

## Royal Contract 681

### Chapter 681: Stagefright

The wind blew on the stage, just a slight breeze of cold air, but his palms were still sweating, probably due to his frail nerves. Marcus had never felt this anxious before throughout his life as he stared at the crowd before him.

It was not the people looking at him that had caused this tension on his stomach and trembling in his hand. He could handle a crowd like putty in his hands.

"I came here not just to celebrate the building of this great project or the celebration of our friend's birthday." The back of his palm automatically went to his forehead to wipe the trickle of sweat that moistened his skin.

Then, his eyes scanned the crowd below the stage, searching for someone. The glaring sun on the other side made it hard for him to look, making him squint his eyes and slightly cover them from its rays to see more clearly.

Finally, after going from right to left, he saw the person he was looking for, sitting quietly at the front table, closely watching him. Her face was a picture of beauty, minus the exhaustion and the curiosity in his eyes.

He thought that she might be wondering what he was doing on the stage. Based on her facial expression, she was still clueless about his intention to sabotage the party she had arranged.

"I am here for another reason." He scratched the back of his head, feeling his veins were about to pop out from his nervousness. Who knew that this would be this hard? Certainly not him.

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He could effortlessly fight inside a courtroom, defend their company from any corporate attacks, or speak on podiums about his plans for a great company.

However, he believed that this was worst than anything he had experienced before as his hands uncontrollably shook just thinking of what he had to say next.

"Anyway, I hope you will indulge me for a few more minutes of your time before we conclude this celebration." Marcus could see the others nodding their heads as if confirming their permission.

Eventually, the time had come for him to proceed with his next step. He could not prolong the inevitable anyway since time would not wait for him.

"Wait for a second." He pointed his finger in front of him, waving at the crowd, asking everyone that he would not take long, begging for everyone's patience. "Hold this." Handing the microphone to the host, believing he would not need it anymore.

The crowd seemed to be confused by his action but remained quietly waiting. His feet speedily moved down the stage, walking fast in one direction.

As soon as he reached his destination, he stopped. His face shifted down, staring at the woman sitting on the chair, surprised to see him before her.

Shock covered her lovely face, raising her high eyebrows in the air with her questions. Who could blame her when she was included in the list of people not allowed to know about his plans?

"What are you doing?" She finally asked, her tired voice floating in the air. To some, she had a loud voice most of the time, but to him, it was the sweetest melody he had ever heard.

It sounded so cheesy even to him, but admittedly he was starting to like those things. Lately, he had stopped asking his secretary to do him favors. This time, he did buy his flowers and gifts, making sure to choose her favorites.

Instead of answering her right away, he grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet. "I think you should come with me, Jacky, on the stage to find out." Then, he whispered something in her ears.

"A surprise that he and Alex had prepared," Telling her privately as if it was a secret between them.

"Oh!" She willingly went along, assuming it was for Dani. It was not his fault since, technically, he did not lie. But in truth, he had been planning it for her for a while.

"What is the surprise?" She asked since she had no clue, still thinking she should be on it, but he was not about to ruin it by telling her right then and there.

"You will know it once we are on the stage." That was all he could say as he guided her to the stairs and on the platform.

As he escorted her on stage, holding her hands, he wondered if she could feel the trembling in his hands. But then again, he believed his hands had stopped shaking. Maybe her warm hand had calmed him slightly down.

"Can you stand over there?" Picking the center of the stage where everybody could see them while their friends stood just a few feet from them.

Her face kept looking at their friends as if asking what was going on, but Alex only shrugged his shoulders while Dani mouthed something like I do not know. Honestly, Alex was lying, and Dani was clueless.

"What for?" Jacky questioned him, probably thinking about being in the limelight.

One of her deepest secrets was her stage fright. Although there were moments she could handle being in front of the people, it was different when the spotlight was on her, just like now.

She had kept looking at him as if she was ready to bolt at any moment as her eyes kept looking at the mass of people gathered below the stage.

"Because I need to do something." Marcus stood straight in front of him, tapping his breast pocket to get something.

Unfortunately, he could not seem to find what he was looking for as his hand came empty after checking his left and right pockets. He knew he had taken it earlier and stored it safely somewhere.

Then, after what seemed an eternity of patting his body in front of everyone, he finally found it in his pants pockets. Probably in his nervousness, he might have thought that he had placed it in his breast pocket, breathing a sigh of relief.

He looked at everyone around them with expectant faces as if they were nervous for him. Even Alex looked worried as he watched him.

“What is wrong with you?” Jacky asked her, seemingly confused at his unsettling movements.

Her hands reached out to him, touching his arms to assure herself that he was ok. But when her eyes met with him, something flickered in them as if she figured out what was happening.

Her gasp told him that she was shocked by this discovery. Then, she started fanning her hands across her face as her breathing became unstable. He believed she was suffering from a mild panic attack.

“Are you ok?” Immediately, worry lines also etched on his face, watching her in such a state.

But Jacky quickly recovered, using his arms as support as she held on to him. Then, she took deep breaths to calm herself down. Anxiety still glazed her eyes, but she never looked away from him.

“Please, say you are not doing what I think you are doing?” With a croaky and broken voice, she asked him.

His eyes watched her scan the area, seeing the entire crowd gathered to support them. Her face was pure horror as she looked at him and back to the people around them. Her fear had become more than just a stagefright.

#### Chapter 682: Falling in love

Marcus was not about to back down now. He would not claim to have confidence in the future. But whatever would happen to them, he would be there to support Jacky.

“What if I am?” Suddenly all his nervousness was gone as he continued to look into her eyes. He wanted to be her support through all of this and throughout their lives.

Then, his goal became as clear as daylight, as if he had known it all along but was too afraid to confirm it. He wanted this girl to be his for a long time.

No, not just a long time.

He wished to be with her forever.

The world seemed to be just him and her as everyone else disappeared from his sight. His eyes could only see her face and hear her loud breathing and beating of her heart. But then again, those were probably his that he was listening to as he pulled her hands to his lips, planting a single kiss.

And there was nothing to fear as long as they were together. Finally, understanding what Alex had been saying all this time. If fate meant them to be together, there was nothing that would stop it from happening.

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"No, don't do it." She whispered with her face, full of doubt in them as if she was afraid to hear what he was about to say.

He could not blame her when all he did to her was hurt her in the past. But he had hoped they had found a way to get passed that.

He had planned to propose to her at the cottage, but he could not seem to get good timing. It felt it did not feel right for him to do it during that time. Today, at this moment, it was different.

"Why?" He wanted to know because he could finally feel it in his heart. He finally knew this was it. Then, he noticed her eyes landed on Haley, who looked as surprised as she was.

Could she be hesitating because of her? What did she learn about the two of them? Did Haley tell her anything? Another thing that he should have told her. What was the relationship between him and her?

"Because you are not ready." She blurted out as her hands flew in the air, looking exasperated by the entire situation.

She did look tired. Probably from all the days she had worked to make all of this work. Then, this whole day she operated like a robot to deal with all the problems. He could not be more proud of what she had accomplished singlehandedly.

However, he could not blame her for how she felt, but he could not accept her reason. It was not her to decide if he was ready or not. Because at this moment, he did not doubt how he felt.

"Why would you say that?" His hands quickly grabbed her by the shoulders forcing her to look at him.

"What did I do to indicate that I do not wish to marry you right now?" His words came out of his mouth without waiting for her answers.

Because it was the truth, he would marry her now if that was what she wanted. But if it was what he wanted, he wished to prepare for a grand wedding where she could choose whatever she had dreamt of when she was young.

He heard that most girls had this childish wish to be married in a white dress with many flowers, and all their fantasies come true. He had attended such weddings. The best example was his best friend's wedding.

"Because you did not propose on the cabin." Her eyes had a few tears threatening to fall when she admitted that. It was quite a surprise to hear her say that because he believed he had not mentioned anything about proposing to her.

Marcus suddenly looked at his friend, but Alex quickly denied saying anything. But she quickly explained the situation, shedding light on his inquiries.

"I saw the ring and thought you would propose, but you did not." She mumbled, fidgeting with her hands as if he caught her going through his things. "I found it lying on the floor when it fell probably from your pants."

Now, he remembered wondering why it was in his pants pocket when it was supposed to be under the bed. It must have fallen from the bed and landed on his pants on the floor, which Jacky assumed was the hiding place.

It had all made sense now. The way she oddly behaved on the island from time to time. She had expected the proposal when he decided it at the same time.

"I did not propose at the time, not because I was not ready." He pulled Jacky into his embrace, wanting to assure her that it was not the reason. "I only merely postpone it because I felt it was not good enough."

He could feel her small sob on his chest, realizing that he had made her cry. He forced her to tilt her head, using his fingers until she gazed into his eyes.

Slight tears glistened on her cheeks, but her eyes were as clear as the morning sky as they looked back at him. They searched for the truth in his eyes. Hope was evident in their depths.

"I love you, Jacky." His words flowed like silk out of his mouth. Those were words that did not come from his brain but directly from his heart.

Those three-letter words had always been something that was not part of his vocabulary before. He never believed in them since he never had good examples of good relationships.

That was until he met Alex's parents. But he always thought that they were the exception to the rule. Couples like them were a rarity that happened only on a few occasions.

But when he became witness to Alex and Dani's love affair. He felt that it might not be as rare as he thought. Maybe love could also be possible in a man like him.

"I said I love you, Jacky," Marcus repeated as if he had said those words for a long time, finding her silence adorable.

Her eyes were big, and her lips were wide open as if she was more shocked by his admission of love, comparing it with the proposal he did earlier.

"Will you marry me?" Taking the chance while she was speechless to continue with his plans.

He knelt before her, taking the ring out of the box and displaying it in front of her. He tilted his face, staring directly into her eyes, fixed on the ring in his fingers.

He could tell that she was not sizing up the size of the stone in the ring. She would not care if he gave her a fancy one. It was one thing he had loved about her.

She was digging deeper into herself, assessing her feelings for him. Her eyes might be looking at the ring, but her heart was looking directly at his.

"I love you, too, Marcus." She placed her fingers into his cheeks, caressing them with her soft touch. "I will marry you." Suddenly, nothing else mattered. It was just the two of them.

Two people, coming from different walks of life, stumbled into a complicated relationship. But in the end, finding themselves falling in love.

Chapter 683: Number one priority

"Eida, you have to look at this from our point of view." The producer of her show stood from his chair and sat on the edge of his desk, facing her.

She had to tilt her head up to look at his face because her boss was one of the tallest people she had ever seen. If he did not make it to the media, he could have become a basketball player. But that was beside the point.

Her boss disagreed with her idea to downplay her interview with the Prince by just reporting the information she gathered about him and playing some clips.

“But, Sir,” Eida stared at his boss, pleading with his sensibility. “Prince Wellington is adamantly refusing live interviews.” Turning to her other side and looking at the man sitting beside her.

If she could not convince her big boss, she hoped her director might back her up. He always believed in her, supporting her mostly with her ideas. Maybe this time, he would also back her up.

“What do you think?” Her producer also shifted his head, following her gaze, questioning the man, scratching his nape, probably weighing his options.

She could only wait in anticipation as he mused over her idea for her program. But based on his apologetic expression, he was about to side with their boss in this one.

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“I am sorry, Eida, but I think it is better if you do the live interview.” Her producer told her as he explained the possible benefit compared to what she had suggested.

Her boss also turned to her as if she was not seeing the point he was making. It would seem that he was trying to convince her that their idea was better.

Under any other circumstances, she would also agree with them. In truth, she would never propose this setup, not if she could help it.

“As you had seen, he never allowed any reporter or media to come closer to him before.” She was not giving up yet, because looking the Prince in the eye would not be easy.

She stood up from her chair, feeling slightly out of breath. She moved towards the window, trying to calm herself down. Her eyes fixed on the people below them, thinking many of them were waiting for her big story.

“That had never stopped you before.” The producer turned to her, a little bit confused by her actions.

He was right about that about her. Something like that would not stop her from pursuing an interview. She would do everything she could to get to the story, using every means possible.

At least legal or just a bit borderline immoral, but not that would warrant an arrest or persecution from her peers. She would not risk her reputation going under if she used something shady business.

“But this is different.” Her eyes still did not look at the two men with her in the room. She was afraid that they might read her like a book. They would know if she was hiding something this big.

“How?” Her producer asked, also slightly suspicious now at her seeming reluctance to do this segment.

She could not blame the two of them because they had never seen her in this state before. Usually, she did not bring problems but usually created solutions.

"Is there something wrong with this Prince that we do not know? Did anything happen that we should know?" Now, it was her producer jumping the gun and making conclusions about her odd behavior.

"No, you don't understand." She finally faced the two. Her resolve set because she believed she had no choice in the matter.

Either she did the assignment her bosses wanted her to do without complaint, or she had to tell them a plausible reason why she could not do it.

However, what justification could she give that would explain her way out of this situation. She could not tell them that the Prince was a terrible man. It was not the truth. But she could not also admit her valid reason.

"Well, then what is it?" His producer's voice was laced with his concern that she might be hiding something, which she was, but he did not need to do that.

"He has become a friend, and I promised I would never bug him about this." She was sure that her bosses were quite aware of her recent association with the Prince.

"Precisely, why you should capitalize on this. You could become our source inside the Palace." Her producer said, excited about the prospect of getting more stories through her connection to the Prince.

She slightly cringed at the prospect of using the Prince as a source. Although, she would have grabbed this chance if that night did not happen.

"Fine. I will do this one. I will find a way to convince the Prince." She moved back to her seat but remained standing in front of the two. "But after this interview, that is the last time I will ask the Prince for information."

That was her condition, or she would drop this entire story and find something else to write. She still believed that this issue was not enough for them to fire her. They still needed her for the show. She wanted to believe that anyway.

"Ok. I am good with that." Her producer finally took her side, but her producer still looked hesitant.

"Well?" She crossed her arms across her chest, tapping her foot on the carpeted floor, waiting for the verdict from the person who would decide her fate.

But how could she convince the Prince to join her on stage when he adamantly refused any live interviews. Aside from that, she still felt awkward after what happened to the two of them.

"Fine." He breathed an exasperated breath as if he disagreed with her decision, but still, he had no choice. "But I want results in this one."

There was an undertone in his voice that meant he meant business. After all, he had a company to run, and stories were his number one priority.

Chapter 684: A scaredy-cat

Now, the producer and her director wished that she would have a live interview with the Prince himself. They loved the story she had presented to them and would love to hear it live out of the Prince's mouth.

But how could she convince the Prince to join her on stage when he adamantly refused any live interviews. Aside from that, she still felt awkward after what happened to the two of them.

"Could you even look him in the eye after what happened to the two of you?" She mumbled to herself, staring at her reflection in the glass window behind her desk. But she promised them a live segment.

Then, adding to the problem. Eida remembered her friend, Amelia. Hearing about who her friend had been referring to when they talked about her childhood love.

Finally, Eida realized they were talking about the same man. Prince Lance Wellington. Her friend was in love and about to get engaged to her Prince.

"Not my Prince." Chastising herself for such a foolish notion. He was not hers and would never be.

She turned around, facing her desk again. Then, she shuffled on her papers, returning her attention to her work. Still, her mind kept returning to her task and set an appointment with the Prince.

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After an hour, she had finally concentrated on her work, forgetting all about the Prince. At least she accomplished finishing a couple of days' worth of work.

"I am done." She turned to her secretary, who had been working alongside her with the stack of files. Work that accumulated while she was away.

Turning off her light in her office, she realized that it was already late. Dining out was her only option because cooking at home would be out of the question.

"Why don't you take my reservation?" Her secretary offered. It was in some fancy restaurant just a few blocks from their building. "My boyfriend just canceled on me due to some emergency at work."

"Why don't you join me? It can be our bonding time." She counter-offered, thinking it would be nice to spend time with her outside the office. "My treat."

"Nah!" Her secretary answered her. "I am not in the mood to see people. It was supposed to be our anniversary." She pouted her thick lips she envied for the longest time.

She felt sad for her secretary and terrible about herself. She vaguely remembered that she told her she was leaving early today for her anniversary. But with her issues, she had forgotten all about it.

"If you are sure." She tapped her secretary's shoulders as she also prepared to leave. "I can be good company." Attempting to make up with her.

"You go enjoy your night, boss." Her secretary turned to her, forcing a smile on her face. Then, she turned on the lights, and they both walked to the elevator.

The elevator ride was quiet, but as they separated ways at the parking lot. She asked again. "We can still have dinner together."

But her secretary shook her head. Then, she shouted to her. "Call someone else, someone who can cheer you up to join you. You look like you also needed it." She shrugged her shoulders before walking away from her.



She proceeded to her car and immediately rode it. But she did not drive away. With the phone in her hand, she thought of a person she could call to join her. But she was drawing a blank.

Not completely. That was a lie.

Her mind was constantly thinking of two people lately. But she kept denying her thoughts from consuming her. But it seemed she was not winning.

She was left thinking if Amelia had finally left the City as she initially said to her or did she stay to fulfill her father's wish to marry the Prince.

Then, the Prince who had bothered her waking and sleeping hours. Was she affected by what happened to them? Or was it deeper? Was finding out about his impending marriage to her friend bothering her?

"Stop it." She slammed her hands on the wheels, quickly grabbing the keys of her car from her bag.

She roared the engine of her favorite car, loving how it purred every time she hit on the gas. It was music that calmed her nerves during times like this.

Then, a guard tapped on her window, probably wondering what was wrong with her. "Mam, are you ok? You have your engine on for a few minutes now. Do you have a problem?"

She did not realize what she was doing. All she knew was that she enjoyed listening to the engine's motor. "I am good, just thinking if I forgot something." She quickly excused herself, not wanting the guard to make a big deal out of this.

"If you are sure?" She smiled at the kind guard, remembering saying similar words earlier.

She moved her vehicle away from the parking lot and drove to the restaurant. She believed it was only hunger making her think crazy, remembering she had a small sandwich for lunch and nothing in between.

As she walked inside the restaurant, guided by the hostess to her seat, she could not help but notice the high society dining in such a place.

It was indeed one of the best restaurants in the City. If her secretary dined here alone, she could not afford it. Luckily, her boyfriend worked as a high executive with a high-paying job. However, his work also occupied most of his time.

A waiter immediately came to assist her to her seat. "Here is the list of the specials." The man handed her a white card. "Shall we come back for your order?" He asked while pouring her a glass of their complimentary wine.

But before she could respond to the waiter, a familiar voice called her name. Judging from the source, it was not far from her table. She wondered if it was her mind playing tricks on her. Or it meant that she had stayed.

When she searched the room for her friend, her eyes did not land on her. But instead, they stared at another set of eyes. The one she had been staring on her dreams.

It only meant they were dining together and were getting married and having babies. Her friend would be so happy. It was what she had been dreaming of for almost her entire life.

But what about her? What about what she wanted? Suddenly, she realized she might also have some interest in the Prince. She was just afraid to admit it. She was such a scaredy-cat when it came to relationships.

Chapter 685: The third party

Eida finally snapped out of her trance, realizing that she was staring at him. Her eyes quickly looked away, looking for her friend instead, just a few feet away from him, with her Dad and the Count standing close.

Suddenly she figured it was a family affair as the men took their seats while Amelia walked in her direction. Lance also turned around and joined their fathers at the table.

"Amelia, it is a surprise to see you here." It perfectly described what she felt at the moment. As much as she was delighted to see her friend, her guilt was also consuming her.

Not that she did something wrong against her friend. She did not know that they were referring to the same man. But still, she wanted the man her friend had loved since childhood.

"My father insisted that I attend this dinner before I leave," Amelia whispered to her, leaning closer to her to avoid being overheard by the other occupants at the nearby table.

She glanced to the other table. Fortunately, Lance was facing the other side. He had his back on her. But she could see that her father was looking in their direction, probably wondering what was taking her too long.

"I think your father is wondering what you are doing here when you should be dining with them." Eida tilted her head to her friend, who remained standing before her.

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Her face maintained a friendly smile, calm under pressure, but her heart was beating like she was in a race. But she could not make her friend suspect anything.

"Are you on a date?" Amelia unexpectedly asked, ignoring her statement. Her smile was genuinely happy for her. She always wanted her to end up with a good man and a long relationship.

However, a dream like that, beautiful as it sounded, was an impossible situation.

She quickly shook her head in defense. "No, I am just having a quiet dinner alone." Smiling at her friend, not wanting her to know how she truly felt.

At the moment, she never expected that she would end up in a situation like this or feel slightly petty about her lack of love life, but her friend did not need to know that.

She had never felt alone before, but her current condition seemed to mellow her down. But she quickly bounced back, smiling at her friend, not allowing this moment to ruin it for her friend.

"Why don't you join us?" Her friend abruptly offered, slightly shocking and making her speechless.

First, she was not expecting that she would see her here. Then, dining with her, together with the Prince, would be insane. She could not possibly face him under this condition.

"No. I do not think that is a good idea." Her head automatically shook, responding no to her. "Besides, I think that is a family affair." Excusing herself from a very awkward situation.

If she had a choice, she would run out of this room and quickly go home, away from her friend and her feelings for the Prince. She would lock herself in her room and cry her eyes out until she could dispel this pain that was starting to grip her heart.

"It is a good idea. Please, I need you." Amelia begged her as if she was a lifeline that would save her from drowning in her father's plans.

Eida had witnessed her friend's unending heartache at the hands of her father, who never loved her and only used her when he needed her.

Tonight was a perfect example as the two older men discussed the fate of their children according to what would be best for their legacy rather than their children's happiness and future.

"I think that my presence would only make all things uncomfortable for everyone." She honestly believed that, especially for her. Although, she wondered how Lance was handling their current situation.

Was he also affected by what happened to them just like she was, or was it just another mistake that he would shrug off as unnecessary to dwell on and move on?

Why could she do that? Well, she had been in many one-night affairs before. She quickly bounced back after saying goodbye to them. Why was her one-night experience with him bothering her so much?

"I heard that you are doing a story about him, so this is your opportunity to get to know him more," Amelia stated, but her tone was apologetic as if pleading that she should join them.

But how could she when the last thing she wanted to do was see them together, let alone sit across from them with their parents probably discussing their impending wedding?

Another royal wedding that would take the world by storm, a news story that her bosses would bug her to take on her shoulders. Suddenly, her world felt like crumbling down.

"I don't want to be a bother. It will be better if I stay here." Her hands touched her friend, hoping that she would accept her excuse.

As much as she wanted to be there for her friend, she believed it was time that she also faced this situation alone. It was like she had to endure dining alone with the two of them just a few meters away from her.

"Amelia, we are about to order." Her father called to her in that dominating tone that she hated. But she had no choice.

Eida watched her friend turn to her father, signaling that she would be just a minute. Her friend gripped her hands tighter, then smiled at her. "If you ever change your mind, you are always welcome to join us."

"I am sure," Eida nodded at her friend, telling her that she should return to her table.

As Amelia moved away, the waiter returned to take her order. She went to the motion of ordering her food, but during the meal, she barely touched her food, playing with most of it as she avoided looking at the other table.

Her mind kept thinking of her conversation with her friend. It reminded her of many love stories that ended tragically because another party entered the scene. Was she the third party that would ruin her friend's happiness?

Chapter 686: Dance of passion but full of lies

Luckily, Eida was not facing them, or that would be another torture that she had to endure. Watching the two of them with their parents, probably discussing their wedding, would be hell.

Thankfully, she had gone through the first two-course meal without a hitch. But she had enough.

After what seemed forever, the head waiter came to her. "Is there a problem with the food?" The man in a black, formal jacket asked, probably wondering why she barely touched them.

Looking at her barely eaten food, she could not blame his concern. After all, she did come from the media, and her words of dissatisfaction could become an issue if it would say something terrible.

"No, it was great. I am just not particularly hungry." She did not want to make a fuss over her. "Can I just have the check?" Refusing their offer for a complimentary dessert.

After settling her bill, she took her coat and walked out of the establishment without looking back. She waited outside as the valet brought her car upfront. She was about to move out of her spot when a hand stopped her, gripping her arm.

Surprised, she turned around only to find the man she had avoided all night, standing next to her, staring into her eyes. She felt her breath trapped inside her lungs as she found herself lost in his eyes, unable to utter a word.

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"Call me." The only words she heard came out of his lips before he turned around and walked back inside.

Under a slight daze, she walked to her car. After a few seconds of recollecting herself, she started her engine, speeding out of the restaurant and back into the street.

After a few minutes, she abruptly swerved to the side, parking the car on a curve, unable to move on, afraid that she might bump into a street light or another car as her eyes glazed with uncertainty.

What did he want from her?

Why did he come after her outside?

What was going through his mind? Her mind swirled with questions of what he meant by calling him.

Was it about the interview that she had scheduled with his secretary? Or was it something else?

She shook her head, chastising herself for making a big deal out of all of this. She leaned over the steering wheel, resting her forehead on her arms as she held on to the wheel.

Her world had been spinning since she had bumped into him. Everything she had built was starting to crumble down on the ground. She had to have a better grip on her life, or soon, she would find herself ruined.

“He is not worth destroying your life.” She shouted at herself, glad she was inside the car where no one would be able to hear her.

Frustration ran through her entire body, feeling the churning in her stomach, not because she had barely eaten but because of the stress of the situation.

She took her phone out and quickly typed a message. Then, with a new plan, she roared her engine back to life and moved toward her apartment.

She would end this once and for all. “I need to get my life back.” A resolve that she promised to herself.

As soon as she entered her home, she took her shoes off, wanting to feel her bare feet on solid grounds. Straight to the wine bar, she took a glass and poured herself enough strong alcohol to calm her nerves down.

Then, the view outside beckoned her. She walked to the balcony to breathe some fresh air. She took the lights that littered the street as a distraction from her thoughts, waiting for the night to deepen.

When her bell rang, she knew it was time. She placed her empty glass on the nearby table and walked straight to the door. She had to face this and get it over with as she squared her shoulder and breathed deeply.

Before opening the door, she knew who would be standing behind it. But what she did not expect was what would happen next.

She stood there paralyzed, just staring at the man she had seen just a while ago. Although she never had the chance to speak with him, he had plagued her mind the entire time.

“What...” But the words died down in her throat as he moved forward, quickly shrinking the space between them. Suddenly all the air around her was sucked out, leaving her breathless again.

He was not finished with her yet, grabbing her by the waist. Then, pulling her closer without waiting for another word, his lips sealed her fate.

She was helpless as his tongue invaded her mouth, not giving her a chance to think or resist his advances. His lips moved with a hunger that wanted to be satiated. In truth, it mirrored hers.

Her mind still tried to fight back, insisting that she should pull away from his embrace, but her body had a mind of its own as it moved on its own accord.

“Aaahhh!” Words that she only recognized when she was in extreme pleasure echoed in the room. She loved what his lips and hands were doing to her. She did not want them to stop.

Then, her thoughts of ending all of this tonight vanished into thin air as she welcomed him to her embrace, not holding anything back.

Her hands entwined around his neck and shoulders, pulling him impossibly closer to him, wanting to direct him to where his lips should go next.

"I need you." His masculine husky voice reverberated in her ears, a timbre that sent shivers through her spine, heightening the sensations his body was already doing to her body.

Then, she suddenly felt like she was falling, but she was not the only one as he came down with her immediately. Somehow they ended up in her bedroom, on her bed, battling to remove each item of clothing in their bodies.

No words were needed, just feelings as she allowed him to take the lead. At the moment, being one with him was the only thing running through her mind.

But, it was not yet time, as she felt him move and a second later, she was on top. He had just given her permission to take the lead in this exploration.

Groans of pleasure filled the room as she ran her hands through his body, wanting to feel every curve of his muscles, savoring the few moments she had control over their desires.

"Oh, you don't know what you are doing to me." He mumbled as he regained dominance, shifting their position once again.

But before she could respond, his lips came down and claimed hers into a punishing kiss, as if he was expelling every demon that had possessed him into this kiss.

She would have responded the same thing, but she never had the chance as her body responded to his manipulations. She had submitted to him willingly, without hesitation.

A few seconds later, he claimed her as if she was his. But her mind still insisted this was a mistake. She was just a puppet he was stringing in this dance of passion but full of lies.

Chapter 687: A rare gem

"Ohh!" Eida covered her face with the thick blanket, unable to look at him after waking up from a night of another passionate encounter.

As the rays of the morning sun flooded her windows, so thus, all her memories of last night. Upon seeing the man lying beside her, wide awake and staring at her, a giddy feeling invaded her body, looking through his expressive eyes.

Still, guilt also nagged at her, bothering her mind, heart, and conscience. What now?

She immediately ran to the bathroom and locked herself in the room, trying to calm herself down. Hoping when she had returned, Lance would be gone.

But to her surprise, Lance was still waiting for her in her room. She assumed he would have left just like before, now leaving her more confused than ever.

With her robe safely secured around her, she felt more confident facing him. She moved closer to the bed, watching him, waiting for him to say something, anything, to break the awkward silence.

"Why did you do that?" She finally asked the man who was now sitting on the edge of the bed, with his pants and shirt partially buttoned. Still, she could not help but blame him for what happened.

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However, she could also not deny she was equally responsible for allowing him. She was ashamed for wanting it as much as he did. In her defense, she still maintained if he had not initiated the kiss, they would not end up in this situation.

She wondered if she could repeat that scene last night when he entered her door. Could she stop him by then? Or would she replicate the same scenario?

"I want you." It was a simple answer. Even a child would understand those easy words, but her brain seemed unable to register them properly, thinking they were foreign.

She watched him lean his elbows on his knees, supporting his upper body as he looked down on the floor. She wondered what was going through his mind when he said that.

Did he mean it?

"Do not say that." Covering her ears as if that would block what was already running through her mind.

She turned around, not wanting him to see the struggle in her eyes. Her heart wanted to believe those words, but her logical mind still warned her not to take them seriously.

"Why not?" His question took her aback. But she was not about to believe that a man like him would want a girl like her.

She moved further away from him, going nearer the window. She needed to look at something else because her mind insisted that she should face him. But she could not.

She was afraid that, after looking at him, she would find something she was not ready to see. She was terrified to hope. Because when that happened, she would get hurt.

"Because this is not real, Lance." She finally voiced out what was going through her mind.

Suddenly, she was facing him. Her mind was so focused on the world outside that she did not notice him moving in her direction. She suddenly found herself in his arms.

His eyes were blazing with anger as if her words angered him. His arms held her tightly against his body while his eyes held hers captive. She had nowhere to go.

"Then, what am I to you? An imagination? A dream?" His tone was ice-cold as his eyes forced her to listen. "Everything that happened the other night and last night was more real to me than all my past relationships."

She tried to look away, but she could not as he trapped her between his body and the wall behind her.

"You are only saying that, but what happened to us was just sex."

She grabbed him by his head, forcing his lips down to hers, then kissed him. She wanted to show him that what they had was nothing but lust, a pure carnal need of the flesh.

Eida kissed him with passion, but she quickly let go of him. "I can kiss you, and I can kiss any guy that walks to that door." Pointing the door to him. "This meant nothing to me."

Suddenly, her brain took over her emotions, reminding her that she should have ended this last night. There was no point prolonging her agony, knowing that this man would never belong to a girl like him.

A Noble Prince, like him, did not end up with a thrash like her. One word got out that they were in a relationship, and the world would be pouring all her dirty past into the mix. It would instantly ruin him.

A man like him should be marrying Amelia, who was what he needed. A woman that he could be proud to have standing behind him. Not her.

"You can say what you want, but I know what I feel every time you are in my arms. You can deny it all you want, but your body tells me otherwise." This time, his lips claimed hers, not forcefully but passionately.

His hands moved around her back, pulling her closer until no more space stood between them. Then, she felt lost again as her brain lost the battle with her heart.

She wanted him, and there was no denying it. But how could they even make this work? How could she hurt a dear friend if she learned that she was going after the same man?

She was not even sure if she loved him. In her vocabulary, wanting and loving were two completely different things. Besides, she had no idea how to love.

"I don't know what to do." She finally admitted her fear. "I never felt like this before." She mumbled to his lips, hoping that he could help her.

"We will figure this out together." He answered her, carrying her back to the bed, laying her gently on the soft bed, like she was a treasure he needed to cherish.

Nobody had ever made her feel like that, only him. He had made her seem like a rare gem despite all her flaws.

Chapter 688: The man of the hour

After another extraordinary exchange in bed, she stretched her muscles, unwinding the fatigue in her nerves. She suddenly felt her cheeks burn in embarrassment, thinking of all the unusual things they had done all morning.

"I think I need food," Eida told him, needing an excuse to get off the bed and away from him. "How about you? I am sure you are hungry."

She knew it was still uncomfortable to think that he wanted a relationship with her, but her mind warned her to tread carefully. Getting into deep with him could mean trouble.

Suddenly she remembered his father, the Count, who seemed to be smitten with the idea of his son marrying Amelia. She could already picture his father objecting to this affair.



"Well, I can certainly use real food. I think I lost a few muscles after that." He teased her. Suddenly, it felt like they had talked like this for a long time.

Then, his hands snaked around her waist, tickling her, causing her to jump out of bed. "Do not do that." She chastised him before walking further away.

"I will be in the kitchen. I will try to find something we can eat." She told him as she grabbed her robe, suddenly unconscious if she was standing in front of him naked.

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In her mind, he had more than seen her body. Why should she be embarrassed by it anymore? She put the robe on before walking towards the door.

"Why don't we take a shower first?" Lance offered as he stood in front of her, naked just like the way he was born.

"As much as I like what you are offering, I think I will pass." She shook her head at the idea of taking a shower with him. Besides, her stomach was protesting. It needed nutrition.

"Are you sure?" He remained standing in front of her as if seducing her to change her mind, but she could only smile at him.

"Take your shower and follow me outside." She instructed, moving out of the room, never looking back. She was afraid, taking a peek, she might suddenly change her mind.

Once in the kitchen, she quickly rummaged her cabinets and refrigerator for anything she could prepare. Fortunately for someone who rarely cooked in her life, there were a few eggs, bacon, and some leftover bread.

But after taking a closer look at the bread, she discovered it already had molds on it. That went her plans, taking the bread and throwing it in the trash.

"Coffee, eggs, and bacon it is." She mumbled to herself, finding no other choice as her hands felt the pan. After sensing the heat, she cooked the eggs and bacon.

All that was left was to wait for the coffee to boil. And the man in her bathroom to come out. Then, they could have a mini breakfast, more or less lunch, judging by the ray of the sun by her window.

Then, the bell resounded in her entire apartment. She suddenly looked for her phone, but it was probably in the living room where she left it last night.

She wondered who would visit her since she was not expecting anyone today. But then again, it could be about work since she failed to come and report to the office today.

Once she opened the door, her body went into shock. She held her breath as if her lungs suddenly failed to breathe, or was it her heart that skipped the beat.

Whatever happened to her, she would pass out if she did not recover soon. She forced the air back to her lungs and looked at her friend, trying to put the shock away from her expression.

Outside her door stood Amelia, tears flowing down her cheeks. Suddenly, she had put two and two and came up with four. Her friend was here to talk about Lance.

But how could she invite her inside, knowing that their prince charming was inside her bathroom, taking a shower after their wild night and morning in bed?

"Can I come in?" Her friend suddenly spoke up, still standing outside her door.

Her face was a picture of pain and suffering as her makeup smudged all over her beautiful face. She quickly covered her shoulders with her arm, enveloping her in a friendly hug.

"Of course, come in." She opened her door wider and guided her to the living room. "What is wrong?" Showing concern for what her friend was going through.

Again, a series of guilt went through her, knowing what was wrong with her friend. But how could she also turn her away if she needed a friend?

However, in this situation, could she still call herself her friend? Or would it be more appropriate if she associated herself with a snake? It seemed that would be more appropriate for the situation.

She wanted to help her friend, but finding out the truth about her and her Prince seemed worse than shooting her in the heart if she saw him walk out that door, meaning her bedroom.

"During dinner last night, our fathers insisted that we were good for each other. In my heart, I wanted to believe that." Amelia told her as she sat on the couch, sobbing on her handkerchief filled with her makeup.

Quickly grabbing a tissue, she handed one to her. Then decided to put the box in front of her as she sat next to her. She wanted to listen to her, but her mind was also busy thinking of what to do with Lance.

"But..." She encouraged her to continue, thinking maybe she would be on her way home by the time Lance had finished in the bathroom. But she knew that was wishful thinking.

"Lance could not see the point of marriage. He disagreed with our father's proposal and eventually walked out of the dinner." Her friend continued narrating the event of last night.

She tried to recall her memories, but she knew she avoided looking in their direction. The only thing she remembered was the moment Lance followed her.

Was that the time he walked out on her friend? Did he decline to marry her because of her? Did he choose her over Amelia? Thousands of questions ran through her mind as she tried to focus on her friend's story. It was hard, but she had to try.

"Maybe..." She was about to give some form of advice to her friend when a loud bang sounded in her room.

"Do you have a man in your room?" Suddenly, her friend stood from her seat, probably looking at her for the first time. "I am sorry, you should have told me you have company."

She quickly grabbed a couple of more tissues and dabbed her face. "I should not have come here. Maybe I will call you, and we can talk again." Her friend seemed embarrassed to bother her.

"No, that is ok. You are always welcome to come to me anytime." But the more she talked, the more she felt like her soul was burning in hell.

"Don't worry. I am ok. I think your listening has helped me a lot." She quickly moved towards the door.

Somehow, she was slightly relieved that her friend thought it was another one of his flings. Although she planned to tell her everything about him, she felt this was not the right time and the right way.

But, as Amelia was exiting the door, the door in her room also opened wide. The man of the hour walked out of her bedroom only in a towel.

Chapter 689: The monster under the bed

Ethan raised his hand, about to knock on his door when it suddenly opened. The man he came to visit stood on the other side with a smile on his lips, welcoming.

"Ethan, glad you could make it to my humble home." His eyes darted at the man who opened the large door wide for him to enter.

He signaled for his driver and one of his bodyguards, who came with him, to stay in the car. He did not need protection from his son as far as he was concerned.

Although the other man before him still needed to learn about this dark secret. His eyes scanned the room ahead, wondering why he had no one protecting him.

Two securities guarded his gate, but he expected at the least five or ten muscled men armed with heavy weapons roaming his massive lawn.

But to his surprise, he had yet to see his mercenaries. He did assume that his son would take on his father's legacy, at least the man he had known as his father when he died.

"I did ask for this private meeting. It will be rude of me if I will not show up." Ethan answered him, still observing the kind of life his son had been living.

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His feet stopped in the hallway, seeing a particular painting that reminded him of someone. He could feel that his companion also stopped and stood at his back as he examined the artwork.

Until now, he recognized her work, looking at her initial at the bottom of the frame. "Could I touch it?"

"Sure." A pensive voice responded to him, but he understood why.

"Thanks." His voice hinted at a smile, recalling a past he had almost forgotten. It was what it felt like growing old. He was becoming emotional.

His hand extended upward, allowing his fingers to gradually lower to the paint surface. He had watched his friend paint something similar to this for years, loving how each line created a picture but depicted a feeling.

He dragged his fingers down, feeling the roughness in the tender spot at the tip of his fingers at the way her stroke created a masterpiece.

"Isn't she magnificent?" The voice behind him whispered, sighing a heavy breath afterward. It would seem just like him. This young man remembered her so memorably as well.

"She certainly is. I have not seen this work before." He knew most of her work. He watched them form and become a work of art.

However, after they had separated ways, he never saw any of her work again, except for one. The one that he had kept in his office. It was a keepsake of their friendship, the three of them. And also a constant reminder that he had a son and the mistake he committed against them.

"She did that a year before she died. She rarely painted anymore, and she was happy when she finished that." Gerald told him, but his voice seemed to have questions on them as if something bothered him.

"I am glad that she did what she loved until the end." Remembering how much she was passionate about her work. At first, she tried and tried, but nobody would like to buy her paintings. Then, when she fell in love with Joaquin, things changed.

Her hands worked like magic, and one at a time, she created paintings that captured her love and passion. It was not just colors and figures. It had meaning.

He did not understand it at that time, the power of love. When he insisted he wanted what they had, his mind and heart had no idea what they were doing.

Having Laura in his life now gave him a full grasp of what love should be, but it was too late when he had created a rift between all of them.

"Shall we proceed inside?" Gerald led the way as he backed out of the portrait and walked beside him.

He scanned the place for more things he could discover about his son. Anything that would indicate and show him what kind of personality he had besides the things he had already read in the report.

Sometimes, just looking at the sort of environment he had created around him would be enough to give him a picture of his life.

So far, there was nothing out of the ordinary that he had seen. It was just the typical house of a bachelor like him. However, his house and decoration indicated the success he had achieved in his life.

"I thought you would like to go to the garden. I set up a little snack for us." Gerald informed him, ushering him to the other side of the grand house.

It was not as big as his, but it was large enough for someone like him without a family. Probably living alone in this house was lonesome, remembering his situation in his home with Laura.

"That would be perfect," Ethan replied to his gracious host as they sat on the patio overlooking his massive pool and luscious garden.

As soon as they were seated, the door at the back opened, and uniformed personnel came nearer to them, serving some snacks he had promised.

"I hope that the fresh air is not too chilly for you," Gerald asked as he crossed his legs and laid back on his seat, breathing the cold air around them.

He could also feel the biting breeze, but it was not enough to make him uncomfortable as he also took a large gulp of air into his lungs. "Not at all." He responded, feeling the winter was coming.

As they sipped on their hot tea, Gerald tried to observe him, then watched him from the peripheral of his eyes. His host did not rush him to spill his beans, but he could see his curiosity and anxiousness to know his intent.

But his son did not need to wait long as he took one more sip of his tea before setting his cup down on the table to look at him. Up to this moment, his mind still wondered what stories his son heard from his mother or father about him.

He would assume that it was not quite a fairy tale based on his actions. Maybe it was more like he was the monster under the bed.

Chapter 690: Biological father

"I know you wonder why I ask for this private meeting?" Ethan began entwining his two hands together on his lap as he tilted his head down to watch them together.

His mind had rehearsed what he would say to his son since he had decided to tell him the truth. But now that he was a few feet away from him, it would seem that his words failed him as he finally looked into his face, nose, lips, cheeks, and the entire structure of his face.

There was no denying that Gerald was his son. He could see his younger self in him, but he also saw a piece of his mother in him. How could he have abandoned his search for him? All those lost time.

"Yes, I doubt this had anything to do with the cases since I already discussed that with Alex and Dani," Gerald answered him, still seemingly unaware of his real purpose for coming to see him.

However, he could see now that behind his smile was hidden anger. His assumption was correct. His mission today would not be easy as telling him the truth.

"Nope. It has not, and it also had nothing to do with business." Ethan's voice, although loud, still had lost its strength. "It is more personal, and it involves our connected past."

His eyes narrowed, directing at him as if mentioning that past had triggered something in him. The anger that was so subtle earlier was finally taking a peek. Soon, he could count that it would come out in the open.

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"What do you mean?" His son's voice elevated by an octave compared to before, but he could see that he was still trying to control his temper, but his hands clenched at the side was not a good indication.

However, as much as he also wanted to protect his son from the truth, it had to come out eventually. He realized now that it was not wise for him to believe he could carry it to his grave.

"I am aware that you knew my association with your parents." He observed his son's eyes, and Gerald did not deny it.

His face remained lacking expression, not wanting his son to misconstrue his feelings. But inside his heart, he was trembling in fear that he might reject him. But what did he expect after what he did to him?

He believed it was only ok for his son to hate him for his horrible actions. He knew he should accept whatever punishment was given to him because that was what he deserved. But for a father, he still hoped.

Leaning forward to the table, he stared directly into his eyes, knowing that this was the moment of truth. He placed his hand on top of the table, using it as support, but he was not afraid of the possible outcome. He would gladly accept whatever it was.

“Yes,” Gerald finally admitted. “My mother had mentioned your name a couple of times. She told me you used to be friends with her and my father.”

Then, his son stopped as if he was reorganizing his thoughts, carefully rearranging what he was about to say to him. But he would wait until he was ready to tell him what he knew.

After a few seconds, his eyes slightly blaze in anger. “Ok, I will admit, I hated you. You are the reason why I never had a normal family.”

His hands entwined in front of him, leaning forward and following his lead. His eyes blazed with hatred as they focused on his. “My father told me how you tried to destroy our lives.”

That was it.

He knew now what happened to his son. Joaquin had turned him against him, his father. His friend’s final vengeance against him, using his son to bring him down.

“I hope I can deny it.” His eyes lowered to his hand, again ashamed of what he had done. “But in a way, it was true. I did bring pain and misery to Joaquin and Marietta.”

His admission only angered Gerald even more. As if he had just confirmed everything his father had said to him. But he hoped that he would still give him a chance to explain his side.

“Then, what are you doing here? Are you asking for a bullet in between your eyes?” Gerald said in a threatening voice, and from the expression on his face, he knew that his son could do such things.

“If that is what I deserve, I will accept it, but I hope you will give me a chance to tell my side as my dying wish.” He was not afraid of death. He had accepted long ago that at any time, he could die.

No amount of money or power or even prayer could save a man’s life.

But he had defied death several times before, but this time, he was sure if he could cheat him once again.

He could see his son watching him, surprised by his answer. He probably thought he would shrink in fear and beg for his life. But that was not why he was here.

“What do you want from me, old man?” This time, Gerald was just indifferent. He knew that his son was only indulging him, but he had no plans to believe what he would say.

But here it was.

“I want to get to know my son.” The words flowed on his lips without stopping. It was loud and clear, and there could be no reason for him not to understand it.

He examined his son’s face, covered with bewilderment, probably unable to process what he had said. But a few seconds, it swiftly transformed into fury as his face turned red in rage.

“What are you talking about?” He suddenly stood up from his seat and grabbed him by his collar with one hand, and then his other hand balled up into a fist on his side. “I am not your son, and you are not my father.”

His eyes clouded with rage had looked at him, but he never wavered. He kept his eyes on him, not wanting to break their only connection.

If this could be the only time he could touch his son, he would grab the chance as he moved his hands and gripped the young man in his arms.

His touch did not mean to stop him. It was only a mere opportunity to stay connected with him. As his cold hands felt his warm skin, he somehow felt his blood flowing in him.

Even if Gerald did not forgive him, he was his son, and he was his father. He could die happy knowing he had finally told him the truth. He was his biological father.