

Love's Second Chance

Chapter 1

Zara Cardellini wanted to surprise Jonathan Xarr on the eighth anniversary of their relationship.

She specially requested a day off from her job at the dance company to visit his company. Little did she expect to hear an unknown woman's voice when she arrived outside the president's office.

"Writing articles is so difficult, Jonathan." The voice sounded demure, with a slight kittenish undertone.

It made Zara stiffen.

Subsequently, Jonathan's voice rang out. "Don't worry. I'll help you."

He spoke with a warm, gentle tone. It was a tone that Zara was once extremely familiar with.

Zara opened the door and entered, only to see that Jonathan wasn't sitting at his desk. He sat on the couch near his desk, and beside him was a young woman in a white dress. He was leaning in to look at the woman's laptop, which made him seem very close to the woman.

When Jonathan realized Zara had entered his office, he froze before standing like nothing was wrong. "What brings you here, Zar?"

Zara didn't respond. Instead, her attention was on the woman, who appeared young. She was probably around 20.

The more she looked at the young woman, the more she felt the latter had a striking resemblance to herself from eight years ago.

Jonathan stepped in to introduce the women when he noticed Zara's gaze. "This is Harper Gavino, Hayden Gavino's younger sister. She's currently interning at our company. Hayden asked me to look after her in his absence."

Zara nodded, suppressing any unsettling sensations she felt. "I came to ask you out for lunch."

Before Jonathan could speak, Harper shot to her feet with excitement. She exclaimed, "Zara? I'm a huge fan of yours!"

Zara was still in a daze, unable to process what had happened.

That was when Jonathan smiled at Harper, who was acting like a fangirl. Only after that did he explain, "Harper used to take ballet classes, too."

Zara was the youngest principal dancer at Yorwick City's ballet dance company. Because of that, many dancers saw her as their idol.

Harper immediately butted in when she heard the two were going out for lunch. "Can I come along?"

Zara would have agreed if this was an ordinary day, but today was her and Jonathan's eighth anniversary.

Before she could say anything, Jonathan patted Harper's head and said, "You little foodie. Come on, then. I'll take you out for a meal."

Zara naturally couldn't decline since Jonathan had already spoken up. So, she flashed a smile and went along with it. "Sure, let's all go."

So, the date went from a meal between two people to three.

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In the restaurant, Jonathan had strict control over whatever Harper ordered. He seemed oddly responsible for the latter, almost like he was more than a friend or brother. Still, Zara kept mentally making up excuses for his behavior.

Harper pouted upon seeing Jonathan had ruled out over half of what she wanted to order.

Jonathan noticed the former wasn't speaking, so he said, "You can get a milkshake on the way back to the company."

Only then did Harper smile again.

For a split second, Zara felt like she was the unwanted third wheel at what should have been her eighth-anniversary date. She watched in silence as Jonathan took care of Harper in many ways.

She found his actions very familiar. That was because everything he did in that instant used to be specially reserved for her.

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Zara was 20, and Jonathan was 22 eight years ago. He was a known wealthy heir and womanizer at the time. Meanwhile, she was the campus belle who devoted herself to practicing ballet and was never interested in dating.

They only interacted during Jonathan's graduation ceremony when Zara danced as part of the juniors' farewell to the seniors.

That was when she captured Jonathan's attention, and he began doing the extreme to pursue her.

Zara's parents divorced early on in their marriage. That caused Zara to have an unapproachable personality, and she didn't believe in love. So, she never planned on dating.

Even so, Jonathan was too passionate to resist. He had little patience toward women, yet he was surprisingly determined to be with Zara alone and courted her for half a year.

Jonathan invited Zara out for meals, making it a point to remember the foods she disliked. If she were on her period, he would even order warm, soothing teas for her.

He would show up at all of Zara's competitions. Whenever she won an award, he would be the first to deliver her a bouquet of fresh flowers.

He set off fireworks in the city for her and rejected several other girls because of her. Zara was the only woman in his heart. He only had eyes for her.

Zara's heart wasn't made of steel, so she eventually felt touched by his actions.

Since they started dating, Jonathan stopped his womanizing ways. Their relationship then lasted eight years in the blink of an eye.

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Zara basked in Jonathan's boundless and meticulous care whenever they went on dates eight years ago. They were now on a date eight years later, but Jonathan's focus was on another woman.

Zara later snapped back to reality.

A waiter brought over some dishes. Alas, he accidentally spilled the hot soup on Harper's arm, causing her to shriek.

Jonathan's expression shifted at once. He bellowed, "What the hell are you doing?"

He scooped Harper up frantically and bolted out of the restaurant when the latter's face pale. In doing so, he completely forgot about his girlfriend. She was still sitting at the table and staring in a daze as he vanished from her eyes.

The restaurant manager brought over a cake on a push cart soon after.

Zara had handmade that cake to celebrate her and Jonathan's eighth anniversary. She had asked the manager to bring in the cake halfway through the meal to surprise Jonathan.

However, the manager looked at the empty seats at the table and tensed awkwardly just then. He was even holding up a big banner that said, "Happy Eighth Anniversary."

The situation was evidently and ironically not a happy celebration.

"Ms. Cardellini..." the manager struggled to speak.

Zara forced a stiff smile while maintaining her composure. "You and your employees may enjoy the cake."

Then, she picked up her bag and left.

She had just exited the restaurant and looked at cars traveling down the busy street. There was an emptiness in her as she suddenly recalled their first anniversary. Jonathan booked an entire restaurant and even shipped over a thousand roses for her.

Zara disliked being flashy. So, she asked him not to make such a big deal over their anniversary.

Jonathan hugged her and replied, "But I want the whole world to know that I love you, Zara."

He was thoughtful and spent all his time with her during her birthday, Valentine's Day, and every anniversary in their first few years of dating.

However, Zara could tell Jonathan no longer put in effort for such events since two years ago. They would usually just have a meal together to celebrate.

After their passionate honeymoon phase ended, they gradually settled into a dull relationship.

Zara often comforted herself by saying all couples went through this. Yet, she never expected the man, who wanted the world to know he loved her, to forget their anniversary.

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Zara later got home and took a shower.

For the first time, she didn't leave the bedroom after she was done showering. She merely stood as the water evaporated from her body. At the same time, she stared absently at the full-length mirror in her bedroom.

She was still a tall, slender woman with delicate and beautiful features.

Yet, that was when Harper's face flashed in her mind.

Harper was as beautiful as Zara, but Harper's gaze was livelier and brighter. Those were qualities Zara no longer possessed.

Nobody could be young forever, but there would always be someone younger. An instance of that was Harper, who was 20 years old today.

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It was almost 10:00 pm when Jonathan returned home.

He had been caring for Harper at the hospital all this while. Even when he returned home, he continued to worry about her and made several calls to the hospital.

He told Harper, "You can't wet your wound, okay? Call the nurse if you need anything. Don't try to do it yourself."

Zara silently listened to him while hanging up his coat, which he had just taken off. Just then, she found strawberry-flavored candy in the pocket of Jonathan's coat.

Jonathan hung up at that moment.

"I thought you disliked eating candy." Zara held up some of the candy in her palm.

Jonathan glanced at the candy before putting them back into his suit pocket. "Harper likes those. I keep them on hand in case she gets bored during meetings."

Zara froze. She suddenly recalled that Jonathan used to keep her favorite mint candy on hand. It was for whenever she was nervous before performing on stage.

He would say, "There, there. Have some candy, and you won't feel nervous anymore."

Zara wondered when Jonathan had replaced her favorite mint candy with these strawberry ones. She didn't say anything but fell into a daze.

Jonathan could tell something was off with Zara's mood. He abruptly held her hand and placed something cold around her wrist. Only then did she snap out of her daze.

Zara lowered her head and saw that Jonathan had put a thin bracelet around her wrist. It had intricate metalwork. With one glance, she could tell it cost a fortune.

Jonathan hugged her, his warm breath tickling her ear. "Sorry, Zar. I couldn't be with you today on our eighth anniversary."

He had finally recalled what day it was. After a pause, he added, "Don't mind Harper. I have no choice but to look after her because Hayden entrusted me with her care before he left the country."

Zara's arms were on each side of her body. She balled her fists but ultimately said, "I understand."

Jonathan kissed her forehead. He figured he had resolved the matter and headed to the bathroom for a shower.

Meanwhile, Zara remained on the spot, but her heart wasn't at peace.

Back then, Jonathan would do everything in his power to cheer Zara up if she wasn't in a good mood. Once, they had fought, and Zara hadn't answered his calls because she wanted to calm down. To her surprise, he took a more than ten-hour flight back from a foreign country, Atraria, to see her.

Yet, even as he apologized now, Zara could tell something was off. He was so obviously thoughtless and bland that Zara couldn't lie to herself anymore. She had to accept that Jonathan was different from before.

She felt suffocated. It was as if a boulder had crushed her chest.