

Royal Contract 661

Chapter 661: The bounty on the head

"Do you think he would be cooperating with us this time?" Dani asked Ben, who was driving her to meet Alex later on.

After hearing what Tim said about Nick trying to get in touch with them and careful deliberation, Alex finally agreed with her that they should at least check what he had to say before completely shutting him off.

Maybe he had valuable information he could share with them. He might be a slimeball, a despicable man, but he still had information that had led them to some good leads. Maybe he had a few more things he was hiding from them, using it as his last card.

"I think he might have something, but he is becoming more desperate to use it. I think he believes that his life might be in danger." Ben answered her, quickly glancing at her in the rearview mirror.

Words on the street, there was already a price on his head. Rumor was spreading of someone offering a nice reward to whoever would be the first to put him down.

Tim's contact had not yet materialized a credible witness to confirm this allegation. For now, it was a rumor with no foundation, but they could not be too sure. It might be true.

"So, someone else wants his silence." Dani was not surprised by this. It was only natural for cases like this to be violent. She had seen worse.

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But she was hoping that she would be able to talk to him before the other party got to him. In this case, she believed it would probably be her brother who was behind this.

If her speculation was true, just like what Alex had told her before. She should expect the worse and think that her brother was the one running the show on the other end.

"I believe so." Ben had no plan to hide anything from her. After the ordeal she had gone through, he believed she was more resilient and strong-willed than any woman he had met before.

She could handle what else might be coming her way, especially if she knew what was happening around her. The more prepared she was, the better her chance of surviving what might come her way.

"Then, I guessed we should hurry before anyone else learns of our plans and stops us." She told her security, not wanting to waste any more of their time.

She sat quietly on the back of her seat as she contemplated the questions she wanted to ask the man that had caused so much trouble in her life.

Was she ready to face him again without losing her cool? After what he had done to her and her husband, she knew how traumatized she was.

She acted relaxed and collected but deep inside, she was shaking like a leaf every time she would think of that time they were in captivity.

"Are you sure you are ready to see him?" Ben asked. Although, he could already see the determination in her eyes.

It was his job to protect her from anything that might harm her. So, if there might be a slight chance that she was not ready for this, he would want to know so he would know how to act around her.

"I have no idea if I will ever be ready for this. But I know I have to do this." She was not going to pretend that she knew what she was doing.

But she would do this because it was necessary. She would face this fear because it was the only way she had to fight it. Fearing fear itself was not the way to recovery.

Facing whatever was gripping your heart and preventing you from breathing was the only way to beat it. She might fail on her first try, but she could always do it again until she found a way to control her fear and overcome it.

"At least you can be assured that Sir Alex would be there, together with Tim and me." Ben smiled at her through the small mirror, and she knew she felt better.

He was right, she thought. She had nothing to fear since all they had been doing all this time was protect her. Ben might have failed once, but it did not mean that he was not trying his best.

It was an unfortunate accident that she knew would never happen again. But she also came prepared. She took lessons about self-defense, realizing that she also needed some protection, at least a refresher course to jog her memory.

"Thanks again for everything, Ben," Dani knew that words would never be enough for what Ben and men like him were doing for people like her.

Many people with money and power disregarded what these men did for them because they thought they were paying them more than enough for their life and sacrifice.

But nobody could put a price on a man's head. They deserved more than that. Not even a criminal like Nick deserved to die because a man said so.

Now, she suddenly wondered if her father had something to do with the price on his head. She knew how much her father hated Nick after all he had done. Now, she could not help but think that he might be one of them who had put a bounty on his head.

"Are we still far?" She asked as she checked on her phone for any messages.

She had never been in a correction facility before. She did not usually handle criminal cases. Therefore, there was no need for her to go to such places.

She had seen what it looked like on the inside of a cell.

She assumed that it would not be easy to be locked inside for a long time. At least, she was basing it on the deposition cases she had worked on before.

"We are just a few minutes away." Ben looked at his watch before glancing again on her way. "But I had received word that Tim and Ben had already arrived. They would be waiting for us at the gates."

He could not see any problem at this point. Most of the security inside were allies. He was confident that everything would run smoothly, but he would still be vigilant for anything that might go wrong.

“Honestly, I can not wait for this to be over.” She smiled at Ben, who was not just her security anymore.

He was more than that. He was a friend and a brother like what Alex had told her. These men had risked their lives for them not because they were paying them but because they were their extended family.

As they neared the facility, she was surprised by the commotion at the gates. She was expecting it to be quiet with not much activity. But red lights and loud sirens were booming around them.

“Something is wrong?” Ben said as he stared at the commotion not far from them.

He quickly called his boss to verify the matter. He would not proceed if they deemed that the princess would be in danger. He would not take that risk.

“What?” Ben asked, talking rapidly on the phone.

She could partially hear what he was saying, but she had no idea what the other said on the other line. But from what she heard so far, she knew something was wrong. Now, her mind was back to the bounty on the head.

Chapter 662: Bang!

“What do you mean?” Nick shouted on the phone, unable to believe that his lawyer could not even get him to transfer to another facility.

He could already feel that his other inmates were staring at him as if they knew something he did not. He had managed to make friends with some. But in this place, you could never trust anybody.

They might seem friendly to him because they knew he had money, but once someone offered them more, they would turn their back on him. They might even be the ones who would stab him in the back.

“That is not acceptable.” He shouted again, finding all his lawyers incompetent. He still rotted in jail. Yet, he kept paying them an enormous amount of money for their retainers fee.

He was afraid that if he did not get out of this place soon. He might die in his bed as he slept or now as he walked back in the hallway towards his cell.

He slammed the phone into its place and walked back to the door where a guard was waiting for him to finish. He just used up his pass for the day. Now, he could not call anyone else.

“Aren’t there anyone else looking for me?” He asked, hoping that something else would make this day less gloomy.

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The man he ordered to contact his enemies said that the other party had already received his message. He just had to wait for the response.

But he hoped that they would come soon. He hoped they had come yesterday. He would have called them if he had their number. But he was left to wait until they came to respond to his heed.

They were his last chance to get out of this place. He would do anything and say anything as long as they would help him get out of this hellhole.

"No one is looking for you." The guard said as he opened the door to let him pass him. He felt the iron rod stuck into his back, poking him to speed up his movement.

"Come on, back to your cell. Hurry up." The man said impatiently. He slightly flinched from the impact, although it did not hurt that much. Still, it reminded him not to anger the guards.

"Ok. I am walking as fast as I can." He tried to widen his stride, making his feet move quicker.

He could see the other guards looking their way while the other inmates avoided getting their attention. Nobody wanted to mess with the guards. Because inside this cell, they were no match with them.

A guard had already beaten him before, and he had no plan for a repeat. But he could not run because that would also anger the guards. He just walked ahead of the guard, using a slightly quicker pace.

"Hey, Mister Travis." He heard a bulky man inside a cell he had not seen before. "You should hang out with us sometime." The man shouted at him as he continued to walk back to his cell.

He turned his head in his direction, examining his face for recognition, but he believed it was the first time he had seen him. He must be new inside, or he would have recognized his face.

He also quickly looked away, avoiding making any eye contact with the other prisoners. It was not wise to look at them directly into their eyes unless he was asking for trouble.

He was beginning to learn the rules inside a prison. He was not referring to the regulations set by the authorities but the laws of the inmates.

"You." A guard shouted, probably referring to the other man. "Keep your voice down." He heard the guard instruct, but he continued on his way without looking back.

There was something off about the man when he briefly glanced in his way. His eyes were sharpened as they stared at him. He seemed to be in deep thought.

He sensed something off about him as if he could not trust him. Not that he could trust anyone else around here. Still, he had to stay away from him until he figured out who he was.

"Hey, is that Travis?" Another guard shouted at their back. He asked the other guard, accompanying him back to his cell.

"Yes, why?" The guard at his back asked, making him curious why the other one was asking for him.

He wondered what he did now. Or, if finally, he had a new visitor who might bring him some good news. He was hopeful for the latter since he knew his time was running out.

The big boss might not have liked his response to his offer. But he could not take the entire fall for this. He might be guilty of some of it, but not everything was entirely his idea.

"The warden assigned him in the bathroom duty today. He wanted him to clean the west wing." The other guard walked towards him, looking at him from his head to his toes as if he was sizing him up.

He maintained his silence, not wanting to anger any of them. He had enough problems to deal with, learning that answering back would not help him with his situation.

"I still had a few things to do, so could you take him?" The guard who was behind him said.

Suddenly, he was walking away from his cell and turning into a hallway that would bring him to the designated location. He had learned that, despite his wealth, he could not avoid the disgusting chores inside this facility.

He had washed greasy dishes in the kitchen, helped in the laundry, and dug dirt in the garden. He was not surprised by this new task anymore. He could already imagine the nasty condition of the bathroom he would be cleaning.

"The warden needs this spotless." The guard pointed to him the cleaning materials already waiting for him on the other side of the dirty and stinky room.

It looked like the bathroom had not been cleaned for quite some time. But that was not unusual since this part of the prison was not frequented by the inmates.

"Yes, I will do my best." He even saluted the guard as he walked out of the room with his fingers pinching his nose.

He knew the guard would not stay far away, but he would be at a considerable distance, out of the reach of the stench coming from this room.

He could not even try to take a deep breath because it had smelled so bad. He quickly grabbed the bleach and soap, putting them in the pail with water.

"Big boss, if you think this would scare me, you are wrong." He mouthed in the empty room. His voice echoed and bounced through the walls.

He placed the sponge on the water, scrubbing the tiled walls, and making the suds drip down to the floor. He thought that should help with the smell as he let the cleaning detergent do its job.

He started whistling, not wanting the eerie silence to get to him. This silly task would not break him down. He was made tougher than this.

Bang!

Chapter 663: The end was near

Bang!

Something dropped to the floor behind him. It had made a big noise that reverberated around the room. He was slightly startled hearing the sudden loud noise.

He quickly turned around to see some of the cleaning materials scattered around the floor. Then, a man walked out of the shadows, showing his tall figure.

Judging from the smirk on his face, he was the cause of the commotion. He must have intentionally knocked off the bottles that sent them flying on the different areas of the floor.

“What do you want?” Nick recognized the man as the one who had called him earlier as he walked back to his cell. And he did not like his presence inside the small empty stall.

He dropped the sponge he was using back to the pale and kept his position away from the man. He wondered what he needed this time, but he could not help the slight fear that crept to his spine.

He did not like the way he was staring at him. He could see the evil gleam in his eyes as if he was planning something untoward toward him.

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“I heard that you are cleaning this place by yourself. I thought I might as well check if you need something.” The man who had not identified himself spoke up in the quiet room.

He walked further inside the room, letting his eyes roam the different cubicles in the room. It was like he was checking if anyone else was present with them.

“Well, I need someone to scrub those bowls.” He sarcastically answered the man, pointing to the cubicles he had just looked at a moment ago.

He straightened his back, standing tall, showing the man he was not afraid of him. He would not be easily intimidated by him if that was his purpose. He would not back down that easily.

“That certainly looks nasty.” The man responded as he briefly glanced inside the cubicle before returning his attention to him.

He scrunched his nose, appearing disgusted by the scene before him. Then he grabbed a detergent left on the counter and read the label.

“Yes, this entire place is nasty.” He never wavered his eyes away from his unknown company, watching his every move.

He was not entirely referring to the room or the facility. He was also directing his words to the people around him, particularly the man before him. He could see that he was up to something no good, and he should never allow his guard down.

One thing he had learned during his stay in this place, everybody wanted something. But that was not what bothered him. It was how they planned to get it.

He believed he was no different. Everybody in this joint would do anything for money, power, or freedom. With that knowledge, he knew his life might be in constant danger.

“Yeah, I agree with you with that one.” The man answered him as if he was trying to gain his trust.

However, he would not allow such words to fool him. He knew he had to be alert and careful around this man before he ended up lying on the tiles with pools of his blood covering the floor.

“If you came here to help, you can do those areas.” He pointed to the one that was on the other end. “If not, I would appreciate it if you would just leave.”

He would not let him anywhere near him, afraid that he would suddenly put a knife at his back. But he would still be vigilant if he planned to stay for long as his company.

He had no idea where the guard was. If he suddenly decided to attack him, he was not confident if he could defend himself with his size. But he would try his best since it was his life on the line.

"The warden did order me to come here, so I had no choice on the matter." The man said as he grabbed another set of pale but did not put soap or bleach on it. Instead, he slowly walked toward him.

He had this determined look on his expression that sent shivers through his entire body. His eyes were not blazing with fury but more of what predators used when they hunted their prey.

Somehow he knew it was his end when the man dropped the pale in front of him, slightly spilling its contents. Then, he finally pulled something out of his back, a sharp metallic object that sparkled when the light from the window hit its surface.

"Why are you doing this? Who ordered you to do this? Who are you working for?" He muttered his questions as he made his last stand.

He was not a fighter. He might look fit, but he had never fought any of his battles. He had his men fight for him. But now, he realized that his men were not here to defend him.

However, he still had his brain. He believed he could still come up with something. He was not ready to give up yet. He still had one more card he could use.

"It doesn't matter. In a few minutes, you would not need those answers." The man said, aiming the knife in front of him.

He could see that he was determined to kill him. He might have been sent here for that specific purpose, to end his life. He wondered who had ordered him. Was the warden included in the payroll?

"Whatever they were paying you, I will double it." He finally offered the man, knowing that money was the usual savior in this scene.

It was the only thing that could spare his life. If the man was greedy enough, he might still have a chance to survive this. But if not, he had no idea how he could dodge his attack.

He seemed to be skilled at killing people from the way he was holding his knife. Not that he would know much about knives. He never used one except on a few occasions in the kitchen.

If he only had a gun at his disposal, he would have shot him instantly, right between his eyes, without blinking. But all he had was a sponge and a pale of water with soap.

"Money?" The man gradually stopped in his tracks as if thinking about his offer. It slightly gave him hope.

If he could convince this man that sparing his life would be more lucrative for him, maybe he could still save his life.

"Yes, I will triple whatever they were paying you to kill me." He upgraded his offer, hoping that it should increase his chances of survival in his hand.

"And how do you propose to pay me?" The man asked, lowering his weapon on his thigh as he loomed closer. He thought the man seemed to be listening to reason.

“By arranging a transfer to your account or giving it to you, cash.” He quickly replied, seizing the chance to convince him.

“That is a tempting offer.” The big man moved one step closer, but before he realized what he had planned to do. He was too late.

The man moved swiftly, using the opportunity to strike him while his guard was down. He wanted to fight back, but there was nothing else he could do.

He grabbed his shoulders, holding on to this unknown man for support. He tilted his head, staring into the man’s eyes. He knew fear when he saw one. It reflected in his eyes.

He knew then that the end was near.

Chapter 664: Uncovered the truth

She still could not believe it. Her eyes wandered around the sterile room, staring at the clean white walls. The entire space was bright as lights illuminated everything around her.

She never wished for this. It was not what she wanted for a man like him despite his many wrongdoings. Her head finally tilted down, focusing on the bed before her.

Her eyes landed on the pure white sheet covering his body from head to toe. She heard what the doctors said. He was proclaimed dead on arrival. There was nothing they could do for him anymore.

“Are you ok?” A hand touched her shoulders, emitting warmth to her shivering skin.

The cold temperature of the room did not make her tremble, but the thought that he was finally gone had shaken her to the very core.

She turned her head at her back, staring into her husband’s eyes full of concern for her. She had no idea what he might be thinking, but she wanted to reassure him that she was ok by forcing a smile on her lips.

“I wanted him to pay for his sin, but not like this.” She nodded her head at the police officer handling the case. She wanted to see him one last time. “I was hoping that he would realize what he had done and repent for his sin.”

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The officer slowly lowered the white sheet down his chest, revealing his face to her. His complexion had turned white as blood stopped circulating in his body.

She still recognized him, remembering the man that she used to love. Yes, she admitted to loving this man before she learned how despicable he was. That was why it hurt so much when he betrayed her and used her for his interest.

“I am sorry about this, Dani,” Alex responded, wishing he could wipe away the sorrow on his wife’s face. “But, we don’t hold his fate in our hands.” That was the truth.

He wanted him dead. He believed that going to jail would never be enough punishment for all he had done. He also felt that a man like Nick would never change.

He would always find a way to manipulate the system. Once he got out, he would find a way to insert himself and start another havoc in their lives. In his opinion, whatever happened to Nick, he deserved it.

"I know you are right." She focused her attention one last time on his cold, lifeless face. It was the last time she would see him. Finally, she would bury him for good, together with her nightmares.

She never believed in the death penalty, hoping that even the worse criminals deserved a second chance. But what happened to Nick was worse than being electrocuted on a chair because he did not go through the due process.

Killing him in cold blood was a coward's way. He should have had the chance to defend himself, but from the report of the jail warden, he was found in an isolated place, lying on a pool of his blood, barely alive. There was no suspect.

"Shall we go?" Alex wrapped her in his arms, enveloping her cold body in his warmth. When she nodded her head, he pulled her away from the dead body of her ex-fiance.

After a few minutes, she was exiting the backdoor of the hospital, away from the media frenzy, wanting to get a scoop on the latest news.

"Do you think Dad had anything to do with this?" She asked once they were alone in the backseat of the car, on their way back home.

She could not help but think that her father might have something to do with his death. She knew that her father was not a murderer, but she wondered if he could do this because he wanted to protect her.

"No. I am sure that Ethan had nothing to do with this." Alex assured her.

They might have thought about it, even planned to have him executed. But they could not push through with it, considering what it would do to Dani if she ever found out.

"Then, it is probably my brother who did this." Concluding that he might have the motive for wanting Nick's silence.

Suddenly, fear crawled into her mind as she looked outside her window. If her brother was capable of such a criminal act, she wondered what else he could do to her and her loved ones.

"We don't know that, but we could not discount the possibility." Alex also had the same conclusion and came up with the same thing.

He wished that a different circumstance awaited Dani when she eventually learned about her brother's identity. He hoped that her brother was living somewhere far away from all of this.

But he could not disregard that he might be the one running the underground syndicate. He also wanted his wife prepared for the worse. Whoever her brother was. He might be the mastermind of all this crime.

"I think you should rest for the day," Alex suggested, seeing the toll the death of Nick had on her.

He pulled her closer to him, cradling her body against his as he comforted her. He was not jealous of the way she reacted to Nick's death.

He knew that whatever she felt for the man had been special during the time. But he had always been confident that what she felt for him was true love. There was no comparison.

“No, that is not what I need.” She hastily objected, believing that she was not that weak.

She might be affected by his death. Still, she had obligations to fulfill. That should not stop her from continuing her day. She asked her husband to drop her at her office, where she still had a few things to do.

She would deal with the rest of the issues when the police had finalized the reports. For now, she would concentrate on her job and do the things where she would be helpful.

“Shall I pick you up later?” He offered, not wanting her to be alone. It was the only thing he could do for her for now.

He would get to the bottom of this. He would not stop until he had uncovered the truth behind everything happening around them.

Chapter 665: Lonely soul

“I have an answer for you.” The man standing at his door announced without asking for permission to speak. He proceeded inside the room without waiting for an invitation.

He continued to walk inside, only stopping when he stood a foot away from the front of his desk. Then, he dropped a folder in front of him without saying another word.

His guest just smiled and took a seat on the available chair, full of confidence and satisfaction on his face. He thought that the man must have something good to be in this enthusiastic mood.

“That sounds great, Stockholm.” He said, dropping everything he was doing and concentrating his attention on the man before him, studying him under his peripheral vision.

He picked up the file from his table and waved it in front of him, confirming the authenticity of his work. When the man nodded, he opened the file and skimmed through it.

His eyes sharpened on the information written in the documents. He could not believe what he was reading from this discovery that his most trusted investigator had dug up.

“I worked day and night to get that information, Ethan.” He proudly stated. “It was not easy because your friend Joaquin had paid a lot of people to hide them.”

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He had to go through several of his contacts. It was not easy since his reference was way back years ago. Most people who might know the story had already died or moved away.

“How accurate is this information?” Ethan could not rely on hearsay or possibilities. He needed accurate information regarding the identity of his son.

He could feel his heart beating as the name registered in his mind. His name was familiar. He had heard that name before. However, he would have never guessed that his son could be him.

"It is one of my finest work." The detective proclaimed to his friend and most important client. For him, that was a masterpiece.

In his years in this business, he had never used as many favors to get this information. He had never worked this hard to solve this mystery in a short time.

But he did this because his dear friend needed his answer. Therefore, he would put his life and career on the line, standing by what he had reported in those documents.

"Thank you, Stockholm. As usual, you never failed me." Ethan would never doubt his word. If his friend said that this was the truth, he believed him.

There was no reason for him to question his honor or his skills in this business. He had always delivered a good quality of work. If he made a few mistakes, it was never intentional. But this one, he could see that he was confident about it.

"I think my services are no longer needed but do not hesitate to call me again if you need my help." Stockholm moved out of the chair and saluted his friend.

His friend would send his fee through the usual means. Sometimes, he declined his excessive payments, but he still sent them anyway. But he just repaid him with good service.

Ethan was wealthier anyway than he or anyone he knew. He could very well afford his rates. Still, he would always consider Ethan his friend, believing it went both ways.

"Oh, I never knew that we have company." Another voice came through the door, but he quickly recognized her as his wife.

She looked lovely as ever. But still, the toll of all the stress, all that was happening to them lately. It showed on the etched on her face.

He wished he could ease her worries. But for them to get through this, they had to face each one head-on without hesitation or fear. They could not keep hiding from the truth and running from the past.

"I am already leaving and going back to my vacation. But it was nice seeing that you are back on your feet, Ethan." Stockholm stood from his chair and shook his friend's hand.

Then, he turned to the lady that was walking toward them. "It was always lovely to see you, Laura." He kissed her warm hands before saying his farewell to the friendly couple.

It was time that he went back to his life and let them deal with their lives. He could only hope that the information he had provided them would help them fix their family and not tear it apart.

"Did he get the information that we needed?" Laura asked her husband as she stood in front of his seat and watched the retreating back of the private detective.

She knew that he was not just a friend of the family. She had always known that he had been helping her husband secretly, but she never usually meddled with their business.

This time, she knew she had to be a part of this situation. She could not sit in the corner and quietly watch on the sidelines. She had to actively participate if that was the only way to keep this family together.

"She had kept their identity well hidden. Joaquin also made sure to erase every evidence of their existence." Ethan began explaining to his wife what the report said.

"Then, how did Stockholm learn of his identity?" Laura quickly interjected, slightly confused with the situation.

She knew she should have waited for the rest of the story, but she was either too excited to know who the boy was or too frightened to discover his connection to them.

"Fortunately for us, he decided to use his mother's surname." He told his wife, moving the document in front of her.

He could see the confusion in her eyes. There was no recognition in them. Why would there be? She never had the opportunity to know these people.

But if she had learned who his son was, she might suddenly feel different. At this point, there was no reason to alarm her. He would deal with this on his own at this point.

"Do you recognize his name?" She asked, having no idea who was the man on the report. "Did Stockholm include where he is now?" She kept asking, hoping to find answers to her many questions.

If what they had been saying was true, she would like to know who this man was in their lives. Was he a threat to their peace, creating havoc in their lives? Or was he just another lonely soul, looking for answers just like them?

Chapter 666: Some secrets were better left unsaid

"Amelia. Glad I caught you." She cringed when she heard her father's voice calling to her, stopping her in her tracks when she was about to leave the house.

She had been avoiding him all day, but somehow, she still bumped into him on her way out of the door. She gradually turned around and faced him, not particularly happy to see him.

"I hope you finally change your mind," He abruptly said to her, using his commanding voice to intimidate her.

She knew that he would insist on his plans, but she was not interested. She only extended her stay because she had promised her friend that they would go out tonight.

"I am not marrying Lance, Dad." She said. "That is my final decision. I am leaving this place tomorrow." She voiced out explicitly her plan, not wanting her father to misinterpret or think otherwise.

She had loved Lance with all her heart ever since she could remember, but she was not forcing him into this marriage because their parents wanted them to extend their wealth and power. She would not be a pawn in their merger plans.

"I hope you will rethink your decision because I am only thinking of what is best for you," Leonardo told his daughter, letting his voice boom in the room, emphasizing his wish for this marriage to push through.

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He always believed that his daughter had been a spoiled brat, blaming his wife for indulging all her whims. She was rebellious and an ingrate to all he had done for her.

However, he thought this was her chance to show that she cared about this family and their legacy by marrying her childhood friend. Besides, he was doing her a favor by choosing someone she loved.

"I am sorry, Dad, but I need to leave." She moved closer to the door, finally ignoring her father, irritated by his assumption of knowing what she wanted and needed.

Growing up, she wished her father would give a damn about her life. She always hoped he would show interest in what she did, but that time was long gone. She had no use for it now.

She just wanted to be left alone to do what she wished with her life. She had to go away again. So she could get over her obsession with Lance. Hopefully, someday she would find the man for her that she deserved.

"By the way, I was looking for you earlier because I need to tell you that Thomas and Lance will be dining with us tomorrow night." His father continued to talk to her despite her walking away.

"I do wish you will join us before you leave. Lance, at least, deserves to see you before you disappear on us again." She heard her father say before she could exit the door.

She tried not to look back or stop because she already knew what her father was doing. He knew how much his emotional blackmail affected her. He knew using Lance would make her change her plans.

"Damn!" She mildly slapped both sides of her cheeks to wake her up from the reality that her father never cared about her. He never did and never will.

However, hearing that Lance would be expecting her for dinner made her think if she could abandon him without even saying goodbye.

Maybe seeing him one last time would finally give her the closure she needed instead of her just running away again from him like what she did last time.

She put her car in reverse and started her engine. She badly needed the drink that her friend offered her. Then, maybe in the morning, she could think more clearly.

"I thought you would never show up." Eida was already sitting at the table she had reserved for them.

She arrived a few minutes earlier than their schedule, but she did not mind waiting because she had a few things she had to deal with anyway.

She had been on her phone for the last ten minutes, dealing with an issue with one of her stories. But she was glad that her friend was here now. They could finally keep updated with their lives.

The other day had been a hectic schedule for her. Therefore, she asked her friend to meet her tonight instead.

"I am sorry." Amelia quickly apologized, knowing that she was a little late. "I was held up." She did not want to elaborate on her reason for it as she ordered her food and a glass of wine.

"How have you been?" She excitedly asked, wanting to forget her earlier conversation with her dad. Her friend offered a good distraction from her problems. "Are you dating someone?"

She would rather ask the questions instead of answering hers. Her friend could be nosy sometimes, but that was her job. Luckily, anything she told her did not end up in the news.

But tonight, she was in a dilemma whether to confide in her or keep it to herself. At the moment, she just wanted to hear what her friend was doing with her life and see what the rest of the night would bring.

"Easy with the questions." Eida raised her brows at her, seeing that her barriers were up. She could only guess that it had to do with her father. "What is going on with you?"

That was always her case. But she wondered about the childhood sweetheart that she used to tell her. Nothing about him had come up yet.

She never knew his name because she would rather keep it to herself, but she knew how much her friend liked him, enough to run away from her unrequited love.

"I am sorry. I am just curious about the recording that I heard. It seemed that it was so passionate, it could be something more." She teased her friend, trying to redirect her friend's attention back to her.

She could already see the reporter in her itching to ask her questions that were swirling in her mind. But she was not yet ready to answer them.

She believed that anything to do with Lance was something she should keep to herself. Some things were easy to share, but some secrets were better left unsaid.

Chapter 667: A reporter, not a romance novelist

She was glad that her friend was starting to be bold with her questions, but the timing was not right. Or the subject.

"As I said, it was a one-time thing." She dismissed the topic, not wanting to elaborate more.

She had been distracting herself with work all day, avoiding thinking about him or whatever happened to them. So far, it had worked until now that her friend had to bring it up again.

She admitted that it was one of the most passionate encounters she had the pleasure to experience, making it quite unforgettable. But she had to forget it, knowing that she had no plans of getting involved with the prince.

She also doubted that the prince would want anything to do with her. It was a night of passion but a mistake nevertheless. She would not dwell too much on it because it was a waste of her time. She believed the prince was probably regretting it by now.

"Besides, it was a mistake." She quickly added, seeing the curiosity in her friend's eyes. "He was a client and a story. I should not have involved myself in that way."

Her friend knew how she was a stickler for her rules. It was the first time she had broken that rule, and she had no plan to do it again. She should never have slept with a person she was doing a story on. That was just unprofessional.

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"Precisely." Her friend shrieked loudly, making some of the diners look in their direction. "He was a client." She toned down her voice, realizing the attention she was getting. "He must be special for you to break your most sacred rule." She kept giggling.

Eida suddenly regretted saying too much, seeing that her friend was putting two and two and arriving at ten. Her friend's eyes lit up like a firework when she thought she had come up with the answer that would solve all their problems.

"Nope. Don't go there." She warned her friend, thinking that she was jumping to a conclusion. "He is nothing but a story. I was horny, and he provided the relief to my itch."

It sounded vulgar even to her ears, but she had to say it so that her friend would stop harassing her about him. That was the last thing she wanted to do. To talk about a man that she was trying to forget.

Although, it would be hard since she was still trying hard to finish the story. And she had barely started doing her piece. Then, she wondered if she should still do the live interview. But that would be too complicated.

"I doubt that. You could have any guy in this bar if you are only looking for someone to scratch your itch." Amelia stared at her friend, waiting for her reaction.

It had been a while since she had talked to her friend like this. But she knew she could still remember some of her telltale signs if she was lying to her.

In truth, Eida was just the second person she could talk to about her personal life. She could talk about many things, but anything that related to her personal feelings, she rather bottled it up.

"I was busy the last couple of months that I did not have time to look for anyone else." Eida reasoned, but even she could not find the logic in that.

She hated to admit it, but the more Amelia questioned her about him, the more she doubted her feelings. Could she be starting to like this man?

"You know what I think. You are just scared to face the truth that you might be evolving." She still told her without waiting for her to shut her down. "That you are starting to crave for a man's attention. You might be finally ready to commit to a relationship."

"You are one to talk about being scared. Until now, you could not even admit to the man you loved all your life that you are in love with him." Eida could not stop the words from spilling out her mouth.

Honestly, her friend's words jabbed at her that she felt like retaliating. She could feel that her words might have some truth to them. She hated admitting it. Instead, she had taken a thrust at her friend to stop her from going at her again.

"I guess you are right." Amelia could not deny it. She had been avoiding it for far too long, but her friend was correct. Suddenly, she realized that her friend knew most of her secrets.

The irony of her situation was that she liked confiding in a person whose profession was to snoop around other people's lives. Then report about it.

To others, they are the most untrustful people on the face of the planet. It was what her father told her about her friend when he learned that she went out with her. But they were wrong about her.

"I am sorry about that. I did not want to hurt your feelings." Eida also realized her mistake.

She had taken out her denial and frustration on her friend and made her feel bad about it. This reunion was supposed to catch up with each other and not keep secrets.

If she needed a friend, here was a perfect one who could help her with what she was going through. She unexpectedly started thinking of confiding in her.

"Honestly, you are right." Eida drank the remaining wine in her glass, believing she needed it now. "I think he is more than just a client or a hookup."

She found herself talking about him and how she started liking him. The more she got to know his character, the more she obsessed with him. But she still refused to mention his name.

"You are also right." Amelia sipped on her wine, finally admitting that it was time to close that portion of her life. "I think I should also talk to him tomorrow night and tell him how I feel."

If her prince charming even had an inch of love for her. Maybe she should consider agreeing with this marriage. At least see if it could turn into something more.

However, if Lance told her, he would never love her, not even one bit. Then, she should move on and go on with her life without him.

"I truly love him. Now, our parents want us to get married." She suddenly found it easier to confide her dilemma to her friend. "But I am not sure if he loves me too. He admitted he was dating someone else."

Voicing out her lips, what was in her head suddenly felt like a ton of bricks just landed on her heart. It felt heavy and painful, hearing that the man she loved might be in love with someone else.

"Maybe he is just afraid to admit that he loves you too since you have been gone, considering it a long time. So, he might be protecting his heart." Eida was unsure where those words came from since she was not good with a relationship.

However, she did not like how her friend looked so depressed about her situation. She would do anything to help her friend, even if she had to act as a matchmaker for them.

Her friend deserved to have the man she loved because she was a good person. Any man would be lucky to have her as a wife compared to her, who had no idea about love.

"Are you sure about that?" Amelia never considered it that way, never thought that Lance might like her but was afraid to get hurt because she was always away.

Could her friend be right about this? Suddenly, hope grew in her heart as the thought that Lance might also love her. Or at least, he wanted to marry her became a possibility. She immediately turned to her friend, happy that she confided her secret to her.

"I think I might know some few things about men." She boasted with her friend, but her knowledge was limited to what they could do in her bed. But her friend did not need to know about that.

"So, who again is this man?" She asked. Maybe she could help, but she was not making any promises. She was a reporter, not a romance novelist.

Chapter 668: Playing a tug of war

"Take as much time as you need." The doctor in charge of his autopsy waited for him to finish his visit before he had to perform his job.

He did not like going to this part of the hospital due to its gloominess. Today, he had no choice. The only family he had was now dead.

"Thanks." He responded without looking at the other man inside the room. His focus centered on the table where his brother lay.

He was operating when his brother arrived at the hospital. Nobody bothered to inform him because no one knew his connection to the victim.

Once the police found him after his operation, that was the only time he knew about his death. Now, looking at his brother lying in a morgue was not what he imagined would be the next time he would see him.

"How did he die?" He wanted to know the cause of his death, determining if he suffered first or was dead on the spot. The police did say he was stabbed multiple times in the midsection.

He had visited him twice inside the prison, trying to show him some support. But the first one, he refused to see him. On the second one, he saw him briefly, but he did not say much until the visit ended without them connecting at all.

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In his opinion, it felt like his brother was condemning his existence for all his misery. He could not blame him since he was a bastard, sharing a life that was supposed to be his alone. But he did not ask for any of this. It was not his fault.

"In my first diagnosis, stab wounds. But I will know more after further examination." The other doctor told him as he stayed on the other side.

This man might be thinking about his connection to this dead inmate. Maybe just like the rest of his co-staff in the hospital. But he did not care. He never tried to hide that he was a bastard, but Nick was too adamant not to expose him to his world.

"Will you also let me know?" He glanced at the doctor before returning his attention to his brother, all colors drained from his lifeless body.

He felt numb as if he had no idea if he was sad or happy about his current situation. He just lost a brother. Therefore, he should grieve for his loss, but he was not.

He still felt sad that his brother had passed away. He had hoped for a deeper connection with him, but he had always placed him in the distance. It was like he was only tolerating his presence.

"Of course. As soon as I finish my report." The doctor informed him, then he stared at his brother one last time before saying his final goodbye.

He planned to arrange for his burial and all the necessary things. In the meantime, he just wanted to leave. He had to be somewhere else.

He stepped away from the bed, turning around and walking away from that horrible place. After a few minutes, he was sitting in his car, contemplating what had just happened moments ago.

"Cassie." He uttered on his lips, suddenly remembering that she had to know.

He quickly roared his engine and shifted the car out of the parking lot and onto the street, driving towards her new apartment.

After discovering that his brother had frequented her previous apartment, Alex arranged her transfer to a new one, but it was farther from his apartment and the hospital.

His fellowship in the hospital was also taking most of his available time. Therefore, it had been difficult for him to visit Cassie with his busy schedule. By the time he was back at his apartment, he was usually fast asleep.

"Hey, I heard what happened." She immediately enveloped him in her arms as soon as she opened the door for him.

She had heard the news of his death on the different tv channels flashing the incident. It seemed his unexpected death was hitting the media frenzy, and the hunt for the mastermind interested many spectators.

"Yeah, I just came from the morgue to visit him." He moved further inside the room and slumped down on the sofa, then closed his eyes.

He felt his other side dip as she sat beside him, but he did not open his eyes but continued to let his mind ponder on his current situation.

Then, her fingers caressed his forehead, feeling them gliding along with his short hair. It continued in a steady pattern, calming him down.

"Are you alright?" Her soft voice somehow soothed his frail nerves.

He could sense the concern in her tone, probably thinking that he was distraught by the situation. But honestly, he had no idea how to feel about it.

In his mind, people who knew they were related might think that he should feel bad about what happened to his brother. Others might think that he would seek justice for his death.

But in truth, he was a little relieved that he was dead. It sounded terrible, but it was not his intent. He just thought that at least his brother would be at peace. He had been through a lot.

He also felt bad that his brother did not get the chance to repent. Everybody he believed deserved that chance. But a man who lived with a knife in his hand had a great chance of dying in one.

His brother had lived a life of crime. Therefore, he might have acquired more than his fair share of enemies who would want him dead.

"Yeah, I think I am." He finally opened his eyes, turning his face to look at her.

Suddenly, he felt guilty that he had ignored her for the past few days. He had been too busy, not even able to visit her. Now, here she was, comforting him in his time of need.

He also promised to take her on her dream vacation. But sadly, he never came around to fulfilling that promise. He guessed it was time that he did something about it.

"What are you thinking?" She let her fingers entangle with him as their hand entwined. She leaned closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

He could not see her face anymore, but he could feel her warmth from the contact of their skins. It felt nice to have her around. He had missed her presence lately.

"You." He admitted without a reservation. He was through bottling up his feelings for her.

He shifted in his seat until he was facing her. With the tip of his fingers, he tilted her face until she was directly staring into his eyes. She looked so beautiful, his brain told him.

He could read the surprise in her eyes as if she could not fathom the thought that she was constantly on his mind. But she was. She had played like a broken record in his consciousness. Even in his dreams, he had thought of her.

"What do you mean?" Excitement and fear course through her body, playing a tug of war in her heart.

Chapter 669: Vanilla was not bad

Cassie could only wonder if he just missed her as a friend or was that look meant something more as she continued to gaze into his eyes.

Her heart twisted in anticipation, wishing for him to think of her more than a friend. But her mind kept warning not to expect too much from his kindness, frightened that she was setting herself up to fail.

After the short kiss they had shared, they had never discussed anything about it. Suddenly, that incident felt like it was just a mistake or a figment of imagination conjured by a lonely soul.

"I like you, Cassie." He spoke softly and held her hand firmly in his, lifting them until it was in front of his lips. After a few seconds of staring into her eyes, the surface of his tender lips landed on her skin.

Then, his action followed a path that created havoc in her heart. His words, lips, and touch implied what she wanted to hear. Was this it? Was this what she waited for since she admitted wanting him?

Her eyes could not look away as his eyes held hers in a trance. She found herself lost in the message reflected in those swirling orbs. She finally believed he felt the same way about her.

"I like you too, Jacob." She could not stop the words as they flowed smoothly like silk out of her tongue. It sounded so natural that it felt like she had already said those words to him a thousand times.

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Then, her hands automatically moved in their own accord, wrapping around his neck as she twisted her body to be closer to him. This time, she was not holding herself back.

She lifted her face closer to him until they almost breathed the same air. But before she could think of backing out, she moved her body until her lips touched his.

It was a battle of domination and desire as both unleashed their inhibitions, letting their emotions stand aside, allowing their bodies to do the talking.

"Are you sure about this?" She was the one asking the question, knowing that he might just be undergoing a tremendous ordeal. She did not want to think she was using him during his vulnerability.

Still, her lips roamed down his jawline, exploring the different parts of his face. She could only wonder if she could stop or wanted to stop if he asked her to, realizing again that this was a mistake.

Suddenly, he stopped returning her kisses as he slightly pulled away from her. She had no choice but to stare at him with questions in her eyes. Was this it? Did he finally realize that this was not supposed to happen again?

"Stop doubting that you deserve more." His words penetrated her heart like a soft blow. It made an impact. Not meant to hurt her but to make her aware that he cared about her.

"You are an extraordinary person. Do not let your past define who you are." Then, his fingers caressed her cheeks, wiping the tears that she did not know she was shedding.

She wished it was that easy to erase her past and move on. But every time, she remembered all the horrible things she did to her friend and her family, thinking she was the victim. She could not forgive herself and forget that easily.

"Hey, look at me." His fingers were slightly forceful as she bowed her head down in shame. But it did not hurt. He just wanted her to look him in the eyes.

"I am sorry, Jacob. I am never like this." She did not know what had changed in her since she met him.

She usually took what she wanted and did not care about others' feelings, just like what she did with her friend, Dani. She took Nick from her without considering her feelings.

In truth, she had taken him intending to hurt her friend and ruin her life. That was how bad she was. But with Jacob, she wanted to change. She wanted to be a better person than the girl she kept looking at in the mirror.

"I know. You are better." His smile seemed to brighten her outlook. "You have a heart capable of so much kindness and goodness, if only you will believe in yourself."

Suddenly, she wanted to believe his words. She might have a chance for a second life, remembering a quote she once read. No one could run out of second chances, but only time.

Should she grab this one while she had the chance?

Then, he kissed her again, allowing his lips to tell her what he might not be able to express more with words. In her opinion, she had heard it loud and clear, feeling her body soar to the clouds with everything that he did with his lips, hands, and body.

“Ahhh!” She finally released the longing she had been feeling for him. For the first time, she moaned not because of the lustful pleasure he was giving her. It was because of the passionate love he devoted to her body.

Slowly, she felt him lift her into his body, carrying her like she was made of a breakable material, gently laying her on the bed. She never felt like this before, like she was precious.

He was the first man who treated her like she was also a princess. That she also deserved to be on top of a pedestal. She had not dreamt of such, but it felt so great that she did not want to settle for anything less anymore.

His hands caressed every part of her body like a priceless gem that required extra attention. He made love to her as she had never felt before.

“You were great.” She felt his lips kissing her forehead while she closed her eyes to recover from such bliss.

It was a passionate session that she would never forget in her entire lifetime. She should consider this her first and hopefully not her last.

Suddenly, she realized that this was better than anything she had experienced before. Vanilla was not bad at all as she initially thought.

Chapter 670: A riddle wrapped in a mystery

“The case will probably be close,” Mike proudly uttered over the line. Satisfaction was evident in his tone. “You are almost free, Gerald.” His friend’s voice boomed on his receiver, full of jubilation.

“Was that your handiwork, Mike?” He specifically asked. His mind had been wondering about the case that was airing all over the news.

He heard about Nick’s death last night, but he was sure he had not ordered the hit on him. He still had plans for the man, and killing him was at the last of his agendas.

However, he considered that Mike might have misinterpreted his plans. Therefore, he wanted to clarify it before jumping to any conclusion.

“Nope, that was not me.” Mike quickly answered. “Wait!” Realization began to dawn on him. “That was not you.” His friend expressed his surprise, making him cringe at the sound of his loud voice.

Afterward, he could hear from the other line that his friend was probably shuffling some papers then, typing on his keyboard. He could only wonder what he was searching for while talking to him.

But he was used to his friend. As long as he could do his job well, he had no issues with that. He could employ any method he saw fit.

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"No, it was not me either. But Nick could have acquired several enemies inside that might have wanted him dead." He finally concluded, realizing that it was not them that had done the job but someone else.

Nick was an arrogant son of a gun. He would not be surprised if he had offended another of his inmate and caused him or them to retaliate. Those cases were common inside the prison.

But it was also a chance that someone hired an inmate to get rid of him. Until a suspect was arrested, which he doubted was a possibility. This incident would remain in unsolved cases.

"Well, if that is the situation, we should be thankful that they had finished the job for us," Mike said as a loud bang resounded on his end.

"What was that?" Gerald asked, curious about what his friend was busy doing while talking to him.

He would have met him today, but his morning and his table were full of papers that needed reviewing, and clients, demanding his time.

He could not neglect this other part of his life. It was the pain and sacrifice of having a double life.

"Working for the DA's office has its perks, but it also has many downsides." His friend started complaining. He could sense that he hated to be back in this manual labor.

But for now, he needed his friend, in the meantime, to be his inside man in that office. He knew he would tolerate his current situation as long as he wanted him to be there.

"Just concentrate on the perks, and you will do just fine." He jested at his friend, trying to change his mood.

He was about to say something else when his peripheral vision caught something outside his glass wall. It would seem he had another visitor, but he doubted that he was one of his clients.

"Make sure that you increase my perks if I have to continue doing this." His friend warned him, but those were empty threats. He was used to his loud mouth.

But he was not interested in listening to his friend anymore. On the other hand, his eyes focused on the man looking in his direction instead.

"As much as I enjoyed our daily chats, I would say adios, for now, my friend, because I have a visitor waiting for my services." He abruptly ended their conversation when his unexpected guest stood by the door, guided by his secretary.

"Sir, Mr. Hamilton insisted on talking with you, but you have an appointment in fifteen minutes." His secretary explained to him, but she kept looking at the imposing man beside her.

"I don't think you need to worry. I will not take fifteen minutes of your boss' time." His guest moved forward inside the room, not waiting for him to invite him. "Do you mind if I sit down? I am not as strong and as young as I used to be."

He took the available seat before his table. Again, not waiting for an invitation. He wondered if this was how he acquired his wealth all this year by bullying his way around.

He had not met him before, but he heard great things about the man from his associations. But it was different from what his father had told him about this seemingly honorable man.

"Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Hamilton." He waved his hand, but it was pointless since he seemed to be already enjoying his position as the man crossed his legs and squared his shoulder on his chair as if he owned the place.

He watched his guest's eyes roam around the room as if he was sizing up his office, studying every nook and crook around him. He wondered what he was doing in his office anyway.

"First, thank you for seeing me without an appointment, Mr. Brown. I heard that you are a busy man. But, do call me Ethan." His guest stated, but he never attempted to shake his hand.

He continued to sit on the chair, staring at him. He seemed to be studying him this time. His eyes were sharp but friendly. He did not see any contempt or untoward anger at him.

Therefore, he could only assume that this might be business-related or something to do with his daughter's case. It could not be about his association with Nick and the kidnapping.

"It is my pleasure to meet the great Ethan Hamilton. It is an honor that you should grace me with your presence. I think that you are busier than me." He never liked pleasantries, but now, he believed it was required.

"Great seems to be such a strong word. I am just an ordinary retired citizen now." Ethan smiled at him. Suddenly, he realized that the man did not look as imposing as he used to be when he looked at his pictures.

He had been his motivation to strive to be on the top of everything he did. His father had told him everything this man had done to his family.

His father had to hide him and his mother from the world because of this hateful, vengeful man. He could not take his place in the community as his father's son because this man kept harassing their family, especially his mom.

"Oh, yes. I heard about what happened to you. I am glad that you are ok now. It seems that your son-in-law is managing your business quite well." Time was ticking, but he still did not know why this man was here.

But telling him that he was retired would mean his intention had nothing to do with business but something else. But now that Nick was dead, he doubted also that it had something to do with the case.

Could he have something that would implicate him in the case? Was he here to blackmail him from coming after them? But he doubted that from the look on his face.

Mr. Ethan Hamilton might be retired, but he was no fool, that he was sure. But his smile gave him a goosebump. He could sense that he was trying to tell him something. He could see the older man as a riddle wrapped in a mystery, an enigma.

