

Royal Contract 821

Chapter 831: Eternal love

Everything looked amazing, from the chandeliers hanging down the ceilings to the elegant colored curtains hanging on the walls and the splendid mini orchestra playing in the background.

Laura believed her daughter and her husband, with their friends, had outdone her and her late husband in preparing this Annual event. She could not be prouder of what her daughter had done.

She was also sure her husband would be proud of her for taking his place as the new hostess of this Annual Charity Event that her father started decades ago. A tradition that she promised to continue in memory of her father's memory.

"Do you like it?" Someone sneaked behind her back, hugging her while resting her chin on her shoulders. She was slightly startled, but she recognized her voice immediately. "Do you think I did a good job?" Her daughter asked, but she could hear a bit of doubt in her voice.

She could not blame Dani for her fear. It was only natural since it was her first time. But seeing what her daughter had accomplished in her debut, she could only imagine what else she could do in the future.

She remembered last year, the last time she did this with Ethan. She believed she was shaking with anxiousness, wondering if she had done anything wrong. To think she had been doing this for decades.

But for her daughter to do this for the first time at this level, she could only clap her hands and sing her praises. She believed her daughter should be proud that she had successfully pulled off an event of this magnitude.

.....

She took her hand that was dangling before her and kissed her knuckles. "You did a marvelous job, my Princess." Her eyes roamed again around the room, inspecting every crook and cranny of the place.

Honestly, she could not find anything that would not satisfy her fancy. She was a terrible critic because she loved perfection in everything she did.

She only wanted the best because she only wanted to give her best for her husband, who had always given her more than his hundred percent. She loved it when Ethan would praise her final work. It made all her effort more valuable and worth her while.

"You know you should stop calling me that. I am already a full-grown woman." Dani interrupted her thought, bringing her back to the present.

She looked at her daughter with her stunning gown and could not agree with her more. She had grown up to be a fine young woman, a respectable lawyer, and now the leader of his father's empire.

Soon, she would dominate this industry with her husband, running it just like her father. But still, it would not stop her from treating her like her little Princess. Nevertheless, something else could change her mind.

"I will only stop calling you my Princess once you give me a grandchild that I can call my new Princess or Prince." Laura countered, speaking what her heart most desired. "Please, do it soon because I am old and tired of waiting." She pleaded with her eyes.

She might have lost her husband, but, in the meantime, she was looking forward to meeting her future grandchildren. Losing someone did not always mean the end of the world. That life should stop existing.

She just had to refocus her energy on something else until the time came that she would be reunited with him again. There was no rush, just anticipation. But she believed it would be one happy reunion.

"You are not yet old, Mom, and you are not even sick. So, you can still wait." Dani also teased her.

She faced her daughter and tendered a soft kiss on her cheeks. She certainly missed her company, but she knew her daughter was now a busy woman. She could not hug her time.

"Where are Alex and your friends? I also want to congratulate them for doing a great job." Her eyes scanned the room, finding Alex walking toward them.

Looking at his son-in-law, with his dashing and genuine smile, she suddenly remembered the first time she saw him with her daughter. She always knew that he was the one for her. She had seen it in his eyes, how much she loved her. And she was right.

"Hello, Laura. I hope you are having a great time." Alex greeted her, hugging her before planting a kiss on her forehead. "You look stunning as always. Are you ready for the party of the year?"

"You look quite a debonair yourself, Alex." She appraised him from head to toe while he paraded his tux before her. "Well, you should watch this one. Many would surely be eyeing him tonight."

She playfully bantered with Dani and Alex, enjoying the youthful conversation she had as the other organizers joined them as they waited for the official start of the celebration.

"Don't you think this party will be better with children running around?" She turned to Alex, who had a naughty glint in his eyes. Well, she knew he got her message, loud and clear.

"Mom, they will come when it is time. Stop pressuring Jacky and Marcus." Dani was good, placing the spotlight on her friends.

"First, we had to get married before talking about babies." Jacky countered. "And stop pointing fingers." Jacky turned to her daughter.

Everybody was laughing, and that was all that mattered.

She knew that her daughter had many surprises stored for the event. She could not wait for its revelations. She had asked her about it, but she was tightlipped about some. Although, she did share a few where she would be participating.

"We still believed that you could have outdone us if you had arranged this celebration. You are still the best in organizing big events like this." Jacky interjected, praising her for all her past works.

Having no job and staying at home had given her the luxury of time. Organizing for birthdays, anniversaries, and other celebrations had become a passion for her.

“Well, I appreciate the praises, but I will soon have to pass the crown to you guys. I think all of you are doing a great job of following in my footsteps.” Her hands waved in the air, pointing to the beautiful ballroom around her.

She could already picture the hundreds of people filling this room, in awe just like her. For the first time after all those years of attending this event, she would be like them, not the host but just a spectator, a guest in this glorious gathering.

“We have to go, Laura. But we will be seeing more of you later.” One by one, they left her as they attended to their obligations to this party.

She could only wish them good luck because it would be a long night for all of them. Handling a crowd this size would not be a piece of cake. But she was glad that her daughter had people to support her.

“I love you, Mom. I did all this for you and Dad.” Dani hugged her again, whispering in her ears.

She believed she did, and she loved her more for it.

“I know. I love you too, my Princess.” She stepped away from her daughter before they started crying, seeing the tears forming in her daughter’s eyes. “Now, make this party a night to remember.” Pushing her daughter away to go with her husband.

It was time to cut the string and let her daughter soar to greatness. She and her late husband had done their job. Now it was her turn to create her new legacy.

“You look lovely, Laura.” She turned around and found some old friends who were early to the event. She guessed it was time to entertain their guests. Well, it was her honor to be part of this celebration.

“You also looked lovely, my friend. And thank you for joining us today.” She began, hugging her friend and ushering her and her companion to a nearby table where they could talk much better.

“You know we will never miss this event. We will continue to support your daughter.” Her guest tapped her hand as concern covered her friend’s face. “But we all miss him.”

She knew some of them would not understand how painful it was to lose a loving husband and a great partner, but it was the hardest thing she had to face throughout her life.

But Ethan would never like her to mourn for him. He would rather see her celebrate life because she was still here with their daughter. She could still create memories with her and their future grandchildren.

“Yes, we all miss him.” She genuinely smiled at her friends, showing them that it might be difficult. But she would survive this. She would live for him.

Her eyes automatically searched the room for his presence. She did this every time someone mentioned his name in a conversation. However, she knew she would not find him anywhere.

She recalled in the past that she never had to search long when looking for him. Her eyes could easily spot him in the crowd, and her ears could recognize his voice in the short distance, either talking or joking with their guests.

Ethan was a presence that was hard to miss, not because he was a big man but because everyone loved him. But tonight, her eyes would not see him, neither her ears hear him speak or laugh again.

But her heart would continue to sense his presence. He would always be here with them. She might not be able to touch him physically, but her body could feel him in the air. His voice would float in the wind, whispering in her ears.

So, she would smile because she knew he was smiling with her. She would enjoy this night because someday, she would be telling him all about this magical night that her daughter prepared, honoring his life.

It might all sound crazy, but her heart begged to disagree. For her, this was what eternal love was all about.

Chapter 832: A good girl all year round

Amelia did not have to go far to attend the Grand Charity Ball. All she had to do was go down from the tower she was staying, and voila, she would be part of the massive celebration everyone would talk about for years.

She knew she should be excited to be part of this once-in-a-lifetime event. She would be helping numerous charitable institutions, coming from the support they would receive from all the guests participating in this event.

“What is wrong with you?” Pointing to herself as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. “You should be happy. You flew all this way because you are excited about helping these people.”

She kept talking to herself, reminding herself why she was here in the first place. But her heart was not listening to her brain as it went on a downward spiral.

Honestly, all she wanted to do was fly back to Eida and Angela rather than go to this party. She had attended so many parties like this that she would prefer the company of her friends.

“Yeah, right?” Her inner self taunted her, knowing exactly the truth behind her melancholy. It was not because she missed her friends. She was yearning for someone else she knew she would not find here.

“No. I am not.” She denied it once again. But who was she kidding? It was written all over her face and embedded in her eyes.

.....

All the proof was there.

Her heart already knew what it wanted. All she had to do was open her eyes to see and allow her ears to listen. But of course, fear always stood in the way.

“Why do I want you when thousands of men out there were better than you?” She uttered in frustration, knowing she had to fight what she was feeling.

She had been hurt countless times before by Lance's rejection. She was afraid to get her heart broken again. A great possibility if she would allow her heart to take this lead. She was better off listening to her mind.

"I am better off without him." She said with determination. "I am sure there is a single man out there meant for her." She could try to find him instead. As she said, there were thousands of men out there. She was bound to meet one at the party that could be better than him.

Quickly, she stood up from her bed and rushed to the bathroom. A quick hot shower should keep her blood flowing. She readied herself for the party, prepared to meet new people with fake enthusiasm. Well, she was trying her best.

When she was about to wear her new dress, she stumbled on the paper bags Haley suggested she buy yesterday. Her new friends insisted it would be handy on several occasions like this one and for sleeping.

In total honesty, she could not see the logic of putting on something that barely hid anything. Anyway, she already bought it, might as well try it. Besides, there was no one here to see her sporting it and no one to judge her.

"Ok." She picked one from the selection of bags, something that would match her dress, not that she was wearing it tonight. She was only trying it on out of curiosity.

After donning it, she understood what her friends were buzzing about, seeing it fit her body provocatively. Without her friend's watchful eyes and nosiness, she finally felt the effect of these flimsy materials on her body.

It still made her uncomfortable, but somehow, she agreed it made her feel different. She never felt sexier and more daring as she stared at herself in the mirror, looking at someone she could barely recognize.

Maybe she should wear it tonight, for a change. She thought as she once again modeled her body before the mirror. She loved wearing beautiful, elegant clothes. But honestly, she was not daring enough when it had to do with flaunting her body.

Then, her phone rang. It was Haley calling. "Hey, I am almost there. I will meet you at the party." Her friend told her. Then, she left a few instructions before hanging up on her. She seemed to be whispering and in a hurry.

She could only surmise that she was probably with her date. She wondered who her date was because Haley had forgotten to mention his name. But she also did not ask, or maybe she did. She just forgot.

Now, she had to hurry. Although the party would start much later, they wanted to be the first to arrive to see the final details. They could not leave the finishing touches to the coordinators because that was where the problem usually occurred. Then it would be harder to fix the issue.

"I guess it is time." She finished her preparation and rushed to the door, ready to face her obligation for the night.

A few minutes later, she was crossing the lobby floors on her way to the massive ballroom where the event would happen. Although she was not part of the whole process, she could not help but be proud to be part of this gathering for a good cause.

Finally, she was feeling the celebratory mood, infected by the buzzing of the people around her. Her thoughts of not wanting to attend this party had slowly dissipated in the air.

She was busy explaining to the coordinator that the flower arrangement was slightly wrong. But she was adamant that she had it right according to the specification.

"I was there when Haley told you how she wanted it done. So, I know this is missing some things on it." She insisted, not wanting a hiccup in their preparations. "Look at the other table." She moved to the nearby table and grabbed the vase in the center.

"Did this look like the same to you?" Comparing the two vases full of flowers. It did not. "Please, fix this."

The woman seemed embarrassed by her mistake as she promised to look into it. It was not Amelia's job, but Haley was still not here, so she had to take over her job until she arrived.

Well, she wanted it fixed, but before they could finish her instruction. A warm, big, soft hand covered her face, blocking her eyesight. She could tell it was a man judging from his large hand and presence behind her.

Immediately her thought told her it was him. Evan was here. She felt giddy like a child who had an early Christmas gift. Honestly, she believed she deserved it because she had been a good girl all year round.

Chapter 833: Soaring free

Amelia could not wait to turn around and see his face and hear his voice. Suddenly she could not lie to herself anymore. She did not want to continue to be alone.

She wanted him to be here and be with her, longing to spend and enjoy the night with his company. Would it be nice if he would dance with her, share a few drinks, and laugh with her?

She knew she could not fight her feelings for him anymore. "Evan!" She expressed excitedly, guessing the man who had his hand covering her eyes. But something was wrong when he spoke. She knew it immediately.

She could not help the disappointment that washed over her. "Hello, Amelia. It is nice to see you here." A familiar voice greeted her, making her realize he was not the man she wished to see.

When she turned around, her eyes confirmed what she had already guessed. The man was not Evan. Her enthusiasm disappeared as quickly as it had come as she forced a smile on her lips when she faced the man.

"Hi, Tony. Nice to see you too." She greeted an acquaintance whom she met at several charity events. She would not count him as a friend, although he was persistent in getting her attention and pretending they were close.

He once expressed his wish to court her, but when she shut him down years ago, he had accepted it gracefully. From then on, he just pretended that they were close friends.

.....

In truth, he creeped her out a few times, but she did not want to be rude since he had not done anything to warrant it. It was more of just a feeling of being uncomfortable around him.

"I can see that you are busy." He said, probably noticing a few staff waiting for their instructions before them. "But I only want to greet you. I hope you will be saving me dance for tonight."

She moved a few steps backward away from him, putting a considerable space between them. Although she was not afraid of him, she did not want to give him any false ideas that she was interested in him.

She admired Tony for all the support he had been giving many charitable institutions. He owned several jewelry businesses in most parts of the world, making him a very wealthy man.

He was handsome and charming, but there was something about him that she did not like. She could not pinpoint it, but her mind was nagging to stay away from a man like him.

"I am busy." She was not lying since she had tons of things to do. But she welcomed the alibi if that would make him leave her alone. Not that he was bothering her, as she said, she never felt comfortable around his presence. "I probably will be busy the entire night. I might not have time for dancing."

She hoped that he would take the message that she would not have time to chitchat with him. The last thing she wished for tonight was to spend it with him or dance with him.

Could this night get any worse? She hoped not as she looked at the man before her.

"I am sure we can work something out." He said before he began to move away, winking at her before disappearing from her sight.

There went her peace of mind. Not only was Evan not here, but now she also had to deal with a man obsessed with being too friendly with her. She only wished he would become busy with the other guests so he would not bother her much.

"Well, I hope you would not mind if I attend to my obligations." She excused herself with a smile, but before she could turn around away from him.

Tony grabbed her hand and raised it to his lips, planting a kiss on her knuckles. She wanted to snatch her hand away from him. However, she did not want to make a scene.

The place was starting to pack up with guests. A scene like that would cause disturbance and extra attention that she did not want. Instead, she smiled and slowly took her hands away from him.

"Until later then." He bowed to her with a victorious smile that made her skin crawl. But like before, all she could do was smile as she watched him leave. But after dismissing the staff, her eyes landed on a pair of eyes intently watching her.

This time, she did not want to look away as his eyes locked with her gaze. Then, he moved toward her without breaking their connection. She wished to make a step, but it would seem her feet were unmovable on their spot.

“Who was that guy?” He asked with a voice partly tinged with indifference. As if he wished to look disinterested, but his eyes were telling her otherwise. His eyes continued to narrow on the departing guy, disappearing behind the crowd.

“Nobody. Just someone who loves to donate.” She answered him honestly. She did not want any personal association with that man. Other than as one of the people she dealt with in her profession.

“Well, he seems too cozy to be just a client.” He expressed his concern. Or was that accusation in his voice? “Is that how you treat all your donors? Maybe I should be donating more to get such treatment and attention.”

Was he jealous? That was her only conclusion. But that sounded more incredulous.

Why would he be? They were nothing to each other, although her heart wished they could be something much more than friends. But at the moment, she doubted if they were even friends.

“What are you saying, Evan?” Suddenly, she did not like what was coming out of his mouth. It was like his voice was accusing her of some wrongdoing that she was not aware of doing.

“Nothing.” He suddenly retracted, probably sensing the hostility in her voice too. “I am sorry. I should not have said those things.”

“No, you should not have.” She turned away from him. “What is wrong with you?” Now her voice raised a decibel higher as frustration mixed with anger coursed through her veins.

She turned away from him, having enough of him. Her excitement about seeing him had turned to dismay after what he had said. No amount of apology could take back what he said.

But before she could move away, his grip on her wrist stopped her. Then she felt him yank her back to him. She was out of balance on her heels and landed directly on his chest.

“You.” He uttered in his barely controlled anger. “You are what is wrong with me.” After his declaration, she lost all ability to speak.

She was trapped.

She was lost.

Then, she found herself soaring free.

Chapter 834: Scared of the past

The ride from her apartment to the party had been full of chatter and laughter. Gerald knew what to say most of the time. He was intelligent, humorous, and a typical charming knight in shining armor.

Now, she stood beside him as his date for the night, in front of a group of his clients. She learned that it was not hard to like him because all of these people only had high praises for him.

He had been the perfect gentleman ever since she had met him. Honestly, she had yet to find fault in him. The only flaw she managed to dig about him when she searched him on the internet was a few cases he lost defending his pro bono cases. She could hardly fault him about that.

“You are lucky to be dating this fine young man.” The sweet lady told her, patting her on the hand. “If I am still young, I would point a gun at him and force him to marry me.” It caused an uproar with the other guests.

“You mean to say you don’t think I was not as hot as him when you finally agreed to marry me.” Her husband reacted and complained, looking like his heart was just broken, making stubbing gestures towards his heart.

“You know I marry you for the money, dear.” She teased her husband for forty years, creating more laughter among friends. Everybody knew that the two had an almost perfect marriage. At least that was what everybody could see.

“I will try to look at my options.” Haley jokingly said to the adorable couple, not wanting to appear affected by their bantering. But honestly, any woman would be lucky to marry a man like him.

.....

He seemed perfect in every sense.

But that was usually where the warning bells go off.

Nobody could be without any defect or imperfection. In her book, everyone had a skeleton hiding in their closet, waiting for its revelation at the most unfortunate time.

But that was the problem with finding a new partner. She had to open herself up to all kinds of risks. She had to trust someone before he would trust her to show her who he was.

“I think you have planted enough silly ideas in her head.” Gerald smiled at the other guests before excusing them from their company. “If you don’t mind, I want to dance with my date.”

He pulled her to the dance floor, then held her body against his, leading her to the rhythm of the slow music. “I hope you did not take them too seriously. They could be a handful sometimes.” He whispered near her ears.

She would be a hypocrite if she denied that his voice did not tickle her spine down to his toes and his hands had not electrified her, making her exhilarated not because of the celebration but his presence.

“Don’t worry. I don’t think your friends said anything I have not figured out myself.” She admitted to him that she knew more than enough about him. “But I do wonder what else you are hiding.”

She looked up to his face, staring into his eyes, trying to read his thoughts, but all she saw was his admiration directed at her. Instead of making her doubt his intention, she felt more hooked on his appeal.

Either he was genuinely interested in her, or he was good at acting. After all, he was a great litigator, winning most of his cases. He was good at his words and making bluffs. He was no different from a liar and a performer.

“So, you have been researching about me. Smart girl.” He nodded in approval. “But you should not trust everything you read on the net. Some of it might be real, but many might not be what it seems.” He continued to warn her.

She knew those words should send chills through her bones. Not the kind of excitement that had her toes curling but the one that had her lips trembling in fright.

But honestly, she was not afraid of him, not even one bit. But her mind still insisted that she did not know him. He could still end up a psychopath, a killer hiding in the guise of a saint.

“Of course, I have to. I had to be sure that you are who you said you are.” But still, what she knew about him could only be a quarter of his true identity. “But you are right. The articles could be wrong.”

She believed it would probably take months or even years before he would show his true colors. In the meantime, all she would see was only the good side of him.

It was the reason she would rather stay single. She had no time for building a relationship and the patience to wait to get to know one. Then, eventually, she would be disappointed to learn that he was not the man she wanted in the end.

But was she ready to take that risk with this man?

“Are you ready to tell me everything? Confess to all your crimes.” She playfully asked, smiling sweetly at him as he swayed her to the music.

She knew she was threading on delicate and uneven grounds. She barely knew the man. Technically, this was just their second date if she considered last night as a date.

However, she could not help but test the waters if he would say something that would make her feel differently about him. Why wait for the dirt to come off when she could peel it now?

“I think we are not in that stage just yet. But I assure you, I have many secrets under my belt.” Gerald looked at her with that boyish smile planted on his lips. “Just like you have things you still do not wish for me to find out.”

Then, he had her twirling around in time for the music before catching her again. She landed on his chest with his eyes fixed on hers. She felt trapped in them, unable to look away.

It sounded like he was scaring her away, telling her she should run for the hills. But her feet remained planted on the floor, and her hand entwined with his.

She knew she was not running away. Instead of fear, she took it as a challenge. Just like her, she believed that they were the same. Their secrets had them hiding in the guise of their careers.

Unable to risk trusting people again.

Afraid to be judged.

Haley believed he was scared of the past that haunted him all his life, just like her.

Chapter 835: A moth to a flame

"Are you scaring me away?" Haley asked, smiling but slightly confused. "Because if that was your intention, you have to do better than that." She was breathing heavily in his arms.

He could feel her fast heartbeat as she pressed her body against his. She could feel her labored breath against his skin as she looked up at his face. There was no sign of fear in her eyes, only defiance.

He wanted to warn her because she was someone that his sister knew. Dani was her friend. She was not just a stranger. But what could he do when she did not want to stay away?

He could not understand his fascination with her since the day he saw her. He thought he could put himself at bay and distract himself by using other women. But seeing her again had him obsessing over her.

"Don't tell me I did not warn you. Because honestly, I can't stop thinking about you." He pulled her closer to his body, making her feel how much she had been on his mind.

He could feel how her body reacted to his words and his nearness. He could see how her lips parted, waiting for his kiss. Her eyes reflected what he was feeling about her.

She desired him as much as he wanted to possess her. He knew he could take her anytime he wished, but that was not his game. It could not just be sex with her. It should be something more.

.....

"What if I say that I feel the same way?" She admitted, seemingly unafraid of what she was offering to him on a silver platter. "I don't know why but you intrigued me. I know I should not trust you, but I want to take that risk."

He was surprised by her admission. Honestly, he expected that she would put on a fight. But he did not think that she would surrender herself to him this easily.

He had no idea if this was just a game, but from what he had learned about her. She did not like to play games. She had not been in a relationship for a long time. Now, he was more intrigued than usual.

"You have no idea what you are offering me, but I don't say no to a good offer on the table." He once again whispered in her ears. "Are you sure about this?"

He was a man with needs. At that moment, he knew he wanted her so much. It took all his self-control from pulling her aside and taking what he wanted from her.

But he was not a total monster. He still had respect for women. He only liked women who were willing to sleep with him. He did not take pleasure in forcing himself on any one of them.

But instead of answering him with words, she snaked her hands around his neck and pulled him down to her. She planted a soft kiss on his lips, initiating something that he believed he would not like to stop.

"What about joining me in my room for a few minutes?" He offered when they came up for air.

As soon as she nodded, he quickly pulled her to the other end of the ballroom, outside the lobby. Then into an elevator on their way to a room he rented for the night.

“Are you sure about this?” He again whispered in her ears as they stood with the other occupants of the small box, lifting them to his floor.

He was not sure why she was asking her about this again. He should be rejoicing that she wanted this as much as he did. But he could not stop asking himself if she would need more from him.

Usually, he would not care about these things. He sometimes entered a short fling but usually ended it with a clean breakup. No fuss. No mess. He did not make any false promise of marriage but just a good affair.

Immediately, he dismissed his thoughts, wanting to concentrate on enjoying her company. He could always deal with the consequence later. At the moment, he did not wish to ruin the night by overthinking this.

Whatever was happening to him?

“Yes,” Haley whispered back to him, holding his hand tighter to indicate that she was not backing out of this. He could tell from how her body was reacting to him and not just by her words that she wanted this as much as he did.

Finally, the elevator stopped on his floor, and once they were out, he quickly pulled her towards his room, unlocking the door, allowing her to enter freely. Then, when he closed the door, he knew he could not stop what would happen next.

Instead of offering her anything to drink, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Not the usual kiss that would make her toes curl but the kind of kiss that would leave her panting for more. Because this night would not be about him, but it would be all about her needs.

“I want you so much.” He whispered into her ears as his lips and tongue glided to her slender neck. “I would not be able to stop if I continue to kiss you like this. Tell me now if you don’t want me to...” But he was silent by her finger as it landed on his lips.

“I don’t want you to stop. I also want this so much.” She confessed to him as she returned his kisses with the same intensity. “Please, do not stop.” She begged him as her arm snaked around his shoulders while her fingers buried in his hair.

He knew there was no turning back as she had said what he needed to hear. They were two consulting adults. He trusted that she knew what she was entering when she had agreed to join him tonight.

He was not a predator, but he was no saint.

She was not a helpless prey either.

She was more like a moth to a flame. So brave to go after what she wanted, oblivious of the danger awaiting her.

Chapter 836: Only lifeline

I like her. I want to take a chance with her.

Saying all those words to her felt like a heavy boulder rolled off his shoulder. His heart felt light while his mind was set free. Would it be too much if he said he was a changed man?

Evan knew his revelation shocked her. It was evident in her eyes when he looked at her. But her eyes also told him that she felt the same way. She wanted this too, as much as he did.

But before he could question her more. To tell himself that he was not just imagining it. Someone interrupted them. Her obligation took her away from him.

"I am sorry. But I need to attend to this." Amelia strode away reluctantly from him.

But he was not walking away from her. He was not giving up this time. He would push through how he felt about her, no matter the consequences. He was not running away from his feelings this time.

"I will be waiting." Even if it took him forever, he would be there for her. He had never felt like this before. He was scared out of his wits, but the feeling of anticipation outweighed all his fears.

.....

He believed it was not a mere desire of the flesh that he wanted from her. It was more, but having not much experience in courting a girl. He felt lost.

As he stood on the sidelines, casually conversing with the other guests, his eyes remained glued to her everywhere she went. She would disappear behind the curtains, or other people block her view, but his eyes would still find her.

He had never stalked a woman before. Suddenly, it felt like he now had a first-hand experience of doing it as he watched her every move. But in his defense, she knew he was stalking her, waiting for an opportunity to be with her again.

"Hey, you made it." A female voice walked beside him, slightly startling him. He was so intent on not losing her out of sight that he did not see his friend coming.

"Hi! Rosella." He greeted David's fiancée. "Yeah, my grandmother insisted I attend this party and not abandon my friends." But he knew his grandmother's intention. He was thankful for her suggestion.

"I am glad that you took her advice. I am sure that your grandma is just fine this weekend. You could always fly to visit next week." Rosella patted him on his arm for assurance.

"David and the gang are having a conversation over there. Maybe you would like to join us." Rosella offered, pointing to the other end of the ballroom.

He had considered that before, but it would take him away from her. In this position, he had a better view of her whereabouts. He did not want to lose her out of his sight.

"No, I am good here for now. I will join you a bit later." Evan pretended to discuss something with the people in his group like he had been doing these past few minutes.

But it would seem that she was not buying it as she kept staring at him with those questioning eyes. He could tell she had noticed how he had been staring at Amelia all this time. His eyes could not stop seeking her out.

"Well, you can pretend all you want, but I am not buying the act," Rosella whispered in her ears. "Aren't you tired of this cat and mouse chase?" She asked as her eyes followed his and spotted Amelia talking to some people.

"I have no idea what you are talking about." He suddenly questioned if he should regret telling them his secret.

But he knew Rosella only meant well. She would always look after his interest because she was a good friend. But sometimes, she liked to snoop into his business like it was her business.

He eventually excused himself from the group to get away from her. He strode to the bar where he could get a drink, but he could tell she was still following him. She was not done with him yet.

"Stop fooling yourself, Evan. Stop being afraid of what you are feeling and take the plunge. I promise you it would all be alright." Suddenly he felt like one of her students, being told what to do.

But he was not taking offense. He recognized when he was in the wrong. Rosella had always been right when she said he would eventually meet his match.

"Some woman would make you crazy, and you could never stop thinking about her." Those were her words that he thought were a curse, but now, he honestly believed it was a blessing that the girl turned out to be Amelia.

"Stop, Rosella. I get what you are saying." Evan did not need another lecture from her.

"No, you don't because if you did. You will not be standing here, staring at Amelia like a damn stalker." Rosella stared at him with those big, round eyes like he had been a schoolboy who had done a terrible deed.

"Yes, I do. I already admitted to Amelia that I like her." At least, he believed that was what he said to her as he finished the drink in his hand.

"Really!" Rosella exclaimed happily, jumping excitedly in front of him. "Tell me, what did you say exactly to her." Suddenly, she pulled him by the shoulder and made him look at her. "Tell me." She insisted.

He knew she would not stop, but he tried to recall the exact words. "She asked if there was something wrong with me." He told her as he recollected his statement earlier.

"Then, what did you say?" Rosella asked with anticipation. He could see that she could hardly wait to hear what he said.

"I said that she was what was wrong with me." He believed that was what he told her. Then, he realized he did not say the words. The words that would inform her about what he felt. It only repeated in his mind, but he did not speak it out loud.

"Then?" She asked, waiting.

"That was it." He admitted, feeling like a fool. He wondered if he had scared her away, angered her, or even made her hate him. He knew then that it did not sound good on his end, repeating it now to her friend.

Judging from the look on his friend's face, she was not impressed. She was more horrified than happy with what he did. Who would be, realizing his mistake? He knew he had to rectify the matter.

Suddenly, he felt like he was a fish drowning in the sea of his stupidity. His only lifeline was her, and she was slipping through his fingers.

Chapter 837: No guts. No glory.

It had been long since she had last felt this way. It was great, yet, all they had been doing so far was kissing and a bit of touching. Truthfully, he was a way better kisser than in her past relationships. Not that she had many and lasting.

Haley had three on and off serious ones, but it all ended badly. She had learned the hard way that they all only wanted one thing from her, money and power. They only used her love to get what they wanted. But that was then when she was still naive and foolish.

"Wait," Gerald suddenly pulled back, holding her face in the palms of his hands. Then, he stared at her as if demanding her attention. He kissed her one more time before letting her lips go. "I got to get this."

She did not even notice that his phone rang. Or maybe it was in silent mode. But she sat and waited for him to get back as he moved to the window to talk in private. It did not take long.

When he got back, he assisted her off the couch and let her stand beside him as he reached for the remote. Then, soft music echoed in the room. He started dancing with her, leading her to the gentle sound.

When the song ended, he stopped. "Do you want something to drink?" He offered, moving to the side of the room, grabbing two glasses and a wine bottle.

All of this seemed familiar to her. It was a classic move before proceeding to the next phase. She had seen it countless times before, in movies and in real life. It was nothing new.

.....

"Yes, please." After a few seconds, he was back at her side. She accepted a glass of wine and took a sip, allowing the alcoholic beverage to add to her courage.

She might not be innocent, but she doubted she was in the same league as him. She did not doubt that he was an expert in seducing a woman. She was not that naive to realize that.

His hands returned to caress her cheeks before he lowered his head and whispered something in her ears. "Take off your clothes for me." It was such a hoarse request that sent tingles on her bones.

Instead of alarming bells, thrill sent waves of excitement throughout her body, only wanting to please by obeying his order. She knew she should be wary and run. However, she would rather stay and see through this new challenge.

Besides, nobody had ever tried to order her around before. All her past relationships only wished to show her what they thought would advance their agenda.

All her ex-boyfriends appeared like true gentlemen who could not hurt a fly, showing only their good sides. But inside, they were monsters, hiding behind their cute smiles and masquerades.

"Why?" Of course, she was a bit hesitant. She was not as bold when it came to sex. She was not that experienced.

She stood in the middle of his room, debating whether she should undress before him. It was different when he was the one doing it compared to her, giving him a show.

"It would prove that you want this and not just me. Besides, I want to see what lays under that beautiful dress." Gerald returned to the sofa and sat comfortably, sipping his wine as if he could not wait for her performance.

Suddenly, she wondered if he was trying to scare her away. Then, she remembered the constant question of whether she wanted this. It was as if he was giving her a chance to back out. But it was only fueling her curiosity about him.

It seemed Gerald was different. He was not afraid to show her who he was and what he wanted from her. He was willing to point out that he was in command in this situation.

He was a contrast to all the boys she had dated. He was a complete badass, and he was not hiding it. "What about you? Are you not going to take your clothes off" She dared to ask as she let her fingers touch the zipper of her dress.

"I will but ladies first." His eyes followed her fingers as they glided down on her side, loosening the dress she was wearing. Fortunately, the zipper worked this time.

Soon, her dress ended up on a pool at her feet as she stood in her new lingerie before him. She stepped aside and picked up her gown, placing it neatly on the armrest of a chair before standing straight before him.

She slightly felt uncomfortable, but the appreciation reflected in his eyes ignited burning confidence inside her. Then, he reached for her hand and tugged her until she sat on his lap.

Then, there was no more time to think as his lips claimed hers in a possessive kiss, demanding for her to surrender to his control. He took the lead in the kiss, not giving her an inch to resist. This time there was no turning back.

"I want your clothes off, too." She breathily said, but her hands started working on his shirt, unbuttoning them until she could feel his skin against the palm of her hands.

Then, it was a fight for control as both wanted something from the other. An intense need that both desire to be fulfilled. Still, both minds debated whether they were doing the right thing.

But, of course, pleasure took over all reasoning as both indulged their need for the flesh. But as the saying went, regret always came after the deed was over and not before.

Not that she had any plan to regret this night. She came here sober, in her right mind, not coerced in any way. She had decided that, after a long time, she would like to take a risk with this man.

"You are perfect." He huskily said in his low voice as he pulled her on top of him on the long sofa.

She doubted that. She never had a stellar life in contrast to what everyone thought. A girl who had everything, that was what she always heard. To others, it seemed she was living a dream, but to her, it was a curse.

Now, she hoped to break that curse and feel normal again. She wished to try again with a man who seemed to desire her. Not because of her money or power, but simply because of her.

But was he the right man? She had no clue.

But one thing was for sure she ought to try.

No guts. No glory.

Chapter 838: Worth saving

Dani walked toward the center of the stage, thanking everyone for pledging their support to the organization. The celebration had barely started, but they had almost reached their quota for the night.

The rest of what they would be collecting would be just a bonus that they could add to their foundation so they could help more in the long run. Dani could not thank all the people who had helped her achieve such success.

“As we all know, this Charity Event has been a family tradition my father, the late Ethan Hamilton, had started for decades.” She stood in front of everyone on the stage, facing all the people who knew her father.

“We would not be here tonight if it was not for his vision. He always believed that success is not only defined by the size of one’s wallet but the capacity of one’s heart to help.” She continued, remembering his father’s words. The countless wisdom he had imparted to her.

“Helping is not all about taking credit for what he did, but seeing how many lives he had changed and improved through his simple act of kindness.” She could see some of them as they joined her in this celebration.

“I want to give tribute to the man I had loved with all my heart. The man I believed had touched many lives either by his words or actions. Please join me in commemorating his memory.” She raised a glass of wine she held in her other hand, making the others follow her lead.

“Let us celebrate the memory of a great man, a wonderful husband, an honest businessman, a friend to many, and the best father.” Her eyes could not help but seek out her mother, who stood not far from her.

.....

Then, her brother, who was not yet ready to accept them in his life. He should be joining them as part of their family. But he chose to stand on the side with the other guests.

But she did notice that her friend, Haley, seemed too cozy with him. Suddenly, she wondered if the two were together. She vaguely remembered introducing them, but she thought that they never followed up on that. Haley would have mentioned something about that.

But if her suspicion was correct, should she warn Haley about him? Well, she believed she should. Gerald might be her brother, but Haley was also her friend. She just hoped that she was not yet too late.

"Congratulations!" People applauded and praised their success, not only her but the entire foundation and the people who had sweated their blood and tears to make this happen.

"You did it, my Princess." Her mother was one of the first to hug and salute her for a job performed well.

"I could not have done this without you and Dad, even if he was not physically here." She knew that he was guiding her every step of the way. But she owed gratitude to her husband and friends, who never left her side.

Then, she spotted Jacky and Marcus on the other side, raising their glasses to her. She knew they were happy about the success of the event. But the night was far from over. She still had many things planned for the rest of the evening.

"Shall we proceed to the next program?" She instructed the host of the celebration. Now that the pressure was less since everything seemed to be running without a hitch, they could start to relax and enjoy the rest of the evening.

She had planned for the auction of some items donated by their wealthy friends and benefactors. Several expensive clothes, jewelry, collectible pieces of art, and other valuable things.

She believed this would also bring about a good amount of funds for the new projects she had put on hold. But now that she was settling in her new position, she knew she could have active participation in the foundation.

"You were great," A familiar voice commented before feeling his arms wrapped around her body. "But you should rest. You look a bit pale." Alex turned her and stared into her face.

She could see the worry lines on his face as if she would suddenly drop to the floor from exhaustion. She felt tired, but it did not mean she could stop now.

"Don't worry. I think I am a bit hungry." She was attributing this uneasiness she felt to the exhaustion of dealing with this celebration for months. "Do you think we can look for food?" She requested, unable to contain her hunger.

She believed she hardly remembered breakfast earlier. Then she barely ate lunch. Dinner had been almost just the same. Now, she was suffering the consequence of lack of food.

"I know we can work something out." Alex pulled her away from the crowd until they had reached the other end of the ballroom. He called for the attention of the waiter. Then, he requested whatever meal was available in the hotel's kitchen.

She guessed she could not find anyone as adorable as his husband. He was the most loving and caring man in the world. At least now that her father was gone.

But he suddenly received a phone call as they waited for her food. He had to excuse himself for a few minutes. But she did not mind that was part of their jobs. "I will be back." He told her as he moved further away from her.

She nibbled on the meal the kitchen had prepared as she waited for him to return. At least it alleviated her hunger and gave her enough energy to continue. As she had said, the night was barely at its climax.

“So, here you are.” She looked up to see her brother standing before her. Not the man she was waiting for but still someone she wanted to speak with about some private matters. “I was looking for you to congratulate you. You did a great job here, Dani. I assure you that you have my full support.”

Sometimes, it was hard to deal with his brother, knowing what he did to her and Alex and what he did for a living. She was not talking about his daytime job.

“I am also looking for you. Thanks because you save me the trip.” She looked up at him from her seat and studied his face. “What are you doing with Haley Rosley?” Dani could not wait anymore. She had to know.

Gerald was a horrible man that she wished she could change. But that was not how life worked. She believed she could not save everyone, not even her flesh and blood.

Sadly, she was beginning to believe that Gerald was not worth saving.

Chapter 839: Big plans

Gerald had attended countless fundraising events but had always managed to be discreet. He usually did not allow the spotlight on him, anonymously donating so people would not talk about him.

He had lived an extreme balance of fame as a celebrated defender of the weak and anonymity throughout his career, hiding his secret life from the world. A life not acceptable to society but a life of wealth and power.

“I am Haley’s date for the night.” He answered Dani truthfully. He had nothing to hide because he had done nothing wrong.

He could not see anything inappropriate with him dating a single woman. He was a single man, after all. “Why is there a problem with that?” But he could see that this did not sit well with his sister, judging from her stare.

She had that look that said she disapproved of him going out with her friend, like a mother, not liking the boy her daughter was dating. Well, he had news for her. It was not his problem.

“I don’t think that is a good idea. I think you should stay away from my friend.” She told him, clearly showing how much she objected to the idea of his association with her friend.

But could he blame his sister? Many would tremble in fear if they knew who he was and his connection to the underworld criminal syndicate. Only a person with a criminal mind would understand what he did behind the shadows of the law.

.....

He was not a good man, not by the social standard. Still, he did not choose this life. He was thrown into this situation the moment he came into this world. He was not making excuses for his actions, but he was the person he was today because of his circumstances.

"I think Haley is more than capable of deciding that for herself." Gerald stared at his sister, amused at how she protected her friend against the big bad wolf. Now, he just confirmed how she still saw him.

Still, he could not allow anyone to dictate what he did with his life. She might proclaim that they were family and had shared the same genes, but she still saw him as the enemy. The outsider that almost ruined her life.

Anyway, Haley was a grown woman who made her decision to go out with him. He did not force himself on her. In addition, Haley was not in any form of danger with him.

He just wanted to get her off his system because, at the moment, he had to admit, he was craving for her. Despite his barrier, this woman managed to creep into his defense.

He was not saying he could see a future for the two of them. But it would not take long before he had tired of this woman. Then, he would move on, and so would she.

No harm, no foul.

At the moment, he believed the feeling was mutual. Therefore, why not explore it and have some moments of fun while on it? He could not see anything wrong with that.

"Not when you are not telling her the big picture." Dani looked pissed at him. But as he said, it was not her business.

If Dani was so concerned about her friend, she should talk to her. She should warn her to stay away from him. He tried to scare Haley away, but she would not listen. Haley came to him of her free will.

He was just a man who could not say no to a woman who also wanted his attention. Truthfully, he liked her. She fascinated him. Not many had tickled his interest before. So, why would he turn her away?

"Just hold your horses, my dear sister." He looked both left and right, just double-checking that they were still far from hearing distance from any other guests. "I am just dating her. I am not planning to marry her."

Still, even if he was showing interest in her, it did not mean he was seriously contemplating a lasting relationship with her. He doubted that it was her intention too.

For him, this was just like any date between two consenting adults. They both wanted the same thing at the moment. When it was over, they would go on their separate ways.

"That is precisely my point." Dani hissed at him, unable to contain her displeasure about this entire idea of him dating her friend. "You are just playing with her. She does not deserve that."

He was about to respond to that, but he noticed Alex was on his way back to the table. The last thing he wanted was another confrontation with his brother-in-law. They did not do well being in the same space.

"I am not taking advantage of your sweet friend if that is what you are implying. I am not making false claims and promises. I enjoy her company. I believe she feels the same way." With that, he said goodbye and left.

As he walked away from his sister, he wondered if he should heed her word for him to stay away from her. In other circumstances, it would be easier to walk away from Haley.

It would save him the trouble of dealing with his sister and its complications. Besides, she was not part of his initial plans. She might only become a distraction that he did not need.

“Hey, where have you been? I was looking for you.” Haley stood before him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I thought you might want to dance.”

But having her in his arms like this, he knew he was far from getting over with her. He already had a taste of her, and his body loved it, remembering how her body entwined with him between the sheets just a few moments ago.

Then, her lips covered his, coaxing him to respond to the intensity of her kiss. How could he say no to this? He could not deny that his body wanted it as much as she did.

“I am here now. Come on, let us dance.” But there was only one thing he wanted to do. It had everything to do with body coordination but had nothing to do with dancing. But, of course, that would have to wait for later.

At the moment, he had to keep up with his appearance in this glamorous event. He still had big plans, and this event had everything he needed to accomplish them.

Chapter 840: No priceless masterpiece

“Good evening, everyone. I guess all are having a great time judging from all the smiles on your faces.” The party host called the attention of everyone, halting the music, making the dancing stop temporarily to make way for another program.

Amelia could only smile nervously at the back of the stage, waiting for the next event to happen. At least she was not the only one anxious, seeing her friends and some other guests shaking and breathing heavily beside her.

She could hear the announcer continue with her spiel, entertaining the crowd as they awaited the revelation of the next event. Still, it did not comfort her as she felt sweat dripping down her temples.

“Girls, smile.” She heard her friend talking, trying to boost their confidence. “It is not like they are hanging you on a wooden spike.” Dani continued with her joke.

Amelia could not help but smile, admitting Dani was right. She was overthinking her situation and putting pressure on herself when it was not necessary. She just needed to breathe and calm down.

“Easy for you to say. You are not in our shoes.” Jacky voiced out her protest, but she did not appear anything like she was nervous. “Luckily, Marcus would not allow any of these men to buy what I am selling.” She confidently bragged among them, lining up at the backstage entrance.

At least Jacky seemed so sure of her future, believing that her fiancé had her back. But who would have her back when she was not even in a relationship?

.....

"I am a married woman. No one would take an interest in me. But you, Jacky, are still single until you wear his ring on your finger." Dani pointed out. "As for the rest of you, enjoy your single life and this night."

True.

All she could do was try to have fun. She was still young. Although her clock was ticking, she should not fret about not finding the right one. She would eventually find her soulmate. She just needed to have more faith.

However, her mind conjured up an image in her head. It was clear whose eyes were staring back at her. Of course, she recognized those sparkling eyes.

But how could she declare that she found the one when she still yet to hear his declaration of his undying love for her? Would he ever love her the same way she did?

"Amelia, is something wrong?" Haley, who stood next to her, asked. "You look like you have seen a ghost." Her friend's hand held her by the shoulder as she checked on her. "Are you ok?"

Was she?

She was not sick. She knew that. But she believed what was happening to her had nothing to do with her health. Was it? She suddenly questions if falling in love had nothing to do with a heart condition.

Oh, my! She just admitted that she loved him. When did this happen? How could she know that what she felt was love and not just some infatuation with a man she could not have?

"I am ok," Amelia answered her friend. She did not lie. Physically, she was as healthy as a horse. But emotionally and mentally, she was confused about how to proceed with this discovery.

Should she keep this bottle up inside her?

But before she could dwell on it any further, the announcer started calling their names, snapping her out of her reverie. She had to shove her emotions aside and concentrate on finishing this task.

She only agreed to this because she knew many would benefit from this event. Many lives would change with every single buck she would gather in this fundraising gimmick.

She was not doing this for herself. She psyched herself up, motivating herself to go up on that stage and do what she had to do. It was for the good of the many. It was for their cause.

"Ready?" Haley asked her again. The concern seemed to appear on her expression. But she smiled and assured her friend that everything was perfectly under her control.

"That is you." Amelia tapped her friend, telling her that she was up.

Quickly, Haley hugged her and walked away, stepping into the limelight as a spotlight showered down on her. She watched her friend stand in the center of the stage, all smiles, confidently showing the crowd what she had to offer.

Then, the bidding started.

After Haley, it would be her turn, then the rest of the women who volunteered to participate in this activity. She could already hear the bidding start for Haley.

Jacky, who had gone first, had a generous buyer. Of course, as she had proclaimed, Marcus made sure he won the bidding. But, he still paid a considerable amount. It was, after all, for a good cause.

“Do we have another bidder?” It would seem three men were fighting for her as the auction continued.

The fight for the prize lasted until the last man standing gave his final offer, and the others surrendered. It would seem the man Haley introduced as Gerald won.

At least Haley seemed satisfied that her date fought to win the bidding. She looked ecstatic when the man claimed his prize on the stage. Amelia had never seen her this happy. She was glad for her friend.

But now, the moment of truth.

It was her turn next. Then, the anxiety was back as her nerves went on haywire. It was not the auction that had her on edge. It was the man who would be bidding for her.

“Let us call on our next volunteer, Ms. Amelia Stewart.” It was her cue to enter the stage. She followed the light until she stood beside the item that she would present.

Then, the host announced the details of the painting up for auction. It would be the art that the winner would be taking home. But as a bonus, whoever would win the prize would also get to have dinner with the one presenting it. That would be her for this particular piece.

She did not doubt that many would be interested in the beautiful, valuable treasure. It was, after all, an invaluable worth of art. But would the winner be interested in having dinner with her because she was no priceless masterpiece?