.”

Chapter 398

A brief silence followed, settling over the table like an unspoken agreement.

Then Alice spoke again, her voice gentler, almost reflective.

“If people learned how to express what they truly feel… wouldn’t everything be easier?”

Her smile didn’t fade as her gaze shifted-brief but unmistakable-between Maya and Damien, before finally settling on Ashcroft.

“Do you agree, Nicholas?” she asked lightly.

Nicholas swallowed hard.

He lifted a hand to the back of his neck, laughter slipping out a second too late. “Ah… yes. Of

course. Of course, I do.”

A few smiles surfaced around the table.

Some amused.

Some a little too knowing.

Alice nodded once, seemingly satisfied.

Nicholas returned the gesture, then quietly moved to take his seat, relief written plainly

across his features.

Only then did Alice raise her hand-subtle, practiced.

A petite woman stepped forward at once, dressed in tailored black trousers, a crisp white polo beneath an open black suit jacket. She bowed politely to the table before turning to

Alice.

“This is my assistant, Hana,” Alice said calmly, offering a brief introduction.

Without ceremony, Alice passed her the wrapped bottle Nicholas had brought.

“Please take Mr. Ashcroft’s generous gift to the vehicle.”

“Kashikomarimashita,” Hana replied softly, bowing once more before withdrawing, her footsteps soundless as she slipped from the room.

The dinner and conversation around the table resumed, but something had shifted.

It was subtle-almost imperceptible if you weren’t looking closely. Laughter came a beat too

late. Smiles didn’t quite reach their eyes. Even the clink of cutlery sounded measured, cautious, as though everyone were stepping carefully around an unspoken truth.

Maya kept her gaze fixed on her plate.

She could still feel Damien beside her-the space he occupied, the heat of his presence, the absence of his hand where it had been only moments ago.

Damien ate mechanically. Polite. Composed. Perfectly controlled.

Alice's words lingered, echoing softly in her mind.

If people learned how to express what they truly feel… wouldn't everything be easier?

Maya exhaled quietly and lifted her glass, taking a small sip of water she didn't need. Her pulse refused to slow.

She didn't look at him.

Because if she did, she wasn't sure she'd be able to keep pretending that everything was fine.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Alice spoke again.

"As I was saying earlier, Damien, I apologize for my daughter's actions."

Damien inclined his head, sincerity in his voice.

“That’s not necessary, Aunt Alice.”

Alice shook her head gently.

“I disagree. What she did was… manipulative. She even kept it from me for so many years.”

Damien set his cutlery down gently. He picked up his napkin and dabbed at his lips before speaking.

“And… let’s admit it,” he added, calm but firm. “Clever, too. She did what she thought was best

at the time, to protect herself. Besides, she didn’t cause the company-or me-any trouble at

all.”

He paused, letting the words settle, then continued. “In fact, she excelled in her role. The PR department benefited greatly from her contributions.”

A quiet exhale left Damien, the edge in his voice easing.

“And… honestly, if it weren’t for her, Maya probably would have quit.”

His gaze shifted to Maya and held. Too steady. Too intentional.

In his eyes, she caught it-the unspoken plea, the weight of everything they had left unresolved. Words swallowed. Of truths still waiting to be said.

“Everything…” he continued, carefully, “…worked out for the better.”

The words sounded measured, almost rehearsed. As if he weren’t speaking only about the company-or Harper-but about them. About choices made and paths taken. About the fragile hope that maybe, somehow, the damage hadn’t been permanent.

Maya’s fingers tightened around her cutlery. Then she looked away, as if forcing herself to.

Alice noticed it-the weight behind Damien’s words, the intention behind his pause, the silence that followed. Understanding flickered across her features. Her expression softened, a small, knowing smile tugging at her lips as she exhaled.

Chapter 399

“And it always will,” Alice said gently. “In life, there are storms that pass. But they’re not always bad.” She paused, letting her gaze drift-briefly, deliberately-between Damien and Maya.

“Sometimes, they come to clear the path.”

The words were offered lightly, almost conversational, yet their meaning settled heavily between the two of them-quiet advice wrapped in grace.

Then Alice shook her head, amusement returning to her eyes. “My daughter is a lot of things … but harebrained, she is not. She can be reckless… even recalcitrant at times. She has a very strong personality, but also a soft, pure, loving heart.”

A soft chuckle escaped her, memories flickering across her face.

“Her father and I learned that the hard way. The tighter we held the leash… the stronger she pulled away.” She paused, letting the words settle.

“So we learned to let go. To allow her to make her own choices… to learn on her own. We knew she’d come around… when she was ready.”

Her gaze darkened briefly with memory. “I watched some of those decisions almost break her, but I also saw how they made her stronger.”

Her eyes drifted across the table, settling on Dahlia and Eleonor with warm, steady recognition. A quiet, unspoken understanding passed between them-parental solidarity wove n through a lifetime of shared experiences.

“You know, as parents… seeing your child in pain hurts tenfold. And as much as you want to intervene, sometimes you can only offer support.”

Nicholas’ hand tightened under the table, fingers curling into a fist. The subtle flicker of shadow in Alice’s eyes when she spoke of the near-breaking decisions sent a cold knot of unease down his spine.

What could have happened to Harper that left such a mark? Who-or what-had caused that pain?

Alice’s voice softened again, carrying him out of his spiraling thoughts.

“But one thing we are always proud of,” she continued, resolute, “is that our daughter never abandons her responsibilities. Look at her now-when she found out about the attack, she didn’t hesitate. She flew back immediately to help.”

Her smile deepened, a spark of mischief appearing.

“She helps silently. There are countless times when problems are resolved before anyone even realizes there was one to begin with. Her father will ask if it was her doing, and she’ll deny it outright.”

A knowing smile touched Alice’s lips. “We know her too well. She’s our little firecracker-small, bright, full of life. She sparks when least expected, lights up a room, sometimes even startles

you.”

She let out a light laugh. “Oh, and she absolutely hates it when we call her that.”

She lifted her glass and took a measured sip of wine before turning to Maya, her expression softening- mischief glinting beneath her composed exterior, the very same look Harper wore when she was on the verge of revealing something she shouldn’t… or confessing to something she already had.

“I’ll tell you a little secret,” Alice said lightly. “It’s easy to know when Harper is lying. When you confront her and she’s too quick to deny it, can’t quite meet your eyes, and lets out that strange little chuckle…” She laughed softly herself.

“That’s it,” she concluded fondly. “She’s guilty.”

Soft laughter rippled around the table, easing the tension just enough.

Hana returned quietly and stopped beside Alice. “Excuse me for the interruption,” she said apologetically.

She leaned in, murmured something in Alice’s ear, then held out her phone.

Alice’s eyes lit up with instant recognition, a playful smile curving her lips.

“Ah,” she said lightly, “speaking of our little firecracker.” She waved a hand toward Hana. “Put her on speaker.”

Hana obeyed at once, tapping the screen and placing the phone on the table.

A familiar voice filled the room, sharp with worry.

“What do you mean by that, Mom?”

Alice’s tone turned fond. “Nothing you need to concern yourself with, sweetheart. What can I do for you?”

Chapter 400

There was a beat. Then-

“Mom? Is Maya there?” Harper asked, urgency slipping through despite herself. “Is she okay?

I can’t get a hold of her. Her phone’s off. I’ve been calling all day.”

Alice answered calmly, almost amused. “Calm down. Yes, Maya is here. And she’s perfectly fine.”

Across the table, Maya stiffened.

Her heart sank as realization hit.

She slipped a hand into her pocket and pulled out her phone. The screen was black. She pressed the button.

The moment it powered on, the room erupted-notification chimes, vibrations, one after another, echoing far louder than she expected.

Maya froze.

“I- I’m sorry,” she blurted out, flustered, fumbling to silence it as the sounds continued their

relentless chorus.

When she finally managed to mute it, she glanced down at the screen-and her breath caught.

Missed calls flooded the display. Dozens. Over a hundred.

Most of them from Damien.

The rest-from Harper.

Unread messages stacked beneath them, Damien's name repeating over and over. Messages she hadn't even had the chance to open.

Beside her, Damien couldn't help but glance down. He saw the screen. The timestamps. The sheer volume.

Something in his chest loosened.

So that's why.

She wasn't ignoring me.

Her phone was just… off.

The tension in his shoulders eased, just a fraction-enough to matter.

Harper let out a breath on the other end of the line, the tension in her voice easing.

“Oh. Okay. Good-good.” She hesitated, then asked more carefully, “Um… Mom? Is Damien with you right now?”

Alice glanced up. “Yes. Why?”

There was a brief pause.

“Is… is this a good time?” Harper asked. “I need to tell him something important.”

The shift was immediate.

Alice’s gaze moved to Damien. His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. He glanced toward Ashcroft, then toward the elders seated around the table, weighing the moment.

Before anyone else could speak, Eleonor set her napkin aside.

“Let’s move to the study,” she said evenly. “For privacy.”

No one disagreed. Subtle nods passed around the table.

On the speaker, Harper clearly heard the decision.

“Oh-great!” she said quickly. “Perfect, then. Give me ten minutes and I’ll be right back on.” She paused, then added briskly, “Oh-and Mom? Please tell Jaime to plug his laptop into a screen. I’ll send him a link. Okay?”

“Alright,” Alice replied, amused. “We’ll be ready.”

“Thanks! Bye!” Harper chirped, and the line went dead.

Chairs scraped softly as everyone rose, moving toward the study with quiet purpose. The air was thick with anticipation, each step carrying a weight they all felt but dared not speak.

Jaime broke off immediately, heading toward his room. “I’ll grab my laptop,” he called over his shoulder, already halfway down the hall.

As everyone else moved through the manor’s corridors, Maya’s pulse quickened, Damien’s jaw tightened, and Alice’s eyes sparkled with anticipation. The air seemed charged.

No one knew what Harper would say… but everyone knew it mattered.