

Royal Contract 951

Chapter 951: Better off living on the street

It was starting to darken as the streetlights illuminated the streets. Buildings shone their bright lights that radiated out of the clear glass windows.

When she tilted her head to the growing darkness, she wondered if the moon and the stars still lingered above the sky tonight. The clouds or the city smog have covered most of the world above them. She could not see anything beyond, only the spreading shadows.

"I better head home. It had been nice to meet you, Claire." The boy stood before her in the busy street under a dimly lit streetlight. "And thanks for the meal and this." He pointed to the jacket she bought at a flea market at a low discounted price to keep him warm on a cold night.

She was impressed with Neil. The boy was intelligent, if that was even his real name, as he wiggled his way around the city without difficulty and haggled prices with merchants with ease.

"Wait!" She called to him. "Where are you staying? Let me walk you home." Serena knew she should let him go. The boy was not her responsibility.

She was not supposed to trust him and like him. But here she was, wanting to save him. She did not even know him, except for the lies he kept telling her. At least, she believed that most of what he said was not true, like having parents waiting for him.

"Claire, you don't have to do that. It is getting dark. You should also get back from where you came from." Neil answered her as he kept staring at her face. "Don't worry. I would not tell a soul about who you are."

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"What do you mean?" She asked, but somehow she already knew what he meant by it. Then, he gestured with his hand for her to bend down until her face was inches from him.

"I am a fan." He whispered, stretching his hand until he touched her cheeks and tapped it gently. "And this is the best day of my life." He continued. "Thanks." Then, he took her hand and grazed it with a delicate kiss before walking away, waving his hands in the air before disappearing into the corner.

She knew it was for the best that they part ways. It was time for her to go home too. It was not safe for her to loiter on the streets at this hour unprotected. She did not even know how to defend herself if needed.

She could act tough and brave in front of the camera, holding weapons and performing action scenes. But in real life, she had no clue how he would fend off a criminal face-to-face. She could not even defend herself from her boyfriend.

However, something about the boy forced her feet to move in the direction he went. Quickly, she followed him into the dark alley where he ran off and hoped she could catch up with him.

"Neil, where are you?" She asked more to herself when fear crept into her skin, and a shiver went through her spine as she walked further away from the crowded street.

But as she stared at the smeared walls and smelled the stench-filled narrow path, she knew this was the last place she needed to be, but she had to find the boy. She did not understand what obsession possessed her, but she felt obligated to help him.

However, she did not see any signs of where he went. In truth, she could barely see anything, but her ears could hear clanking noise and shouting, probably coming from the buildings nearby.

When she moved deeper into the darkness, swallowing her fear over her crazy idea of finding the boy, she found two paths that would lead in opposite directions. Neil could have turned left or right on the other end of what seemed to be more alleyways.

"Neil?" She tried calling him when something moved in the shadows on the left path. She hoped it was him because the other options were frightening.

She could almost hear her heartbeat as it drummed across her chest. A little faster, it might finally explode out of her ribcage. Now, she understood fear as she stared at a tattered-clothed man approaching her with a crooked smile.

She had only seen men like him in the movies. They were usually actors dressed up, with prosthetics and makeup on their faces. But this man was missing several teeth, and his face had stains either from a bruise or the dirt he acquired in this dirty stench of a place.

"What do you want, lady?" The man asked when he was close enough.

She knew she should run, but fear had her feet planted on the filthy, damp floor.

"I am looking for Neil." Serena took a chance that the man might know the boy, but she knew that was not likely.

Her eyes kept darting left and right, hoping help was on her way. But who would come to her rescue when nobody knew where she was? She had ignored all her calls all day, knowing it would be her manager wanting to get hold of her.

"I am Neil." The man slyly answered as he spat on his palms, pressing them together before rubbing them on both sides of his thinning hair as if he was trying to fix it in its place. "What is it that you want?"

"I am looking for a different Neil, a child." She quickly answered, fixing her hat to cover her face as she finally forced her feet to step backward. "I am sorry if I disturb you, but I think I came to the wrong place." She added, hoping that the man would take the hint and leave her alone as she made her escape.

"Leaving so soon, but we are just getting acquainted." The man looked disappointed, which only heightened her fear. "I have a good wine back there if you care to join me." He even offered, pointing in the direction he came.

"No!" She quickly shrieked out of fright. "It is getting late." She said calmer this time. "I..." She was about to decline when she heard another voice coming from the other path.

"What are you doing here? I thought I told you to go home." At least the voice sounded familiar, even if it had an edge of irritation in it.

She quickly turned around and found the boy walking towards them. She had never felt so much relief from seeing him. But still, what could he do against this man? The creepy man was still bigger with the two of them combined.

"Neil, I was looking for you. Where did you go?" She could still feel her hands shaking as she stared at her young friend and the man on her other side.

"I went to check on something. But you should not be here." The boy answered. "You should go home."

"I think you should go home with me." She said as she kept looking at the man who stood on the other side, just watching them. "This is not a good place for a child like you."

"I think something is wrong with your head. I am not your problem to save. I can take care of myself." The boy looked at her, shaking his head in disbelief.

"And you can drop the tough act, Neil. Claire is my friend." The boy reprimanded the man, who seemed to know the boy quite well.

"I was just having some fun." The man said as he turned to face her. "I am leaving now. I am sorry. Did not mean to scare you." He said as he walked away.

"If he was Neil, then who are you?" She asked, knowing she was at a disadvantage. The boy discovered who she was, but she still had no clue who she had spoken with all this time.

"Kenneth, but most of my friends call me Ken." The boy finally introduced himself.

"Did you know the man who snatched my purse earlier?" That was the only explanation for why he had retrieved it effortlessly from him.

"Yes, we worked these streets together. I recognized who you are. Or at least, I think you resembled someone I know." He finally confessed, telling her something that was possibly true.

"Do you mind if you come with me back to my place? I want to talk where I don't have to keep looking behind my shoulder. After, if you want to leave, I will not stop you." She promised as she waited for his answer.

She wished there was something she could do for him. It was like, after all the wrong things happening in her life. She wanted something positive to come out of it.

She had no idea if what she was doing was right. In her heart, it felt good to see the boy again. It would be nice to have a second chance to help him.

"Will you promise not to seek me again after I do what you ask?" Ken seemed impatient as he waited for her answer. "But honestly, nothing you will say would change a thing." He answered, probably guessing what she wanted to do.

"I only want to help. But yes, I will stop looking for you if you come with me." She only wished to give him options. A child like him had a better future off the street. He should be at school, acquiring a good education, not pickpocketing to earn a living.

"I am not going back to a foster home. I am better off living in the street with my pals." He continued as if answering a question she had never even thought about, at least, not yet.

Chapter 952: A promotion, an engagement, and long life

Her eyes scanned the room, looking at the exquisite and posh diner in the middle of the busy district. An expensive restaurant Amelia had chosen for their celebration. Eida had no complaints about it, liking the place instantly.

Although Eida would admit, the meal would cause a dent in her salary. But it was worth it. She paid for the experience and the quality bonding time with her friends. Besides, the food was exceptional.

"I think he is looking at you," Amelia exclaimed as she poked her in the arms to catch her attention and subtly pointed to a man on the other table, just a few meters away.

"Who are you talking about?" Eida was only curious because it might be someone she knew. But she would not care if it was some guy looking for a date.

"See, he is standing." She said as if confirming that she was right. "I think he is coming over." Amelia giggled like a schoolgirl.

Finally, Eida slightly turned to glance at the man her friend was referring to but confirmed he was not familiar. He was not as handsome as someone she knew, but he looked decent. Still, she was not interested.

"Hey, ladies. I notice that you are new to this place. I have not seen you around here before." He said as an opening line. "Welcome to our place. I am Martin."

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She immediately concluded that the man was probably working as the manager of the place or something on that level as he stood aristocratically before them.

The man extended his hand to Angela first. "I am Angela, and these are my friends, Amelia and E..." Then, Angela stopped, seeing the narrow stare from her friends. "I meant Sarah."

Eida had to look at Angela to remind her about the name she was using when she moved here. Her friends still call her Eida, even if she had insisted they learned to use her new name. As they said, old habits died hard.

"It is nice to meet you all." The man said, shaking Angela and Amelia's hands and then hers, but he seemed to linger longer on her hands, more than she liked. "But do you mind if I get your number? I will love to see you again."

She believed he was a sweet talker. Maybe if she had met him a few years ago, she might take him on his offer. But not now, when she had Luisa. She could not go around seeing random men while raising her child.

"I am flattered, but I don't think so." She did not wish to be rude, so she tried to smile and be polite.

But she noticed the glare that her friend was sending her way. She even felt her kick her in the shin to question her decision. However, she would not change her mind, staring back at her friend.

"That is a shame." The man said regrettably, but he still pulled out a card from his breast pocket and dropped it on the table beside her. "If ever you change your mind, please don't hesitate to call." He persisted, smiling at her and her friends.

"I won't take much of your time. Please enjoy your meal and the rest of the evening." He looked at Angela and Amelia, then at her. "It was nice meeting you ladies." Then, he was moving away.

She could not help but watch his back as he moved away, wondering what he saw in her. Maybe, in the past, men would find her alluring, but now, she knew she was anything but attractive.

"You know you have every right to date again and be happy, right?" Amelia asked, looking at her disapprovingly. "He seems to be a good catch."

"He could be a high-ranking executive, even own this entire restaurant, or be the most generous philanthropist on this planet. Still, he would not interest me," Eida said, ignoring the man showing attraction to her and hoping that would shut her friend from pursuing this topic.

In all honesty, she could live without a man, finding that she did not miss dating or the company of the opposite sex. There was a time when socializing was a big part of her life, that being at her best, just like today, was essential to her social status.

That being with a man filled an emptiness in her. But now, she had Luisa and her friends. She never longed for another man's company. She felt contented to work hard every day and go home to her child.

"Still, don't close your heart to the possibility." Amelia grabbed the card on the table and read it. "Speaking of owning the restaurant." She pointed to the card, indicating that the man they had the pleasure of meeting was indeed the owner of this place.

"Still, it doesn't matter," Eida said adamantly, firm with her reserved. "I am happy with my current life." She did not need to add another complication.

"I know a few good lads who would be happy to meet you," Angela interjected, supporting Amelia. "I think Amelia is right. When the time comes, you need to move on and start building a life, a family for you and Luisa."

Eida knew that her friends meant well, but they had to understand that it was not an option for her yet. Not this time. For the first time in her life, she did not need a man to feel complete. She was happy.

"I know that, but my priorities, for now, are you guys, my Luisa, and my career." Eida looked at the two. "But I will take note of your suggestions in time." She knew that they would not stop if she kept fighting them about it.

"Anyway, shall we talk about your wedding?" She tried to change the topic away from her dating life or lack of it.

"Yeah! Have you set a date yet?" Angela excitedly asked while setting aside Eida's situation. "Just tell me what you need, and I will be glad to help." She even offered.

"I am still waiting for Evan to return so we can discuss it," Amelia answered her friend and future grandmother-to-be.

Truthfully, she felt that they had rushed into this engagement. She and Evan still had a lot of things to discuss, especially the changes that would happen in their lives.

"Just tell us what you need from us," Eida assured her that things would work out all well.

She could see that her friend still had a few issues to iron out with Evan, but she did not doubt that Evan would find a way to fix them in no time. She had never seen a couple more in love than those two. She would do her best to ensure this wedding would happen without a hitch.

"Shall we toast?" She raised her juice, which had no alcoholic beverage, while her friends did the same. "This is for the good things still to come."

She saluted her friends for all their help in her difficult times. Then, their support and love for her only child. She also wished to celebrate this night for all the blessings, for a promotion, an engagement, and long life.

Chapter 953: A crying mess

"I think you should go straight to bed, Angela." She concernedly said as they walked into the apartment, still in a high after their delightful dinner.

It was a successful evening as they enjoyed each other's company and talked about their lives. Well, it was mostly Angela who had been sharing her most colorful and delightful experiences in life.

However, she noticed her older friend was not as agile as before, and sleeping late seemed hard on her too. After all, she was not getting any younger, and her sickness had been causing her difficulty as of late.

"Of course, you are right, my dear. I am quite exhausted." Angela fanned herself as if she was a bit short of breath from their activity.

"Bea, would you help Angela to her room?" Amelia said when she saw Bea come out of Luisa's room. Angela's nurse aide probably heard the commotion of their return and decided to check on them.

"Of course," Bea answered, rushing to Angela's side. "You looked like you had a great time." She commented, seeing the smile on their faces.

"Yes, it was fun," Eida responded with a nod. "How about Luisa? How was she?" Eida asked Bea, who had volunteered to babysit her child while they took the night off to celebrate.

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"Luisa is both the angel and the devil." She teased Eida since Luisa could be both at one point and another. "But don't worry. She is already sleeping tightly."

When Luisa was quietly playing or asleep, she looked like an angel that could not do any harm. But she started demanding to be fed or grumpy from wanting to sleep. She could create chaos like no other. But, of course, they all knew that.

Bea slowly guided Angela toward her bedroom, leaving Amelia and Eida in the living room, still on a high. Amelia pulled Eida to the living room, sitting on the couch side by side, still slightly chuckling until all the laughter died.

Both fell into silence, lost in their thoughts.

"I guess we better get some rest too." Amelia finally stood up, realizing it was getting late. She still had a few things she had to do in the morning.

"I think I will stay a bit longer. I am still not sleepy." She informed her friend as her body remained buried in the cushions.

She knew she should be getting into bed, too, since she had worked early the next day, or better yet, in a few more hours. However, she did not plan to lay awake all night. She would prefer to exhaust herself to sleep. But what to do?

"Ok. But don't stay up too long. You have work tomorrow." Amelia reminded her. "I will check on Luisa before I retire. You go and enjoy the rest of the night." Her friend held her hands and squeezed them gently before walking away.

"Good night, Amelia." She said before she disappeared from her sight. She continued to stare at the view before her. But she barely saw anything. It was like her mind was blank, suddenly empty of any thoughts.

Maybe it was the fatigue of overthinking things, but now her mind finally gave up. She could not even come up with anything to think about, yet, sleep still evaded her.

She looked around, but everyone seemed to be inside their rooms, probably already falling asleep. She did not want to check on Luisa, not wanting to wake her up. Besides, Amelia had already checked on her. The last thing everybody needed was to stay awake all night.

"What about a late snack?" She quietly mumbled as if thinking aloud. When was the last time she lay on her couch like a sack of potatoes and ate popcorn while watching a movie?

She quickly rushed to the kitchen and shoved a pack of popcorn in the microwave while making some juice. A carbonated soda would be better, but she was still breastfeeding. She did not want her baby fed with all the junk she loved to eat. At least not when she was still young.

Soon, she was back on the couch with a bowl of popcorn and a glass of juice in both hands. She took the remote of the television and began scanning the channels for something interesting.

Undoubtedly, there must be a movie she would like to see on one of these numerous channels. Finally, after scanning half of the selections, she found one that seems interesting.

She had no idea what it was since she rarely looked at advertisements lately. However, it looked intriguing enough as she focused her eyes on the screen.

"Now, that is not fair." She muttered under her breath as she munched on her popcorn while complaining about the narrative. She took her juice and drank it, unsatisfied with how the story ended.

However, sleep was far from visiting her doorstep. She decided that a few more minutes would do the trick. So, she picked up the remote and scanned the channels for something else.

Then, something finally caught her attention. It was not a local network but an international talk show reporting a worldwide affair. She watched on the screen as the host informed the public of an upcoming grand celebration.

"Isn't that sweet of him, taking his fiance on the race track to give her a spin? I will surely want to ride him..." The female host flirtatiously spoke, winking at the audience, causing the girls in the crowd to cheer with excitement.

"Don't you mean ride with him?" The male host corrected his partner with her error. But, of course, everyone knew it was intentional to please the viewers.

But it was not the only thing that captured her awareness. The photos flashed on the screen and had her eyes glued. She could not even blink as she examined each one with unbridled interest.

Pictures of them on the race track, during dinner, and some other social events, always touching, staring at each other's eyes flashed before her. Then, the host talked about the impending union of Prince Lance Wellington and her fiance, Camille McKinley.

It was like she was reliving a nightmare as she gazed into his eyes when she froze the screen. She had seen it before in her dreams. The look on his face and the darkness in his eyes. As if all the life in him had died.

He was marrying her out of obligation, not love.

She killed the man who she knew had always been full of life.

She did this to him.

She did this to their child.

She ruined their lives.

Tears started forming in her eyes as she thought of the what-ifs. Regret filled her heart with sorrow. She could have given her child a better life than what she could give her. Luisa could have been with a father who would love her more than his life.

But instead, she chose to be selfish and think of herself. Her fear drove her to run away instead of fighting for them. Now, no matter what she did, it was too late. There was nothing else she could do but watch at the sideline and regret her life choices.

"Eida, is everything alright?" She heard her friend's voice at her back, probably wondering why she was crying.

She was once again a crying mess.

Chapter 954: Nothing but mere trash

People were gazing at her as she crossed the entry of the fancy building she was staying. Then, the man in the lobby stopped her and her companion before they could cross towards the elevators.

“Where are you two going?” The man in a black uniform with an earpiece sticking in his ears held his arms to block their path. “This is a private place for special guests only.”

She suddenly realized that none of them must have recognized her with the clothes she wore and the hat and glasses on her face. Of course, the boy could never pass as one of their guests with his stained and faded clothes.

“I am going to my room.” She told him as she rummaged in her pocket for her keycard, showing it to him once she found it.

That should be enough to allow them entry since she had proof of staying on the premises. However, the man only sneered at her, glancing at her from head to toe. She could tell he did not believe a word she said.

“Where did you get that?” The man accusingly said, taking the card from her hands. “Who did you steal it from?” He continued, looking at her, and the boy liked they were pests he could not wait to squash.

“Who are you calling thief?” The boy finally reacted, ready to fight the man bigger than him threefolds or more.

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She could see the fury in his eyes, realizing the boy must have endured many unfair judgments in his short lifetime. She pitied the boy for whatever reason that he had lived alone in this world.

Was he abandoned as a child or orphaned by some tragic incident? Whatever the explanation of it remained a secret to the boy or through fate.

“Ken, let me handle this.” Stopping the boy from throwing punches in the air. Her companion might be short and skinny, but his bravery made up for what he might have lacked.

“As I said, I am a guest here.” But Serena still avoided telling him who she was. She would prefer to resolve this without using her name. But she could think of one way to end this misunderstanding quietly.

She could not make a scene, not wanting to create a commotion that would attract attention. “Will you mind escorting us to your manager, Sir? I wish to speak with him.”

It was the only way that she could settle this situation without creating too much raucous. The manager knew her condition and would sort this issue out without a fuss.

Nonetheless, the man only laughed at her, a full blast of laughter. She could tell he found her request hilarious. However, she was not letting this incident go unnoticed because she was going to teach this man a lesson he would never forget.

She found it insulting that this man would look down on someone who did not wear the finest clothes or had no golden trinkets covered with precious stones around their bodies. Who were they to judge her or them, referring to the boy standing behind her?

“I am sorry, but is there a problem here.” The woman from the reception area finally came to check on the growing fuss.

She looked calm and collected as she approached them, putting a forced smile on her well-made face. But she could see in her eyes that she could not wait to get rid of them since she probably thought they did not fit in with their standards.

The woman patted the boy on the shoulder to appease him, but she could tell that the woman was only doing that to avoid more confrontations. But she wondered if she would believe her.

"This man would not let us pass, but I have a keycard." She would show her, but the man placed it in his pocket. "If you don't believe me, let me just speak to your manager."

She watched the woman's initial reaction and knew just like the man. She found her claim outrageous. But she did not laugh the same with the security but merely gave them a condescending smile.

"I am sorry, but the manager had no time to deal with folks like you." The woman politely said as she pouted at the boy and continued. "I am sure you will find better accommodation somewhere else."

Then, the man signal for two other securities to their side, commanding them to escort their unwanted guests. "Please follow us." But they were dragging them back to the main door.

Of course, she had more than enough of how the staff of this facility had handled her delicate situation. She never thought they would be so cruel to people they thought were beneath them. She could not stand it anymore.

"Serena, are you ok?" The boy asked when she tripped on one of the feet of the security, forcing them out of the lobby floors. She ended up kneeling with a loud thug. "Aaaggghhh!" She gasped in pain from the hard impact.

"Let go of me. I need to help my friend." She heard the boy shout, looking before her as the boy struggled against the arms of the guard, dragging him away.

"Stop this instant." She shouted, creating an echo inside the room. Luckily, it was late, and only a few people stood on the premises to witness her outburst. "Let go of him." But she did not care anymore who else was out there.

She hastily removed her cap, releasing her long blonde hair from its confinement, and let it cascade down on her back. Then, she took off her glasses, distinctively revealing who she was.

"Ms. Serena?" The woman seemed to blink twice, unable to believe who she saw.

"Ms.Anderson." The guards suddenly stopped, letting go of her and the boy upon realization of who she was.

"You are so ready to judge me for my appearance that you could not even recognize me with my flimsy disguise," Serena said to the men and woman before her.

She knew that if they would have looked close enough at her face, they might get a hint of who she was. But hence, they only saw her clothes and readily concluded that she and her companion were not worth their time.

They were nothing but mere trash.

Chapter 955: A deal was a deal

"Accept our apologies." The boy imitated the manager, who could not stop apologizing for how his staff had behaved toward their guests. "You should see their faces. They were ready to fart out of their pants."

"Maybe you meant pee." She corrected him as they laughed inside the elevator on their way to her room. "You were brave down there. But not everything could be settled with a fist." She advised him.

Serena noticed earlier how the boy had clenched his fingers, ready to strike. Although she believed the man deserved a light beating, that was still not the way to resolve matters, not with violence.

Besides, she doubted that the boy could even hurt the burly man. He would only make a spectacle of himself more than teach anyone a lesson.

"I know, but he should not have called you a thief." Ken lowered his head, seemingly watching his worn-down shoes. "It is ok if it was just me since it is true."

Then, he tilted his head upwards, finally looking at her face. "But he judged you just because you were not looking your best." He dared again to hold her hands as the lift kept climbing to her floor. "You are the kindest person I have ever known, and I will never let anyone badmouth you."

She did not expect to hear that from the boy. He said he was a fan, but she did not know he would defend her like that. She felt overwhelmed with emotion as she gathered the boy in her arms and smiled down at him.

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"Don't put me on a pedestal because someday you will learn I don't deserve it." She did not want to disappoint him as she had disappointed her family.

She knew despite the success she had achieved in her career. She still ended up with nothing in the end. She was a loser who could not even get anything right. After this case, she would return to nothing.

"What are you saying?" Ken might be wise for his age, but it did mean he understood everything she said.

As far as he was concerned, his new friend was the best person he had ever met in his young life. Although he had met a few friends, he still felt uncomfortable trusting them, but with her, it was different.

Or maybe she had influenced his judgment since he had idolized her since he saw her on the television. He had watched some of her movies and looked at her pictures on the billboards, using her as inspiration.

Who would have thought he would have the opportunity to meet her in person? Not him.

"Nothing." She realized she was talking to a child even if he appeared wise for his age. "Shall we go inside?" She said as she held the key in her hands. "We can order something you like."

The boy nodded his head. "Neil told me never to say no to good food." Recalling one of his mentors on the street.

"That sounded good advice, even from a man like him." She suddenly remembered how frightened she was in his presence.

Maybe he was harmless, but just like everyone in her world, they judged people according to their appearance. Probably, it was time that she reconsidered how she lived her life and how she viewed the world.

"Are you crazy?" A woman shouted even before she had opened her doors. Then, she found her manager sitting in the room, waiting for her. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?" If looks could kill, she would drop dead that instant.

"Nora, what are you doing here? It is late." Serena stared at her manager, confused and a bit apprehensive about how she looked at her. She was not expecting to find her in her hotel room at this time of the night. Unless. "Is there a problem?"

Her manager looked like a dragon as her nose burned red and her ears seethed with steam. Could she blame her, remembering she had ignored all her calls? She must be worried about her. Now, she regretted her actions.

"You?" Nora snapped at her furiously. "You are my problem." She began pacing the room as if trying to calm down but finding it difficult. "You were not answering your phone. Then, Claire had no idea where you went."

Her manager rattled on, not allowing her to speak or even enter the room. She stood by the door, waiting for her manager to ease up. "Do you wish for me to have a heart attack? What are you thinking?" She added.

Serena did not answer, not wanting to rile her up more. She knew she deserved whatever her manager would say to her.

"Are you even thinking at all? And what are you still doing standing out there?" She looked at her like she had gone mad. "Do you want everyone to hear our conversation?"

It was not like there were people in the hallway. However, they were not exactly alone on the entire floor. Someone might walk in and find them discussing her situation.

"By the way, this is my friend, Ken." She introduced her friend, pulling away from the wall until he stood by her side.

However, she could see now that he was slightly apprehensive about joining her in the room after what he had witnessed. She wondered if her manager was able to scare him.

"And who is that?" Nora asked, looking at the boy like she was about to explode. "You lost it." She freaked out, waving her hands in the air and shouting profanities.

"Nora, let me explain." She wanted her to understand her reason for bringing the boy with her.

"Why would you take home a stray boy in your apartment? Have you lost your mind?" Her manager did not stop saying words that the boy could hear. Maybe even her nearby neighbors overheard her.

"He is not a lost puppy. I want to help him." She defended her decision to take the boy against her manager, who never gave her a chance to say her piece.

"Hey, don't worry. That is ok. I have to go anyway." Ken interrupted their heated argument.

But she did not want him to leave. "No, you are staying."

"You said if I don't want to stay. I can leave." The boy reminded her of their earlier agreement.

But that was supposed to be after she had thought of a way to help him. Not before they could even enter her room. "Yes, I said that." She knew she had no choice if that was his wish.

"It was great to meet you. But I hope we don't cross paths again." The boy smiled at her and then at her manager. "It is my pleasure." Then, he walked back to the elevators.

As he pressed it, it automatically opened and closed as he rode it. Then, he was gone.

"Good riddance." Her manager breathed a sigh of relief as if she was glad to deal with that problem.

"You are better off not associating yourself with another problem."

She wanted to believe that her manager was right. But in her heart, she felt the opposite. She wished to save the boy from a gloomy future, but how could she do that when her life was a mess?

She looked at the closed door at the end of the hall. She wanted to go after him, but what could she do? Besides, a deal was a deal.

Chapter 956: Ready to brave a new day

He had watched her since she stood up from the bed and took a long, hot shower. He was afraid to ask her what she had planned for the day. He did not want anything to rock the boat that was already floating in a wavy sea.

These past few days seemed great since she was getting better and better, and he could see the old Jacky once in a while again. He hoped it was a sign that they could finally weather this storm.

However, there were times that she did fall from the wagon, but it was not worse than before. This time, she seemed to recover quickly. Was she in the stage of acceptance? He could only hope.

"Stop watching me." She must have noticed him eyeing her. "I am going to work." She finally explained, clarifying his confusion. She acted like it was nothing out of the ordinary.

Now, he observed her move from the bathroom and her closet, searching for clothes, only to realize she was serious. But he could not help but feel apprehended by her plan, wondering if she was ready.

"I can go with you to your office," Marcus offered his wife, staring at her as she combed her hair in front of the vanity mirror, fixing it in a tight ponytail.

She dabbed her face with some fleshy-colored cream, covering most of her face and neck. Afterward, she put something on her eyebrows and shaded the top of her eyes.

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He loved looking at her with her makeup on, but he did not mind if her face was bare. He still believed she looked beautiful no matter what she put on her face or wore on her body.

Nevertheless, he would not wish to go through the hassle of doing that every day to look beautiful. He was contented to wash his face and brush his hair, occasionally shaving the growth of his mustache and beard. But that was it.

"I am just going to the office," Jacky muttered as she painted her lips with something red. "Stop worrying." Popping her lips before the mirror before she looked at him, rolling her eyes at him for overreacting. "I am ok." She reassured him.

But could she blame him for worrying about her? It had been a while since she returned to work. And he was not yet that confident that she could handle pressure.

However, he also wanted to believe it was for the best. That being out of the house, sulking here on her own, would do her good. Being with other employees and friends might ease the mind of her woes.

"Just let me take you to work and pick you up later." He compromised, only wanting some guarantee that she would not break down behind the wheel and meet an accident.

He knew he was overreacting. His wife was not suicidal. At least their therapist did not believe so. But he was not taking any chances. She meant everything to him, more than his life.

He had gone to work for the last few days, and leaving her alone in the house had been hard enough. But maybe, it would be better if she had company who could see her and talk to her.

He hoped work could finally distract her and get her back on her feet. He was willing to try anything as long as it would give him back his wife, the fun-loving woman he had loved and would love for the rest of his life.

"Fine. But don't make a habit because I might get used to it." She teased him. Although they had carpooled before, she had always preferred driving herself to work.

She had always loved her independence. Besides, her husband had to go out of his way, so he dropped her off or picked her up. She believed it was not only inconvenient but impractical.

"I promise. Just a year until I feel comfortable to take the training wheels off." He said, referring to himself. He just needed that guarantee that she would be ok.

Then, a thought came to his head. Was it a good idea to hire a bodyguard to follow her or a chauffeur to drive her around? But he knew that she would shut it down immediately.

Then, she moved out of her seat and walked toward him. She took the tie in his hands and wrapped it around his neck. She then leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on his lips when she had knotted the silk securely, aligning the tie on his chest.

"I need you to stop worrying about me." She buried her cheek in his massive chest, listening to his chaotic heartbeat. But as she continued to hug him tighter, she could feel him relax and his breathing even.

She never thought such a sound could be so comforting, like a sonata playing on a grand piano. It did not possess many complicated notes, but its rhythm and tempo were enough to make her soar to the clouds.

It was so peaceful and therapeutic.

"I am trying." He gasped as he released a massive bulk of air stuck in his lungs. He knew she was right. He had to stop handling her as if a delicate flower that would wither away.

She had always been much firmer than that. She was resilient and would bounce back from this. It might be a big hurdle in their relationship, but they had faced others before and handled it with flying colors.

He just needed to give her time, plenty of patience, and love. He believed as long as they were willing to help each other, they could come out of this much better than before.

"That is good enough for me." She lifted her head again and planted a soft kiss on his lips before moving back to the bed to put on her dress.

After a few minutes, they strode out of their apartment, hand in hand, toward his car, ready to brave a new day.

Chapter 957: An inherent trait

Angela watched his grandson go back and forth in the living room as if anxious about something. He seemed to be waiting, but for what? She scanned the room for any clues, but it was just her and Goliath in the room.

Eida was at work while Amelia was at a foundation she had been helping, leaving Luisa in her room with Bea as her sitter. It had been a welcome surprise that he came even without notice.

She missed him dearly, his only grandson. She remembered many memories of their family and just the two of them as they flashed before her eyes. Maybe she was becoming a sentimental fool as she stared at the remaining heir of their bloodline.

She hoped that someday, he would have a son or a daughter that would brighten his life just like he had shed light on hers. But, of course, she wished it would be soon so she could experience a new life placed in her arms.

"Would you stop spinning like a top, Evan?" Angela ordered, remembering how he was like a child. He had always kept her on her toes.

Her grandson was the spitting image of her departed husband. He had been a constant reminder of what was great and sad in her life. The day she met and married her dear beloved and eventually lost him, leaving here to wait for their reunion.

But she was not in a hurry. As long as her grandson needed her, she would stay. She knew her beloved would wait until she was ready to reunite with him.

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"I am sorry, Grandmama." He moved toward the bar, where they kept a few bottles of fine liquors for guests since they rarely drink now as Eida still breastfeeds her child.

Then, he poured himself a glass as if he was in deep thought. Perhaps, thinking of a serious problem. But what could be bothering him? Angela hoped it had nothing to do with the wedding.

He already had his chance to walk away, but he pursued her. She would not allow him to have second thoughts and renege from his commitment to Amelia. That was just not acceptable.

"Do you have something you want to share?" She had always been a good listener. He had confided in her many times, more than she could count or remember.

They had been best friends since fate stuck them together. They had lived together for so long they had learned to love each other and respect who they were, even their weaknesses.

"It is nothing. I am just tired." He finally sat on the chair and let his body recline on the soft cushion.

He pretended not to be bothered even if his mind was swirling in his head. He did not wish to burden his grandmother, who was already going through a lot with her health.

"Tell me it had nothing to do with your proposal with Amelia." Her concern was evident in her jittery voice. She could tell when he was keeping something from him. He was lying to her face.

She knew her grandson had always been responsible regarding her needs and his obligation to his work. But when it came to women, that lay his flaws. No woman could tie him down except for Amelia. At least, that was what she believed.

"What made you think that? Nothing is wrong with our relationship." He assured her, seeing the worry lines on her forehead.

He quickly moved to her side, covering her hands with his before looking into her eyes. In his stare, he swore to her that it had nothing to do with the woman he loved but something he could not share with her.

"I promise, Grandmama. I am here to set a date with Amelia and fulfill all your dreams." This time, he genuinely smiled at the second woman he fell in love with, at least next to his mother. And the only woman he could commit to besides Amelia.

He was not lying about that. Truthfully, it was the first reason he visited Amelia. He also wished to discuss the details of the wedding. He knew that with his grandmother's failing health. He had to expedite the wedding.

But there was another reason he had come today. His conscience had bothered him since he had seen his friend that night. He knew he had to do something before it all became too late.

"Oh! Is that true?" Amelia begged the Gods that he was not just saying that to appease her. She extended her hand to his face, feeling the roughness of his growing hair on his jawline. "Promise me that I will see my grandchild before you bury me in the ground."

She knew it was morbid to talk about death, but she accepted it a long time ago, but if God would allow her a few more years, then who was she to decline it?

“Speaking of grandchild...” Evan said as he heard the sound of a wailing child. “I think Luisa wants some company.” Thankful for the distraction.

He never wished to talk about death, not when it meant his grandmother would be leaving him for good. She was the only person left in their family. He did not want her to part, not just yet.

“Of course, she will always be my eldest grandchild, my dear Luisa.” She uttered with so much tenderness, seeing Luisa come out of the room, carried by her sitter.

“Let me take her while you rest,” Evan informed Bea, who smiled, glad for some time for herself. He held Luisa in his arms, missing the young rascal.

Besides, it was just a matter of a few hours, then Eida would be home to take her child. In the meantime, he could use the time to spend with his only goddaughter.

“I miss you, my Princess.” Slowly, learning a few tricks on how to handle her. It seemed it worked because she stopped screaming and started giggling. “I promise to protect you as long as I live.” He whispered in her ears.

Angela watched his grandson play naturally with their young princess. She could tell he would be a good husband and a father if he would only give himself a chance. He did not need to be afraid of committing since it was an inherent trait already ingrained in him.

Chapter 958: Hard to hate

He had everything under control.

Did he?

At the moment, the answer had become debatable as he discovered several factions in their group that allied against his governance, a possible threat to his position.

After discovering the mole in his organization, he had tasked a few of his most trusted men to investigate the name given to him by the traitor. It would seem his good old friend was heading the pack against him.

“So, what do we do about them?” Mike asked as he told his friend what he had recently learned.

His friend went straight ahead to his stock of alcohol and started pouring a considerable amount into his glass, chugging it in one long gulp before preparing another one for himself and offering one to him.

Then, his friend settled on the sofa as if waiting for a plan. When he did not respond immediately, Mike expressed. “We could not fight them off without declaring war within the organization.” Concluding the same thing he was thinking.

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That would be chaotic, causing an unruly disturbance within their well-established institution. A division would form among their members, and everyone would have no choice but to pick sides.

He could already picture the problematic outcome if he allowed this to escalate. There was a likelihood that many would still take his side, but that would create a great divide and restlessness. Blood would surely flood the street, and many of their comrades would perish.

"I am thinking about it," Gerald answered, still uncertain, knowing it was just a matter of time. Either he fought them or gave up his crown, both unappealing in his opinion.

And the problem would not stop there. The authorities would surely get a whiff of the situation and capitalize on it. Then, in a worst-case scenario, their entire operation would probably blow up in their faces. They would be lucky if they could pick up the pieces.

He had seen many organizations like theirs dissolved due to power play. Instead of working together, they killed each other, leaving the organization vulnerable to their competition, enemies, and the authorities.

He had to resolve this immediately, not wanting to fuel the growing unrest within his comrades, but he had to find a solution to the problem without complicating matters.

"Think fast." His friend recommended with his brows tied into a knot. He finished his drink and lighted a cigarette, puffing the stick until it created a white cloud around him.

He had never seen Mike this anxious before. His friend had always been calm and a source of good advice. He had valued his counsel more times than he could count.

However, condemning himself to doom would not help him in his situation. He preferred to stop whoever started the fire and burn him instead. It was his priority before this dilemma spun out of his control.

"I am sure you have ideas in that big head of yours." Gerald stared at his friend, who never ran out of things to say. But at the moment, he seemed speechless as he remained quiet, sitting on his chair.

"I am coming up with one soon," Mike assured him. He trusted his friend to think about this and give him a recommendation. "What about the governor position? Are you still running?"

He might not always agree with his friend, but he valued his input in most decisions. It had been more helpful in many ways than one. Still, the last decision always remained with him, and his friend never stopped supporting him.

"I have to equate it with this current situation." He knew that running would be beneficial for his career and would be helpful to the organization.

However, he had to figure out his situation within the group before he could explore another avenue. He did not want everything to go out of proportion, leaving him standing in a vulnerable spot.

"Do you still intend to marry Haley? You know that if this continues, she will be the first target." Mike reminded him, still unconvinced he was only using the girl.

He had seen Gerald use women like they were nothing. Therefore, he could not believe that what his friend felt for this chick was anything but casual sex and for his career advancement.

He was emotionally connected to her, whether he admitted it or not. And that could be another cause of this rebellion in their party. The other leaders were losing their confidence in him, seeing that he had a weakness.

"I..." But before Gerald could even deny anything, his friend cut him off. He did not want to look at Haley as a disadvantage but as someone beneficial to his plans. But his friend might be right. He was not blind to the possibility that she might be the issue behind his situation.

"Don't bother lying to me, man. We have been friends for a long time. This chick is different, and you know it." He insisted, not wanting to hear any more of his excuses.

"That is your opinion." Gerald still would not confirm his suspicion because he did not want it to be true.

He was at a crossroads between letting her go, far away from him, or keeping her close for her safety. At this point, he was not sure anymore which one would be better for her.

He could not care less about her father and family, but he was starting to care about her. But love was still something he did not believe in, no matter what his friend said. He was still using her for his needs and intentions, nothing more.

"Hey! What are you guys up to?" Suddenly, her angelic voice echoed in the room. He was not expecting she would be back early.

Truthfully, Haley was practically living in his apartment for two weeks, almost coming home every night after her work and hanging around during the weekends.

"I thought that you were having dinner with your father." Gerald greeted her with a soft kiss on her lips before letting her sit on his lap.

He could conclude that a few more scenarios like this. It would indicate that they were living together. It was another thing to consider with his growing problems.

"He had to cancel because of some problem. I hope you are staying, Mike, because I am preparing dinner." Haley offered to his friend.

Although Mike was adamant that Gerald cut Haley off his life, he still acted civilly with her when trapped in the same room. He did not show any untoward feelings toward her.

On the contrary, he treated her like they had been friends for a long time. And personally, Haley was so loveable, generous, and kind. She was just hard to hate.

Chapter 959: End in a nightmare

She was early today. Thankfully, Edison had been cooperative as he woke up without a fuss and ate breakfast without complaint.

And as if luck was on her side, her travel time seemed to be anything but smooth. People were pleasant on the street while traffic was light. Even the coffee shop had less crowd than usual.

It must be her lucky day as she entered the building with more than an hour to spare. As her boss had said, it was better if she could make it ahead of her schedule and prepare everything before the boss arrived.

“Good morning, Ria.” The woman at the reception greeted her. They were fast becoming friends since she started working for the company. She greeted each one of them with a wide smile.

She believed this would be a great day for her. She could feel it in her heart. As the elevator packed up and moved to her floor, she could not wait to start her day right.

But her mood changed when her eyes saw a familiar man as the doors opened to her floor. He stood in the open area just a few meters away from her.

“Miss, aren’t you going down?” A man who had just entered the lift held the doors for her, keeping them from closing on her.

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“Oh! I am sorry.” She had no words to express how embarrassed she was. She recognized the man from the lower floors, from the legal department, she believed.

However, she felt like her feet had metal chains with a heavy bowling bowl as she dragged them on the floor, making her way to her table. But her eyes remained glued to the man who had his back on her, unaware she was ogling him.

She was not expecting to see him. She was shocked as her eyes focused only on him. Not because she found him attractive in an impeccable suit but because she remembered ruining one on the first day they met.

“Watch where you are going, Ria.” One of the secretaries shrieked when she almost bumped into her and spilled the coffee on her.

“I am sorry.” She was glad the girl was fast and dodged the cup before it spilled on her. At least she only caused a few droplets on the floor this time.

Now, she wondered how she would balance the cups on her other hand and the stack of papers on her other arm while she tried to wipe the floor with a tissue. She could have just left, but she did not want anyone else to slip on the wet portion of the tiled floor.

Slowly, she lowered herself, bending on her knees in her tight-fitting skirt and balancing her foot on her high-heeled shoes. It was not an easy task as she successfully landed on her butt with the files scattered on the floor. Thankfully, the cups of coffee seemed to remain intact.

“Are you alright? Do you need any help?” She was still feeling the humiliation of earlier and added this to the mix when she looked up to see who it was. She could feel her face burning upon looking at those familiar eyes staring at her.

Soon, before she could even react further, he knelt at her level and started picking up the folders on the floor without waiting for her answer. How could she respond when her voice and logic seemed to abandon her?

Gratefully, she did not see a tinge of smirk or laughter on his face. He seemed genuinely concerned more than making fun of her. Compared to their other encounters, he seemed friendlier today.

But that could also be a trick, refusing to take the hand that he offered to help her up. She could not help but imagine taking his hand, and then he would let her go, pretending it was an accident and causing her to fall back to the floor.

"I am fine." She quickly recovered, snapping back to the present. Since her other hand was free, she only slightly struggled to return to her feet without using his help.

"Are you sure?" He asked again as he stood at full height, towering over her.

But she would not let him intimidate her just like the last time. "Yeah, I am good." She answered him as she straightened her skirt and blouse while holding onto the coffee.

Suddenly, "What are you doing?" Ria was surprised when he bent down again and leaned on the floor. Then, she realized he was wiping the coffee on the floor, something she had forgotten she was supposed to do.

"We don't want anyone to slip on those." He mumbled as he stood up before her.

"Of course!" She answered, a little dumbfounded since she did not expect he would do that. She had always found him arrogant, so seeing him in that position was surreal. "Anyway, thanks. But can I have my files back?" Remembering he was still holding onto her stack of papers.

"Why don't I escort you to your table?" Instead, he offered, not handing the papers to her. "I am Zach, by the way." He extended his hand to her but realized he still held the dirty tissue he used to wipe the floor. "Wait!"

He rushed to the canister on the corner, dumping the paper in his hands before returning to her side. Then, he offered his hands again, hoping to make up for their last meeting.

"I don't think that is necessary," Ria answered for his offer and introduction. "Just hand my papers so I can return to work." She suggested instead, dismissing his hand and asking for the files.

"I don't think we were properly..." He was about to say 'introduced' and ignored her request, but somebody else joined them in the hallway.

"Oh! There you are." Brenda appeared before them with a radiant smile on her face. "Good, you finally met." She indicated the two of them. "I am sure you will enjoy working on this new task together."

"What do you mean?" Ria reacted quickly to the news. She felt like her day started great but would end in a nightmare, glaring at the man for ruining her day.

Chapter 960: Not the proudest moment

She watched from her peripheral vision the man sitting beside her as they listened to her boss discussing a project they had to work on together. It was new, so she had not heard about it.

However, it seemed he was already familiar with it, leaving her at a loss as she tried to catch up. It was what she got for being on leave for several days. But she was not worried about the job. She knew she could handle it.

What worried her was working with this man? She remembered their other encounters and the letter he had left on her desk. Was he serious about what he wrote?

She might find out soon enough since she would be spending more time with him soon. She did not even know he had been transferred to their floor, a gigantic leap from the mail room.

"Ria, do you have any questions?" She heard her boss ask her. At least she caught her name in the sentence.

She watched her boss look in her direction, expecting something from her. Well, as much as she wanted to respond to whatever she said. She could not since she had no clue what was happening around her.

"What?" She was not paying attention since her thoughts were preoccupied with the man beside her. "I am sorry, but I am just a bit confused." She was, at least, that was not a lie.

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"Of course, you are probably overwhelmed with what I said. Zach here had a headstart compared to you." Brenda seemed to understand her predicament, but she was glad she had interpreted it in such a manner. It saved her from explaining why she zoned out.

"So, I will let him explain the rest of the details." Brenda continued when she only nodded. However, that last part was not what she had in mind. "Can I count on you, Zach, to help Ria get updated with the project?" Her boss looked at her counterpart, and he nodded in agreement.

"Of course, leave it to me," Zach answered confidently, but instead of seeing the arrogant smile on his face, his expression seemed different, as if friendlier.

She did not know if he was concocting some evil scheme to sabotage her, but she would be ready to prove to him that she was no pushover that he could play with and destroy.

If the company would only hire one intern at the end of this program, then she would make sure it was her, not him, who would get the job. She knew she needed it more. Besides, she was willing to work harder for it.

"Ria, do you think you will have a problem working on this project?" Brenda turned to her. "Tell me now so I can reassign someone else to it if you are not up for the challenge."

It was tempting to say yes, but she knew it would not help her career if she backed out of this just because of him. Undoubtedly, she could handle a man like him. It would be a piece of cake.

"I think I will manage just fine." Ria knew she could not back away from the challenge, or it might haunt her in the end. She would have to endure his company and act professionally around him. Hopefully, he could manage to do the same.

Then, her supervisor's phone rang, making them sit quietly and wait till she was through with whoever was on the other line. When she placed the receiver down, she looked up and directed her attention to the guy next to her.

"Alona wants you to report to her right away." She pointed at Zach. "By the way, you will have to work on this project with your other responsibilities, so work on a plan," Brenda informed her as she dismissed them both from her office.

As they were walking outside the room, Zach stopped her from walking away by blocking her path. "I think we should work on a schedule that would work for us. If you have any suggestions, maybe we could discuss them later at lunch."

She wanted to say no, but, of course, he was right. If she had to work with him on this project, she had to learn to cooperate. Besides, it would be best if she created a schedule that would work in her favor.

"Ok. We can make it a working lunch. Shall we do it on my desk or yours?" Ria hurriedly asked since she wanted to get away from him soon. "Do you prefer any food so I can order early?" She took the initiative so she could speed up their interaction.

"Well, I was thinking that we should go out," Zach said, slightly surprised that she would suggest eating in. "But that will work too if that is your preference." He did not want to contradict her since he would try to make up for his previous behaviors.

But he kept wondering what her reaction was to his letter because, at that moment, he could not tell. She was being polite and cooperative, but that was it. Was she still mad at her? He could not tell.

He wanted to say sorry, but what if that was not the right time? He was not good at this since he could not remember experiencing anything like this before.

"I think that should be sufficient and efficient. We could work while eating." She said, thinking of treating anything to do with her association with him as professionally as she could.

"Fine. If that is what you want." He answered with a cordial smile. "Then, I will see you at lunch."

"Ok!" She said with a curt nod as she turned to leave, walking toward her tiny office.

"Wait!" He suddenly called to her, making her stop, glancing back behind her. "Anything." He said one word.

"What?" She honestly did not understand what he meant by that.

"The food for lunch. You asked me what I wanted." He clarified. "Anything you like." He answered her before moving away, leaving her gaping at him.

She quickly turned away after watching his back move away. She could not believe that she was ogling him again. What was wrong with that man? But more importantly, what was wrong with her?

He was like the devil sent to make her life a living hell. But again, she might be overreacting. Still, her experience with men was not the proudest moment of her life.