

Royal Contract 981

Chapter 981: As a boyfriend, not a husband

She looked out the window of her expansive office, trying to figure out what she should do. She was a grown woman capable of thinking and deciding for herself.

She had proven, time and time, that she could rise to the challenges in a man's world. She had designed and built many beautiful houses and buildings in this progressive city. Better than any of her competitors.

Yet, she felt like the men around her still had a hold of her decisions. They still assumed she was incapable of managing her life. First, her brother thought she was making the worst mistake of her life. And then, her father, who believed he could run her personal affairs for her.

"Can you hold my calls?" Haley spoke to her secretary when she told her that a client was on the line. She was not ready to entertain anybody, especially not when her mind was going haywire.

After seeing her father at his office moments ago, she could not help but be more conflicted with her situation. It seemed her father had a different opinion on the matter compared to her brother.

She liked Gerald. Ok, admittedly, she believed she had fallen in love with him. But it did not mean she was in a hurry to marry him. She was still at the phase where she wanted to get to know him more.

She also wanted to listen to her brother, but she believed her eyes were blinded by what she felt for him. She wished to give him the benefit of the doubt. That maybe they were wrong about him, believing she saw something different.

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She returned to her desk and sat on her chair, thinking of what her father had said to her. Her father insisted that she should convince Gerald to run for office and for him to marry her.

Then, her thoughts brought her back to her meeting with her father. "Do you love him?" Her father's words still reverberated in her mind. It was like her father wished that she should propose to him instead of the other way around.

"Yes, I do." She did not want to deny what she felt for him. "But I hardly know him. I could not just marry him." She told her father. "I still want to get to know him." She insisted.

She knew that Gerald was considering running for the Governor position. It was what was taking most of his time nowadays. But regarding proposing to her and marrying her, that was another matter.

She could not force herself on someone if he had no plans of committing to her. She loved Gerald and would like to see where their relationship was going. But making him marry her was not something she would consider unless it was his decision and not only hers.

Besides, she did not want to be just a pawn in his political career if he was only going to marry her because it was what the voters would like. It would not be a marriage between two people in love but a political strategy.

“Please try to reconsider what I am asking you. It is not just for the good of our family but for your future.” Her father still tried to convince her.

However, she did not want any part of it, knowing it was what her father wanted from this relationship. Her father only wished to use her to proceed in building his empire. Now, he had his eyes on Gerald as his key to achieving it.

“No, Dad. If Gerald asked me to marry him, I am saying no.” She bluntly answered her father. “I loved him, but our relationship will not become part of your political or business schemes.”

Then, she walked out of her father’s office and never turned back, no matter what he said to her. She would not change her mind about it. She was not ready to marry him, despite loving him.

If they truly loved each other, they could wait until they were ready to commit to the real thing. Now, regarding Gerald’s political career, she planned to stand by his side if that was what he wished but as a girlfriend and nothing more.

Then, her secretary was back in her office with another call. But just like earlier, she declined to accept it. “I know he is an important client, but tell him I will call him back when I am available.” She told her secretary, who insisted that the client wished to talk to her.

But she could not deal with a client under her condition. Not when she was not thinking straight. But she would call them as soon as she had a breather from all this thinking of marriage and political careers.

“Hey!” She decided to call him instead. Who said that she did not want to hear his voice. She might not be ready for marriage, but she still would like his company at every possible chance.

“What is wrong?” He asked, and just like that, she felt better.

He seemed to read her mind as he tried to comfort her with his soothing voice. She did not even need to see him but simply hearing his baritone had her heart calming in an instant.

“I just miss you.” She calmly said, but it did not imply she was asking him to marry her. It only meant she wanted whatever they had to continue until the point they could not stand not to be together forever.

She might not make sense to someone else, but what she wanted made perfect sense in her mind. And she believed that Gerald was in the same boat as her. Gerald might also like her but was not yet willing to commit to her in a deeper relationship.

“I miss you too.” He uttered on the other line. Then, it was a conversation between two people who could not wait to be together again.

In conclusion, their relationship could still go either way. He might run for the hills or ride into the sunset with her. But until then, she was contented to have him by her side as a boyfriend, not a husband.

Chapter 982: Bad? Not all.

He was early, just like almost every day working in this company. He had never thought he would ever feel enthusiastic about coming to work, whistling his way out of his car until he reached the thorough pack lift.

Still, he did not mind squeezing his body among his co-workers as he made his way to the top floor. He was looking forward to working on his project and seeing her again.

He still could not fathom what he saw in her, but every day he spent with her brought him closer and closer, admiring her very much. He believed he had not met anyone like her. She was so different from most of the girls in his circle. It was refreshing.

“You look like Sylvester, who just swallowed a yellow canary with that grin on your face.” Alona greeted him as he walked past her desk. “I gather you did not heed my advice.” Her brows rose in her forehead, challenging him to answer.

Of course, he had an idea of what she referred to with that remark of hers. Honestly, he did feel like he was floating, although he still did not reach cloud nine. However, he was in no hurry to get there.

“Can a man just be happy to be alive?” He avoided answering her question as he continued to his desk, dropping his things on the side and quickly checking on his emails and things to do for the day.

“I hope you know what you are doing.” She still proceeded with her assumption as she walked into his desk and dropped a folder on its top. “I don’t want anybody getting hurt at the end.”

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He understood her meaning since he believed she had looked into his past. He was not someone who would have a stellar record when it came to women. But in his defense, he had never found the right one.

But come to think of it, he was not looking for her either. He believed he was still young to think of a serious and committed relationship. Suddenly, he wondered if that had changed.

“Of course, I think you are an excellent mentor and have taught me well. I promise I will not get hurt in any way.” He jokingly responded to her comment.

Besides, he had no intention of making her cry. He only intended to get to know her and determine his fascination with her. It was not as if he was declaring undying love to her and offering marriage to get her into bed. He believed that was not his style.

He admitted that he had been in many relationships. But he had never intentionally hurt any of them when they separated ways. It just did not work out in the end.

“You know that is not what I mean. But anyway.” She shrugged her shoulders at him but shoved the folder closer to him. “Since you did a great job on your last project, Sir Alex wishes to congratulate you and reward you.”

“What is this?” He asked, staring at the folder before him.

“Sir Alex needed you to meet with a client tonight. He wanted to see you in action.” Alona explained to him.

She instructed him to review the contents of the folder, information about the profile of the client he was to meet, and the details of his responsibilities.

"You mean you are entrusting this to me." He took the file, excited about the new challenge. He knew that one of his strengths was meeting people and convincing them. It was one of his charms. He believed he could do this with flying colors.

"I think you earned it," Alona said, smiling genuinely at him. "Besides, Sir Alex would not have given you that file if he did not believe in you." She assured him.

He was glad that their boss finally recognized his efforts. He thought their CEO only saw all his mistakes and judged him from the first day they had met. But he could not blame him if he did. He was indeed an asshole back then.

The entire day had his schedule bombarded with work. He barely had a lunch break, let alone a bathroom break. He wanted to see her, but it seemed the other side of the office was busy as well. But at least he had seen a glimpse of her when she occasionally passed by the hallway.

"You should leave now." Alona reminded him about the dinner that he was supposed to attend.

"Yeah, I am leaving." He said as he gathered his materials for the meeting. He had hoped he would still bump into her, but he had not even seen her shadow.

He could see her again tomorrow, but now Alona was right. The last thing he needed was to be late for the meeting and make his clients wait. It would be another terrible first impression, remembering his first day on the job.

Barely thirty minutes later, he was at the assigned restaurant, sitting at his reserved table with an expensive bottle of wine. The best way to impress a client was to dine and wine them. And he came prepared.

"Sir, your guest are already on their way." The waiter he tasked to inform him of their arrival told him.

He quickly stood from his seat, ready to greet his guests. As they walked inside the restaurant, his smile suddenly vanished, replaced by confusion. He was not expecting someone he knew would accompany his guests to the dinner.

What was she doing here? With them? They seemed to be chatting with her animatedly that she had not bothered to look in his direction. When she finally did, he also noticed the surprise in her eyes upon seeing him.

"Mr. Whitman, this is my associate, who will join us tonight." The woman said as she ushered them to their seats, introducing him in the process.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Whitman." He immediately uttered, recovering from his shock to see her there.

"Zach, what are you doing here?" She immediately whispered near his ears when she moved toward the last available chair beside his.

"I should be asking you the same question." He replied, still dumbfounded by her unexpected presence as he helped her to her seat.

He guessed they would not have the answer until they had returned to work. In the meantime, they seemed to have no choice but to work together again.

Would it be so bad? Not all.

Chapter 983: Toast to success

She could feel her heart thumping inside her chest as she sat across the table with their clients and the man she had been working with hand and hand in their last project by her side.

Ria had stepped her best foot forward, trying to be confident despite her inexperience. She was intelligent, not to brag about the scholarship that had helped her secure a good education and this job.

Still, compared to her partner and competitor, she felt inadequate as he appeared natural and in his elements as he charmed his way to their client's heart and mind.

"Honestly, I had some skepticism about meeting the two of you. I thought Alex might have been slacking in his decision-making by sending you to convince me to invest in this project." Mr. Whitman said as he sipped his wine, looking fascinated at the two of them.

"I assure you..." Ria was about to say.

"We are..." Zach was also about to say his opinion.

"But..." The older man stopped them from saying more as he held his free hand before them. "I think I saw what he saw in the two of you. Both of you are young minds exhibiting much potential, with creativity and determination."

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"I agree." The other man sitting beside their client seconded the compliment. "I think Alex had landed a landmine by hiring you in his company."

"Thanks." The two simultaneously answered, both overwhelmed by their praises.

"I think I like what you have presented. Both of your proposals are great." Mr. Whitman pointed at the two young interns. "Let me work on a counteroffer and send it to your boss. I am sure that this will be one lucrative joint venture."

The two could not help but smile at the man's proposal. It meant that they did well in representing their boss and their company. They could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Soon, Mr. Whitman and his associate excused themselves after a successful and delicious dinner, leaving the two on the table. Both were still on the high of their first successful negotiation. Suddenly, it did not matter who won the proposal, but both were happy to make the client happy.

"Shall we drink to that?" Zach offered, seeing that the bottle was still almost half full. It would be a waste to leave it unfinished.

"I..." She was about to decline since she already had a glass and was not a drinker.

She did not intend to drink, knowing she had a low tolerance for alcohol, but it might seem rude to their client if she declined a toast. Besides, it had calmed her nerves even for a bit, so she finished the one glass.

“Come on. We need to celebrate.” He urged her, seeing the hesitation in her eyes. “It is not every day that we have an opportunity like this.” He reasoned, also feeling elated by his achievement.

Somehow, he felt like he had accomplished something through his merit, not because of who his father was or because he carried his family name. Truthfully, he was ecstatic that nobody even mentioned his father.

He was glad, as far as their clients were concerned, he was just an ordinary person with a typical common name. And it was great.

“Ok!” She finally accepted as he refilled their glasses with the expensive wine.

She would admit it was far better than the wines she had tasted beforehand. Of course, she and her few friends could only afford the cheap versions. She believed this one must cost much, much more.

But it was no problem since the company would take the tabs of this meal. At least they had some good news that would come with the bill, justifying their expense.

“Wait!” He said as he raised his hand to catch the server’s attention. Quickly, a man in his black and white uniform stood before him. He ordered a chocolate cake for dessert.

“I think the celebration will not be complete without something sweet.” He announced when the waiter moved away.

Their clients declined the dessert part since they still had other arrangements. But it seemed her partner was keen to have one. But who was she to say no to a delicious treat, having a sweet tooth herself?

“I think you did great,” Ria stated, unable to think of anything else to say. She suddenly felt awkward, realizing that they were now dining alone. It suddenly felt like a date as her heart quickened and butterflies swirled around her stomach.

Nonsense! She reprimanded herself for putting a different meaning to the situation. She quickly shoved the idea away, concentrating on their jobs instead. It was not the time for her foolish thoughts.

“But honestly, I do like your proposal. I think yours is so much better.” Zach admitted as he took half of his drink in one gulp.

He was not just saying that to please her, but he believed that his ideas might be good, but hers was innovative. However, he would admit that she was a novice, as seen in her performance. It was transparently clear earlier that she was very nervous as she presented her game plan.

“Is it that good?” She asked hesitantly, still doubting herself, unable to believe that she had come up with that proposal in such a short time.

The project was not that simple, but Alex already gave them the backbone of what he wished to happen in the proposal. All they had to do was add something to it that would make it exceptional and present it to the client.

"Yeah, it is. So, stop doubting yourself." Somehow, he wished to help her gain the confidence she lacked but would need to excel in this job.

Like Alex, he also saw the potential in her. Maybe she could be a great competition to him someday, but for now, he outdid her in showmanship. That was not surprising since he had grown up entertaining people in his father and mother's circle.

On the other hand, he believed he had to work more on his creativity. He could not be complacent in the word "good enough." He had to work harder next time. But it seemed that Ria was already natural in that department.

He raised his glass to her, praising her for a job that was well executed. It was a toast to success.

Chapter 984: A wallflower

She was smiling, laughing, and having the time of her life. When was the last time she felt this way, giggling again at what he said? It seemed it had been a lifetime ago, remembering that she never had the luxury of being carefree.

Sadly, she did not have much of anything growing up. She had to work most of her life and study hard to prepare for a better future. Then, she had to face a crucial bump in her life when she had her son.

"You should finish the last bite." He offered, scooping the last portion of the chocolate cake from the small plate.

Unfortunately, the restaurant had run out of his order, leaving them with one plate to share. The manager offered a different dessert, but they settled to share that one piece.

"I think I have enough." She muttered, smiling while holding onto her fully packed stomach. She believed she had eaten more than enough to last her until tomorrow.

"Please, one more piece." He insisted, taking the spoon closer to her lips as he urged her to take another bite.

She chuckled again as she refused the last piece of the delicious treat, but he was relentless. Eventually, she took the bait and ate the cake to make him stop. "Satisfied?" She noticed they were already gathering attention from the nearby tables and feeling slightly embarrassed.

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"Quite a bit." He reacted as his lips turned upward into a contented grin. "But I will be happier if you go out with me again." He added as he leaned forward, closer than before, with a pleading look this time.

Tonight, with the help of alcohol in her system, she felt different. She was more upfront and fearless as she said what was on her mind without inhibitions. "You are a funny and charming man, Zachary Andrews." Smiling adorably at her.

In her book, that was two different things. She met quite a few who were attractive but were never funny, not all. But a few had a great sense of humor but lacked the finesse and appeal. But a deadly combination could be devastating, especially for the female population.

"I am glad I can be a source of your amusement." He responded with a boyish, charming grin, showing a few dimples on both sides of his cheeks. "But you have not answered my question."

Once again, this a perfect example of men who she should be avoiding. She concluded that he was dangerous as she gazed into his eyes, mesmerized by his handsome and friendly face. But as much as she wished to look away, she could not.

Still, her mind warned her that she was crossing a line she should not take. She should not be flirting with a stranger. After all, what did she know about him other than women were falling at his feet?

Suddenly, looking at him reminded her of being a victim of a guy like him. It was in the past, but it was something she would never forget. It was a lesson she swore to ingrain in her mind so she would never commit the same mistake again.

"I think I need to go to the bathroom." She said, needing a space between them as she excused herself. She needed to avoid answering him because, in her condition, she might say yes.

She was afraid that her walls had fallen, and he was starting to sneak into her personal boundaries. She could not have that. She had to snap out of it, not wanting to break her promise.

In her defense, he kept refilling her glass, and she unconsciously drank more than her limit as she enjoyed his company. In truth, it had been a long while since she had an intellectual but humorous discussion outside her work.

Most of her conversations at home were syllabic monotones between her and her baby, who barely understood her instructions. So? Yeah! She had a great time tonight with this man that she barely knew.

"Woah!" Nonetheless, her head started swirling as she stood up. Her sudden movement affected her equilibrium, making her unbalanced in her steps.

As she had reminded herself beforehand, she should not drink more than her body could handle as she realized that her world was spinning. She finally realized that she was drunk.

It might be just two or three glasses of wine, but it was more than she could manage as it impaired her movement, even her vision, it would seem.

"Are you alright?" He asked her, quickly moving to assist her back to her seat. "Are you drunk?" Looking surprised as he stared at her closely. "But you only have..." Then, his eyes seemed to light up, probably realizing his mistake.

"I am sorry, but I think I drank more than I can handle." She interrupted him, unsure if she was slurring her words, but felt her head floating as if she was in the clouds.

"Then, let me drive you home." He offered, looking like the alcohol did not affect him that much.

She observed that he looked like a man who could handle his liquor well. But what did she expect from a man like him? He seemed to be the light of the party.

"No, I can manage to go home myself." She attempted to stand up again, ready to leave, but failed as she fell back on her seat. But it seemed that the more she moved, the more her condition worsened.

The alcohol was finally doing its possible worse as it reached her head and started affecting her thinking. She believed she could barely manage to coherently formulate words anymore as her thoughts swirled in her mind.

"I don't think so." He announced with finality as he held her in place. "Wait while I settle the bill." He called the manager's attention.

"Fine." She answered him as if she could go anywhere with her current condition. She could barely stand up without falling. Then, how could she leave without assistance?

She watched him under her woozy eyes as he dealt with the manager and asked him to have his car ready at the front entrance. She concluded that he was a man in charge, the center of attention, while she was just a wallflower, comparing herself to him.

Chapter 985: Not until then

It was late when she turned up in her daughter's room. Work had been chaotic since her boss decided to pull her out of the Royal Wedding. They reassigned her to another story that was keeping her on her toes.

She had no idea why the management suddenly changed their minds and gave the story to someone else. But that was not a loss that she would like to contest. She was glad that for whatever reason they had, she was free from a sure disastrous situation.

"Hello, my darling." She greeted her sleeping child. She did not wish to wake her up, but she had missed her so dearly that she could not help it.

Her nanny said her little princess had been cranky all day, but she did not seem sick. She concluded that her baby probably missed her since she had been coming home late.

"Hey, I knew I heard Luisa cry." Her friend had shown up on the doorstep a few minutes after Luisa complained about her, ruining her sleep. "I did not hear you come in."

"I tried not to wake everybody up." But she seemed to fail when she woke Luisa up. "The nanny said that she had been throwing tantrums." She asked her friend, hoping that it was nothing serious.

"Yeah, I think she is still adjusting to her new nanny." Amelia tried to assure her that nothing was wrong with her child.

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They all knew that she had to pick a nanny that would be there for Luisa when the time came that Amelia had to leave. She was getting married soon and would not be around to care for Luisa anymore.

But Luisa did not seem to warm up with the nanny she chose. So far, this was the second nanny she hired in a week. But Amelia was right. They had to give her time to adjust to a new person taking care of her. After all, they were still strangers.

"Good." Making her feel a bit relieved. Then, she danced with her little angel in her arms, loving the feeling of caring for her. She had a tiring day, but feeling the warmth of her child close to her heart seemed to relax her, easing her body of exhaustion.

“Wait!” Amelia uttered with a slight surprise. “Why are you here?” She questioned her with curiosity.

“Dah! This apartment is my home.” She answered sarcastically, but she knew that was not the answer her friend wanted to hear.

After she failed the dinner date with the restaurant owner, her friend set her up with other blind dates. But she always managed to find a way to shut it down.

However, tonight, Amelia managed to corner her and force her to agree to a blind date. Now, she was wondering why she was here instead of her date.

It was late if she came from work, but it would not be late if she had come from a successful date. So?

“Don’t tell me you did not like him?” Her friend asked, looking quite disappointed. “He is a great guy, and he liked children.” She continued, lobbying for her recommended date.

How could he not like kids when he was a pediatric doctor? But that was not the point. “I am sorry. I am sure he was a great guy, but I never got the chance to meet him.” She could not lie to her friend.

“Eida, are you serious? What is wrong this time?” She asked, feeling exasperated this time as she ran her fingers through her long hair. “Why did you stand him up?”

“First, nothing is wrong with me,” Eida answered her friend calmly. “Second, I called him an hour before to cancel.” She was hoping that would calm her friend this time. At least she bothered to inform him that she was not showing up.

“Why?” Amelia looked at her with disbelief. “Why would you do that?” As she paced the floor in front of her. “I told you that he is looking forward to meeting you.” Stopping before her to get an answer.

“I was going to meet him, but as I was packing up for the day, my boss called me for an emergency meeting. I am sorry, but I could not turn my back on my job.” Eida explained to her friend.

She was not lying about that. She was on her way to meet him but could not say no to her boss. Well, the last part was a lie. But her friend did not need to hear that. But truthfully, she was relieved that she had an excuse to back out of it without having to make up excuses.

She had been dreading it the entire day, even going as far as praying for a miracle to happen. But it seemed it was an answered prayer as fate intervened on her behalf.

“As if people are going to suffer if you don’t get the gossip out on time,” Amelia mumbled around her, still bitter that she did not show up on her date. “Now, he would think you are not interested in him.”

She wanted to spell out to her friend that she was not. But that would hurt her feelings. “Maybe fate is saying he was not the right one for me.” She hoped it sounded better than her telling her friend to stop it.

But she loved her friend, and the last thing she wished to do was to make her feel bad. She knew she had been under tremendous stress with the wedding. She could not add up to what she was going through.

But she could not go on a date again, not after the last one. Her date was charming, attractive, intelligent, and a true gentleman. But she was not ready for him.

“Why don’t we talk about your wedding? Do you need any help?” She wished to change the topic, knowing Amelia would not rest until she got another date.

However, she could not use another person to forget another man. She had done it before and looked at where she found herself now. But she was not closing her door to the possibility of falling in love again and finding her true love.

She knew she had found him.

But maybe she could find it again the second time around.

Once she was ready, she might date again, but not until then.

Chapter 986: Mysterious woman

His eyes tried to focus on the road ahead. It was slightly late therefore traffic was lighter. Still, he avoided going over the speed limit, not wanting to attract the attention of the cops. The last thing he needed tonight was for someone to pull him over and a DUI case, driving under the influence.

Zach was not afraid to get caught. His father was a Senator. He could get away with a minor misdemeanor with just a slap on the wrist. But avoiding the hassle was still better. Besides, he liked not using his father and his position for a change.

“Are you sure about the address?” He asked as he searched the street for the address she told him in her drunken state when they left the restaurant and before she dozed into a restless sleep in the passenger side.

But she did not respond as he failed to wake her up on his first try. He had no way to confirm the address. Having no choice, he searched his navigation pane on his dashboard, determining if he had the right place.

Still, he doubted if he was at the correct address as he passed several beautiful townhouses on his way to her apartment. She did not seem to fit in this place based on the limited knowledge he gathered about her.

Nobody in the office seemed to know much about her. He would have asked Alona or even Brenda about her, but that would only send red flags and daggers his way. They seemed protective of her.

It was a classy neighborhood with expensive properties on the top end of the estate scale. On the other hand, the woman beside her was not the typical heiress who could afford such luxury.

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“Hey, Ria! We are here.” He whispered as he stared at the woman who still had her eyes closed as he parked the car on the pavement outside her apartment. “Ria!” He called her again.

“Oh!” She looked at him, slightly disoriented, with the alcohol inhibiting her system. She shifted her eyes from him and his car before returning them to his eyes. “What is going on?” She asked as she adjusted in her seat.

“We had a few drinks, and I offered to drive you home,” Zach explained as she waited for her to remember.

“Oh! Yeah!” Her eyes finally lit up, probably remembering the earlier event. “I am sorry if I have troubled you. I could have taken a taxi instead of letting you drive me home.” She believed that was what she said.

But he heard just a portion of it as she slightly slurred her words. But he still understood what she meant by it. “Don’t worry about it. I am just happy to help.”

“I guess I better get home,” Ria uttered, a bit coherent this time, as she attempted to remove the seatbelt. “I think this thing is stuck.” She concluded when she could not unbuckle it from its lock.

“Let me help.” Zach offered as he removed his seatbelt to bend over to her side. Then, the unthinkable happened.

He barely unlocked her belt when he felt her hands raised into the air and wrapped around his neck. Before he knew what she intended, her lips were already grazing his, and her hands locked him in an embrace.

He slightly pulled back in shock and stared into her eyes. He was unsure what was happening, but honestly, he liked it. Who was he to complain if a beautiful woman wanted to kiss him? But still, he did not understand it.

“Ria...” He wanted to ask what she was doing, but she stopped him by pushing herself back into his lips, sealing their mouths, preventing him from saying more.

He could not help himself as he finally succumbed to his desire and kissed her fervently. He finally admitted that he had wanted to kiss her. He did not know when he had started fantasizing about her, but he had been obsessing about her.

“Don’t stop.” She muttered in her lust-filled voice as he pulled away from her lips to travel down her cheeks and throat.

“I don’t want to.” He responded as he invaded the opening in her neckline. But the confine of his sports car was not exactly convenient to what he had in mind. “Let us go inside.” He suggested as he quickly extricated himself from her embrace and jumped out of the car with a purpose.

Soon, he had her in his arms, pushing her inside the apartment building and into her apartment floor. “Where is your key?” He asked when he found the number of her door.

He took the liberty of taking it out of her purse since she was fumbling with it and had the door open in record time. Soon, he had her pinned by the door, pushing his hands against her clothed breast while his lips took care of her exposed skin.

“Aaaggghhh!” The moan he was eliciting from her was enough to fuel his desire to have her.

He could not wait to take her by the door, the couch, or her bedroom as his fingers crawled up on her legs, pushing through the hem of her dress. Then his other hand worked on removing the fastening of her dress.

Then, he felt her hands move slowly from his chest, dragging down his torso. The anticipation was killing him as he waited for her to wrap herself around him. He knew he was burning up as he stared into her eyes, raging with an inferno of desire.

He could sense she was ready to have him as his fingers inched their way to her core. He already knew it would not take long before he could bury himself and get lost in the realm of their passion.

But.

An unexpected event happened.

A knock behind the door interrupted him from his plans, freezing him in place. Someone was calling Ria from the other side. A neighbor perhaps, he thought.

He wanted to ignore the intruder and continue, but Ria seemed to snap out of her trance as her expression turned from an intense desire to a horrifying shock.

"Ria, are you home?" A young voice continued to call her outside.

"Oh my!" She mumbled in a frenzy as if she had just made a terrible mistake. "I am sorry. I don't know what came over me."

She quickly pushed herself away from him, creating a distance between them. Then, she started fixing her clothes and her hair before looking at him with that guilty or embarrassed look. He could not quite distinguish between the two.

"That is ok." He responded, still baffled by her unusual reaction. He believed they were two adults about to do a consensual act. Therefore, it was not something to be ashamed of or overreact about as he stepped backward to give her space.

"No, it is not." She snapped at him, suddenly angry. "This should not have happened." Pointing to the two of them.

Then, she turned around and faced the door, seemingly composed and not as drunk as before. As if a bucket of ice bathed her and returned her to awareness.

She took a few deep breaths as he watched her from a distance, wondering what had gone wrong. And more than that, who was that girl behind the door? Again, he was left wondering who this mysterious woman was before him.

Chapter 987: Yes, maybe

After her ex-boyfriend had discovered where she had been staying, her manager suggested that she should relocate to another hotel. But she did not want to stay in another lodging where her ex had access to her whereabouts.

"Are you sure you will be fine in here, Serena?" Her manager asked as she helped her move into the apartment she would be renting for the remainder of her stay in this city, at least until her case finished.

She looked around at the middle-sized room. Well, at least by their standard, the people who lived in this area. But the entire flat was barely the size of her bedroom alone.

Still, she liked her new temporary home despite its size and location. She doubted that Elliot would ever think to look for her in this place. First, it was not where she would imagine herself living. And second, Elliot would never want to step into a pest-infested area like this.

"I am sure. This apartment is perfect." She enthusiastically answered her manager as she dropped her bag on the floor near the couch in the middle of the room.

"And besides, Adam lives just next door. He assures me that this neighborhood is safe." As long as no one recognized her as the famous actress, she added subconsciously.

"I still think it would be safer if I get you a more appropriate apartment and hire a bodyguard to follow you around," Nora recommended as her eyes roamed around the room, extending her movements to the window to check the outside.

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"I understand your concern, but I am fine here. I don't need someone following me around." Serena stretched her body, feeling the fatigue of her sleepless nights as she stayed in the different hotels.

She did not feel comfortable knowing people knew who she was. Any one of those staff could inform her situation to the paparazzi or her ex. Suddenly, she remembered the bystander taking pictures of them by the door.

Luckily, those pictures had not roamed the internet or the tabloids yet. Hopefully, the guy had a change of heart and deleted those pictures. For now, she wanted her anonymity. Hopefully, no one would identify her with her star character.

"Ok. I give up." Nora raised her hands in the air as a sign of surrender. "But if anything goes wrong, please call me immediately." Like a mother hen, she would come running to save her.

"I will. I promise." She stood from the couch and hugged her manager. "Now, you can stay and watch a movie with me or leave and let me have some peace." Giving her an option.

"I wish I could, but I still have work to be done," Nora said goodbye and left her in her new dwelling while she lazed around in her living room, planting her feet on the center table as she grabbed the remote.

As planned, she dozed off automatically, unaware of someone knocking on her door. For an unknown reason, she felt more comfortable in this place than the hotel she had stayed in, with their complete security running around the establishment.

Finally, several more knocks woke her up, making her aware of a visitor outside her door. She quickly stood from the couch and strode towards the door but suddenly stopped.

"Whose there?" She remembered she was new here and did not know her neighbors except Adam. It could be anyone giving her a friendly welcome to the area or someone who might have recognized her earlier.

"Adam." He answered her with that distinctive voice. "I just want to check on you." He added behind the door.

Somehow, she had finally memorized his tone, recognizing him effortlessly even if she did not see his face. Hurriedly, she opened the door, glad he had come by to see her.

"Hi!" She slightly waved her fingers at him, showing him a friendly smile.

"Can I come inside? I brought dinner since I figured you might still be adjusting to the place and had not time to cook or order food." He lifted the paper bags in his hand, indicating his takeout food.

"Thanks. That is very thoughtful of you. You did not have to do that, but I truly appreciate it." She mumbled as she opened the door wider to let him pass. "Please make yourself comfortable."

She was thankful that he thought of food. Honestly, eating had never crossed her mind. Now, she realized she was starving, and there was nothing in this apartment she could eat.

She had been living in hotel rooms where room service was easy. She failed to remember that she had to change her ways in her new living condition. She mentally took note of buying food the next day.

Who knew? Maybe she would not be a famous star after a few months. Then, she would have to start living a modest lifestyle. Her situation was a perfect way to prepare herself for such an eventuality.

"What are you watching?" He asked as he settled on the couch and arranged the food on the small table.

"I forgot." She responded as she joined him on the couch and helped take the food out of the packaging. "I fell asleep." She admitted that she had no idea what was playing on the screen.

Then, she raised her brows at him when she saw his reaction to her statement. "What?" She asked as he looked at her funnily with a slight smirk on his lips.

"That explains this new look." He pointed at her and made a circular motion at her current appearance. "I almost did not recognize you." He teased her.

"No..." Then, it dawned on her what he implied as she jumped on her feet, suddenly feeling conscious about her looks. Then, she ran toward the bathroom to check on herself.

"Hey! I was only joking. You still look great." She could hear him saying, but she also caught a slight chuckle from his voice.

"Wow! You look great." She mumbled to herself once she faced her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Her hair was a little out of sorts, then her face had a pillow mark on her cheeks, probably from the uncomfortable position she ended up in on the couch. But the worse was the dry saliva that was sticking down her chin.

In her defense, she was exhausted, too tired to even think of being comfortable or how she would look. Besides, she was startled when she suddenly had a visitor without notice.

“And why does it matter?” She asked herself if she looked like a piece of crap.

She believed she liked him. Did she want him to like her too? Yes, maybe.

Chapter 988: Nothing left but bones

She came back to the living room after more than a few minutes. She changed her clothes into something more comfortable after washing her face and brushing her hair.

She debated whether to shower, but that would take a lot of time. She did not wish to bore him while waiting for her to finish. Besides, the hot meal looked appetizing. She did not want it to go cold.

“Sorry about that.” She took a seat on the spot she had occupied earlier and pretended to check the movie he was watching. “Did you change the movie?” Noticing that it was not the one playing when she woke up.

And wanting something to talk about instead of the awkwardness she had suddenly felt around her. She had been with plenty of men but had never felt this way before, not even with the men she had loved.

The last time she felt like giggling about a man was when she was a teenager, looking from afar at her childhood crush. In this business, relationships had been more like a game of connections and arrangements, money and fame, nothing about passion and love.

She was a fool to equate her relationship with Elliot with the latter. Maybe she had cared for him and thought of it as love, but she now concluded that he did not feel any such thing.

To him, their affair was about what the people wanted. They did look great on the movie screen. The fans craved their offset love romance. And she was under the illusion that it was real.

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“Yeah, I am not much about romance,” Adam answered as his eyes glanced her way.

She could see what he meant by that as she watched the scenes turning into a brawl fight. Suddenly, she wondered if he liked to fight since he did have a mean punch. She could still remember Elliot lying on the floor.

“You know you can audition as an actor. You will do great in action movies.” She suggested, looking at his attractive face and masculine arms that showed on the short sleeves of his shirt.

He was not as handsome as Elliot, but his chiseled face and body would work well in a leading action role. But, of course, that was if he could act. But why would he enter the crazy entertainment world when he was busy saving the world?

“Unfortunately, I don’t see myself in such a superficial and shallow world.” Adam casually answered.

“Not that I am generalizing.” He suddenly felt afraid he had offended her, taking his words back. “I think you are more than that.”

She was not insulted by those words since she also believed it was true. It was a business that many had exploited for their gains. For some artists, it was passion, but to most, it was for the glory.

"Don't worry. I also think the same thing. But unfortunately for me, I liked it. I also believe it is the only thing I am good at." She admitted, not wanting him to think she was mad about his opinion of her work.

The promise of glitz and glamour had lured many aspiring actors or dreamers into her world. But it was not the money or the fame that had pushed her feet in this direction.

It was her passion for the art of becoming someone else in front of the camera that had her living in this chaotic industry. But in the end, she feared that this world would realize that she did not belong and spilled her out of it soon enough.

"I don't believe that. I am sure that you can be anything you wish to be." Adam said. If he had not worked hard enough, he would be just another statistic of those who failed to reach their ambition.

He would not be where he was today, doing what he had always dreamt of doing. He had seen people he knew back then still striving to make ends meet because they had easily given up on their dreams.

"But that is the problem. All I ever wanted was to act in front of the camera." Now, that dream might soon end as she thought of the battle she had to win. "Anyway, how did you learn how to fight? Maybe I should take up some lessons from you."

She wanted to change the subject as she ate the delicious food he had brought with him. It was depressing to think she might lose the thing that she had fought hard to have.

"Living in the slums taught me how to defend myself. But, of course, I took some formal lessons in boxing at a local gym." He explained his knowledge of self-defense. "But I can bring you there and introduce you to my trainer." He offered, glad that they shifted the topic to something else.

"I like that. Can we do it tomorrow if you are free?" She suggested, thinking of nothing else to do. Besides, she finally agreed that she might need to learn some basics in defending herself.

"Sure. We can do it early in the morning since I have clients in the afternoon." He would have taught her, but his work also demands most of his time. "I can also show you around the neighborhood. So, you know where to go for supplies and stuff."

"I love that." She felt excited that she would be spending more time with him, feeling the butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

But she only smiled at him, not wanting to show how much his presence had affected her. Despite being a star, she had never been bold with men. She might be attractive to one or two of her co-stars, but she would not breathe a word about it to anyone.

Now, she could tell that she was attracted to this man. But even if she wanted to make the first move, she did not feel it would be right. She was still in a messy ending relationship, and it would be unfair to him to be standing in the middle.

It would look like she was using him as a rebound from her failed relationship with the famous actor. Adam would become bait for the piranhas in the media circus. They would be feeding on him until there was nothing left but bones.

Chapter 989: Man and wife

She looked at herself before the mirror, satisfied with the new gown draped around her body. She might not look as alluring as before. But as long as her husband looked at her like his eyes could not have enough of her, she would not mind.

It was his opinion of her that mattered most and nothing else. She could have grown like a fat cow, but she believed her husband would still love her just the same.

"You sure you are up to doing this," Alex whispered in her ears as he stood behind her, staring at her through their reflections.

She turned around to finally face him, assuring him not with words but her body language that she could handle her body. She was fine and ready to leave. She would not miss this day.

Besides, her doctor had given her a clean bill of health. Nothing was stopping her from going to this occasion. Most importantly, she wanted to be there for her friend.

"Yes!" Dani answered her husband with an excited smile on her lips. She genuinely wished to show her support to her former best friend, who was getting married.

She knew if her father had been alive, he would have attended the ceremony. Maybe even walked her down the aisle. She had always been like a daughter to Ethan and a sister to her.

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It was time to bury the past and move forward to the future, at least in their relationship. They might have hit a road bump, but it should not stop them from going in the same direction again.

"Then, shall we? We don't want to miss the ceremony." Alex teased her since he kept saying that she moved at a snail's pace.

She knew he was messing with her. They still have ample time to reach the wedding and a moment to spare. But truthfully, moving around had been difficult as her term came closer. Still, it would not stop her from attending the most important day in her friend's life.

"Stop teasing me. Otherwise, our baby might race you to the finish line." She warned him, but she knew it was just for good laughs as he made a zipper sign on his lips. "Better." She responded, approving his action.

"Maybe if we are early, we can still convince Jacob to reconsider." Alex jokingly said as he assisted her into a chauffeured driven car.

"You know it was Jacob who was lucky to have her." She defended her friend, who had made a three hundred sixty turned around.

Her old friend was back. She had seen it in her eyes. Whatever negative influence Nick had on her had vanished when Jacob came into the picture. She finally saw the friend she grew up with and who had been her first best friend.

Although she could never take Jacky's position anymore, her old best friend would always have a space in her heart. Maybe eventually, they could regain everything they had lost in their relationship.

"Yeah! He is lucky. I am just jesting with you." Alex understood what Cassie had gone through. He also saw how she had changed and stuck by Jacob through the good and bad times.

The company had taken a tremendous hit when Nick died, but Cassie held the company together for Jacob. She had fought tooth and nail to bring it back to its glory. With that, she had earned his admiration.

"Anyway, have you heard from your parents? They called me yesterday, saying that they were thinking of visiting since we could not go to them." Dani reminded him about her phone conversation with Katherine.

She remembered how excited her mother was to see her friend. Laura had been fighting her loneliness by doing charity work, but Dani understood her mother's need to be with the people she loved.

She would have visited her, but her condition had prevented her from too many strenuous activities. She was lucky today that her doctor had approved her to attend this celebration, but with strict instructions not to overdo herself.

"Yes, Mom called early this morning to remind me. They intend to arrive by early next week." He could not wait. Just like Dani and Laura, he also missed his parents.

Although compared to Dani, he had seen them the last time he had come to visit Lance. But that was still a while ago. They were getting old, and he wanted to spend more time with them if possible.

"Great!" Dani could not be happier. She had always dreamt of a big family. Someday, she would see her family growing as her hands instinctively touched her belly.

Soon, she would have a child in her arms.

And a few more minutes later, they entered the grand hallway where the ceremony would take place. Laura, her mother, stood by the massive double door, waiting for the bride to arrive.

"Hey, Mom," Dani immediately greeted. "Are you ready?" She asked as she kissed her on both cheeks.

"Ready as can be," Laura answered with an eager and delighted smile. "The groom is already inside, and the bride is already circling the block." She informed them excitedly. Her mother had agreed to walk Cassie on the aisle in her father's stead. Just like her, Laura had always considered Cassie as family.

"I can't wait to see her." She opted to wait by the door before joining the rest of the guests inside. She would like to wish her friend the best of luck in her wedding before anything else.

Finally, the bride arrived, marching towards them with a nervous gait. She could understand the feeling. She had been in that same situation before. But she knew once Cassie saw her husband-to-be, all the nerves would disappear, and her concentration would only focus on him.

"Congratulations, Cassie." She hugged her friend as she stood before her, afraid to hold her because of her condition. "Don't worry. I won't pop in your wedding." She teased her friend, hoping to calm her nerves down.

But she knew it would all soon be over. They had already dealt with the hard part of the relationship. The groom waited patiently inside, while the bride could not wait for the ceremony to start. It was perfect.

At the end of this, all her friend would want was for the ceremony to be over. And then for the priest to declare her as his wife. Dani still remembered how happy she was, hearing the bishop announce them as man and wife.

Chapter 990: Unconditional love

Weddings usually would bring people closer together. People they had not seen for a long time, long lost connections and severed ties, ready to mend again.

Today was no different as she saw people she had not seen for a long time. Friends she had almost forgotten, families that had lost words with, and misunderstandings that needed mending.

“Thank you for coming to my wedding. I honestly was not sure if you would grant my request to attend.” The bride uttered in great humility and enthusiasm.

Honestly, she was unsure if her old friend would even consider being part of this grand celebration. But she could not blame her after all she had done against her and her family.

She should consider herself very fortunate that Dani, Alex, Laura, and most of their old friends came to share this momentous event in her life. Her union with the most unlikely man she never thought would take her as his wife.

“Cassie and I are truly honored with your presence.” The groom also echoed his new wife’s excitement to see them.

He knew how much the presence of the people she considered family meant to her. She regretted her past deeds, remorse for all her wrongdoings, and now she had asked for forgiveness.

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Thankfully, the presence of the Hamilton family symbolized their pardon and readiness to forget the past and move forward. That was all he wanted for his wife so they could finally build a family without the past hunting them to the future.

“We are honored to witness your union, Jacob and Cassie.” Dani genuinely expressed her gladness to be part of her friend’s special day. No one should be alone on a day like this, not even this woman.

Yes, she had been a thorn in her side for years. But she had proven that she had changed. It was time to bury those heartaches, with her past that had almost destroyed her.

Jacob also did not deserve to suffer because of what his brother did. A sin of another should not be the burden of another. He did not force his brother to do those bad things. On the other hand, he tried to make him change his ways.

“I am happy to be here, my child.” Lara also held Cassie’s hands in hers, squeezing them gently, telling her without words that they had let go of the past and were ready to move on to the future. With that, Lara sealed her blessings with a kiss on her cheeks.

"You have no idea what this means to me," Cassie whispered to the woman that she had considered a mother growing up.

She could only be thankful that they had given her a chance to make up for her sins. Until now, she regretted ever betraying their trust. She wished she could also ask for forgiveness from Ethan, but it was way too late.

"Hey! Bride and Groom!" Someone shouted behind them. It was some of their old friends who also wanted some attention from the main celebrants. "It is time for the first dance." The organizer also came to them, informing them of the program.

Soon, the newlywed couple was moving into the middle of the room, along with the beautiful music they had chosen for the occasion, symbolizing their union.

"Are you happy?" Jacob whispered into her ears as he twirled his wife to the music before pulling her back into his arms.

He knew that their relationship had started unconventionally. Who would have thought that he would fall for his brother's ex-girlfriend? Not him, and not in a million years. But here he was, madly in love with this woman in his arms.

At the same time, he had no doubt that she had genuinely fallen in love with him. He would know after all the sacrifices she made for him. She could have taken his inheritance when he handed it to her on a silver plate.

But instead, she only safeguarded his interest and returned it to him much better than when it was handed to him. He would never doubt that she was the woman for him. And he had every intention to make her the happiest woman alive.

"Yes, very much." Cassie could only hug him tightly as they swayed beautifully to the music. Two bodies moved as one. He might not be the best dancer in the land, but he made a lot of effort to learn this step for her.

Despite his devotion to his profession and busy schedule, her husband had always made time for her. Cassie could not ask for a more loving and devoted husband than Jacob, making her one of the luckiest women to live and love.

Soon, the entire floor had several other couples joining them in the dance number. The guests had laughter and smiles on their faces, while the newlywed could not think of a more glorious way to celebrate their union but among friends and loved ones.

"You look beautiful and adorable, my darling wife." Another couple on the dance floor joined the newly married couple. But they moved at a slower pace compared to everyone else.

"Maybe you mean fat," Dani responded with a laugh. She could not even see her foot with the big belly blocking her sight as they moved along the dance floor.

"I mean the future mother of my children. The most alluring woman I ever met and luckily accepted me to be her husband." Alex countered, taking her lips in a short but sweet passionate kiss to make his point.

“And a man with a sweet tongue. No wonder I have fallen deeply and madly in love with you.” Dani allowed her husband to lead her along with the music until her feet could not take it anymore.

Then, they were back on the side, sitting on the sideline. They let the stars of the show claim the center stage. They enjoyed the moment as spectators this time, enjoying their friends, old and new, showing everyone what love was all about.

It was the union of two people willing to subject themselves to unconditional love.