

Royal Contract 431

Chapter 431 - The Manhunt

"Why do you have to get yourself involved in this?" His wife looked at her husband with concern in her eyes.

Although she also wanted answers, she was wary that he was stressing himself in this matter. She did not want his health affected by his obsession to solve this case.

"Because our daughter's life is at stake here. If I don't find the person behind her accident, her life will be in constant danger." He could hear the agitation in her voice. He understood her fear, but he could not heed her plea this time.

He could not stop, not until he had unraveled the truth, learned the reason for the accident, and discovered the person behind it all. He would protect his daughter even if it was the last thing he ever did before his death.

"Please, just be careful, Ethan. You know I can't lose you. But do what you must to protect our daughter." She hugged her husband as she sat on the armrest of his chair, hoping she could be as calm as him.

Being married to a man at the top of the leader board had never been easy. She was in constant fear for his life. If he acquired many friends, he also collected numerous enemies.

Many of his competition wanted his position. A number of them also wanted his life, but Ethan had fended them off. He protected himself and his family in the best way he could. Nobody dared touch him or any of his kin until now.

If there was someone who could keep Dani safe, she believed Ethan could. But she was not disregarding what Alex was doing. But the more, the better, right.

"Sir, Mr. Stockholm is here." His butler informed him, mildly interrupting their private conversation.

He never usually butted in any private meetings. But, he had clear instructions to bring the detective to his attention as soon as he arrived.

"Send him in," Ethan instructed, unable to wait for his final update.

He believed that if someone could get the information he sought. It would be him because he was the best in the field he had met so far.

He waited for his best investigator to enter his room and tell him what he had discovered. He did not only deliver what he required but also what he needed.

"Mr. Hamilton." He acknowledged the great man in front of him. Then, noticed that he was not alone.

"Mrs. Hamilton, lovely as usual." He approached her, took her offered hand, and graced it with a soft kiss on the knuckles as his sign of respect.

"It was also nice seeing you, Mr. Stockholm." She replied with a warm smile. "But if you will excuse me, I still need to finish packing for the trip."

She always admired the man for what he did for his husband. Some would use their skills to extort money from Ethan, but he never did.

She strode out of the room, leaving the two to continue with their meeting. She knew that Ethan would share whatever happened in that closed room with her after he had analyzed all the information.

"Sir, you have to forgive me for the slight delay. It had been a bit difficult to find this man. It appeared that they put extra effort to hide him." He began, deciding to forego the formalities.

Whoever was protecting the real identity of the other driver of the car and hiding him had very unlimited resources. He kept moving around and getting ahead of him at every step.

But he was not declared the best if he could not track him down eventually. It might have taken him time, but he already had him on his radar, and he was not getting away this time.

"So, you have his real name and location." Ethan confidently stated.

He did not need to ask to know that he had accomplished his mission. He knew he could count on him to get what he wanted.

"I do." He replied, at the same time, handing his boss the file containing his report.

He already guessed the value of this intel to him. This was not business but personal. He knew information like this would be useless for others but would quite pick a price with this man.

Ethan took the file and perused its content silently. Nothing much could be read from his expression. His eyes remained neutral, not indicating any kind of emotion.

"You never failed me. For that, expect my gratitude." Ethan expressed in words what he was feeling. Although his face remained stoic.

He had worked with Alex and the police to get this case solved as soon as possible. But he knew Alex was preoccupied with the wedding and the business.

The police, though using all their resources was still not good enough. Ethan could not rely on them to find the culprit behind Dani's accident.

In his opinion, as long as the man who was behind hurting his daughter was out there, she would never be safe. They tried it once. They would try again.

"You have been one of the best clients that I ever have. Consider this as a gift to your daughter's upcoming wedding. I hope you catch the man behind this." Lord told Ethan.

He believed showing good faith would not only be beneficial for business but also to their friendship. Not everything was about money. He also valued the connection he had developed with his important and influential clients.

"Well, I would not say no to that. It was always a pleasure doing business with you." Ethan would not insult the man by insisting on paying for his services.

After the long time that they had worked together, he also considered him a friend and a close ally. Something hard to come by in this line of business.

"If you need my help again, you know where to reach me." Detective Stockholm excused himself, leaving him with the information in his hands.

He also had a family of his own. He would have protected them in the same way that Ethan was doing. His respect for the man only increased because of how he valued family.

For the sake of their friendship, he decided to continue his investigation. He would dig deeper into this case.. Ethan did not ask for this, but he decided to join the manhunt.

Chapter 432 - Beacon Of Light

Ethan watched as the door of his office closed. He opened the folder and scanned its contents. One by one, he scrutinized each page, examining the detailed report.

"Care to share with me what you have learned." Laura walked back into the room, unable to stay far away. It was their daughter's life that was at stake.

She could not sit still and not know what was happening. Her packing could wait for later. Her mind would not rest until she heard from her husband that he had found the culprit.

"Why don't you sit down?" He gestured for the chair near him. He had no plan on hiding anything from her.

She had every right to know every detail of this situation, same as him. He had no monopoly of their daughter's life, so she should be part of the decision-making.

"That bad." She followed his gesture and settled comfortably in the seat. She could already tell from the sound of his voice that it would be something hard to hear.

He could fool a lot of people but not her. With the years of experience, she could somehow determine what was going through his mind and heart. Though he tried hard to hide it, even to her.

"A bit, I am afraid." He admitted, shaking his head. He usually did not like showing his emotions on his sleeve. But, he believed that he was weakening in his resolve.

He was growing old and feeling the same way. It was hard to admit, but he was getting tired more and more every day. As much as he did not want to acknowledge it, it showed in his face and actions.

"Are you sure you are still up to do this? Maybe we could let the police handle this situation." She did not doubt her husband's capabilities, but she thought of his health situation.

"You know I can't walk away from this. I can't put the fate of our daughter in the hands of another." He walked towards her and sat down beside her, holding her hand.

He started to relate what he had learned from the investigation. Telling his wife the details of the accident and the evidence they had recovered in the scene.

The driver of the other car tailing his daughter's car finally confessed. Based on the statement, he was paid to do it. But he had no idea who he was working for. He just went on the ride for the money.

But he did give a name, an alias, which Stockholm used in his investigation. Using also the license plate of the car used by the other driver who had escaped the incident.

He had discovered the name of the unknown man. It had a clear description of the man's identity. Most importantly, where to find him.

"What do you think you should do now?" Laura never questioned her husband's decision before, and she was not about to do it now.

She always stood by him all throughout their married life. But she did sometimes share her thoughts with him, hoping that she could help him somehow come up with the best options.

"I am thinking about it." He had been in many difficult situations before. Making decisions left and right. But when it came to his family, nothing about it would seem easy.

He could either share this information with the police or act on this himself. But experience-wise, the chance that the police would catch this guy was slim.

It would seem that sending his team would do a better job. The last thing he wanted was for the man to get tip-off and get away again.

If the source was right, the mastermind behind this might be paying an informant inside the police department. "I guess I have no other option but to organize a personal manhunt as soon as can be arranged."

He already had a team of his best men standing by, waiting for his orders. He had asked his head of security to handle this personally.

He did not want to take chances. Although they were only going after the little fish, he would take every precaution not to let him slip through their trap.

He needed to seize him, unharmed. He wanted to know the information he possessed. He would use him as the bait to catch the larger one.

"Just be careful. I want our daughter to be protected, but I also want you safe." She agreed with his husband with his plan.

She also believed that putting this information in the hands of the authorities was dangerous. In their position, many were coming after them, using money to manipulate the situation.

She could not trust the system in this condition. She believed her husband would have to deal with this aggressively. He had to fight fire with fire because he could not extinguish it with water.

"I assure you that everything would be perfectly ok. Anyway, have you started packing?" He tried to swipe the issue on the side, diverting Laura's attention away from the problem.

He did not want her to worry about it while they were on their way to their daughter's wedding. It was a celebration they should be sharing with Dani and her future husband, Alex.

He stared into her eyes and already saw the answer to his question. As he suspected, she did not go far from his office. She stayed outside, waiting for the detective to leave.

"Barely." She confirmed his already made assumption. "I just could not focus on anything else." She could not explain what she felt about the threat in their daughter's life. "But don't worry. I know you have this under control."

She put her hands together, trying to contain her emotions from pouring out. Now was not the time to be weak. She had to be more supportive of her husband's plans.

She had to be there for her daughter when she needed her the most.. Her family needed her more than ever to be their beacon of light.

Chapter 433 - City Outsider

Finally, the other couple, not a romantic tandem, had arrived at the scene. Both played a specific role as entourage in the wedding ceremony, in charge of the different programs in the upcoming event.

"So, it would seem that we need to work together on this one," Marcus stated the obvious since the organizers gave them a task to follow together. "Are you up for it?"

His voice was more of a challenge than a question as he directed his gaze to her. He was not sure if the idea of being in the same room most of the time would work well in their situation.

But he more than welcomed the opportunity to be close to her again. Not that he was expecting anything from it. He was not deluding himself to believe that she would ever allow herself to fall for him again.

"Do I have any other choice?" She answered him sarcastically, looking at the list of things they had to work on together.

As she had decided earlier, she would act civilly, maybe even a bit friendly for the sake of their friends. After all, she would always be seeing him around. Now that her best friend was marrying his best friend.

They were both directed to proceed to a large room as soon as they arrived in the palace. The head of the coordinating team would like to discuss the wedding arrangements.

"I guess not." He agreed with her assessment, looking at the woman in charge of the ceremony.

The woman did appear to be strict and would not take no for an answer. Not that she was thinking of declining the job. She was doing this not for the man beside her.

It was for her friend counting on her to make the wedding perfect. Although Dani might not have asked for it, she still wanted to make this event memorable for her friend.

"Don't worry. I won't bug you too much." Marcus assured her, hoping that would create a better working environment for the two of them.

He sat beside her at the long table. Then, the other woman was at the center discussing further the details of their participation in the ceremonies.

He realized a few more days of pre-wedding activities was a long time to be antagonizing each other. It would be better if they were on the same page.

"I hope I can count on that." She also thought it would not help if she kept revisiting the past.

He already said his apologies, and she accepted it. Maybe this time, they could start by doing one goal at a time without ripping each other's throats.

She looked again at the list and found some discrepancies in it. She had asked for a schedule for a bachelorette party, but the time allotted to her did not match her initial request.

"Excuse me, Antonette, but I think there is a misunderstanding in my request." She pointed out the schedule listed on the itinerary of the wedding.

Instead of having the bachelorette party at around six in the evening, it would start at two in the afternoon and end by six. That was not what she had coordinated with her.

She already had created a program for the event, and she had no plan to change it according to their timetable. If someone had to adjust their schedule, it would not be her.

"I don't think there is a problem with the list." Antonette looked at Jacky as if she was talking nonsense. "If you can all follow it accordingly, then we would have no cause for delay."

She had all the plans already sorted out up to the last details according to their customs and traditions. She was sure that there was no mistake in it.

"But I can't work in this timeframe. I specifically informed you what I need." She pointed out the error that the other woman made. She was not open to renegotiation.

"I am sorry, but I can't give you that time. According to our tradition, it is..." Antonette was saying, but Jacky did not allow her to finish.

"I don't care about your tradition because we too have ours. My friend had already agreed to have the wedding here. You are not taking this tradition from us." Jacky rattled on about the unfairness of their situation.

She had been planning this event for as long as she could remember. As her best friend, she knew it would be her job to do this for her. It was a no-brainer that she was the only choice.

Antonette was temporarily stunned by the American's outburst. No one had dared question her planning before, and she was not expecting that from their visitors.

"You don't understand. We are following a tradition we inherited from our oldest ancestors. We could not break it to accommodate one wish of an outsider." Antonette finally found her voice and remarked on the situation.

"Precisely. Those traditions are old news that we need to bury in the past. I plan to give my friend something new and different. I need you to change this back to its original schedule." Jacky insisted, pointing to the time she required.

She was not going to let this stuffy woman dictate and derail her plans for the last night of her friend. She would fight for their right to conduct her party according to her schedule.

"I am sorry. But I can't do that. It is already out of my hands. If you want to change the royal wedding itinerary, you have to take it up to the Council." Antonette explained to her with a smirk on her face.

She was not going to let this woman tell her what she should do, even if Jacky was the best friend of the bride. She was assigned with this ceremony because she was the best, and she was not allowing another person to ruin it for her.

The responsibility of this entire event was solely on Antonette's shoulder alone. The success of this celebration would bring honor to her.

On the other hand, its failure would bring shame and disgrace, not only to her and her family as well.. So, she was not allowing some city outsider to dictate her job.

Chapter 434 - The Greasy And Meaty Ones

"Where can I find this Council? Show me to their office, and I will file a complaint." Jacky stood up from her chair, ready to bolt to the location of their offices.

She was not about to back down from expressing her opinion on the matter. If she had to knock on someone's door or fall in line in some office, she would because she believed in what she was fighting for.

"I think we can handle this from here." Marcus finally intervened after being silent for the entire interaction between the two.

He had watched Jacky and Antonette discuss the value of their tradition. In his opinion, it would seem that both had equal reason to argue their cases.

But, he agreed with Antonette. The royal family had never broken their tradition ever. Despite what Alex said, he believed that Alex would not be the first to violate any of it for his parent's sake.

"Thank you, Antonette. We will contact you if we have any further questions." He bowed to the other woman as a sign of respect.

"I think we should go to our rooms and get changed. We'll talk about this more later." He whispered calmly to Jacky before she could respond, not giving her time to challenge him.

He grabbed Jacky in her arms and guided her out of the room before she could protest any further. He knew if he did not interrupt her, the situation would only worsen.

He knew how important the traditions were in this kingdom, and no amount of intimidation coming from Jacky would change that. She was only causing a scene unnecessarily.

"What are you doing?" Jacky complained, still struggling to get free from him after they were several feet outside the door. "I am not allowing her to get away with that."

She was not sure why Marcus seemed to be siding on her side. But it would not stop her from doing what she had to do. She would find the Council, file a complaint against her and modify their tradition.

"Jacky, stop it." Marcus finally stopped in his tracks and let go of her. "This is nonsense. You can have your party anytime you like. It doesn't have to be that particular time."

He thought that she was acting irrational, arguing about a simple conflict in schedule. Under normal circumstances, Jacky had always been clear-headed, agreeable, and friendly.

"Fine." She looked anywhere else, avoiding making eye contact with him. She suddenly felt like she was losing control of her emotion. But she did not want him to see it.

"What is wrong? Why are you acting like this?" Marcus did not move from his place, but he focused all his attention on her. "Don't give me that bullshit about being ok because something is going on. I can see the wheels in your head turning very fast." He had known her for quite some time. He had learned a few of her little quirks.

He noticed the way she looked away from his stare. Her face suddenly changed, indicating that her mind was working overtime on something weighing heavily on her.

"I am just feeling, I don't know." She wished she could easily explain what she was going through. It made Jacky pause and stay quiet for a while.

She was indeed acting like a New York brat. It was not her intention, but this wedding was finally getting to her. But it was not right to take it on Antonette, who was only doing her job.

She could only think of one thing that might be causing her to be like this. The uncertainty of her friendship with her friend was hanging on the balance. "I am afraid that I am losing her." She finally admitted to Marcus what was troubling her.

She was not thinking straight as her anxiety increased. Marrying Alex meant the possibility of losing her friend eventually. But what about her. She would finally be alone again.

"Hey, don't be like that. We are not losing our friends. On the other hand, we are gaining another." Marcus could sympathize with what Jacky was going through.

He also felt the same way, at some point when he first heard that Alex was getting serious with his relationship with Dani. But in time, he had learned to realize that he had nothing to fear.

"I guess you are right." She finally acknowledged that she could not monopolize Dani for herself anymore. On the contrary, she would probably see less and less of her outside the office.

But Marcus was also correct. It would not mean that their friendship would end just like that. They would always be sisters whether the red liquid in their veins did not share the same component.

"Let me take your mind off that grim thought. Why don't we work on your plans for the party? I am sure I can help." He suggested instead, hoping that would divert her mind to something else.

Although he would not know anything about a ladies' party, he figured it could not be that hard. He had battled in courtrooms and boardrooms. Planning a simple party should be a piece of cake.

She was surprised by the offer, unable to tell if he was serious or making fun of her. "Please, I am not your charity case." Jacky turned around, away from him.

She walked back to the main building to find the room assigned to her for the remainder of her stay. But she was not so lucky as Marcus continued to follow her behind.

"I am not. I am sure that I can be a big help. You just have to give me a chance." Marcus confidently stated as he quickened his pace and blocked her path. "Come on, I know my way around here."

He hoped he was convincing because he could use a few more of her company. From the moment he picked her up from her apartment, he had never felt so alive and happy.

He did not want that feeling to go away just yet. He would fight tooth and nail to keep that feeling a little bit more. But he would not force himself on Jacky if it was not wanted.

"I don't know." She stated. She had no choice but to stop in front of him before she bumped into him. She looked around the place and realized that she was not in her element. She was not back home, where she had many resources at her disposal.

Marcus was correct again. It would be easier if she had someone who would know how to move around this place. The palace was massive, and the rules were different.

She could use his experience and knowledge of this kingdom to perform her duties appropriately. She did not want to embarrass Dani because she acted foolishly as her maid of honor.

"I assure you that I will act honorably and no dirty business." He knew adding that would not guarantee her accepting his offer, but he had to try.

"Ok. As long as you promise that you will treat me to a decent pizza or burger later." She was hungry and tired. She could not take the barely-there food that the gourmet chefs kept preparing for them.

She needed real food.. The greasy and meaty ones.

Chapter 435 - Not King Material

They were on their way to dinner. It had been a long afternoon, and yet they were barely done with their commitments. Luckily, Antonette called it a day.

Soon, the couple would have time again for themselves to do as they pleased. But for now, Alex and Dani would have dinner at the palace with the duke and duchess.

They did not mind since both would love to have their company. Besides, after the ceremonies, it would be a while before they would see them again.

"By the way, have you heard from Mom and Dad?" She asked Alex, noticing their absence in the palace. She thought that he might have heard from them.

She was hoping there was as she looked at Alex expectantly as they continued to walk towards the massive dining hall. She did not want to worry, unnecessarily, if there was a valid explanation for it.

"Yeah, I forgot to tell you. But, Ethan called and informed me of a slight delay on their flight," Alex stated but immediately added when he saw her worried face. "They are fine. Don't worry. They will be here in the morning."

He did not supply any further explanation as to why her parents' flight was delayed. He was glad that he did not need to as they entered the room, diverting Dani's attention from him to his parents.

He did not want Dani to worry more about the case. She already had plenty of things to think about the wedding to include that on her plate.

He and Ethan had decided to keep the investigation between the two of them. Dani knew that the police were examining the matter, but not the extent of the entire situation.

"I hope that everything is to your satisfaction, Daniella," Ethan stated as they sat on the long dining table as the servers offered them some wine.

He could already foresee that this would be the grandest celebration in the palace since his own wedding with his lovely wife.

Although they hosted many parties for different occasions, nothing would compare to a union of two people in love with the full support of their influential families.

"Oh, it is more than what I expected. I am grateful for all you did to make it perfect, Katherine." Putting an appreciative smile on her face as she looked at Alex's mother before directing her gaze to the duke. "And thank you for all your support."

Despite her earlier reservations about the extravagant preparations, she still could not help but feel lucky to have a family who loved her enough to go through all this trouble.

Well, she had already considered the duke and duchess as her family since Alex proposed to her. Their fates were already sealed the day she accepted his ring.

"Well, you have to thank your mother too. Laura was amazing." Katherine could not take all the credit. Her friend had also contributed a lot to the preparation of this event.

She could not wait to see her again and show her what they had both accomplished. However, she heard that her flight would be delayed, so she had no choice but to defer her excitement for later.

"I guess I am just in time to congratulate the lucky couple. I meant the happy couple." A smug voice resonated in the room, making the occupants turn their heads to the source of the sound.

Unfortunately, the voice matched the arrogant man standing by the entrance. An unexpected guest had arrived, but an unwanted one.

"Prince Edward, it is nice to see you." As host, Duke Fred was the first to stand up and greet the prince.

He was not informed that the prince would be joining them. It was supposed to be a family affair. But if he analyzed the situation, he would conclude that the prince invited himself to the occasion.

"Will you care to join us for dinner?" The duchess offered, knowing that was the gracious thing to do.

She could not simply ignore his presence and be rude. Edward was still part of the family, even if the prince did not act as if he treated them as one.

"I love to." Edward smiled at Katherine, accepting her invitation. Obviously, he did not care if he intruded on a private event.

He walked further into the room, approaching the people who were already seated, ready to have their meal.

"Edward, when did you get back?" Alex asked, not expecting to see him this soon. He could not help but look at him suspiciously.

Yesterday, when he checked on his whereabouts, his cousin was still back in New York. He was too busy all day that he had not checked on his men yet. He bet that the prince's return would be the first thing they would report to him.

Edward was one of their suspect in their ongoing investigation. He was being tailed by his men, checking his activities and associations. After his alliance with Nick, he could not discount him from the people who wanted to hurt him and Dani.

"Just an hour ago." He stated before shifting his eyes to the bride-to-be. "It is nice to see such a lovely bride." He walked closer to her seat and held his hand to her.

Out of courtesy, Dani would have no choice but to accept his hand, letting the prince plant a kiss on her knuckles. But instead of moving away, he decided to pull out the chair and sit beside her.

"Thanks," Dani answered through her teeth, not liking the way he was staring at her.

She never trusted Edward after she learned of all his dirty antics. He might become the king in the future, but she believed he did not deserve the trust and loyalty of his people.

After Alex gave him a chance to change his ways, he threw his help outside the window. Then, he conspired with one of the most despicable men she ever knew against Alex.

He was simply a detestable human being who did not deserve such an honor. She could understand the plight of the Council when they chose Alex over him.

Edward was simply not King material.

Chapter 436 - Banned Territories

She grabbed the bottle of wine from the welcome package that was left on a side table inside her bedroom. "This is nice." She uttered to herself, examining the expensive bottle in her hands.

She wanted to see her friend, but she was informed that it was impossible because Dani had a prior engagement. She was a bit disappointed, yet she understood her friend's situation.

After a meeting with another program coordinator, Marcus and Jacky decided to go their separate ways. She had declined the dinner buffet prepared for the guest at the garden, opting to stay in her room for the night.

She was tired, frustrated, and not in the mood to mingle. She would be no good company to anyone who would bump into her.? Not that she was expecting to see her type of crowd.

"So, let me see what we have here." She walked further inside the room, scanning the immense space. It was a different room from the one she occupied the last time she was here.

It was actually enormous and more extravagant than the previous one she had before. The design focused on the femininity of the room.

It was something she would approve of, especially the girly colorful decorations. It suited her personality and made the room quite lovely and lively.

"What can I do to pass the time?" She thought, dropping down on the sofa, pouring the wine in a glass.

She could use the reddish liquid to relax her muscles, calm her nerves and hopefully give her a sound sleep. As of now, she was not sure what was making her more agitated.

She leaned her tired body on the back of the cushion, putting her feet up on the coffee table. After taking a sip, she let her eyes wander around the room until it ended up on the ceiling.

She was staring at the beautiful architecture and the colorful arts, but it could have been a blank wall. She would never have noticed any of it as her mind flew away somewhere else.

Was it the wedding, or was it the thought of seeing Lance again causing her restlessness? Then, another thought nagged at her.

Could there be another reason for her internal turmoil?

"This is insane." She stopped herself from letting her mind go to her unwanted reflections of the past or her recent past.

She drank the remaining wine in her glass and refilled it again with a next half full. Then, she took the glass of wine, walking past the living room into the open balcony.

As soon as she stepped outside the doors, she already sensed the calming effect of the air. The night had already seized hold of the light outside, allowing the darkness to take over.

Only in this kind of scenario did she find the beauty behind the shadows. A moment like this showed her that darkness could be exciting and intriguing, giving the vibe of mystery and enchantment.

But before she could drink half of the content of her glass, a knock on her room surprised her. It was late, and she was not expecting anyone to drop by.

"Who is it?" She shouted as soon as she stood in front of the door. Still, she did not attempt to open the door, waiting for the other person to answer.

"It is me, Marcus." The man said behind the door.

But hearing his voice and confirming with his name did little to assure her that she should open the door. On the contrary, it only increased her anxiety to see him again.

Suddenly the thought that she had been avoiding earlier came rushing at the forefront of her mind. She did not want to go to dinner without the assurance that Dani would be there was a lie.

It would seem that Dani's absence at the dinner did not count much to her. The thing that actually mattered was seeing him present in the gathering.

"Are you going to open the door, or are you just going to let me rot out here all night?" Marcus asked with a slight plea in his voice.

He had been debating whether to go back to his room or proceed as planned. The plan was to go to Jacky's room and knock on her door.

It all sounded so simple in his head, but it was more difficult than he had thought when he stood outside her door. His hand poised in front of him but could not bang his fist on the wooden door.

But finally, after several options, he found the courage to do what he had to do. Then he found himself face to face with the woman who had him twisted in a knot when she opened the door.

"What do you want?" Jacky asked, raising her eyebrows at him, daring him to answer.

She was beginning to think that his presence in front of her was becoming less and less a coincidence. It was as if some of their encounters were deliberate.

But it could be her paranoia acting out, making her doubt his intentions. She found it unbelievable that he had a change of heart and suddenly grown a heart.

"I thought that we might grab dinner together. Not here, but I know a place not far from here." He quickly amended his offer, seeing that she was about to decline. "I think I still owe you a pizza or a burger."

He reminded her of their arrangement earlier. He thought it was a perfect excuse to see her and spend time with her. He now understood what Alex had gone through after meeting Dani.

It felt like Jacky was his opium that he could not get enough of. He craved for her the more she moved farther away from him. But he could do nothing but wait for crumbs to fall to satiate his hunger.

"I am not hungry like I told them." Referring to the organizers who invited her to join them at the party.

"But I think your stomach begs to disagree." He stated, trying to catch her with her bluff. He pretended to hear her intestine make a guttural sound due to a lack of food. "Besides, you should not be drinking with an empty stomach."

Marcus did not actually hear anything coming from Jacky. But he could sense that she was already hungry because she had barely eaten anything the entire day.

"My stomach is not making a sound just like you are implying, but a pizza sounds good." She suddenly realized that her stomach was almost empty.

Maybe it would not be that bad to go get a pizza with him compared to going to the garden with all those stuffy guests.

She believed she just needed to be extra careful not to fall again for his charms.

"Shall we go?" He quickly offered before she changed her mind, which she would likely do if she came to her senses.

"Fine. Just let me grab my bag." Warning bells rang in her head, but she was ignoring it.

But seeing him, his handsome face, his impeccable body, and his boyish charms, she knew it would never be easy.. As much as she tried to control herself, her mind finally went straight to banned territories.

Chapter 437 - Wild Guess

Dinner had been full of strain since Edward joined them. Each one was on alert, knowing that none of them could trust Edward's presence.

No one was sure if his best wishes were purely in good faith. But, to be honest, the couples on the table doubted any of his good-boy acts.

"I just talked to your Mom. Their flight would be later. I can't wait to see her and show her all the things we have worked hard to accomplish." Katherine proudly and excitedly shared with Dani.

As a mother, she only wanted to give her only child the best life could offer. She knew Laura also felt the same way. It was the reason they had bonded so quickly.

"I am sure that you have done an incredible job based on what I have seen so far. I am sure that the wedding will be spectacular." Dani truly believed what she said.

She could not find any fault in the way it was being handled, except for the fact that it was her wedding. She actually found everything to be exceptional.

It was the kind of matrimonial celebration she wished for when she was young and immature. Well, not exactly the same, but almost in the same category of her dream wedding.

"Just tell me if you have any further requests. I will try to make it happen. This is your wedding, and I want you to have the best one." Katherine would do anything to fulfill all the bride's wishes.

"I think you have already done more than enough, Katherine. I can't ask for more." Dani was grateful to have a dependable and adorable future mother-in-law.

She felt so lucky to become a part of this family soon. Not because they had royal blood, but because they had golden hearts.

Besides discussing the wedding and slightly a current situation in the kingdom, which was common knowledge, their tongues were tied.

They could not share anything that could compromise their issues and plans within the family, not in front of Edward. They just could not trust him even though he was family.

"If you need any assistance, don't hesitate to ask. My father and I will always be happy to help. We are, after all, a family." Edward offered, knowing quite well that they were not buying his honorable act.

He had heard that they had opened an investigation about Dani's accident. He did not doubt that his name would end up on the top of the list as one of their suspects.

It was indeed the first question coming out of his father's mouth when he arrived at the palace. If his father thought about it, the entire Council might be under the same impression.

"We will take note of that, Edward. Thank you." Katherine answered, still hoping that the offer was genuine and came from his heart.

She still believed in the goodness of people. She remembered the Queen, Edward's mother, who had been a good friend of hers. She knew that if she saw her son now, she would be crawling out of her grave to put some sense to him.

If she had lived long enough to guide his son to a better path, Edward might have grown up to be a better man. Probably a person that would be worthy of the throne.

"Well, it had been a pleasant dinner, and the evening is far from over. I think you, young kids, should make the most of it." Fred suggested, referring to the young couple. Finally, wrapping up the night.

He was happy to see that his son had finally figured out what he wanted in his life. In comparison to most young people, nowadays, still lost with their ambitions and looking for a direction.

He could not help but glance at his young nephew, who still had not learned his real value to the kingdom or his family. If only he would trust them that they were not conniving against him, then maybe someday, he would be sitting comfortably on the throne.

"Dinner is fabulous as always, Mom." Alex complimented his mother's handiwork. "But, I think I will take you up on your suggestion, Dad."

He had enjoyed the company of his parents, and he would have loved to stay for more. But, having Edward around prevented that from happening.

"Thanks again for this evening and for your warm welcome." Dani addressed the older couple with a bright smile.

"You are now part of our family. It is time that you call us Mom and Dad." Katherine insisted as she looked at her with a motherly love.

Dani recognized the reflection on Katherine's eyes. She remembered how her Mom would look at her when she was proud of her.

"Ok. Mom and Dad." She indulged their wishes by repeating the words. It did feel good to let the letters roll out of her tongue. It felt so natural.

She stood up with Alex's assistance and finally said goodbye to the older couple and the other guest. They were the first to leave the room, hoping to make an escape from Edward's company.

But Edward also followed suit, excusing himself for something else he had to do. He caught up with them outside the dining room and in the hallway on their way to the main room.

"By the way, it is nice to see that you are ok. I heard about the accident." Edward turned his head, looking directly at Dani on his side as he walked beside her with Alex on her other side.

"Thanks," Dani replied back, unable to think of any other snide remark to his statement.

She could sense that Edward was up to no good, but she had nothing to support that claim. It was different to express her thoughts on another man's face, but to say it in front of a royal prince was a different story.

That was treason, punishable under the king's judgment. She was not afraid to voice out her thoughts, but only if she had something to back it up.. At the moment, all she had was speculation, just a wild guess.

Chapter 438 - Moving Target With A Large X

After hearing Edward refer to the accident, something inside of him clicked. Alex abruptly charged into Edward's direction in a swift move, blocking his path, making him suddenly stop.

On the other hand, Dani did not expect what Alex did. She was surprised by the action. She did not know what was going through Alex's mind as if he was declaring war.

Then, after a glaring battle where no one seemed to want to lose. It was Edward who first broke the silence. "What seems to be the problem, my dear cousin?" He asked with a crooked grin but still keeping his eyes focused on him.

Alex maintained an impassive face as he continued to keep his eyes also fixed on the other man. He wanted to stay calm, but he could feel his blood boiling.

He just had enough of his cousin's tricks. He wanted to believe that he had nothing to do with this accident but past experience indicated otherwise.

"I hope if you heard any kind of information about the accident. You would share it with me immediately," Alex spoke up with a tight lip as he studied his cousin's reaction.

If it was not Edward, another one of his suspects was his ally, Nick. But he could not ignore the possibility that they might be working together on this too.

It was not beyond Edward's capability to resort to his dirty tactics. If paired with a sinister man like Nick, Edward might be more than capable of doing horrendous things.

"Are you saying that you suspected foul play?" Edward acted stunned with what he heard.

Although he already knew all about the ongoing investigation of the police. It did not mean that he could not play dumb in front of his cousin.

Not that it would throw him off the scent away from him and divert his attention elsewhere. He still did not like to confirm or deny any participation in the incident.

"Yes, the police suspected that something was off," Alex explained, not wanting to elaborate more.

If his cousin was involved or the mastermind behind it, he did not want to tip him off about the details of the case. He preferred to catch him with his lies.

"Of course, you could count on me. Do you have any suspects or evidence on the case?" Edward asked, seeming to be thinking deeply of what Alex said.

He was actually enjoying the haunted look in his cousin's eyes. It was clear that he was on a witch hunt for the culprit. It was evident he was eyeing him to spill the bean.

A dark shadow passed through his vision, clouding his judgment. He was like a bull with a red flag waving in front of him. He could not stop himself from charging and going for the kill.

"If I found out that you had a part in what happened to Dani, I will forget that we are a family. I will personally come after you." Alex said in a barely controlled temper, grabbing his cousin by the neck of his dress shirt.

He knew he should never have said that, but there was something in his eyes. He could not stop thinking that he might have something to do with it, one way or another.

"That sounded like a threat," Edward grabbed Alex's hands that were still gripping him tight, tapping him gently. "I think it is time to let me go. I am still your prince."

In a fistfight, he knew he was no match with Alex. Maybe if he was lucky, he could land a few damaging blows on his face and body.

On the other hand, he would be suffering a broken nose and some broken ribs. He would even probably end up in a hospital. Well, that did not sound fair. So, he always resorted to power.

"That is not a threat but a pledge." Alex was not about to back down from him whether he was the prince in line to the throne or even if he was the king. "You know me, I never renege on a promise."

He was never afraid of him or his father. To him, their titles did not excuse them from doing something wrong. It did not give them the license to do whatever they wanted.

On the other hand, their position should always put them accountable for their actions. It should make them realize that they had a higher moral standard to follow since they were the ones people looked up to.

"Hey, stop it, you two." Dani tried to separate the two from the hold they had of each other. "I think this is just a misunderstanding." She continued, prying them away from each other's throats.

Dani heard everything, but it was hardly any news to her. She had already gathered the part about the police investigation. She concluded that her father and Alex had included Edward and Nick on the list of responsible for her accident.

"Fine." Edward abruptly let go of his hand, waving them in the air as surrender. "Since I understand that emotions run high on occasions like this, I will let this one slide." Edward tapped Alex on the shoulder, his expression clearly mocking him.

He was fascinated with the way his cousin was losing control. It was not like Alex to get his emotion get away from him. All because of this woman.

"Ok." Alex finally let go of him, but he did not apologize for his action. He only did it because of Dani, who seemed alarmed by the situation.

If not for her, he would have beaten Edward to submission until he confessed all his crimes. It might not be his upbringing and training, but he was willing to do it for the safety of his future wife.

He was willing to set an example to whoever would think that they could use Dani against him. The first time he had learned of her accident, he already figured that he and Dani had a target on their backs.

"Don't worry, my cousin. I won't use this incident against you, although I can have your head on a plate." Edward liked to exaggerate matters as if he still lived in medieval times.

But he continued in his statement when Alex did not attempt to respond to his words. "I will even help you find the culprit." He placed his hands inside his pants pockets, bowed to Dani, and walked ahead of them, leaving the two behind.

Alex decided not to dignify what he said with a response. Edward was all bark but no bite when it came to his powers in the palace. He did not even understand his position and responsibility as the heir prince.

"Are you ok?" Finally, Dani's voice broke through his thoughts.

If only all his enemies knew that the only way to get to him was through her, then her life would be in constant danger.

"I'm good. I am sorry about that. I should never have lost my temper." This time, Alex apologized to her for his inappropriate behavior. But, his eyes still glanced at the retrieving back of his known adversary.

But he believed he should have done more. He was afraid he only put a mark on Dani's back by not acting on instinct.. Dani was now a moving target with a large X on her back.

Chapter 439 - Once A Cheater, Always A Cheater

The food and wine were fine, but the company was questionable. That was what it felt like as Jacky sat across from Marcus in a classy restaurant not far from the palace.

At least she only had to deal with him and not an entire crowd. She kept telling herself as she listened to his idle chat about some uninteresting business transaction.

"It sounds like you did a great job in closing the deal." She stated, unsure if her statement even fitted the situation. She just knew she had to say something from the way he was waiting for a response.

In truth, she was barely listening to him, only catching a few bits and pieces of the story. Her eyes were more focused on the way his lips moved, distracting her from the topic of conversation.

She kept trying to look away, directing her gaze to her food or the other diners around them. However, at some point, her eyes were magnetized as it returned its attention to admire those lips, those eyes, and that body she knew so well.

"I hope so." He answered, a bit confused with her answer. He did detect that she was a bit distracted as her eyes kept wandering around.

He did feel frustrated, debating whether to charm her back to his arms or to bore her to death until she decided to call it a night. It would seem that he chose the latter.

But he did notice, once in a while, how she would look at him. It was as if she was devouring him with her eyes. He could see the reflection of his own hunger as if he was looking at a mirror.

"Anyway, it had been a tiring day. I think it is time that we get back to the palace." She suggested, deciding she had enough of torturing herself by sitting across from him and not being able to touch him.

It appeared that she was not over him as she initially thought. Or maybe she was just feeling lonely. Whatever her reason for feeling this way, she did not plan to entertain acting on it.

She would shove the thought way beyond her consciousness. She would bury the feeling in the deepest recesses of her heart. In her opinion, he just did not deserve to earn her trust again.

"Sure." He knew that somehow he did mess up. He could see it in the way she looked at him. As if she had made a decision. It was the same look she gave him when she ended what was between them.

He could not blame her for coming up with the same conclusion. He had hurt her, and he could not assure her that it would never happen again. He never believed he deserved a second chance.

He was just about to leave her by the palace entrance when they bumped into someone who was on his way out. He suddenly stood his ground beside her, deciding not to go just yet.

"Lance?" She was surprised to see him at this late of the hour. But then again, she might not be the reason why he was here. It was a mere coincidence that they had bumped into each other.

But as fate would have it, she still saw another person who she wished to avoid today. Maybe it was just not her lucky day. But when was she lucky, anyway.

"Jacky, I have been searching for you. I came as soon as I heard that you had arrived." Lance greeted her, pulling her into a hug.

He had agreed to remain friends with her and keep in touch despite what happened to their failed love affair. Or the lack of enough love in their relationship.

He had dropped some papers for the Duke to sign. So, he figured to see her while he was already on the premises. He would have loved to catch up with her.

"I was out." Jacky simply explained to him without adding any details. She slightly pulled away from his embrace, but he never completely let go of her as he continued to hold on to her hand this time.

She did not try to snatch her hands away from him, finding a bit of comfort in his touch. She had always been so comfortable around him that she never needed to pretend to be anything else.

She was indeed happy to see a familiar and friendly face in this seemingly alien world. She welcomed Lance's presence like it was the only natural thing to do under the circumstances.

"I gathered that." Lance retorted back, finally acknowledging the other man at her side. "Marcus, it is nice to see you." He seemed to be brooding, standing quietly on her other side.

He wondered if he had interrupted a date or something more. Judging from their different reactions, maybe not. But then again, he might be mistaken.

Although, he would not be surprised if the two rekindled their love affair. It had been quite transparent to him that what Marcus and Jacky had was truly special.

He felt that it was probably one of the reasons he could not fully commit himself to Jacky. Because he could see that she was still holding back. She was still stuck in the past and could not let go.

"Lance, good to see you too." Marcus could not help but feel the slight pang of jealousy at how the two greeted each other. He could sense the closeness that the two shared.

He had heard rumors that they went out, but he never confirmed if they were in a relationship. He was not even aware if they were currently seeing each other.

If they were, and then she would not have gone to dinner with him. But still, that did not answer the question. Observing them under subtle scrutiny, they did appear to be very close.

"I hope I am interrupting with..." Lance was about to add your date, but Jacky stopped him by replying quickly.

"Not at all. Besides, we only went out for dinner to discuss the preparations." She said, denying that it was dinner between two people in a relationship and immediately correcting his presumption.

She could guess that he assumed she went on a date with Marcus. But she would not consider this anything resembling that. It was just a friendly dinner and nothing more.

"You are not interrupting at all." He also interjected upon hearing her response.

He could not blame her for how she reacted. It was clear that he was an unwanted character in this scenario. He was only interfering with the rest of their night.

"In fact, I think it is time for me to leave. It had been a delightful evening." Marcus nodded in Jacky's direction before turning to Lance. "She is all yours." Saying it as if he meant it.

Marcus turned around with a plastered smile on his face, not waiting for Jacky's response anymore. He continued to walk back to his car, which was still parked in the driveway.

He did not want to look back, afraid to see what he would witness between the two. Until now, he was not ready to let Jacky go.

He still hoped against hope that he would find a way to win her back to his arms. That by some miracle.

But he had to learn to forgive himself so he could finally forget about her. He could not keep hoping that Jacky would be better off with him. Because he could never guarantee that.

"She is all yours." The word kept repeating like a broken record in his head. "What was that?" He held his head in the palm of his hands as he remained seated inside the car, lent to him by Alex.

After a few seconds, he started the car and drove away, with no particular direction. All he knew was that he had to get away. He had to clear his mind.

But he believed that he had done the right thing. He never had a chance with Jacky, especially when there was a better man than him, like Lance.

Lance was a true gentleman and a genuine prince. Unlike him, a douche bag with a long list of bad records of charming women into bed. "She was better off with him." He kept convincing himself.

He believed despite his promises to change for the better, there would always be that possibility that he would revert back to his usual foolish behavior. He was a lost cause.

Like a leopard could not change its spots, he, too, could never change his essential nature.. He was afraid that once a cheater, always a cheater.

Chapter 440 - Private Servant And Loyal Protector

The next day had been more eventful than the previous one. The day started with brunch, where all the guests were invited. At least those who were already present.

Many of the other guests were still scheduled to arrive later or soon. But the couple was glad that those who mattered were already sitting beside them at the breakfast table.

"I am so glad that you are finally here. I tried to see you yesterday, but Antonette would not let me see you." Jacky complained to her friend, who sat right beside her on the round table.

As her best friend and maid of honor, Antonette gave Jacky several tasks that she had to do before and during the ceremonies. A tradition that she had to do for the bride.

But knowing herself, she would be incorporating her own tradition and style into this. She would not lay back and allow Antonette to get all the fun. She was not afraid to spice this up.

"I am sorry about that. But don't worry, we will have some more time to bond later." Dani assured her friend, knowing she was as excited about the wedding. Maybe even more.

She had been dreaming for the two of them that they both find the right man. A man who would fall head over heels in love with them. Then, they would be the luckiest and happiest women alive.

She could feel her genuine happiness for her. She could only hope that Jacky would also find her knight who would take her to her happy ever after. Because for her, Jacky deserved it more than her.

"I am just so happy for you. Your dream is finally coming true." Jacky told her, beaming with happiness for her. "Well, not this wedding, but you are marrying the man of your dreams."

She could not stop the slight sob that escaped her mouth. She could feel the tears brimming in her eyelids, just thinking of her friend walking down the aisle in a few days towards the man that she would share the rest of her life with.

She held them back, not letting the tears of joy spoil the evening. It was time to rejoice and be merry. It was a celebration of two hearts uniting into one very soon.

"I am happy, too." She told her friend, looking at her fiancé, who sat across the other side of the table with Marcus on his other side.

Then, on the other side of the table were their parents, who were busy conversing with each other. Her parents arrived early that morning and were more than happy to join them for this late breakfast.

On the other tables were the other guests, who would join them through the entire ceremony. Some were families, friends, business associates, and influential connections.

Who said that weddings were family affairs? They did not know what they were talking about as Dani observed their guests. Many successful business transactions happened during these occasions.

Unfortunately, hers was no exception.

"Do you want to get out of here?" Someone suddenly whispered in her ears.

Dani was preoccupied talking with one of the guests, while Jacky was whisked away by Antonette to do something again. A familiar voice slightly startled her by his sudden presence at her back.

"Can you excuse me for a second?" She told the lady she was talking to.

She allowed him to drag her wherever he had planned to take her. Enjoying the thrill of running away, ditching the stuffy event for something fun.

The only problem was, she left Jacky to fend for herself again. But she guessed her friend would understand. She was the one who encouraged her to take a chance with this man.

"Where are we going, Alex?" She asked when they were safely outside the massive structure, ducking behind the big trees and threading the grassy lawn.

She figured they were going on an adventure. However, she feared she was not appropriately dressed for it as her pointed heels kept sticking in the muddy surface.

She did not mind ruining the shoes, but she was afraid to break her ankle. "Wait." She pulled her hand out of his grip when he did not respond to her question.

"It is a surprise. I promise you will like it more than talking about our history." He had been watching her the entire morning, enduring the lectures about their past.

He had admired her dedication to learning about his culture and tradition. But, he could also detect the boredom in her eyes. There was a time for those life lessons but not today.

He planned to save her from the tragedy of his past and show her the beauty of the future. Of course, it is a destiny that would only end in a happy ever after.

"What makes you think that I did not like talking about your history?" She dared him to challenge her. But one raise of his eyebrow was all it took for her resolve to crumble.

She could not deny that he was right. As much as she wanted to discover his heritage, it was not the time. She wanted to enjoy this day with her family and friends, not some scholar who wished to teach her their ways.

"Really, babe?" He finally asked, not at all, convinced that she enjoyed a minute of her conversation with the professor.

He had seen the excruciating pain she was in during the entire time that she was listening to the professor's discussion. He could have deceived the professor, or she chose to ignore it, but it did not fool him.

"Fine. I almost yawned when the professor reached the war between whatever, luckily you pulled me out of there just in time." Dani could not even remember which era the woman was talking about.

But she could not disgrace Alex by ignoring his heritage. She was indeed fascinated by it and would surely love to know more about it. One day, she would find time to study them.

"Anyway," Alex was about to say something when she stopped him again. She pulled him to a stop again, and this time, she removed her shoes and decided to walk barefoot.

This grassy lawn and the pebbled walkway were not designed for the modern era as far as she was concerned. She should have worn her sneakers if she had known about this plan.

"I could carry you instead if you like." He offered, finally realizing his mistake, noticing the discomfort of her shoes in their task ahead.

He positioned himself at her front, signaling her to jump on his back. "I can also carry you in a bridal style, whichever you will prefer." He offered as he waited for her to choose.

"Are we still far from our destination?" She was weighing her options, although the back ride seemed like fun.

"A bit further through those trees. I will suggest you get on. Walking will be painful for your feet." Alex recommended as he made a quick glance at her.

He could see that she was still contemplating her options. In truth, there was no other option. He was not allowing her to walk by her barefoot.

He would not allow anything to hurt her, not even him. So, if he had to carry her throughout this marriage to protect and keep her safe, he would do it without any hesitation.

He might become one of the most influential and powerful people in their lifetime.. A king who would sit one day on a throne, but he would never stop from being her private servant and loyal protector.