

Royal Contract 1071

Chapter 1071 The baby's sake

She woke up feeling slightly disoriented. She hardly had a restful sleep. Then, her eyes opened to gaze at an unfamiliar room. Where was she again? She could not help but ask her still fuzzy mind as she searched for answers.

Suddenly, she remembered sitting in her car, crying outside Gerald's apartment. Then, all the events of yesterday came flooding into her mind. She remembered the horror of seeing him lying in that morgue, totally unrecognizable.

"He is dead." She mumbled with trembling lips as her eyes watered, ready to stain the pillows underneath her head.

She closed her eyes, hoping to control the surging emotions, the pain threatening to break free. She did not want to cry. Not anymore, as she remembered doing that almost all night.

But a tear still broke free as she felt it create a path down her cheeks. Then, many followed as she finally turned around and buried her face in the soft cushion. She could not stop because the pain just kept piercing her heart.

"Haley!" She thought she heard a voice, but she wished to ignore it. She did not want company or anyone's sympathy.

"Haley, are you alright?" The voice persisted, louder this time. But she still did not want to acknowledge it as she buried herself deep in her pillows, covering herself with the thick blanket.

"Haley, I am starting to get worried." The man behind the door started knocking on her door. "Would you please answer me?" But she still kept crying.

She wanted him to go away, whoever he was. She did not need him. She was not the man she wished to be with at that very moment. Then, a sudden thought entered her mind. Wait! Who was he?

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"Haley! I am sorry, but I need to know that you are ok." Then, the door opened, and she sensed someone had entered the room. The voice sounded familiar.

Then, she finally realized who it was, remembering that he had offered to take her home. But instead, she opted to go home with him for the night.

She did not want to see her father or anyone she knew under her current condition. Besides, he was right.

She should not be alone in her present state of mind. She was suddenly thankful that Gerald had a good friend like him. Quickly, she wiped the wetness on her face with the blanket, suppressing the tears left in her eyes from falling.

"Hey! I am sorry again if I barged into your room. But I am worried about you." The voice calmly said, seemingly much closer than before.

She took a deep breath and slowly removed the covering from her face as she finally looked at the man who had been nice enough to let her sleep for the night.

"I am ok, Mike." She answered, slightly sniffing as she patted her face dry with the edge of the blanket. "But I think I should be going."

She believed he had already done enough. She could not abuse his kindness by being a burden to him. He might be a friend of Gerald, but she was not his responsibility.

"No, you are not ok." He sat on the edge of her bed, looking down at her. "You are hurting. I understand because I also lost my bestfriend."

Suddenly, she felt guilty because she was only thinking about her pain, not considering that he must be devastated too. She could see in his eyes how Gerald's death must have affected him.

After all, Gerald once mentioned that Mike was like a brother to him. Therefore, he must be mourning his death but was trying to be strong for her. But she wondered what Gerald might have told him about her condition.

"It is just hard to accept..." She could not even say the words. It was like confirming it was true. But what she wanted was the opposite. She wanted someone to tell her that it was a big mistake.

"I know, but we have to be strong." His hand stretched until he was touching her face. "You have to be strong for the baby."

Her surprise must have registered on her face since she was hoping to keep that a secret. But she could only surmise that Gerald might have shared that information with him before he died.

Suddenly, she wondered if they had talked about her before he met his death. How? When? Where? She still had many unanswered questions in her mind. But was she ready to hear the answers?

"Did Gerald talk to you about me before he died?" It was possible since they were close. She wondered what could be his last words. What did he say about her?

"Unfortunately, we only talk about business. Gerald did not even mention that you are pregnant." Mike admitted to her as he stood from the bed and started pacing the floor.

"The nurse at the emergency mistaken me as your partner. She accidentally told me about the condition of the baby." He continued, explaining how he had learned about her condition. Then, he stopped and stood near the window, looking outside.

"That is ok." She answered, knowing there was nothing else she could do about it. "But can I ask a favor?" She started moving on the bed, finding a more comfortable position.

"Of course, name it," Mike said, wearing a friendly smile that covered his face. "Anything that you need, I am here for you."

She smiled at his statement, feeling the sincerity in his voice and the genuineness of his offer. She wished she could have been more open to him when Gerald was alive. Maybe they could have become good friends too.

"I hope you will keep what you learned about me a secret until I figure out what I will do from here on." She asked him, staring into his eyes.

Many things were going on in her mind at that moment, and planning her life and her baby's future were not yet one of them. She needed time to think this through before making any concrete decisions.

"I assure you that your secret is safe with me." He slightly nodded in affirmation. "But for the baby's sake, would you come down and eat breakfast with me."

Chapter 1072 His only legacy

After Mike left her alone, Haley finally moved toward the bathroom to check her condition. She was still wearing her clothes from last night. But her makeup was a mess, and her hair was like a bird's nest.

She would be appalled by her appearance if her situation had been different. But at that moment, she did not care about how she looked. Still, she did not want people staring at her. She did not want them to suspect that anything was amiss.

Quickly, she washed her face, removing all the stains that reminded her of her pain. Then, she combed her hair with a brush she found on the counter, deciding to tie her hair in a messy ponytail before fixing her clothes.

"I guess that would do." She did not have any plans to do a sleepover. Therefore, she had no other change of clothes.

Then, she exited the room where she slept and slowly moved down the stairs. It was slowly coming back to her, remembering going to that room and locking herself up to cry all night.

However, she hardly recalled the details of the place when she passed this hallway last night. Her mind was spiraling out of control during those times, so focusing on other things was not her priority.

She remembered him calling her for dinner, but she ignored him, not having any appetite to eat anything. Now, she could feel her stomach grumbling from the lack of nutrition.

"I am sorry, but we will eat soon." She spoke gently down her belly, reminding herself that she also had to consider their child's health and not just herself.

But where was she going? The place was huge as she turned her head from left to right. She wondered if this was Mike's house. It was clear she had no idea who he was.

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Then, she caught the scent of burning bacon in the air. And it was coming from her left. She could only assume it was coming from the kitchen, which was probably not far from where she was standing.

"Mike?" She called, hoping she was not lost, but her nose indicated she was on the right path.

She could see the place was well decorated, but nothing seemed to indicate any personal effects. It looked like a house that came from a magazine.

"In here. Just go straight ahead." He shouted as she entered a large, beautiful kitchen.

And Mike was in the center, with an apron on, cooking on the stove. "I am sorry, but can you wait for a few minutes? I accidentally burned the first batch." Showing her the toasted meat. "Why don't you sit down first." Pointing to a chair.

She watched him throw the burnt bacon in the trash and walk to the sink to clean the pot. Then, he was back to the stove to start over again. But she noticed his lack of skills in the kitchen.

"Why don't you move over and let me cook?" She quickly moved around the kitchen island and took over from him. "Can you at least toast a bread?" She asked, looking at the sliced loaf on the counter.

"That I can do. And I already made a fresh pot of coffee." He proudly said, pointing at the coffee-making machine.

He quickly moved to the bread but turned around, facing her. "But you are not supposed to drink coffee." He banged his head with the palm of his hand, making her smile. "Then, what can you drink?" Looking clueless as she was.

She had never actually thought much of her pregnancy. She still had to learn all the do's and don't's, but she had a few ideas. And one of them was not to drink caffeinated drinks.

"Maybe give me fresh juice or water. I guess that would be fine." Haley suggested as she placed the fresh bacon on the pan, hearing it sizzle as it touched the oil.

She was, without a doubt, famished as her belly started rumbling like a drum. The delicious aroma of the bacon had helped her gain some appetite. She knew she had to eat for her baby.

Then, on another pan, she whiffed a quick-to-cook omelet to pair with the toast and the bacon. A few minutes later, she had it on a plate and served it on the table where Mike had already set up two seats.

"I think we make a good team." He complimented them as he helped her on a chair.

She could tell he was only making light of the situation because of her condition, and she appreciated it. The last thing she needed was to cry again and lose her craving to eat.

"Thank you, Mike." She told him as she sat down while he took the opposite side. "Thank you for being a friend."

She watched him smile at her as he extended his hand to hers. "Remember that I will do anything for Gerald. And now that you two are having a baby. You have become my responsibility." Mike said as he gently squeezed her hand before pulling away. "Now, shall we eat?" He pointed to the food before them.

"I know I can hear your stomach rumbling a mile away." He teased her as he shoved one whole bacon into his mouth.

"No, you did not." She answered. She would have laughed if this was just an ordinary day. But the pain inside her still prevented her from erasing the heaviness in her heart.

But she truly appreciated the effort he was giving to make her situation slightly better. But, of course, she could not take him on his offer. She could not put the responsibility of caring for her and their baby on his shoulders.

It was Gerald's, but now that he was not here anymore. It was now solely hers. But that was something she had to plan later when she could think more clearly.

"But please eat. Your baby needs it more than you do. Or was it you need it more than your baby does?: He said, looking confused. "Whatever? You both need it." He told her instead.

For now, filling her belly was her priority. The future of her child depended on it. The most beautiful gift that Gerald left her was the child that would continue his name and carry his blood. In her mind, this child was his only legacy.

Chapter 1073 Acting like her private nurse

Ria adjusted herself on the bed, finding a comfortable position. She could still feel the slight throbbing in her head, but it was tolerable this time. Although she still felt like her body had leads weighing on her muscles, making it hard for her to move around.

Then, her eyes shifted to the man, who sat right next to her bed. He looked less worried than before she first opened her eyes. But she was touched by the concern in his voice.

"The doctors told me that you will be just fine. You must have caught the fever that had been going around. But you will be up in good shape in no time." Zach explained to her as she processed the information.

She did remember feeling unusually tired when she woke up that morning. Then she almost did not make it to her desk, feeling the weakness in her limbs when she was walking or merely standing.

"But you have to eat something, Ria. So you can regain your strength." He offered as he walked toward the other side of the table to get something. "I just had this delivered. You have to eat it while it is still hot. It will help you recover faster."

She noticed he worked on something on the side table, and when he returned, he was holding a bowl of what seemed to be a steaming hot soup. Then, he sat down on the edge of the bed, ready to spoon-feed her.

"Please, give it a try." Zach scooped half a spoonful of the creamy soup, blowing slightly on it to dissipate some of the heat.

"I sneaked this inside, knowing that hospital food is no good." He whispered teasingly, making her smile because she knew that too well.

She remembered almost living in the hospital for weeks when Edison was sick. She could remember how bland the food tasted in the cafeteria. But she learned it just the same since she had no choice.

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Still, the food before her did not appeal to her, despite looking delectable, deeming she had no appetite. But she still tried to eat it as she slowly opened her lips and allowed the spoon to enter her mouth.

She did not want his effort to go in vain. He seemed to be doing his best to help her, and she did not want to appear ungrateful. After all, it was also a nice feeling to have someone fussing over her.

However, she could hardly swallow the liquid, feeling like she was eating something with sand in it. After one more scoop, she had enough. She waved her hand, not wanting to eat anymore.

"Is it too hot, or does it taste bad." He looked worried as he tasted the soup himself.

"No, it is ok, Zach." She answered him, still lightly weak and having a hard time talking. "But I am not yet hungry. Maybe later." She added.

But she could still feel the parchedness of her lips, mouth, and throat, probably from the fever. "Can I just have some water?" She asked instead.

He quickly placed the bowl on the table and fetched her a glass of water with a straw. Then, he was back on her side, helping her to drink. She only consumed a few sips, but it was enough to make her feel slightly refreshed.

"You still need to eat later. So you can regain your energy back." He told her as if she was a child.

Then, she suddenly remembered her child and her other responsibilities. "Wait! Where is my phone?" She asked him, looking around the room for her things but could not find them.

"Unfortunately, your things are still back in the office. We had to rush you here because you fainted at your table." He informed her. "Why do you need to call someone? You can use my phone if you like." He suggested as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and quickly unlocked it.

"Yeah, I need to call my son. I mean Lourdes. She is taking care of my son." She could not help but worry that he might be sick too. They might be trying to contact her, but her phone was back in the office.

She remembered Edison was slightly cranky last night. Although, he did not seem to have any symptoms this morning when she left him with Sasha. Still, it might have manifested later when she was gone.

"Do you know the number?" He asked as he started dialing, waiting for her to dictate the number.

She thought of it. She knew she had memorized it, just in case she lost her phone. But it had been a long time ago. She started dictating what she could remember and hoped it was correct.

"I think that is not it." He said as his call disconnected. "Maybe you said an incorrect number.

She tried again, dictating the numbers as they came to her mind. Then, finally, she heard the ringing tone. Then, Sasha's voice came on to the speakers.

"Hi! Sasha. I am only calling to check if Edison is ok." Ria initially asked, not telling the young girl of her condition. She did not want her to worry since she was slightly getting better. "He was a little out of sorts last night, so I am just checking how he is today."

She could hear noises in the background. Then, her son's voice and laughter filled the conversation. "I think Edison is doing fine, Ms. Ria," Sasha said. "We are watching some kiddie shows, and I am also teaching him how to count."

"That is good to hear." She felt relieved that his son did not get the fever or flu. "Ok. I will let you get back to your show. Kiss Edison for me." Then, she disconnected the call, feeling tired from that simple task.

“How is he?” Zach asked, appearing genuinely concerned as he took his phone from her hands and helped her settle into a lying position.

“It would seem that he has a much stronger immune system than I have. Thankfully, he is ok.” She told him, feeling slightly satisfied.

“Anyway, I will take a quick nap. Then I am going home.” She told him, knowing she could not stay here. She had a child to care for, and she did not want to be a burden to him.

She believed he still had a job to go to and could not stay at her side, acting like her private nurse. But the thought sounded appealing as she closed her eyes with him on her mind.

Chapter 1074 Forever lost

After breakfast, she finally decided to go home. Besides, her father would wonder where she was if she stayed out for too long without telling anyone.

She knew she was a grown woman. At her age, she should be living independently. But she never felt she needed to move out of their house. And despite everything, she still loved her father and did not want to leave him alone in their colossal house.

After her mother, Patricia, died a year ago, she knew her father needed her more than ever. She stayed, hoping to help him with his grief and the business. It was the least she could do after the things he had done for her.

“At least let me drive you home.” Mike insisted as he ushered her out of his mansion. Fortunately, Mike had his driver take her car to his place. Or, she would not have an option but to accept his offer.

“I am fine now, but thank you for all your help.” She refused his offer for her to stay and for him to drive her. She was in a better condition now to go home by herself.

Eventually, she left him by the steps as she drove away on his long driveway. But she knew she was far from being better. Still, she had to learn how to be strong and stop depending on other people how to survive.

The first thing she had to do was to look for a place for her and her child. She finally realized she could not keep living under her father’s roof. Besides, her father seemed perfectly fine now. He might have already moved on from her mother’s death.

But she had to stop by a pharmacy to buy her prescriptions. The doctors said she would need it if she wanted her baby to be healthy. Of course, she could not ask someone else to buy these things for her since she did not wish for anyone else yet to know about her condition.

As she moved around the small store toward the counter, she somehow felt like somebody was watching her. She had noticed it even before she entered the drugstore.

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But when she tried to scan her surrounding, nothing seemed to be out of place. Everybody seemed to mind their business. Then, she concluded that she was only being paranoid.

"Thanks." She said to the old lady on the counter before she returned to her car, still feeling like someone was stalking her.

But who would follow her? She looked behind her, through the rearview mirror. And then the side of her window to check if anyone was looking in her direction. But still, she found nothing out of the ordinary.

"Stop it. No one is after you." She could not help but think that whoever killed Gerald would want to harm her too. But why? She had no quarrels with anyone. And she never meddled in Gerald's affairs.

They had barely announced their relationship to the world because Gerald was very private with his personal affairs. Only a few family and friends knew they were even in a relationship.

She drove home to her father's house, still being cautious. She did not want to end up in an accident because she thought someone was following her.

Once inside the perimeter of their place, she breathed a sigh of relief, believing it was just her imagination. Maybe the lack of sleep was making her crazy. Then, she also had to consider her hormonal imbalance. The doctor also informed her about mood swings.

"Haley, are you alright?" She was not even out of the car when her father came out of the front door, looking worried.

She could only guess that he had finally heard the news about Gerald. He probably tried to contact her, but her phone battery died long ago, and she did not intend to charge it anytime soon.

She did not want to hear from anybody. Not until she could find some semblance of peace and balance in her life. But in the meantime, she knew she could not run away from her father, who stood by her door.

"I heard about Gerald. I hope you are alright." She could hear the concern in his voice. Finally, he enveloped her in his warm embrace, trying to comfort her with her loss.

"I am ok, Dad. But I do want to rest in my room and be alone." She looked at her father, who had this faraway look. It reminded her of the time they had learned of her mother's death.

"Of course, my darling. Let me help you." His father insisted on walking with her in the hallway.

"I am ok, Dad." She repeated as they stopped at the foot of the long stairway. "Please, I just need time to be myself." She tiptoed until her lips touched his cheeks.

"Tell me if you need anything. I am just here for you." Her father offered as he finally let go of her hand.

"Thanks, Dad." Then, she climbed the stairs and never looked back.

She quickly marched along the hallway until she reached her room. Once inside, she locked herself and allowed the tears she had been holding onto since she had woken up this morning. And Mike had interrupted her mourning.

She moved along her bed and sat down on its edge, dropping her things beside her feet. Then, she saw the vitamins rolled out of her bag and into the carpeted floor.

She picked it up and thought of their baby. Hers and Gerald. Then, she turned to the frame standing by her nightstand. It was him, holding her in his arms.

"I am supposed to drink this to make our baby stronger. But do they have a cure to take away my pain?" She talked to the image staring back at her, willing him to answer her question.

But she knew that the only remedy to her broken heart was him. She wanted him alive, with her in this room, talking about their baby's bright future. But that was not going to happen.

Soon, he would be buried six feet below the ground, forever lost, but not in her heart.

Chapter 1075 A selfish unwed mother

She woke up feeling a bit better than before. She felt slightly refreshed but still weak. But at least she did not feel the fever weighing heavily on her. Then, the pain along her joints, muscles, and head had considerably toned down.

When her eyes finally roamed the room, she found him sleeping on the chair, looking exhausted. She wondered how long he had been sitting uncomfortably in that position.

She wanted to wake him up, but she felt guilty that he also had to suffer because of her. She had lived her entire life fending for herself, being independent. That finding someone like him seemed too surreal.

Did she even deserve a man like him? He seemed perfect in every way. Granted that she misjudged him, now, she took all the negative things she had said about him. He was not the same as the other men she met.

He was not even close to her ex-boyfriend. He was far, far, far better. She would be the luckiest woman alive if she managed to snatch a man like him and make him fall in love with her.

"Hey! You are awake." Suddenly, his eyes opened, staring at her. Hastily, he moved out of the chair and stood beside her bed, looking down at her. He checked if she was still intact, nothing missing or broken.

She almost laughed at the thought, remembering a time in her life when she was sick and could hardly move. But she still crawled out of the shelter to buy her medicine because she would die there and nobody would care.

"Just woke up," Ria answered as she plopped herself on the pillow behind her.

Quickly, he helped her by adjusting the bed until she was comfortable sitting up. If she had someone who would always care for her like this, she would not mind getting sick once in a while.

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"You should have woken me up," Zach told her as his arm moved toward her head, touching her forehead with the back of his hand. "I think your fever has finally subsided." He informed her.

He stepped away from her and grabbed a fresh set of water before returning to her side. "You should drink. You must be thirsty."

"Yeah, I am." She accepted the fresh, clear drink and sipped as much as her stomach would allow. She had never felt so thirsty in her life before. "And hungry." She admitted when she heard her stomach growl.

"The soup is already dead cold. But I could buy a sandwich just around the corner if you could wait. One of the nurses told me that they are delicious." He kindly offered.

But something in her mind clicked from his statement. "I bet she did," Ria suddenly commented, then realized that she had said it out loud.

But who could blame her when he looked so delectable that only a fool would not notice a man like him? Even a blind woman would get attracted to him just by smelling his clean, masculine scent.

If she could roam the hallway without being seen, she bet she could hear the nurses talking about his man. But the truth was just hard to accept. How long could she hold on to him?

"Did I hint a slight hint of jealousy in there?" He teased her as he moved closer to her. "Maybe you are getting better." Then, he leaned down until he was almost close to her lips.

She was jealous because she knew there might be hundreds of women more qualified to be with him. Until now, she could not fathom how he ended up with her. She could tell many would raise their eyebrows at her for snatching a man like him.

"Hey, stop that." She quickly moved her hands to shield herself from him. "I don't want you to catch whatever virus I have." She stopped him before he could kiss her, but it took her entire will to do that.

Of course, she wanted his kisses, but not at the expense of him getting sick too. She did not want anybody else to get sick because of her. She did not want them to suffer like her.

"I don't mind. At least we are going to be sick together." He jokingly said. But when he saw the look she gave him, he backed away. "Fine, I am going. But only to buy food, nothing else. And I will be getting that kiss sooner or later."

She could still glimpse the teasing in his eyes. Eventually, he stepped away from her with both hands in the air. He grabbed his phone from the table and was about to leave.

"Wait!" She suddenly remembered something. "What time is it?" She had lost track of time, seeing that the light outside was gone.

"It is already around six. You missed almost the day. That is why you are so hungry." He explained to her, looking slightly puzzled, probably by her expression.

"Can I borrow your phone? I need to call Lourdes or Sasha." She told him, slightly feeling anxious.

She realized she had not called to check up on Edison. She wondered what was happening to him since she had been sleeping all day. Then, she had to make arrangements for him to stay with them until she got out of the hospital, hopefully, the next day.

"I hope you don't mind..." Then, he paused, looking apologetic. "I already took the liberty of speaking with Lourdes while you were asleep. I already told them of your situation and arranged for Edison to stay with them for the night."

She did not expect that he would do that for her. She did not exactly know how to react to his kind gesture. "Did you call her? Did she tell you how Edison is doing?" She believed she was thankful, but she also had many questions swirling in her mind.

Like why was he doing this? What would he get from this relationship? Nothing. But, on the other hand, she would get more than she deserved. So, was this relationship fair to him? She doubted.

Or was she merely a selfish unwed mother dragging him along her misery, destroying whatever future he had?

Chapter 1076 The biggest mistake

He could see the many questions swirling in her eyes, but he could bet that she was afraid to ask most of them, frightened that she might not like the answers.

"I did not call them," Zach answered her question. He could see the confusion on her face as her brows knitted together. "I went to visit them while you were out cold." He admitted.

"You went there?" She blurted out in surprise. It was more a question than a statement.

He moved closer to her again and grabbed her hands. "I have to get you some change of clothes, and I also wanted to check on Edison." That explained why he was tired.

He had been running around, doing errands for her, without her knowing. Truthfully, he did mind doing it for her. Although, he was also surprised at his actions. He never thought he would be doing this for a woman at all.

"You did not have to do that." Ria suddenly looked shy and uncomfortable, not knowing how to react to the situation. "I don't know what to say." As her head looked down, not wanting to see his face.

"You don't have to say anything. I am happy to do it. Besides, I finally met Edison." He said, with a genuine smile, showing her that he had truly enjoyed meeting her son.

Technically, he had seen her son before. But he had rushed out of her place the first time they met. Therefore, she never had the chance to introduce the two of them formally.

"You did." He could sense that a tear was threatening to fall from her eyes. "How is he?" As she continued to ask her questions.

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He did not exactly know what she was asking him. Was she asking if Edison was well? Or if he liked meeting him or if he found him annoying? He could see the fear in her eyes as he gently forced her face to look at him and stared at them.

Initially, he could honestly say that he was scared to death. Never in his life did he feel more afraid of meeting a person in his life. And Edison was just a toddler who could not even say his full name.

But Zach honestly liked him. At least with their first meeting. But even if things get tough in this complicated situation, he promised he was not going away just like that.

This time, it would take more than a child to scare him away, even if he could see that Edison would be an additional challenge he had to face in this relationship. It might take him some time to adjust, but he would find a way because he believed he did not want to lose her.

"He is doing ok. He doesn't seem to have the virus." He assured her instead. He believed this was not the time to talk about what he thought of her son.

Ria seemed relieved to hear that. It only confirmed how much she loved her son and cared for him. Something he failed to experience from his parents.

He had grown up with people serving all his needs but not a mother who would dote on him. Or a father who would be there by his side unless there was a photo op that required them to show off their kids.

Maybe Edison was luckier than him, even if he only had a mother by his side. At least he was getting all the attention he needed compared to him, who had both parents growing up but never showed up when he needed them.

"Do you mind if I use your phone? I want to talk to him." She pleaded with him.

He could still see the desperation in her eyes to be with her son, even in her weak physical state. Most women he knew would only think of themselves, crying dramatically for attention if put in her situation. He could already cite his mother as an example.

He had never seen a woman who was so selfless. Or maybe he had been hanging out with the wrong crowd. But he was baffled by this woman before him, who could only think of her son more than herself.

"Ok. Make your call while I buy us something to eat." He took his phone out of his pocket and handed it to her. "But you are finishing your food when I get back." That was his deal.

She nodded in agreement before looking at the screen, pressing the button to turn it on, but it had a security lock. "Can you unlock it first?" She asked, pushing the phone back to him.

"All you need to do is use your fingerprint." He teased her. "Then, it will open."

He had programmed the phone to turn on fingerprint recognition but used her fingers instead of his. He had nothing to do earlier and found himself playing with his phone.

"Stop joking." Ria did not seem to believe him.

"Go on, try it." He urged her, seeing that she was hesitant to do it. Then, she placed her fingers on the pad, which automatically opened the screen. "You see. I was not joking."

"Why did you do that?" She asked, looking dumbfounded by his action.

"Because I want to. Besides, I know you will use it." Then, he leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "Now, go make your call. I will be back in a jiff."

Then, he turned around and walked out of the door, feeling happy and lucky. He had never felt anything like this before. Like his life was complete and had a purpose.

Quickly, he ran toward the elevator, wanting to catch it before it closed. He did not want to wait for another cycle. He wanted to be fast so he could return as soon as possible.

But it seemed he was not the only one who had the same idea as he accidentally bumped into someone. Then, he had to catch the other person before she fell to the ground.

"I am sorry." He said to her, holding her until she was back on her feet. But when he saw who it was. He immediately let go of her arms.

She was the last person in the world he would like to see. She was the biggest mistake in his life that he wished to forget.

Chapter 1077 A great catch

At long last, home.

She looked around the apartment she had bought with the money her ex-boyfriend paid as part of their settlement agreement. The deal was that she would not seek anything else from him.

"Home, sweet, home." The man behind him said as he opened the door for her. He offered to drive her home instead of her grabbing a cab from the hospital.

Yes, she was finally home again, feeling a giddy excitement of seeing her child again. It might be just two nights, but it felt like it had been a lifetime since she had been in her apartment.

Moreover, she could not sleep another night in the hospital, not seeing and caring for her child, who she missed so much.

"Thanks, Zach, for taking me home." She said as he helped her to the sofa so she could rest. "But you don't have to stay. I know you must be tired."

She was feeling much better now, but the doctors still specified she should not strain herself until she had fully recovered. She still needed a lot of sleep and food.

On the other hand, Zach had been in and out of the hospital, going to work and getting back to her side to ensure that she had eaten and had enough sleep.

"Don't worry about me. Just put your feet up." He helped her get comfortable on the couch. He even ran to her bedroom to get a pillow for her back.

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Then, the bell of her apartment rang, followed by a soft knock on her door. She already knew who it could be behind the door. She could not wait to see him.

"I will get it," Zach said as he hurried to the door and quickly opened it.

As she expected, her young son stood with an excited smile on his lips as the door swung open. But his eyes were not even looking at her. Instead, his focus was on the man standing by the door.

"Hey, my man. How are you doing?" Zach greeted her son, kneeling until he was slightly on the same level as him. He raised his hand, which her son reached to give him a high five.

Edison seemed to be warming up to him, but her son had always been friendly with everyone. Still, it was nice to see them getting along. Compared to the last time they first saw each other, this was so much better.

“Zachy...” Edison greeted him, and to her surprise, her son hugged the bigger man. Then, Edison picked him up and cradled him in his arms like he weighed nothing.

She had never seen his son with a man before except with Ronnie, Lourdes’s husband. Edison seemed comfortable around him as if they had been friends for a long time.

She remembered Zach telling her that he had visited him while she was asleep. Now, she wondered what they had done together to make them seem to bond.

“Hello, Sasha. Come on, join us.” Zach also greeted the young girl who took Edison home.

“I am sorry, but I have to go. My Mom asked me to do a quick errand. But I will be back to get Edison when I get back.” Sasha announced at the door. “It is nice to see you, Ms. Ria, getting better.” She waved her hand and was out of her sight before she could say anything.

Then, Zach closed the door, carrying Edison with him. But the child finally squirmed out of his hold as her son ran towards her. “Momma.” He said in his sweet, adorable voice. “You sick.” He said, still learning how to form his sentence.

“Yes, I was. But I am getting better.” Ria told her son as he tightly embraced her as if afraid she would disappear again. “What have you been doing?” She asked, seeing that he was carrying a notepad in his hand.

“See...” He pointed to the paper as he showed it to her. “Sashi... this, and me... do this.” He placed his fingers on the letters the girl must have written and then moved them to his handwriting.

Of course, it was not much to look at now, but in her opinion, it was a start. It was all just jumbled scribbles that did not make sense. Nevertheless, in her eyes, it was already a work of art.

Still, she appreciated the effort and time Sashi was giving Edison. She could not ask for anything more from her and her parents. They had been too good to her and her son. She had no idea how she could ever repay them.

“What does Sasha mean by coming back for Edison?” She suddenly asked, noticing what the girl said as her son finally moved out of her hold and started playing with his toys in the corner of the room.

“Don’t you remember?” Zach asked as he moved to sit on the chair near her. “The doctor instructed that you should rest.” He told her.

“Yes, but what does that have to do with Edison.” Ria looked at him, slightly confused, as she held her son in her arms.

“It means that Edison still needs to stay with Sasha and her family.” He clarified to her. “I already talked to Lourdes, explaining the situation. And she agrees that Edison should stay with them.”

“Wait a minute. I did not permit you to run my life or my son.” She suddenly felt alarmed that he might be overstepping his boundaries.

"Hey, don't be mad. I am not the enemy here. The doctor said that the virus might still be lingering in your system. He advised that you have limited contact with your son for the time being." He calmly informed her, assuring her that he meant no harm.

Suddenly, she felt stupid for overreacting. Of course, the doctor was right. She did not want her son to get sick like her. And Zach was only being helpful by arranging things for her.

"I am sorry if I snap at you." She was genuinely apologetic. "It is just hard to be away from him." She reasoned this time.

She had been away from him during the trip. And just when she came back, she had to be confined in a hospital bed, unable to see him. It was a bit frustrating on her part.

"Don't worry. I think I understand. I can see now how much you love your son." He told her, extending his hand to hers and squeezing them gently. Then, the bell rang again. "Just in time." He said.

He finally let go of her hand and moved out of his seat to answer the door. "Who is that?" She finally asked, curious again about what was happening in her home. Was Sasha back from her errand? That was quick.

"I took the liberty of ordering us some food. I would have dropped by the grocery, but there was just no time." He explained to her. Then, he opened the door to a man dressed in uniform carrying several paper bags.

"Watch him, but don't move from your position. I will be in the kitchen but will be right back." He told her as he carried the bags into the other room.

"Let me help." She shouted at his retreating back, suddenly wary that he had been doing all the work. She knew she was feeling better. She could at least do something than lie around doing nothing.

"No. You are staying there." He shouted back and stopped her before she could stand up. "Call me if you need anything." He instructed before disappearing from her sight. "Anything." He repeated, shouting from the other room.

She debated whether she should listen to him or force herself to do what she had to do. Of course, he did not mean, literally, everything. Right? That was just silly.

Slowly, she stood from the couch and walked over to the side table. She spotted a few envelopes lying on the top, thinking it might be urgent mail or bills she had to pay.

Then, she also grabbed the tv remote beside it, thinking of putting on a show that Edison might want to watch. If they had limited time together, she wanted to see him smile before he left her to be alone.

"What are you doing?" Suddenly, she heard his voice behind her. "I told you to call me if you need anything." He seemed to reprimand her.

"I am ok. I don't need you to watch over my every move." She responded, shaking her head as he guided her back to the couch.

"I am only following the doctor's orders. Besides, I only want you to be reunited with your son as soon as possible." His eyes turned to Edison, who was busy with his toys.

Suddenly, she felt guilty, thinking he had a point. She wanted to hug and kiss her son, but he might contract the bug that was still in her system. It was better that she followed the doctor before she regretted it.

And another thing, she might as well rest so her body could recover much easier from her sickness. It was the only logical thing to do. Therefore, she returned to the sofa without another fuss.

Lastly, she appreciated what he was trying to do for her. "Thanks, Zach." Believing he deserved it.

She still could not think of why he would waste his time on a girl like her when he could have any woman he wanted. Now, she realized how lucky she was to be with him. He was a great catch.

Chapter 1078 Nice to feel wanted

She saw how his son suddenly grabbed the pizza on his plate that Zach had served him. It was the first time Edison would eat this kind of meal. Edison barely knew how to eat by himself yet without assistance. He was only learning how to use a spoon and feed himself.

Then, there was his health she had to consider. Although he was ok consuming any food in moderation, she still avoided letting him eat anything resembling junk food or anything fatty.

But for tonight, she was going to let it slide. To be fair to Zach, he did not know. She doubted if he had any experience in feeding a child.

"Hey, watch it, buddy." Zach gently tapped her son on the shoulder when he sloppily tried to put the pizza into his mouth. "Take it easy."

She was curious about how he would handle Edison when he was in this mood, so she kept quiet, eating her hot soup as they slumped around the round table in her living room.

Besides, he said he would handle everything while she sat tight and relaxed. It was a welcome change to have someone doing things for her. But she also slightly felt guilty since he did not have to do this for them.

Then, she saw him grab a tissue from the side, wiping Edison's face and hands. "Do you need help?" He asked as her son. When his son nodded with a smile on his lips, he continued. "I will show you."

First, he cut the pizza into smaller slices, in a size that would fit Edison's mouth. Then, He picked another pizza and demonstrated it to her son. "Look." He called Edison's attention and started putting the pizza in his mouth.

Soon, Edison also followed, picking up his thin slice and imitating Zach's action. "Great! That is perfect." Zach lifted his fist to Edison, and her son fist-bumped like they were buddies.

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She did not even know that her son could do that. Where did he learn it? From Sasha or him? She suddenly felt that many things had already happened to her son that she had missed while she had been away and sick.

She could not wait to get better and be with her son again. But for now, she had to settle for being with him in the same room, watching. She could not risk her son contracting the virus in her system.

"Perfect." Suddenly, Edison mimicked him, almost enunciating the word just right. The scene before her almost made her cry.

She always dreamed that her son had a father to look up to, and seeing the two interact almost filled her heart with joy. But, of course, she was also afraid that this was only temporary.

One day, Zach would realize that this was not the kind of life for him. He had consumed more than he could chew. And then he would suddenly spit it out and leave them.

"Now, shall we make mommy happy by being a good boy?" Zach told his son as if they had a bond and that they were the only ones who could understand.

Eventually, Sasha finally took Edison back to her house, leaving her with Zach alone. They had a nice dinner together, with Zach helping to feed her son since she did not want to have more contact with him.

"Thanks, Zach. You don't know what all this means to me." Ria finally spoke, grateful for the man cleaning the mess in her living room.

"Don't mention it. I had fun with Edison. He is a great kid. I would not mind spending time with him." He stopped before her, carrying the plates and trash in his hands.

"Why don't I finish here while you relax and lay down." He even handed her the remote of the tv if ever she wished to change the channel to another station.

She scanned for a while, trying to find a movie that would interest her. But her mind was somewhere. It was thinking about the man in the other room, taking care of her responsibilities and her.

"Found anything entertaining?" Suddenly, Zach asked as he returned to the room, carrying a glass of water. Then, he sat down beside her.

"Nah." She answered, finally giving up and putting the remote on the table near her.

"Why don't you drink your medication before I look for something both of us would like?" He handed her the small pill, putting it in her hand and the water.

"Thanks." She drank the meds and half the glass of water before returning to a comfortable position on the sofa.

She watched him return the glass and take the remote instead, scanning the screen for something to watch. Suddenly, she could not help but wonder what he was doing.

"You must be tired." She said, thinking he had been serving her hand and foot almost the entire time she was sick. "I think you also need some rest. Why don't you leave this with me while you go home."

She tried to pry the remote from his hand, but he was quicker as he moved it away from her. "Did I fail to mention it to you? I am staying for the night." He said as if it was the most obvious thing to say.

“What?” She expressed, slightly surprised by his plan. “You don’t have to stay.” She quickly added, not wanting to be a burden to him any more than necessary. So far, she felt she had already abused his kindness. She could not ask for more.

He suddenly moved closer to her, calming her by wrapping his arms around her shoulder, then pulling her closer to his body. “It is ok. I want to stay.” Then, she felt his hand caressing her hair. “I enjoy being around you and taking care of you.”

Eventually, she settled under his arms, feeling more comfortable with him by her side. Was it wrong for her to think that it was where she belonged? Was she mistaken to believe that he was the one for her?

“But you have already done enough.” She told him, finally looking up to stare into his face. She wanted to read what was going on in his mind. Nothing about his action made sense to her.

Why was he doing all this? She could not understand since nobody had ever been this good to her. It was just too good to be true. She was not a lucky person. Nothing in her life came easy.

“Not close enough, so I intend to do more.” He smiled, looking down at her, gazing into her eyes, allowing her to see the sincerity reflecting in his eyes. “You better get used to me being around.” He said with determination.

Finally, she accepted his words. She was tired of fighting what was in front of her. She could not deny anymore how much she wanted him in her life. She had decided to accept him into her life and her son without reservations. He finally convinced her that he was here to stay.

“Do you have any problem with that?” He asked when she remained silently contemplating her new conclusion.

“No.” She shook her head, agreeing that this was where he should be, right next to her. “I have no problem with you being here with me.”

“Good.” He answered, but this time, he lowered his head, claiming her lips with his. She suddenly remembered that she was sick. He should not be kissing her, but it was hard to stop.

She did not want him to stop, remembering how much she had started to crave his kisses. She could not deny that he made her alive. Her heart which had stopped beating for a long time seemed to have finally awoken again.

She believed she was ready to open her heart again to the possibility because of him. He had given her hope that she still might have a chance to find love again.

“I think I like you very much.” She finally said when he came up for air, allowing her to breathe again.

She could not say if she had already fallen in love with him, but if he continued on this path, she might eventually helplessly fall for him. But she believed she was ready to risk it all for this man.

“I think I like you very much too.” He answered her with a smile that brightened the room.

Then, his lips lowered again to assert his claim on her. This time, it was more intense than before. It seemed he was not holding back this time as he showed how much he wanted to be with her.

“Hey, I think we need to stop.” He breathily said as he peppered her with kisses along the length of her neck and down her shoulders.

Then, his hands traveled along her back, caressing her body with his firm, commanding hands. She was putty in his hands as she savored the warmth that seeped through her skin.

She yearned for more.

She wanted him.

She heard him. “Then, stop.” She told him.

But nothing in her voice could convince even her that she wanted him to stop. Still, he held himself, controlling his impulse to go on. She could see that it was taking everything in him to pull away.

“I am sorry. I should not have done that. You are still weak. You should be resting.” He apologized, but his eyes still reflected the desire that had possessed him to kiss her in the first place.

“Don’t worry. I like it. But maybe we can do it later.” She offered, not wanting him to feel guilty.

Still, it was nice to feel wanted despite her condition.

Chapter 1079 Money that bought silence

She stared at the ceiling, thinking of the man lying on her couch, just a few meters away from her bedroom door. He insisted on staying and camping in her living room to guarantee she would be ok for the night.

She wanted to offer the comfort of her bed, but she did not want him to think she was moving too fast in their relationship. But she could not help but wonder if he was comfortable on her couch since he seemed too big.

“No, don’t do it.” She whispered to herself, stopping her from sliding out of bed and exiting her room.

Deep sleep seemed to deprive her as she kept waking up at all hours. Maybe it was because she had been sleeping all day, or it could be the medication. Whatever it was, she was ready to give up.

But compared to yesterday, she was feeling so much better. It was as if she was almost a hundred percent back to her usual self. Still, she was proceeding with caution, not wanting the sickness to come back.

But that was not the problem, as her body won over her better judgment. “Traitor.” She thought to herself.

She sneaked out of her room and walked to the living room, staring at the sleeping man who seemed uncomfortable in his position, basing it on how his body bent on the couch.

She debated whether to wake him up or leave him be. Still, she felt guilty if she left him in such a situation. She could imagine the stiffness of his muscles when he woke up in the morning.

But then again, should she invite him to share her bed since she had no spare room or bed to offer him? After a few seconds of observing his face, he stirred, making her step away.

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She also did not want him to catch her watching him sleep. It would be awkward to explain herself in that kind of situation.

“Just get some water and go back to your room.” She could hear her mind instructing her body, reminding her that she was also thirsty.

Slowly, she moved away from him, stepping on her tiptoes to avoid creating too much noise. Then, she finally reached the other room without waking him up.

She went straight to the refrigerator, getting some cold water inside. She needed something that could replenish the thirst she felt. Then, after refilling her glass, she brought it back with her on her way back to her room, just in case she felt parched again.

But before she could pass the living room undetected, on her way to her bedroom, somebody called her attention. “Did you need anything?” He asked her, making her face him. “I told you to wake me up if you need anything.”

“I am sorry.” She uttered, feeling like a child caught with her hand on the cookie jar. “You seem so tired. I did not have the heart to wake you up. Besides, I was feeling so much better now. Thanks to you.” She added the last part, grateful for all his help.

“Still, you should have woken me up.” He insisted as he stood up and walked over to her. Then, his hand automatically checked her temperature, feeling her skin for warmth.

But the only heat she felt came from his skin as it made contact with her. She could not help it as her eyes automatically closed, savoring the warmth radiating from him. She was not sick, but still, she could feel a different kind of fever building inside her.

“I am ok. You don’t have to worry about me. But I am more worried about you.” She admitted. “I don’t think you are comfortable with my sofa. I don’t mind if you sleep in my bed, beside me. If you want.” She shyly offered.

She could not help it since she had never shared a bed with a man, except for Edison. She had been sleeping alone since Edison mostly slept in his room. She would offer Edison’s room to him, but the kiddie bed would only fit half of his body.

“Are you sure it is fine?” He also seemed to hesitate. “But I prefer to sleep on your bed since my back is killing me.” He touched a portion of his lower back to make his point.

She could tell that he was not making it up. She did see how he twisted his body to fit on the couch. Therefore, his claim had a solid basis. Anyway, she already offered it. She could not take it back.

“Yeah, come on. The bed is wide enough for the both of us.” She told him.

She bought a wide bed intending to share it with Edison from time to time. Besides, she had more than enough space in her room for it. It would be nice to sleep on something she did not have to bend her body to fit.

Then, she opened her door to him, allowing him entry to her private area. Suddenly, she could feel the sizzling heat surrounding her, but she chose to ignore it. She did not want to put malice in her invitation since she was unsure if she was ready to take this to the next level.

“So, you can take that side,” She said, pointing to her right while facing the bed as she walked over to the left.

Soon, they were both lying on the bed, with the blanket covering their bodies. Then, their eyes stared at the ceiling above their heads, both temporarily lost in their worlds.

Stillness filled the room as no one seemed to want to talk since nothing appeared to come to mind, but neither felt the desire to close their eyes and allow the darkness to consume their consciousness.

“Are you asleep?” Somebody suddenly spoke, breaking the awkward silence.

Ria realized it was not him but she who first uttered the question. She could not sleep, and she did not hear him breathing evenly. Therefore, concluding that he was still wide awake, just like her.

“No, not yet. What about you? Are you sleepy?” Zach returned the question.

“No. Not really.” She truthfully responded as she expelled a big sigh of air from her body. “I think I had already overslept.” She explained, not feeling a hint of fatigue as she continued to stare at the blank ceiling.

Suddenly, she could imagine a painting of his face displayed on the white surface above her. Then, she realized it was just her illusion since she had always wanted to see him.

“Do you want to talk instead? I am not sleepy too. We can kill time by learning more things about each other while we wait for sleep to come around.” he suggested instead, which she believed was a good idea.

She thought about it, nodding in agreement. She believed she had many things she wished to know about this man beside her, just like his likes and dislikes, etc. But that would also mean he had to ask questions that she had to answer honestly.

Was she ready for that? She guessed she had no choice. She could not keep hiding from her past since it would reveal its nature eventually to haunt her even if she buried it in the deepest part of her mind.

“Ok. I think I like that.” If they were going to be a couple, she would have to learn to open up to him.

“Great.” This time, he turned to his side, facing her as he cradled his face in her soft pillow.

She knew she had no choice but to follow his sample and face him. It was weird to see a man lying next to her. But it was a nice kind of weird. She believed she liked it.

“Shall I go first?” He asked as he stared into her eyes. “I hope you will not mind, but I need to ask this.”

Suddenly, she felt wary about his question. But if she would work out this relationship with him, she should be ready to share more intimate things about herself, or this entire thing would be doomed before it hardly began.

"Is it ok if I ask who Edison's father is?" He finally voiced out what probably had been brewing in his mind.

She could not blame him. If she was in his situation, when he was the one with a child, she might also ask the same question. She would be curious about the woman's identity, even if it had been in the past.

"I..." She had no idea how to answer his first question. Honestly, she had decided never to bring up this topic. Never again in the rest of her life. But now that he was asking. Was she ready to tell him?

"I am sorry. But I can't tell you that." She finally said to him. First, it was a past that she did not want to dig up. Then.

She also remembered signing a Non-Disclosure Agreement where she could not disclose the identity of her child's father in exchange for the enormous financial support she received.

The clause stated that she could only spend the money on her child's medical treatment and future needs, including securing a house for her child. But she barely touched most of the money when she started working.

She was saving it for future use. In such a case, Edison got sick again. Or for his education. Besides, she barely needed the money since she could not care much for material things.

But basically, it was money that bought silence.

Chapter 1080 No more

She woke up, realizing that she was sleeping in his bed. She did not remember coming over to his apartment. But she instantly recognized his room upon opening her eyes.

She looked around, trying to see her surrounding, finding nothing was amiss from what she remembered. The room looked just like she had left it before leaving that day.

Then, her hand slid to his side of the mattress, which seemed disarrayed.

When her hands touched his pillow, it was warm to her touch, as if somebody had just woken up and left that side of the bed.

But that left her puzzled as her eyes roamed again around the room. But nobody was there. She could not sense any movement or noise coming from the bathroom.

He was dead, as she repeatedly told herself.

"That is not possible." She mumbled as her mind searched her memories. It was impossible unless someone else slept beside her last night. But why could she not remember anything?

The last thing her mind could recall was that she was hiding in her room, not wanting to see anyone, not even her father. She refused company but only accepted food since she needed to feed her baby.

Therefore, how did she end up in his apartment and sleeping on his bed? It did not make sense as she slowly slid out of bed and walked towards the door.

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Who slept beside her?

Carefully, she placed her ears by the wooden surface of the door, pressing it harder, hoping to hear whatever noise she could detect outside.

She could hear the faint sound of the television running in the living room. She believed a news channel was airing on the screen. Gerald usually watched the news as soon as he woke up while drinking his coffee. But that could not be him.

"It is not him." She repeated to herself. A stranger must have entered his apartment.

Cautiously, she moved away from the door, debating whether to come out and confront whoever was out there. Then, she listened again by the door, but suddenly, the noise seemed to stop.

She concluded that the intruder must have left. Then, slowly, she opened her door, avoiding making a sound. When she peeked outside, she did not see anyone in the hallway.

Then, she made her way to the living room, tiptoeing to minimize the sound of her steps. Once she reached the area, she found that the television was off. No one was there.

She breathed a large amount of air, feeling relieved. She concluded that she must still be groggy from her sleep, making her imagine things. There was no one there but her. Although, it was still a mystery how she ended up in this place.

"Let us just get something to eat." Her stomach reminded her that her baby was hungry as it started to growl.

She believed she left a few groceries in the pantry and the refrigerator when she was last here. She could whip up something that she could eat. Luckily, her baby seemed to like anything she consumed. She was not queasy with food as the other pregnant woman experienced.

But she suddenly stopped by the entrance to the kitchen. It was clear she was not alone in the apartment as her eyes focused on a man by the stove. He had his back turned to her, so she could not see his face, but from her view, she could not believe her eyes.

It was like seeing a ghost because he was dead. Somebody shot him and burned him. That could not be him.

That man cooking was not Gerald.

It could not be him.

She kept repeating in her mind, hoping the image would suddenly disappear. She closed her eyes, believing that once she opened them again. The illusion would vanish.

But it did not.

He stood there, moving as if he belonged in that kitchen, reminding her of the times he would cook for her. He was not a great chef. But he could manage a mean omelet and a few simple dishes.

"Gerald?" She finally called to him, fear and hope mixed in her voice. Was it possible that he was alive?

She could not wait for him to turn around as she heard her voice float in the air. She was anxious to know if it was him, at the same time, afraid that he might be a stranger looking like him.

Or she might be going crazy, thinking he might still be alive and the dead body was not him, lying lifeless on that table. Then, one of these days, the authorities will confirm that it was not him.

Gerald missing was better than him dead. It would at least give her a chance that he might still be alive. Someday, the authorities would rescue him from whoever abducted him and save him.

"Haley. I am glad that you are finally awake." The man said as he finally turned around and looked at her. "I made your favorite breakfast. Come on, join me." He called to her.

She was rooted on the spot, unable to move or say anything. She blinked her eyes twice or several times, hoping to clear the fog obstructing her sight. Then, she realized they were tears flowing down her cheeks.

She was not sure. But was her mind playing tricks on her? It was him, but in a way, she could not tell. It was his voice, his body, but the face seemed different. She did not understand as she stared at him again, wiping the tears that blocked her sight.

"Gerald..." She had no words to say because nothing about this scene seemed right. She could not tell, but the more she stepped closer to him, the more he seemed to move away.

"Haley, what is wrong?" He asked as he finally moved to the table and waited for her with the food he had made.

Was his face burned or something, that is why she could not recognize him? No. That was not it. Something was different about him. It was like he was wearing a mask. It was his voice, but it was not him.

"I don't know." She finally answered him. "What are you doing here? You are supposed to be dead." She confusedly said. Instead of being happy to see him, she could not stop denying that he was alive.

That was not Gerald, she told herself. That was an impostor. She wanted Gerald, but in her mind and heart, that man was not him. But who was he, and where was Gerald?

"If I am dead, why am I here?" He asked as he finally sat down, tapping the chair beside him. "Come, sit with me."

She wanted to go near him, but her feet remained in place even if she kept walking. She had to get to the bottom of this. She had to look into his eyes to confirm that it was not him.

Then, she stopped. She wiped all her tears away. "No, you are not Gerald." She finally said.

No, you are not Gerald. She repeated.

Then, she could feel the room start swaying, and soon it was swirling. She could still see the man sitting by the table, but slowly fading in her mind. Soon, there was chaos as she began shouting. Then, noises filled her ears.

"Haley." A man's voice resonated in her mind. It was familiar. "Haley, wake up." He said as she felt someone tapping her on the cheeks.

"He is not dead." She opened her eyes, shouting the words over and over again.

"Stop it, Haley. You are having a nightmare." She could hear him say, but she did not want to believe him. What she saw was real.

Gerald was not dead. Her heart knew it.

"Dad, Gerald is not dead. Help me find him." She said to her father, who knelt on her bed beside her. He attempted to snap her out of her hysteria.

"I wish that is true, my dear. But Gerald is dead." Her father continued to say to her as he tried to make her understand.

"No, he is not. I saw him. Or rather the man that was on the table. That man was not Gerald." She told her father, believing that it was a mistake. They had the wrong man.

If her father would help her, they could easily find the people who took him. Then, they could save Gerald. She only had to convince her father that the dead man was not the man that she loved.

"That is not possible. Of course, you want to believe that the man is not Gerald, but science doesn't lie." Her father said, making her look up at him. She wanted to read in his eyes that he was lying.

"What science? What are you talking about?" She finally asked, confused about what was happening.

"Mike called early this morning." Her father paused as if he was choosing his words carefully. He looked at her as if he was concerned about her.

It had been a while since she last saw him, acting like a father to her. But at the moment, it made no difference because she could feel her heart squeezing the life out of her as she anticipated his words.

"The authorities finally confirmed through his dental records and DNA that the man was him." He continued.

She did not want to believe it. She quickly looked away from her father as tears began to fall from her eyes. It was clear now. She only had a terrible dream.

In her dream, he was very much alive.

But wide awake, he was just a lifeless, unidentifiable, burned corpse.

In reality, he was no more.