

Perfect Match: Irresistible Desire For You – Chapter 191

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Joseph noticed Ashley was trying to evade his question. Instead of calling her out for it, he replied solemnly, “From now on, the prison will be his home. He is going to regret what he did until his last breath.”

Joseph didn't wish to announce in public the crime James had committed. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became it was unnecessary. It wouldn't be good for the Marshall family. However, he was determined to make sure that James got the punishment he deserved.

“A person like him deserves violent retribution. Please don't be sad. You still have me and Grandpa that you can call family. We can have a child and expand it. A happy life is waiting ahead of you.”

Joseph's face was dark with rage. In order to soothe him, she gently caressed his hand and spoke those gentle words.

Ashley had often envisioned how their future would be. She saw herself holding his hands and growing old.

As he listened to her words, his eyes began to fill with gratitude. It dawned on him he wasn't as lonely as he had thought to be. He still had two precious family members who would do anything for him.

“Thank you!” he said, pressing her hand gently. ‘Thank you for loving me unconditionally and making me feel happy,’ he thought to himself.

Joseph wasn't used to expressing gratitude. However, he made an exception today and earnestly expressed his gratitude.

She grinned at him, her eyes sparkling. “You don't have to thank me. If anything, I should be the one thanking you for giving me true love.”

“Ashley, is there something you're not telling me?” he asked as he played with her soft hair.

If a relationship had to work then the couple had to be honest with each other. After showing her his dark side, Joseph's heart was at ease. But now, when Ashley spoke about true love, Joseph's mind went to Charlie. He was a sleazy and reckless man.

His question surprised her. Confused, she asked, "What is it that you want to know? Can you give me a hint at least?"

Ashley thought she had nothing to hide from Joseph. But the stern look on his face scared her a little. Her forehead was bunched in a frown and she began to think.

"Charlie," he uttered, cutting to the chase.

Ashley's heart was thumping against her ribs. She instantly understood what Joseph was driving at. In a hurry, she asked, "Did Charlie say anything to you? I was in a relationship with him. But it was nothing. Trust me, we didn't do anything—"

Before she could finish, Joseph interrupted and asked, "How long did you guys date?"

Joseph was irrationally jealous when he heard she had been in a relationship before.

"He only touched my hand once. It never went beyond that. Besides, our relationship lasted only for two months. Back then, I had no idea he was such a disgusting man. When he chased after me, he pretended to be genuine and good. I thought he deserved a chance and let him become my boyfriend. If I had any idea he was such a scum, I wouldn't have dated him," she explained worriedly.

When Ashley was working in the Synder Group, Charlie seemed like the perfect man. He was good in every way. He was persistent and continued to chase after her. Back then, she hadn't had the slightest idea that he was a horrifying man. She tried to fall in love with him.

Charlie was on his best behavior when he was around her. Ashley realized she could have a normal dating life with him. In fact, being a reasonable girl, she thought they would eventually get married one day.

However, one night she discovered he was a wretched and shameless man. She had been sad for a while but soon forgot all about him. That was when she realized she didn't care for him much.

Charlie had said he would take things slow. Being cold and indifferent, Ashley dodged when he tried to get slightly intimate.

Her aloofness made Charlie long for her even more. During their relationship, Ashley didn't allow him to make out with her. This vexed him. He was a proud man and her actions knocked his self-esteem.

Joseph was pondering over this matter with his lips pressed tightly. Anxiously, Ashley said, "When I first met you, Charlie drugged me. In a daze, I ended up going to the wrong room. That's how we ended up having sex. I lost my virginity to you and you know everything that happened after that. I have nothing to do with him. He doesn't mean anything to me. You have to believe me."

From her explanation, it was evident she was anxious. She wanted to eliminate misunderstandings. Instead of assuring her everything was fine, his face darkened and he seemed angrier.

Joseph recalled that night when Ashley suddenly appeared in his room. She had indeed been drugged. Fortunately, Joseph and Ashley were destined to be together. If she had gone to Charlie, her life would have been ruined. Joseph clenched his fists. He loathed Charlie with a passion and couldn't believe he had dared to destroy her life once again.

A murderous look appeared in his eyes. 'That scum deserves to die,' he thought spitefully.

Ashley sensed Joseph's rage. However, she didn't know it was directed towards Charlie. She thought he cared about her past with Charlie and assumed she still cared about him. Unable to witness his rage any longer, she said nervously, "Hey, I have nothing to do with Charlie! Tell me you believe me! The only reason I haven't told you about it is because Charlie was never that important to me. And there was never a right time for such a conversation. Could you please stop being angry?"

She wore a worried frown. Joseph caressed her soft hair and said dotingly, "No, Ashley. I believe everything that you say."

"Then why are you angry? Do you mind my past?" she asked cautiously.

"To be honest, I do mind it a little. I know I am not the first man you have loved, but that doesn't matter. I know with all my heart that the love you feel

for me is unconditional. You have no idea how much happiness it brings me,” replied Joseph softly.

He couldn't lie to her. Of course, he minded. But at the end of the day, he cherished their present and didn't have any time to dwell on the past. As long as they loved each other deeply, nothing mattered.

“You just have to trust me. That's all I need to be satisfied. I'm easy to please,” Ashley said, smiling with relief.

“Good to know, but I'm a little unsatisfied,” Joseph said, feigning a serious face.

“What?” she asked, raising her head nervously.

At this moment, Joseph lowered his head and buried it on her neck. In a seductive voice, he whispered, “I want more of you. When can I make out with you as much as I want? The fact I haven't been able to do it has started to kill me slowly.”

All of a sudden, heat swept over her body and color rose on her face. Ashley was speechless. ‘I can't give you what you want...’ she thought, but couldn't utter those words.

Nothing was in her control. Ashley went numb, knowing full well Jacob was going to make out with her.

Right then, her phone rang, interrupting their moment. The flirtatious atmosphere in the air disappeared.

“Move away. I have to answer the phone,” Ashley ordered him and took her phone out of her pocket.

However, Joseph, who hadn't even had a chance to make out with his girlfriend, was adamant. He wouldn't move. “Go ahead and answer your phone. I won't disturb you,” he said seductively.

“It's a call from my father,” she said calmly and waited for his reaction.

Upon hearing this, Joseph immediately moved and sat upright. From his action, one would have thought Ashley's father was right in front of him.

'Things are already bad. I must not give my father-in-law a reason to be angry with me. If I do, he might never approve me.'

Watching his reaction, Ashley broke into a laugh. 'I told you not to kiss me. You deserve it for not listening to me!' she thought complacently.

"Ashley, answer the phone," Joseph urged her, seeing she hadn't picked it up yet.

If she didn't answer the call for such a long time, Joseph knew her father would jump to a conclusion. Her father's impression of him would become even worse.

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Upon hearing Joseph's words, Ashley deliberately picked up her phone while gazing at him, who was anxious.

"Hello, Dad," Ashley greeted after turning on the speaker.

Joseph, who was sitting quietly aside, looked at the smug smile in Ashley's eyes. He could not help but feel angry, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"It's late. Where did you go, Ashley?" Jack asked. His calm and concerned voice rang in her ears.

Ashley leaned over and gazed at Joseph's Patek Philippe wristwatch. "Dad, didn't Mike tell you that I'd be home later? Besides, it's only nine o'clock. It's not that late," she reasoned out.

Jack, who was trying to figure out what his daughter was doing, fell speechless. It was indeed not that late.

But, truth be told, the time was the least of his concern. "Fine. At least tell me what you're doing. Who are you with?"

Ashley looked at Joseph and widened her eyes at him as though asking him what to reply. However, he just winked and let her answer however she wanted.

After mustering all her courage, she answered cautiously, “Dad, I’m with Joseph.”

“What?! Are you really with that bastard?”

Mike did not tell his father that his sister was going out on a date, most importantly, with Joseph. He just told his father that he and his sister would not go home for dinner. However, when Mike returned home alone, Jack, who did not have anything better to do, had a bad feeling about it. He found the truth a little difficult to accept despite Ashley’s confession. He had tried every means to keep his daughter from seeing Joseph, but he still failed.

On the other end of the line, Joseph heard Jack’s slightly agitated voice through the speaker, which made him look at Ashley with innocent eyes.

“Dad, calm down. Why do you dislike Joseph so much anyway?” she asked, a little exasperated.

Joseph, who was eavesdropping on the call, wanted to know the answer to that question as well, so he patiently waited for the answer.

“Really? You still don’t know the answer? A man who has abandoned you, even once, can’t be trusted. Joseph is rich and powerful. He must have countless women that you don’t know about,” Jack answered earnestly.

“Dad, you—”

Before Ashley could defend Joseph from her father, Jack interrupted her. ‘Why do you have such extreme views?’ she thought to herself.

“There’s no need to refute my words. Tell Joseph to send you home in 20 minutes. I’ll hang up now. Time begins now.”

Sadly, even though Joseph felt wronged, he could not defend himself.

He may have indeed abandoned Ashley, but he had only done it to protect her. Also, he may be rich and powerful, but he only wanted one woman, and that was Ashley.

‘Father-in-law, you’re rich and powerful as well, aren’t you? Do you have countless women behind you?’ he mused.

Joseph was speechless for a moment. Once he had gotten ahold of himself, he turned to Ashley, who seemed exasperated as well, and said, "Let's go. My father-in-law gave me 20 minutes to send you home. Two minutes have already passed."

He was the first to get up. Seeing this, Ashley gave her hand to him and then stood up as well. Then, she cradled his arm and said softly, "If I had known earlier, I wouldn't have told my father that you left me. I would've told him that I dumped you instead."

"Either way, the result would still be the same. I'd still be guilty," Joseph answered. That fact may be unreasonable, but it was the truth.

Jack loved Ashley very much. If his beloved daughter was unhappy, he would immediately notice it, especially if she was heartbroken. It was obvious from his answer that if his daughter was hurt, the one to blame would be anyone but her.

Needless to say, Joseph would always be the one to blame no matter what. However, if he was not the one who dumped Ashley, Jack would have hated Joseph a little less.

"Don't worry. My father is not that unreasonable. He'll definitely approve you as my boyfriend eventually," Ashley reassured.

"I know. He's just difficult to please," Joseph responded, hitting the nail on the head.

"Sooner or later, you'll meet my parents. You're an excellent man. You should have confidence in yourself." Since Joseph still looked a little glum, Ashley tried her best to cheer him up.

Joseph could not help but laugh upon hearing Ashley's reassurance.

He was an arrogant man who had never once thought of flattering other people. But, now, he had to humble himself and do his best to please his future wife and her family.

Thankfully, he had already won his brother-in-law's support. However, he still had to get his future parents-in-law to accept him.

Joseph gazed into the long road ahead. He felt that he still had a long way to go before Ashley's parents could finally accept him.

"Ashley, what kind of person is your mother?" he asked abruptly. He hoped that it would be easier to get through her mother first.

"My mother is outgoing, beautiful and generous," Ashley answered after thinking for a while.

"Fasten your seatbelt now. Also, could you be a little more specific?" Joseph asked helplessly.

"Oh. What do you want to know then?" Ashley replied in confusion.

"Just tell me what she likes and what special hobbies she has. Tell me anything that will make her happy."

Ashley looked out of the car window and gazed into the night while she pondered about the answer to his question. "My mother likes collecting stamps. In fact, Zaiden sent her a large set of precious stamps the last time he visited her, so you can't give her that anymore. Oh, and she likes traveling. She often travels around the world with my father. As for her hobbies... I can't think of anything else. Besides, I doubt that my mother is short of anything."

Out of all Ashley's answers, there was one thing that struck him. Why did Zaiden, his #1 rival in love, visit Ashley's parents and give them their favorite presents before he could? He could not help but narrow his eyes dangerously. It turned out that he had to be more careful when he finally met her parents. They would definitely compare him to Zaiden, whether he liked it or not.

"Why aren't you speaking?" Ashley asked with raised eyebrows. She noticed that he had not spoken for a minute and seemed to be thinking about something serious. "I can tell you what my father likes most. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes. What is it?" Joseph's mood suddenly changed upon hearing this.

After all, her father was his biggest obstacle in pursuing his beloved. Joseph felt hopeful that he finally had a chance to prove himself.

To his surprise, Ashley's answer was far from what he had anticipated. "My father likes my mother the most."

Upon saying that, she nodded, proving her seriousness and sincerity.

Mike and Ashley had known this since childhood. Jack had never dared to go against Simone's words, not even once.

"Honey, are you kidding me?" Joseph asked incredulously.

"I'm not. I'm saying that if you can make my mother like you, my father will accept you as well. This hint is very useful than it seemed," Ashley explained with a serious look on her face.

Seeing her persistence and her lovely expression, Joseph did not have the heart to dampen her enthusiasm. "Thank you for that tip. I'll do my best to do that."

Truth be told, he did not find anything useful from what Ashley had said. He still had no idea how to please her mother. What could he do to make Jack accept him?

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The two of them continued to discuss how Joseph could possibly please her parents. Ashley was obviously taking his being into consideration in this matter, so he couldn't help but feel happy about it.

"Here we are. Go inside first. I'll see you tomorrow." When they pulled up in front of the Guzman's mansion, Joseph looked at Ashley with gentle eyes.

"Are you not going in?" Hearing what he had said, Ashley stopped unfastening her seat belt and gave him a confused look.

"No, I haven't prepared anything. Maybe next time."

'I don't think this is the right time to meet Ashley's parents. It's embarrassing to come unprepared. I might be driven out.' Joseph wanted to add, but chose to keep it to himself.

"Okay, see you tomorrow." Seeing the obvious worry on his face, Ashley didn't insist anymore. She got out of the car and waved at him. "Bye. Drive safely, okay?"

With a smile, Joseph nodded at her and waved goodbye to her.

Only when Ashley's slim figure disappeared from his sight did he start the car and left the Guzman's mansion.

As soon as Ashley entered the house, her father's voice rang in her ears before she found him sitting on the sofa, pretending to read the newspaper as he waited for her to come in. "One minute late."

Needless to say, Ashley was surprised. Facing her father, she didn't know how to react, nor what to say.

From the newspaper in his hands, Jack turned his gaze to Ashley, who looked perfectly fine. "Why didn't he come in?"

"He said he would visit you when he was fully prepared," Ashley replied lightly.

"He doesn't have the guts to come, does he?" There was a hint of pride in Jack's voice. "It's a good thing that he didn't. I would have kicked him out, anyway."

From the way he spoke, Ashley figured her father had a huge prejudice against Joseph, which made her a little sad. "Dad, I really don't understand why you are against him."

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yeah."

"Listen, first of all, that bastard had already abandoned you once. Secondly, you have better choices. You can't marry a man who has abandoned you. Lastly, you keep trying to protect him, while ignoring your own father who loves you. I don't like him because of these three reasons!" After saying this, Jack inhaled sharply.

Of course, he didn't know that Ashley and Joseph had broken up because of another woman, but the fact that he left her was enough to disappoint Jack. When he did his research about Joseph's love life, he found out that Ashley was the first woman he had loved. Recently, he had been openly expressing his love for her in the Guzman Group. His pure love and persistence, which were very precious for a noble and powerful man, impressed Jack a little.

However, Jack thought that he was the reason why his gentle and obedient daughter learned to go against him. Thinking that his daughter, whom he loved for twenty years, sided with Joseph just like that, he felt very miserable.

“Dad, hear me out. First of all, the reason why Joseph and I broke up back then was because we had a misunderstanding, but it has been cleared out now. I also believe that he will give me the happiness that I deserve, so your first two reasons are not valid at all. Second, even if I am with him, I will not ignore you. You are always going to be my father, and I love you.” Sitting opposite Jack, Ashley argued in a reasonable way, and added, “Dad, am I right?”

“Then let me ask you, who do you love more, me or him?” Finally, Jack put down the newspaper and stared at her in disagreement.

“Of course, I love the both of you,” Ashley answered without hesitation.

“Sure enough, a grown woman can’t be kept at home. You don’t even want your father. How can you say that you love your father most?” A sign of grief inexplicably appeared in Jack’s eyes.

Hearing her father’s sigh, Ashley helplessly touched her forehead. “Dad, you two are different from each other.”

After all, Jack was her father, while Joseph was her boyfriend. In terms of love, there was no comparison between the two men. Ashley loved both of them but in different ways.

“How is he different from me? We are both men. I should be the one you love most.” The serious look on his face seemed ridiculous.

It was obvious to Ashley that Jack was being unreasonable, but he hadn’t realized it himself.

In the end, Ashley accepted that she wouldn’t win the argument all by herself. Therefore, she quickly changed the topic. “Dad, where is Mom?”

Noticing her attempt to change the topic, Jack couldn’t help but sigh. “She’s in the shower.”

“I see. Dad, I’m going to take a shower too. It will be too cold later to do so.” As usual, Ashley used her charm to get away from her father’s scolding. She gave Jack a small smile while waiting for his reply.

“Go ahead.” Left without a choice, Jack let her escape the conversation.

“Good night, my dear dad!” Then she turned around and went upstairs.

“A grown woman can’t be kept at home…” Watching his daughter walked up the stairs in a hurry, Jack shook his head.

The truth was, he had noticed the change in Ashley’s behavior recently. Unlike the time when she just came back from the trip, she looked happier. Since Joseph had been around her, she became livelier than before.

As expected, love could cause joy and sorrow at the same time.

Meanwhile, Joseph’s grandfather was waiting for him in the living room too when he came home.

The moment he entered the living room, he heard his grandfather’s energetic voice. “Joseph, did you go out with Ashley tonight?”

It could be told from the tone of Leonard’s voice that he was in a really good mood. In fact, his voice was full of affection when he called Joseph.

“Yes.” It was all Joseph replied to him.

Every day Leonard would ask him that, and he was tired of it.

“You seem to be making progress today. But why are you so depressed?” At his age, Leonard still had sharp eyes that noticed almost everything.

“What?” frowning in confusion, Joseph asked.

How did his grandfather say that he had made progress when he didn’t tell him anything yet? And why were his eyes shining as he spoke?

“I understand. Keep up the good work! I hope I can have a great-grandson as soon as possible.” Leonard still looked at his grandson with understanding and encouragement, with a smile on his face.

Confused, Joseph couldn't stop himself from asking anymore. "Grandpa, what on earth do you know?"

Before Leonard answered his question, he glanced at Joseph's lips first and asked hesitantly, "Do you want me to explain it in details?"

"No, thanks." Based on the way his grandfather glanced at him, Joseph had already understood what he meant.

Having felt his grandfather's gaze on him, Joseph opened his mouth to say, "Grandpa, you seem to be in a good mood. Anyway, I'll go upstairs to take a shower."

"Why? Shouldn't I be happy?" But Joseph only ignored him even though he kept shouting. Leonard then shook his head and looked at his grandson's receding figure.

A smile appeared on his face when he remembered the small cut that he saw on Joseph's lips.

There was no need to ask who did it on Joseph's lips. Back then, Leonard used to worry that Joseph didn't know how to make out with women. But tonight, what he saw was a strong evidence that he might have underestimated his grandson. He would have a great-grandson sooner. With this thought, Leonard was really happy.

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It was already late at night. Joseph and Ashley both had gotten home and were now talking on the phone about what had happened earlier.

Ashley told Joseph that her father was asking for her affection. Joseph, who had developed a sense of freedom to say anything he wanted, said that her father's logic and behavior were somewhat childish.

Of course, he did not tell that he felt unhappy when she said that she loved both of them equally. Truth be told, he and Jack were hoping for the same thing. Jack wished that Ashley would love him more, while Joseph wished that as well. However, in Ashley's heart, she loved them in her own way, so there was really no competition between the two most important men in her life.

Needless to say, Joseph and Jack, two different men with completely different positions in Ashley's life, were both being childish.

After quite some time, Joseph mentioned to her that his grandfather laughed at him for having a wound on his lips. Ashley could not help but feel embarrassed. After all, she was the one who bit them. Nevertheless, she thought that it was better to put the blame on him instead.

Ashley realized that it would take days for the wound to heal. She regretted being impetuous and reckless. Now, everyone would find out that the two of them were in love.

She imagined that Joseph's bloody lip would definitely be noticed by everyone. Even just at the thought of it, she felt appalled.

Well, it was Joseph's fault, was it not? If only he had not said anything that he should not have said in the first place, she would not have bitten his lips.

Ashley confidently reasoned this out to him in hopes of making Joseph stop making fun of her.

While the two were arguing whose fault it was, Joseph suddenly realized how fruitful this night was. Not only did he share the unhappiness in his heart with his beloved, but he was also rewarded with a fanatical mark of love.

These two people in love—one was satisfied, while the other was in chagrin, talked sweetly over the phone.

The next morning, to Ashley's surprise, Zaiden came to her office. She was shocked to see him there, especially when she had not seen him for a long time.

"Zaiden, why are you here?"

she asked in bewilderment. Ever since Zaiden confessed his love for her, she felt awkward around him.

"I'm here to see you. Am I not welcome here?"

Zaiden replied with a bittersweet smile, hearing Ashley's slightly unwelcoming greeting.

“No! It’s not like that. Why don’t you sit down first? Let’s talk,” Ashley said as she beckoned him to the couch.

She had hoped that he had finally accepted the fact that she could not possibly fall in love with him. After all, she did not want to lose a close friend who was like a family to her.

Truth be told, she had no idea how hard it was for Zaiden to force a smile.

With his eyes fixated on her, he called her name slowly and greedily.
“Ashley...”

“What is it? Zaiden, if you have something to say, just say it,” Ashley impatiently replied while handing him a cup of coffee.

Zaiden did not speak for a moment, and a deafening silence befell between them. “Is Joseph your lover?” he asked after a while.

“Yes, he is. You’ve seen him before, haven’t you?” she asked, a little confused that he suddenly asked her that.

“Did he ever stay in America?” he asked again instead of answering her question.

“Yes. What’s the matter?” she asked while taking a seat. Then, she raised her eyebrows and looked at Zaiden in confusion.

“Ashley, are you aware that Joseph’s identity is not as simple as it seems?” With his hands clasped, Zaiden rested his elbows on his knees and stared at the woman opposite him.

Ever since they had dinner together, he had to admit that his rival was indeed formidable. Zaiden knew that he was not powerful enough to fight Joseph, but for some reason, he was still unwilling to let go.

Zaiden had liked Ashley for nearly a decade. Unfortunately, she fell in love with another man in just the twinkling of an eye. What made it more agonizing for him was that it felt as though he had been robbed of the chance to stand by the side of the person he had loved. This was the reason why he could not let her go.

As a result, he had hired a person to investigate Joseph's identity. He had just received the e-mail which stated everything that was needed to be known about Joseph. Zaiden found out that he and Joseph were alumni of the same university. However, their batch and department were different.

Looking back, there was a young Ob.rarian man who had received his doctorate in MBO. He even received international recognition for that. However, the whereabouts of that person were erratic. Only a handful of people had seen him. Zaiden was sadly not one of those. After all, he did not study in that university until two years after that young genius's graduation.

While he was in the university, he heard that that genius had a cold and dark aura. However, that was not the end of it. There was a rumor circulating that this young man had been suspected of having affiliations with American gangs.

At that time, Zaiden was busy with his studies that he did not show much interest in that rumor. After all, he thought that it was nothing more than a result of jealousy. But the investigation revealed many things. Apparently, he had had a mansion in the United States at such a young age. At school, his attendance was very low, and he did not even go to work years after his graduation. Even until then, his erratic whereabouts remained unexplainable.

When comparing that with the background of Joseph, there were some similarities. Joseph seemingly had disappeared from the face of the Earth during the couple of years in the United States after his graduation. As a result, Zaiden used this as a starting point in investigating Joseph's activities during those years. Unfortunately, he found nothing. Because of this, he recalled all the rumors he had heard and paid special attention to everything that had happened in the American gangs during those years. There happened to be a gang leader named Jason, who had never been seen by anyone. Jason had made a name for himself at that time.

Coincidentally, the year Joseph came back to Ob.raria, there came a massive shakeup in the gangs in the United States. The leader of the Dragon Gang, who was known to be the most formidable among all, was the culprit. For some reason, the military newspaper was able to publish Jason's photo. Although Jason was wearing a mask, his figure and demeanor were eerily similar to that of Joseph's. It was believed that Jason disappeared yet again in the next few years. However, he suddenly made a big splash in the underworld again this year. Joseph happened to be in America at that time.

In a word, although Zaiden was not 100% sure that Jason was, in fact, Joseph, he speculated that Joseph fit Jason's description.

As soon as he knew this, he rushed to Ashley to inform her about his discovery. He feared that her future was at risk if she stayed by Joseph's side. Of course, he also said this so that he could win her over.

Meanwhile, Ashley was astounded upon hearing his question. Once she regained her composure, she slowly answered, "I know."

Her unexpected answer rendered Zaiden speechless.

"The truth is, he has already told me everything. I don't know why you came here just to say that, but I won't change my mind. I'll always be by his side," Ashley said in a calm and resolute voice.

Even if the whole world stopped them because of Joseph's dangerous identity, she would remain with him regardless. She would still stay by his side, even if it meant turning against the world.

Zaiden was at a loss for words for a moment. He never anticipated that Ashley was this willful in loving Joseph. "Do you really want to be with him, even if he might put you in danger one day?"

"Yes, as long as it's him. I don't care about his identity nor his status. The only thing that matters to me is that I love him. Even if one day he has nothing left and is only a danger to me, I'm willing to live and die with him."

Ashley had been asked about this over and over again that she had grown tired of answering this. However, since she was already resolute in her decision, she decided to reply Zaiden's questions with utmost patience and sincerity.

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Ashley was still resolute. Zaiden's feeling of miserableness didn't fade. A hint of sadness flashed across his eyes.

The mere knowledge that she would spend the rest of her life with another man broke his heart.

“May I know why you chose him? Is he better than me? Or is it because you think he loves you more?” He felt his stomach knot with apprehension. He was doing his best to hold back his sadness.

‘I’ve loved her for so many years. Yet she fell for a man that she has barely known for a year! Is it because I waited too long before confessing?’ Zaiden couldn’t bring himself to give up on her.

“Sometimes there isn’t a particular reason for loving someone. When it’s about love, there is no winner or loser,” she said. She gazed at Zaiden and went on, “Both of you have your merits. But love has nothing to do with merits. I am with him because he loves me and I love him too.”

Zaiden was getting quite persistent. In the end, she had no choice but to compel him to give up on her.

‘They are in love with each other! What am I? Nothing!’ After hearing her reply, Zaiden felt very bitter.

“Ashley, there is one question that has been bugging me. Answer me honestly.” He fixed his stare on the beautiful woman he had loved with all his heart. She was the reason behind his endless melancholy. Yet there was hope in his eyes.

“Go ahead,” she said, looking at him expectantly.

“Had I confessed my love for you before you met Joseph, would you... would you have fallen in love with me?” He spoke very cautiously. This question had been on the back of his mind for a long time.

He often asked himself if he had expressed his love earlier, would she have accepted him?

Nothing good would come out of this confession yet he seemed hopeful.

Ashley gave his question some thought and said in a low voice, “To be honest, I am not exactly sure how to respond to this hypothetical question. But here is my answer, if your feelings were genuine, I may have fallen for you.”

Love had a lot to do with the right timing. If you found someone when the time was right, chances were you would be with them. If he had confessed before, perhaps he would have stood a chance.

However, this world wasn't fair. Second chances weren't given to everyone. He could never go back in time and change things.

"I see." He contemplated over her answer and nodded his head. After a short pause, he stood up and said in a low voice, "Ashley, if he ever hurts you, remember me. I will always be here to protect you."

'That was just a hypothetical question. This is a story of missed opportunities. I lost my love to time and fate. However, if you ever realize Joseph isn't the one for you, I'll be willing to wait for you,' Zaiden thought as he gazed at her with his sad eyes.

Ashley was oblivious to the thoughts that were going on in his mind. She assumed he had come to terms with everything. She stood up, flashed him a smile, and said, "Zaiden, I hope you find true happiness in life. I wish you all the best."

Love was indeed selfish. She could only wish him luck. In her heart, only one person could accommodate and that was Joseph. She was brimming with love for him. She wouldn't even entertain the idea of ever loving another human being.

Under the circumstance, she could only hope that Zaiden would find happiness somewhere else.

"Well... I will," Zaiden said, fixing his eyes on her. He smiled a bitter smile.

Happiness meant different things to different people. And most importantly, not everyone was privileged to taste it. Some people lived their whole life without an ounce of happiness. Zaiden, who had always regarded Ashley as his happiness, was not sure where to find happiness after losing her.

"Ashley, I have to go. I'll let you carry on with your work," Zaiden said courteously, getting ready to take his leave.

"Then, goodbye, Zaiden," she said.

Finally, he took one last look at the beautiful and elegant woman in front of him. Then he turned around and got ready to leave. When he reached the

door, he said in a low voice, "If it's not too much to ask, I would like you to continue treating me as a friend or a brother."

'If not your lover, I can stay by your side as your friend or family member,' he thought to himself and sighed. The conversation he had had with her didn't go as he had planned. Yet he remained stubborn. He nurtured some hope in his heart.

"Zaiden, there is no need for you to ask. I have always considered you my family." As she spoke, she looked at his tall and lean figure.

"I am glad to hear that. Bye." After he bade goodbye, Zaiden opened the door and left.

Once he was out of her sight, Ashley sighed and sat down to continue her work.

Today was quite different from her previous days. Joseph, known as the young son-in-law of the Guzman Group, didn't show up. Nor had he sent any romantic flowers.

The people of the Guzman Group were shocked by this unusual change. The CEO of the Guzman Group, Mike, rushed into Ashley's office in the afternoon, hoping to hear why her lover hadn't shown up.

As soon as Mike walked into the room, he let his curiosity known. "Why didn't Joseph come here today, Ashley? Did Dad forbid him from coming here? Or was it you who asked him to? There is a third possibility. Perhaps he has lost hope."

Ashley heard her brother put forth various conjectures. She looked away from the document she had been dealing with and asked coldly, "Mike, don't you have work?"

"I do, but being the good brother I am, I decided to come here for some information. It doesn't matter how busy I am, I will always care about my sister's love life. So please give me the answer to my question." Mike came up with a lame excuse for his curiosity.

His explanation had rendered her speechless. She knew he wasn't speaking the truth. He was simply here to while away his work hours. It wasn't concern that brought him here. Instead, it was his curiosity and love for gossip.

“Mike, the staff will start their holiday in two days. With all this going on, do you think it’s fine to waste your time caring for me?”

The underlying meaning of her words was pretty clear. She had indirectly asked him to stop prying into her love life. She didn’t need his attention.

She flashed him a meaningful look. Mike straightened himself up and said, “Ashley, if you dislike me, just say it. There is no need to be indirect. I won’t blame you for it.”

The employees of the Guzman Group had a long holiday. As the president of a big company, Mike had enough duties to keep him busy. He had to check the financial statements of all departments and distribute the salary. On top of everything, he was also in charge of holding the annual employee party and other time-consuming tasks.

But the moment he heard that Joseph hadn’t shown up, he left everything aside and went to meet Ashley. He had been quite unhappy in the past few days. After all, Joseph had set him up. Therefore, he was curious to learn what the cunning man was up to now.

Mike’s present priority was Joseph’s downfall. He cared about it more than his job.

Smart as he was, he knew it wouldn’t be easy to get the truth out of Ashley. He decided to complain and force it out of her.

However, Ashley wasn’t falling for it. “Mike, I don’t want to see you,” she said.

The reason Joseph hadn’t shown up in the Guzman Group today was because Ashley had asked him to. Joseph’s special treatment after his injury called for some rest.

However, she wasn’t going to tell this to her brother.

Listening to his sister’s evasive response, Mike was quite annoyed. He wouldn’t give up so easily. He looked at her and said, “My good sister, did Joseph lose his courage to come over here? Doesn’t he have the stamina that takes to chase after you? Whatever his reason is, I am always here if you need to teach him a lesson.”

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“Mike, are you sure you are capable of teaching him a lesson?” Seeing her brother wouldn’t give up so easily, Ashley had no choice but to give him a hard time.

Listening to this, his brows wrinkled with a frown. He knew he was no match for Joseph. His financial resources and background were nothing compared to that of Joseph’s. And now, to make things worse, his sister had made it obvious she was siding with her lover. His father, on the other hand, was out of his control. Mike thought back to the agreement he had signed. When he assessed all the past events, there was no doubt he lacked the ability to do anything to Joseph.

“Don’t hurry to a conclusion. Let’s wait and see. Also, it’s not nice to defend him. You aren’t even married to him yet. And I am your brother. I’ve loved you for more than twenty years. It doesn’t make me feel good to watch you defend a guy you have known for less than a year. Please think it over before you act with partiality to him.” He wouldn’t confess he wasn’t as capable as Joseph. And now, he changed the topic and tried to gain her sentiments.

His words may have sounded earnest to some. But Ashley, who knew him very well, considered it to be a bunch of nonsense.

In the end, she decided if he wanted to waste his time, she would let him do it. She put down the pen she was holding, leaned back on the office chair, and said with a smile, “You are right. You have known me longer and you probably love me more. I need to be fair and care about you more.”

Sitting leisurely on the swivel chair, Mike’s face broke into a smile. He was about to thank her for finally understanding him. Before he could say anything, she cut him off.

“In that case, I would like to know more about you. How about you start off by telling me the military rank of my future sister-in-law? How many times have you met each other? Most importantly, how do you know each other? Have you made any progress with your chasing? Is there any chance she likes you back?”

Ashley knew that the mention of her future sister-in-law would compel Mike to change the topic. Now that he was bugging her, she started to broach this topic, hoping it would silence him. Back then, she didn't know the specific details. But now, she did. She would use this knowledge to shut him up. After all, he had been hell-bent on chattering.

Hearing a series of questions come out of Ashley's mouth, Mike was caught off guard. Soon, he realized it was Joseph's doing. He had spilled the truth and told Ashley everything.

Mike had initially planned on telling his family about the girl he loved after she reciprocated his feelings. But now that his sister knew all about it, it would no longer be a mystery.

"I would like you to keep this a secret. And I'll answer your questions when the time is right." Mike remained silent for a long time but finally chose to break the silence. He took a more serious tone, and said, "I suddenly remembered I have some work to do. I think I am going to stop disturbing you now."

In fact, the main reason why Mike dodged her questions was because he hadn't been in touch with that woman lately. In simpler words, there was no progress in his love story.

Mike chalked up his failure to the fact that the girl he liked was too strong. And he didn't wish to spoil his own image before his family. He couldn't bear the thought of them looking down on him.

Ashley detected the nervousness in his voice. She also noticed he was eager to flee from her office. Her face broke into a smile. Her trick had worked!

But before Mike left, he added something. "I request you to bring your boyfriend to the annual party tomorrow. The CEO of the Empire Group is welcome to attend the party of Guzman Group."

In short, he wanted Joseph to come to the Guzman Group. Mike knew this was his company hence he had an upper hand. Something was indeed brewing in his mind. This cordial invitation had nothing to do with the cooperation agreement between the two sides.

Watching Mike's receding figure, Ashley was overcome by an urge to remind him it was time to get off work.

But she didn't. Instead, she dwelled on the annual party. She wanted to hear what her boyfriend thought of this invitation. Immediately, she dialed his number. "Joseph, what are you doing?"

He said, "Nothing much, just missing you."

His words made her smile. She didn't know how to respond to it.

"I have something to ask you." Joseph said before she could ask her question.

"What is it? In fact, I happen to have something to ask you too. But you go first," she said, eager to hear his question.

"An annual party is going to take place in my company. I would like you to be there," he said softly.

"What a coincidence!" Ashley exclaimed. Once she was over her initial shock, she continued, "That's what I had called you to ask. Now it looks like the year-end parties of the Guzman Group and the Empire Group will be held on the same day. Now, what should we do?" Ashley waited for his suggestion confusedly.

Hearing this, Joseph, who also found himself in a dilemma, said, "I don't really care about the annual party. If you want, I could postpone it. I want to hear what you would like?"

In the past, Joseph avoided going to parties. He disliked interacting with strangers. Annual parties of the Empire Group were something he never attended. However, this year was different. He took Lightning's advice and decided to use this as an opportunity to present Ashley to his employees as his future wife.

However, coincidentally, there was a clash. Both the annual parties would be held on the same day. Being a good boyfriend, Joseph was willing to do what Ashley wanted.

Hearing that Joseph had thrown the question back at her, Ashley thought it over and said, "I can only think of one solution. How about we ditch both the parties and go out on our own instead?"

“Wonderful idea!” Joseph exclaimed immediately.

He preferred hanging out with her alone. The hustle-bustle of annual parties was something he disliked.

“It’s settled then! I am done with my work. However, my father has set a strict curfew. I am supposed to be back home in a while. See you tomorrow.” Ashley informed him about the situation at home before hanging up.

“Okay. Bye,” he replied softly.

After they had kept the phone, Joseph fetched a pen and scribbled something on the paper. As he wrote, a contemplative look appeared in his eyes.

He wrote down an important reminder for the day after tomorrow. It was to remind him to meet Ashley’s parents.

Joseph had been putting off visiting her parents. However, he couldn’t delay it anymore. He had even prepared gifts for them. He wanted to look decent and presentable. Hence he was still looking for the perfect suit to wear.

As he was mentally preparing for the meetup, his phone rang again, snapping him out of his reverie.

“Mr. Marshall, did you miss me?” He heard Zachary’s familiar voice come out from the other end of the line.

“What’s the matter?” Joseph asked, there was indifference in his voice.

“Hey, I haven’t seen you for a while. I was expecting a little gentleness,” Zachary complained, but it was evident he was in high spirits.

“Cut the crap.” Joseph wasn’t in a jovial mood.

Zachary, who was used to Joseph’s indifference, wasn’t bothered by his tone. He knew Joseph was the type of man who liked to get down to business. “I’ll get married on the tenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar. I called to invite you and Ashley to my wedding banquet. And remember to bring me a big red envelope,”

Zachary reminded carefully. Joseph’s mind was fixated on the wedding date.

He wasn't aware it would happen so soon. Surprised, he asked, "Why are you getting married so early?"

"If we don't hold a wedding soon, people might begin noticing Yasmin's belly. If things become bad, she might even refuse to marry me. I can't take any risks. If anything, I think it's already too late," Zachary explained.

Recently the mother-to-be Yasmin was anxious and got premarital phobia. Zachary, who cared a great deal about her, began to get worried for her. He decided to marry her soon and put her mind at ease.

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Zachary was still talking about the worries and happiness of being a father-to-be. However, the person who he was talking to seemed to be spiraling as Joseph was absent-mindedly tapping the table with his fingers.

"Hey! Are you still listening?" Zachary asked in an unhappy tone. He had been talking for quite a while now, but Joseph did not seem to return the same level of his enthusiasm.

"What?" Joseph asked as he suddenly snapped back to reality.

"You're not listening to me!" Zachary was so annoyed that he could not help but raise his voice at his boss. After calming down a little, he asked with a frown, "What were you thinking about?"

He was curious as to why Joseph was not listening to him. It was unlike Joseph to be distracted.

"Nothing," Joseph answered coldly.

Hearing this, Zachary muttered to himself, "Why do I have the feeling that I offended you?"

On the other end of the line, Joseph grew a little impatient while Zachary was wondering what he might have done wrong. "If there's nothing else, I'll hang up now."

"Wait! I'm not done yet!" Zachary helplessly said. However, it was too late. Joseph had already hung up the call.

There was a vague feeling in Zachary's heart that he had offended his boss that Joseph became colder than he already was. However, Zachary could not figure it out.

Truth be told, he had provoked Joseph when he explained why he had called. After all, Joseph wanted to hold a wedding ceremony before Zachary. Unfortunately, that was unlikely to happen, which definitely annoyed Joseph.

Zachary's wedding date was about three weeks away. However, Joseph still had not visited Ashley's parents who were by no means easy to please. He felt that there was still a long way to go before he and Ashley got married.

At that moment, Zachary put down his phone and went to the bedroom to see his wife.

Yasmin was taking off her earphones. She must have just finished talking with Ashley. Seeing this, Zachary walked up to her and sat on the edge of the bed. "What did Ashley say?" he asked.

"She promised that she would arrive on time and give us a thick red envelope. Ashley said the latter part herself," Yasmin happily answered while fiddling with her phone.

"Ha-ha! Ashley is so clever. Well, I just talked to Joseph on the phone, but he did not say anything about that," Zachary said with a sigh.

All of a sudden, he yanked out the phone from Yasmin's hand and said, "Phones are radioactive. You shouldn't use it all the time."

Despite Zachary's concern, Yasmin glared at him with resentment.

Ever since she got pregnant and returned home, she felt that her life had become boring. She had to listen to Zachary and both of their parents all day long. To make things worse, she was not allowed to do a lot of things. Even her diet was restricted and monitored.

Despite being taken good care by her and Zachary's parents, she was eager to give birth to her baby. That way, she could finally return to her old life without restrictions.

Seeing Yasmin's annoyed expression on her face, Zachary could not help but chuckle. "I know you're bored, but you have to be obedient for the sake of our child. Besides, I'm doing the same thing as you."

Upon hearing his earnest words, Yasmin could not help but ask, "Wait. What do you do? I'm the one who carries the baby. The only thing you provided was the s.perm."

She was unhappy to hear this. Her life had been difficult as a pregnant woman. It can be said that both parents own the baby, but the woman is the one who endures the pain of pregnancy and childbirth. Meanwhile, the father just has to provide the s.perm, and it is not even that hard to do so. Yasmin felt aggrieved.

"As the father, I also have a hard time, you know? Think about it. I have to abstain from making love with you for about a year. You have no idea how hard it is to resist these urges. I feel sad just thinking about it," Zachary said in a serious tone, but what he had said did not seem serious at all!

As she gazed at the unhappy look on his face, Yasmin did not say anything.

"That's why we have to hold on! After this baby is born, we won't have another one, so we won't be bothered anymore!" Zachary added thoughtfully while looking at Yasmin, whose face was ruddy for some reason. He must admit that he had had enough of this ascetic life, which had been torturing him for the past couple of months.

Apparently, these young parents were restless and impatient in the childbirth matter.

Just as Yasmin was about to nod in agreement, a shrill voice of a middle-aged woman suddenly rang in the couple's ears. "Zachary, what nonsense are you talking about?!"

That voice belonged to Zachary's mother, Juliet. Without a doubt, she must be hoping that her daughter-in-law would give birth to many children for the Estrada family. She must have been unhappy with what her son had said that she interrupted his and Yasmin's conversation.

"Mom, why do you always appear all of a sudden?" Zachary asked crossly, hearing his mother's criticism.

He and Yasmin had already gotten their passports. As two people who loved freedom so much, they decided not to live in the Estrada family house. Instead, they bought a villa near their parents' houses.

This also made it convenient for Juliet to visit her son and daughter-in-law. As a result, she often came by to bring Yasmin nutritious food that was necessary for her pregnancy.

"Mom, you're here," Yasmin greeted.

"Hello, Yasmin! As for you, Zachary, I'm disappointed in you. How could you say that having kids is bothersome? Look at yourself. You're my only child, yet I'm more annoyed than most of the parents I know," Juliet reprimanded his son while opening the lid of a Tupperware.

Zachary snorted in disdain. He felt that his own mother no longer cared about him now that she had finally had a daughter-in-law.

"Yasmin, drink this soup that I made especially for you. It's good for you and your baby," Juliet kindly said while pouring Yasmin a bowl of soup.

With a smile, Yasmin took the steaming bowl of soup and gratefully said, "Thank you, Mom."

Then, she obediently drank the soup at once. Little did Juliet know, that was only on the surface. The truth was, she did not want to do it, but she had no choice but to. After all, her mother-in-law put effort into taking care of her.

"Yasmin, you'd better give birth to more children, so they won't be lonely in the future. If one of your children gives you a hard time, you can ask your other children to help you," Juliet suggested while looking at Yasmin, who was wrapped in the warm quilt as she drank the soup. Then, with a smile, she continued, "At least, that's based on my experience. You see, Zachary doesn't come home often and always makes us worry. If only we had other children, we wouldn't have worried about him so much."

Before Yasmin could answer, Zachary suddenly asked, "Mom, what did I do that made you worried again?"

"You know what you've done. I don't want to scold you."

Juliet was trying her best to persuade Yasmin to have more children. She could not even be bothered to talk to her son nor to look at him at the moment. Instead, her gaze was fixated on her daughter-in-law, whose face was getting rosy in embarrassment and pressure.

Zachary's parents were relieved that their son, the only heir to the Estrada family, found an excellent wife, got married early, and succeeded in having a baby.

However, Juliet did not want to praise her son for that in front of Yasmin. "Yasmin, take my advice. If you don't want to have another baby soon, you can give birth to another one a few years later. I understand that you, young people, want to have your own space. So, if you find it difficult and troublesome to take care of children, your mother and I can help you with that."

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Juliet spoke to Yasmin dotingly. She was trying to persuade her into having more children. Yasmin listened to her words carefully. Without being noticed, her eyes fell on Zachary. Then she turned to Juliet and said, "Mom, I understand what you are trying to say. However, I think we will think about another child after a few years."

"Okay, if that's what you want. I won't force you," Juliet replied kindly. After a short pause, she smiled and said, "We will go for a walk once you are done with the soup. During pregnancy, exercise is very important."

"Okay." Yasmin nodded her head happily.

Yasmin was presently leading a very happy life. After she married and came to the Estrada family, she had received lots of love. Her husband doted on her and she had never faced a problem with her mother-in-law. Zachary was also quite content. Yasmin's parents showered him with love. Apart from the occasional bouts of anger that Yasmin experienced due to her temper, the two of them had what could be considered a perfect life.

However, in the bustling Ariosia, Joseph was in low spirits.

He had been looking forward to going on a date with Ashley. Everything was prepared. Just then, he received a call that told him their plan was off.

“Joseph, my father insists on meeting you today. And the venue is of your choice,” Ashley said, as soon as he picked the call. Joseph, who had made everything ready for their date, was disheartened when he heard this unpleasant news.

“But why does he insist on seeing me all of a sudden?” he asked, feeling a little confused.

“Maybe he figured I was going to meet you today. It sounds like this idea came to him on the spur of the moment.” Ashley was in her bedroom. She tried to think of a plausible explanation for her father’s behavior.

Just a while ago, Ashley was ready for her date with Joseph. Out of the blue, her father came rushing and stopped her. Jack understood his daughter was going on a date with Joseph. He fixed her with an angry stare and said, “Tell him to come and meet me today. Let him decide the place!” Then he went straight back to his room. Ashley didn’t know what to do. Instead of going back to her father, she went back to her room and dialed Joseph’s number.

“Alright then. I’ll be at your house soon.”

Now that such a dire situation had presented itself before Joseph, he had no choice but to face it bravely.

“Okay. I will be waiting for you,” she said softly before hanging up the call.

Joseph was quite nervous. He changed his casual clothes and wore a formal outfit before setting off.

In a few minutes, he arrived at the Guzman family’s house in a luxurious car. The sun slanted through the glass of his car. The weather was quite warm.

When the servants of the Guzman family saw the arrival of this guest, they got ready to greet him.

Once he had parked his car in the parking lot of the Guzman family, he got out of the car. There was elegance in his every move. He fetched two exquisite gift bags and followed the servants to the main house of the Guzman family.

Joseph was expressionless and his usual coldness was concealed. He walked with dignity. His astonishing looks made the servants sigh in their hearts. He was quite a handsome man.

After he had taken a few steps, Ashley came rushing with a big smile. The servants of the Guzman family immediately understood who he was.

She stood near him and asked softly, "Joseph, how did you manage to come here so fast?"

"Well, I was preparing for our date. You called me when I was almost ready. When I heard about the new plan, I decided to come without any delay," he said honestly, a gentle expression appearing on his face at the presence of his beloved girlfriend.

"I have no idea why my father said he wanted to meet you. It came out of nowhere so I could do nothing but call you." She held his slender arm to give him confidence. Looking up at him, she asked, "Are you ready?"

"I have to be ready. I have no other choice," he said. For the first time in his life, he seemed uncertain and nervous.

"It's okay. I believe in you. It's going to go well. My father is easy-going," Ashley assured, hoping to encourage him.

"I hope you are right," Joseph said in a calm tone. He raised his hand and gently stroked his girlfriend's hair.

Anxiety was starkly written on her face. He managed a smile and said, "Look, I'm wearing the scarf you gave me. It's my lucky charm."

Hearing this, Ashley, who had been fidgeting nervously, observed his scarf. Her eyes widened in surprise. "It's really that one! It had looked so familiar!" she exclaimed.

Ashley had no idea Joseph would wear the special scarf she had picked out for him during their Mexico trip. She ran her hand over the scarf, her face breaking into a smile.

He had worn an expensive and elegant overcoat. And now with the lucky scarf and his confident gait, he seemed capable of anything.

The morning light was shining on them, making them more good-looking than they already were. A bright smile was plastered on their faces. Nobody could deny they made a wonderful couple.

However, Jack, who was standing near the door, caught sight of them. A frown creased his forehead. He disapproved of such behavior.

He coughed and cleared his voice, trying to catch their attention. The romance between the couple came to an abrupt halt.

“Dad.”

“Hello, Uncle.”

Joseph and Ashley greeted Jack, immediately moving and standing a little apart from each other. They then walked towards Jack.

Casting a quick glance at the tall and handsome man, Jack entered the house without saying anything.

Once they were in, Jack took his seat at the head of the table. Fixing his daughter with a stern gaze, he said, “Ashley! Come and sit over here.”

“Okay.” Ashley was about to take a seat next to Joseph. However, upon listening to her father’s words, she obediently walked towards him and took the seat that was designated for her.

Joseph, who was under Jack’s scrutiny, gracefully took a seat. Once he was seated, he decided to introduce himself. “Uncle, I’m Joseph, Ashley’s boyfriend. I have wanted to see you and Aunt since a while. However, something or the other would come up. I feel honored to be invited by you. Please forgive me for not meeting you sooner.”

This was their first time meeting each other. Even though Joseph was quite well-known, he made no reference to his identity. Instead, he presented himself in a humble manner and chose to speak in an unadorned language. He wanted to keep it natural.

Jack, who was about to call Joseph out for sitting so passively, was stunned. He found himself appreciating Joseph for his refined way of speaking.

After seeing him, he had formed a very good impression of this man. His looks and speech were impeccable. Joseph wasn't the cold and arrogant man he had anticipated him to be. Instead, he was modest. Jack, who had initially prepared himself to hate Joseph, realized it would be harder than he had thought.

However, he didn't let his feelings known. He put an indifferent façade and said, "Mr. Marshall, you don't have to introduce yourself. You're a well-known man and it's our pleasure to have you here."

Jack spoke in a polite way. However, he wasn't going to acknowledge the fact that this man was his daughter's boyfriend.

'How dare he come here and claim to be my daughter's boyfriend without even getting my approval!' Jack thought to himself. He tried to revive his fighting spirit.

"Thank you for your kind words, Uncle." Joseph noticed Ashley's father had refused to call him his daughter's boyfriend. "Well, I am Ashley's boyfriend. I think I will be coming here often now. Also, I have brought gifts for you and Aunt. I hope you both will like it."

Joseph was a business mogul. Nobody could refuse his proposal. He was determined to get Jack's approval. He knew he would have to face a lot of difficulties in the future, but he wasn't frightened.

'Since you refuse to admit that I'm your daughter's boyfriend, I am going to keep repeating it,' Joseph thought to himself. His eyes met Jack's. There was an unyielding determination in them.

Ashley watched the scene unravel before her. She could feel the tension in the air. It was palpable. As they spoke, she could do nothing but watch them silently. She was overcome by an urge to bring their verbal fight to a stop. However, she knew that would only make things worse. Hence she chose to say nothing.

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Sitting quietly aside, Ashley had no choice but to watch the two men stare at each other in silence. At that moment, her mother, Simone, came out of the kitchen.

She walked over to her mother right away and greeted her with a smile. "Mom, let me do it."

She then took the fruit plate from her mother's hand and followed her.

"Hello, Auntie. I'm Joseph Marshall." As soon as he heard Ashley's voice, Joseph stood up from his seat at once and greeted her mother politely.

Simone, who still looked so beautiful and elegant for her age, looked him up and down. To his surprise, she suddenly smiled and greeted back, "Long time no see. Time passed by really fast, didn't it? You've already grown up!"

Joseph was a little confused by the nostalgic tone in her voice. "Auntie, have you seen me before?"

"Yes, of course. Your mother and I used to be friends. The last time I saw you, you were just a one-month-old baby," Simone said as she sat down beside Jack and looked at Joseph with an apparent appreciation. "Time flies so fast. Look at you. You've become a famous and excellent man," she added.

Back when Janice was still Blake's assistant, she went to Simone's company to talk about their cooperation. Because of their age and character, they hit it off right away. They developed a friendship and even became frequent contacts.

On Joseph's first month of birth, Janice threw a party for him. As a close friend, Simone attended it. At that time, Janice proposed jokingly that if Simone later gave birth to a daughter, the daughter should be betrothed to Joseph in the future.

At this memory, Simone could not help but smile. "There was another interesting thing back then. When your mother saw how much I liked you, she asked me to arrange a marriage for you and my child. It seemed that that proposal is really going to come true. It's all fate."

Thanks to those beautiful memories, Simone felt satisfied with Joseph.

At first, she was surprised to learn that her daughter was in love with her old friend's son. Now that they had met again after so many years, she was relieved and happy. After all, Joseph was truly an excellent man.

The way Simone looked at Joseph was full of love. Sadly, the untimely demise of both of his parents suddenly crossed her mind. Fortunately, she knew about his family background well, so she never once objected her daughter's choice in love.

However, Jack seemed to disagree with his wife's words. "Honey, fate also depends on a lot of things," he said calmly, having well concealed his displeasure.

He was clearly trying to embarrass Joseph by saying such meaningful words.

But before Joseph could respond, Ashley's voice suddenly came. "Dad, Mom, here are the fruits and snacks."

Although her parents were the ones she was inviting, it was Joseph whom she handed a slice of apple on a fork.

For some reason, this made Jack unhappy. His daughter had not married Joseph yet, but she had already forgotten about him. He had to teach her a lesson!

At the thought of this, Jack cleared his throat and said, "Ashley, I want to eat grapes."

As soon as he said those words, everyone was taken aback and looked at him. They knew in an instant that Jack was jealous.

As a tender daughter that she was, Ashley quickly picked up a big grape and handed it to her father with a smile. "Dad, here's the biggest grape for you."

Meanwhile, Simone took an orange from the fruit plate and said in jest, "Honey, this big orange can mask the taste of the sour grapes."

Ashley could not help but chuckle upon hearing her mother's sarcasm. Even Joseph's lips were curled into a smile. Jack calmly took the orange and retorted, "You're right. I should eat oranges instead, so that my daughter

doesn't have to feed me grapes anymore. That way, she can ignore me whenever she wants."

Everyone looked at Jack, who was calmly peeling the orange while saying those words full of jealousy. They could not help but burst out in laughter.

Meanwhile, Ashley felt helpless. She was just concerned about Joseph. She thought that he must be feeling a little stressed due to the presence of her father, so she decided to hand him a slice of fruit as a sign of concern. However, she never expected that her childish father would make a fuss about it.

"How can I forget my dear father? Here, a slice of apple for you too. I'm fair!" Then, with a serious look on her face, Ashley said in front of Jack, "Mom, let's eat together. I promise I won't be partial."

Without saying a word, her parents took the apple slices from her.

All of a sudden, Simone lifted her gaze to Joseph and asked, "When are you going to marry Ashley, Joseph?"

Simone was happy that Joseph and her daughter were together. She figured that they must have gone through a lot. After all, they broke up before, but now they were together again.

As a person who had also experienced this, Simone could see that her daughter liked this man very much. Whenever Ashley looked at Joseph, there was always a smile in her eyes. Joseph was like that too. He may be indifferent to other people, but there was only tenderness whenever he gazed at Ashley. It was not much, but it was enough to prove that the two of them were really in love with each other.

Since Simone was in favor of the marriage of her daughter and the man she liked, she immediately jumped the topic to marriage.

Her straightforward question made Jack choke on the slice of orange he was eating. His wife's behavior was terrifying!

Meanwhile, Joseph did not seem too surprised by it. With utmost respect and sincerity, he answered, "If you Auntie and Uncle agree, I want to marry Ashley as soon as possible. I promise with all my heart that I will never let her down. I will make sure that she lives a happy life that she deserves."

A touch of emotion flashed through Ashley's eyes upon hearing Joseph's powerful words. Ashley's parents were deeply astonished as well. Joseph had just made a serious promise. As a man, he must not go back on his words no matter what. Now that he had said that, Ashley's parents believed that they had no reason to reject him.

Just when things are falling into place, there will always be someone who ruins the moment. At that moment, the solemn silence in the living room was broken by Mike, who had just come downstairs. "Dad, I suddenly remembered that there's a new family rule in the Guzman family. Do you want Mr. Marshall to know about it?"

Jack had no idea what Mike was talking about. However, seeing the cunning look in Mike's eyes, he cooperated at once. "Tell them."

All at once, everyone looked at Mike, who was casually dressed in a pair of cotton pajamas, and waited for him.

There was confusion and curiosity on Ashley and her mother's faces. Jack seemed to look forward to it, while Joseph had a bad feeling about what was about to unfold, especially when he caught a glimpse of Mike's sly smile.

Now that Mike had become the focus of everyone's attention, he cleared his throat and slowly said, "Mr. Jack Guzman, the head of the Guzman family, said that starting from November this year, Ashley Guzman, his daughter, will not be allowed to marry into another family. If a man really loves his daughter, that man should marry into our family instead. That is the new rule of the Guzman family."

While looking into Joseph's eyes, he continued, "Mr. Marshall, I know that you want to be the son-in-law of the Guzman family. However, are you willing to abide by the family rule? Do you agree on marrying into the Guzman family?"

The truth is, when Mike heard from upstairs that everyone else was having fun in the living room, he quickly got up from the bed and washed up. He did not even change his pajamas! He just went downstairs as fast as he could to join them.

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As soon as Mike went downstairs, he caught bits of their conversation. Joseph was earnestly expressing his desire to marry Ashley as soon as possible. He bore a strong dislike for Joseph in his heart and couldn't bear the thought of this deceitful man getting his wish fulfilled so easily.

As he pondered over it, an idea struck him. Mike had wanted to outsmart Joseph since a while. He decided to come up with a new family rule that his father had set up in a fit of pique. In a calm and composed manner, he interrupted their conversation.

Mike's enquiring eyes were fixed upon Joseph, waiting for an answer.

In Mike's opinion, Joseph would never let go of his extraordinary identity. Besides, he was an arrogant and aloof man. It was very unlikely for him to agree to become a member of the Guzman family. After all, everyone knew that becoming a member of a woman's family was harmful to a man's image. It would especially be humiliating for Joseph who had relished a lot of success.

If Joseph refused to adopt their family name, it would mean that Mike had finally succeeded in hurting him. Thinking of the outcome this question would bring, Mike waited expectantly for an answer. A smile played around his mouth.

However, to everyone's utter surprise, Joseph, who had instantly become the center of attention, said, "I agree to become a part of the Guzman family if it means I can marry Ashley." There wasn't a hint of reluctance in his face.

The smirk on Mike's face suddenly disappeared. Ashley's parents were also quite taken aback by this response.

This was supposed to be a joke, but Joseph, who had a high status, had presented them with a serious answer.

Marrying into a woman's family meant they were willing to give up their identity and status for the woman. Joseph chose to rise to the challenge which was an indication of how much Ashley meant to him.

"Why did you agree to marry into my family?" Jack demanded, his gaze never leaving Joseph. He was very curious to know.

“I agreed because I love Ashley. I am willing to do anything to be with her. That’s how much I love her,” Joseph answered with sincerity.

Joseph had thought speaking to her parents would be embarrassing. However, what he felt was relief. He was glad he had had an opportunity to express the love he had for Ashley in front of so many people.

In short, Mike’s plan had backfired. Instead of making Joseph nervous, it had compelled him to convey his feelings. It also enlivened the dreary atmosphere of the room. Joseph, who had initially been a little nervous, felt confidence exuding from him.

Jack noticed the confidence with which this man spoke. He now held a good opinion of Joseph.

However, he wasn’t willing to approve him fully yet. Anyone who desired to be the son-in-law of the Guzman family had to pass several tests.

Everyone noticed the sudden shift in the atmosphere. The leader of the family, Jack, took the initiative to change the topic. He turned to his son and said, “Mike, go upstairs and change your clothes. Do you have any idea how inappropriately dressed you are?”

“Yes, father. I am aware.” Jack was staring at his son sternly. Mike took the cue and decided to cooperate. He went upstairs to change his clothes.

There was something in what passed between the son and father that showed they had ganged up against Joseph. It didn’t matter how nice Joseph was. The decision of whether they would give him Ashley’s hand was still up in the air.

Joseph was a smart man. He knew what was going on in Jack’s and Mike’s minds. He had never expected this journey to be easy. He knew he would have to face several challenges. However, nothing could deter him from achieving the ultimate goal. He cleared his throat and said, “Uncle, Auntie, if you agree, I would like to marry Ashley as soon as possible. I am willing to accept all your conditions.”

Joseph had waited a lot already. He wished to make her his wife as soon as possible. Yet at the same time, he wouldn't do it without her family's consent. He respected them and heartily wished for their approval.

Jack, who had thought he could brush off this subject, understood Joseph was eager for his permission. There was no way he could avoid this topic. He looked up at Joseph and said calmly, "Mr. Marshall, if I am not wrong, the two of you had a breakup some time ago. But now, you both are back together. However, there is no guarantee that such a thing might not repeat in the future. So, as Ashley's father, I think it's too early to be talking about marriage."

To put it bluntly, Jack had refused to let them marry for the time being.

Joseph was about to give him an explanation. Before he could do that, Simone decided to chime in. She said, "Joseph, your uncle is right. We don't object to your relationship, but it isn't right to rush into marriage. It's not a small decision. You will have to spend a lifetime together. You're still young. We will give you time to think it through. If you both still insist on marrying each other, then we have no issue. However, if you both realize you have lots of differences, it's better to let this relationship go."

Love wasn't the only thing that mattered when it came down to marriage. There were many variables that had to be considered. Simone cared a great deal about her daughter and would hate to see her hurt again.

This period of time could even enhance the understanding between the couple. They could grow to love each other deeply. And the other possibility was they could have a conflict and call it quits. Only time would tell if they were suitable for each other.

Now Ashley's parents expressed their sincere opinion. Joseph, even though eager to marry, understood they had reasons to be concerned. Out of respect for the old couple, he should not be stubborn in this matter. He changed his tone and said respectfully, "Since Uncle and Auntie think it's better to wait, I am willing to wait. I also admit this transition period might help improve our relationship. But, Uncle, Auntie, can you tell me how long it will last?"

He was desperate for an exact time. Otherwise, he worried this would drag on forever. He understood by asking them for a specific time, he would secure his future with Ashley. That way, they wouldn't break their promise.

“We have to think it over. We will let you know later,” Jack said quickly, giving Joseph an ambiguous answer. As an afterthought, he added, “It will also depend on your performance.”

Hearing this, Joseph, who didn't know what to say, was watching him with a dumbfounded expression. It was evident that Jack was prejudiced against him.

Ashley, who hadn't uttered a word so far, decided to speak up. “I have a question. What exactly does a good performance mean?” she asked.

Jack didn't like his daughter's intervention. He cleared his throat and said, “That's up to me. I will watch and decide. Marriage is not a game. Ashley, you should be on our side.”

Jack looked at his daughter admonishingly. She had tried to help her boyfriend. However, her meddling had just made things worse. She lowered her head and continued to eat the dessert in front of her.

“Uncle, I'll wait for your decision,” Joseph said firmly. “But no matter what, Ashley will be my wife,” he added, marking his territory.

He had made up his mind and no matter how difficult it would be, Ashley would become his.

Hearing this, Ashley gazed at him affectionately. This didn't go unnoticed by her father. He coughed, trying to catch their attention.

The couple flushed with embarrassment at being caught by Jack. At the same time, they felt helpless to change the situation.

As this scene was unraveling a crisp and clear voice came from behind. “Dad, why do you always cough? I think it's time you began taking medicine,”

Mike said as he walked towards them, clad in formal clothes. There was a smile on the corner of his mouth, but he tried to look serious. He had deliberately taken a dig at his father. The silence that was starting to invade was broken by this comment.

“You b.rat, are you trying to create troubles for yourself?” Jack gnashed his teeth at his son.

Jack was annoyed because his son quickly changed teams. One second, he was supportive. The next second, he would pull his father's leg.