

Chapter 52 Unexpected News

As the first rays of morning light filtered through the curtains, Alaric's gentle voice stirred me from my slumber.

"Good morning, baby girl," he murmured, his words carrying a warmth that spread through me like sunshine. My lips curled into a soft smile as I turned to face him. He was already awake and grinning at me with that familiar twinkle in his eyes.

"You have a busy day today," he announced, his tone laced with excitement.

"Why?" I queried, a hint of confusion tugging at the corners of my mind. After all, I hadn't made any plans for the day, so why did it suddenly seem so full?

Alaric set down a steaming cup of coffee before me, accompanied by a plate of breakfast, and then met my gaze with a knowing look. "Bex and Ivy are still here, and you're going shopping," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Shopping?" I echoed, my mind racing to catch up with the unexpected turn of events. Shopping wasn't exactly on my agenda—I had intended to head home and start packing for me to move in here, not go on a retail spree.

"Yes, for a dress," he confirmed, his expression unwavering. I couldn't help but laugh incredulously. Surely, he must be joking?

"Alaric," I began, but his hand rose in a gentle gesture, silencing me before I could protest further.

"You agreed to marry me, baby girl. There's no turning back now," he declared firmly, his words carrying a weight that made me pause. "Unless you only agreed to because others were there?" he asks. Yes, I had agreed, but in my mind, I had envisioned an engagement that lasted years, not a sudden rush to the altar.

"I do want to, but—" I attempted to interject, but his unwavering gaze cut me off.

"You said yes because you wanted to," he insisted, his voice soft yet resolute. "That's all that matters."

I sighed, grappling with conflicting emotions swirling within me. Yes, I wanted to marry him—I had no doubt about that. But the sudden timing of our plans left me feeling disoriented, as though the ground beneath me had shifted unexpectedly.

"What's the difference in time, baby girl?" Alaric pressed, his eyes searching mine for understanding. And though I struggled to articulate it, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was no difference. It's just me.

"I... I don't know," I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. How could I explain this sudden uncertainty when all I wanted was to be with him? "There is no difference. It's my fear; I will get ready, eat, then come down to leave with them," I admit.

With a gentle nod, Alaric leaned forward, pressing a tender kiss to my lips before rising from the bed. "I'll see you downstairs," he murmured, his departure leaving me to grapple with the whirlwind of emotions that threatened to consume me.

As I savoured my breakfast in the silence of the room, I couldn't shake the lingering sense of doom; I didn't feel like Beatrix had given up.

As I stepped into the bustling living room, I was greeted not only by Bex and Ivy's infectious enthusiasm but also by the unexpected presence of Alaric's family. I had forgotten they were staying and their presence added an extra layer of complexity to the already chaotic morning.

"We're going dress shopping!" Bex exclaimed with a gleeful bounce, while holding me in a tight hug that threatened to squeeze all the air from my lungs.

"Ruby," my mother's voice cut through the excited chatter, drawing my attention away from Bex's infectious energy. Why was she here? I hesitated for a moment, reluctant to face her, but eventually turned to meet her gaze.

"Your father wants to pay for the dress," she informed me, her words hanging heavy in the air like a storm cloud on the horizon.

"No," I responded immediately, a firmness in my voice that brooked no argument. There was no way I would allow my father to pay, not after everything that had happened.

"Ruby, he's trying to make amends," my mother persisted, her eyes pleading with me to reconsider.

"No, I'm sorry, but no," I reiterated, my resolve unwavering. I couldn't accept his money, not when I still harbored doubts about his intentions.

"Baby girl," Alaric's gentle voice interjected, offering me a way out. With a grateful nod, I followed him into the kitchen.

"What's the issue with him paying?" he inquired, his expression a mixture of curiosity and concern.

"Really?" I couldn't help but scoff, incredulous that he didn't understand my hesitation.

"Yes, really," he affirmed, his gaze unwavering as he waited for me to explain.

"It's a bad omen," I explained, my words tumbling out in a rush as I struggled to articulate the weight of my unease. "I don't trust their sudden change of heart, and I can't shake the feeling that accepting their money would invite nothing but trouble. There is no way—"

Alaric's hand gently placed over my mouth and silenced my rambling. "Your voice is getting louder with every word, baby girl," he observed with a soft chuckle. "But I understand your reservations. However, if you won't let them pay, that means you have to let me."

I blinked, momentarily taken aback by the realisation. I hadn't considered that, my eyes dart toward the door where my parents lingered outside.

"Which is worse, accepting money from me or letting your parents help?" Alaric pressed, his gaze unwavering as he awaited my response.

I wanted to curse him for putting me in such a predicament, but I knew deep down that he was right. "I would rather accept you paying than risk my parents' ulterior motives," I confessed, the words heavy with resignation.

With a sigh, Alaric nodded in understanding. "Then don't let him pay," he conceded, his voice soft. "But remember, their intentions may not be as bad as you fear."

I shook my head, unable to shake the nagging sense of distrust that lingered like a shadow in the back of my mind.

"It's too late for that," I murmured, my heart heavy with the weight of unresolved tension.

"From the conversation your father had with mine, your parents were against Jake because he tainted your innocence, and they sensed he was up to no good."

A bitter irony twisted in my gut at his words. Yes, my parents' suspicions had been justified, their instincts honed to detect the negative that had infiltrated my life in the form of Jake.

"That doesn't remove everything else, Sir," I interjected, my voice tinged with a hint of defiance. "Yes, they had a reason for objecting to Jake and disowning me. But everything else..." I trailed off, unable to articulate the depth of my lingering grievances.

Alaric regarded me with a steady gaze, his eyes reflecting a quiet understanding that pierced through the layers of my defenses. "Look at it this way," he began, his tone measured yet compassionate. "They could sense Jake was using you, and you refused to listen, so they disowned you hoping you would see sense."

His words struck a chord within me, resonating with a painful truth that I had long tried to suppress. In their fervor to shield me from harm, they had unwittingly driven a wedge between us that seemed insurmountable.

"Then, rather than find out you broke up with Jake," Alaric continued, his voice taking on a somber note, "they got shown a video of me, you, and Jake, where Jake makes it sound like you used us for money."

A sharp pang of guilt pierced my heart at the reminder of that damning footage, a twisted narrative spun by Jake's deceitful tongue that had cast a shadow of doubt over my intentions. "They could have given me a chance to explain," I protested weakly, my voice barely above a whisper. "They refused to."

Alaric's expression softened, a silent acknowledgment of the pain that lingered beneath the surface of my words. "True," he conceded, his voice laced with empathy. "They were wrong for not letting you explain the full situation. But they allowed me."

A bitter laugh escaped my lips at the irony of his words. "Because they like you," I retorted bitterly. And though I knew deep down that his presence had softened my parents' hearts to some extent, I couldn't shake the lingering sense of betrayal that scratches at my soul.

"I feel like they have a plan, and I don't like not knowing," I confessed, my voice trembling with a vulnerability I had long tried to conceal.

"Maybe they do," Alaric conceded with a gentle nod. "Or maybe, as your father said to mine last night, they assumed you were just wild, that what happened with me and you was revenge on Jake, and was for a way to gain money. Now they realise that you aren't about to go running from me to another guy, they're willing to listen."

His words offered a sliver of hope amidst the darkness that threatened to consume me, a glimmer of possibility that perhaps, against all odds, my fractured family could find a way to mend the rift that had torn us apart.

"It feels too late," I murmured, my voice heavy with resignation.

"Then wait and see. That's your best plan baby girl, see how things go. If you feel like keeping them on the outside to stay safe until you're sure, do it."

I nod my head, knowing that he's right. Maybe the way forward is to just see what happens? If I push them out and they are trying to make amends, I will feel worse for it.

I walk back through, my father's voice cut through the silence.

"I understand you don't want me to pay, which is entirely fine," he began, his tone tinged with a hint of resignation. "Can you at least let your mother go with you while you look for a dress?"

I hesitated, torn between my feelings. Reluctantly, I nodded.

"Well, that's sorted then," Alaric announced. "The car is waiting outside to take you to whichever shops you want. All the women are going, us men will stay here."

My brow furrowed in confusion at the sudden segregation, a nagging sense of suspicion pricking at the back of my mind. "What's going on?" I questioned, my gaze darting between Alaric and the other men in the room. "Why are you trying to get rid of the women?"

Alaric chuckled, a warm twinkle dancing in his eyes as he met my gaze. "I'm not," he assured me, his voice laced with amusement. "But it's a good way for both sides to get to know each other."

A skeptical expression crossed Sally's face. "I agree with Ruby, something is going on," she remarked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "I can tell when you're lying, son."

The admission caught me off guard, a surprised laugh bubbling up from within me at Alaric's shocked expression.

"It was my idea," Jake says. "Dad and grandad need to sort their issues out."

Reluctantly, I accept his reasoning, though I still had a lingering sense of doubt.

As we piled into the waiting car, the anticipation of dress shopping mingled with the underlying tension that simmered beneath the surface.

"So, I've given the driver a list of shops," Sally explained, her voice infused with cheerful optimism. "We'll stop around midday for food, and continue after if needed. I know a lot of shops local with beautiful dresses, guaranteed you will have your dress today."

A surge of gratitude washed over me at her reassuring words. "Thank you," I murmured, my voice filled with genuine appreciation.

"No thanks is needed," Sally replied. "You're going to be family. You make my son happy, which I didn't think I would see again. For this wedding to happen within a month, your dress needs sorting."

A month? The thought seemed inconceivable, a testament to Alaric's unwavering determination to seize the moment and embrace the future with open arms.

A wry smile tugged at the corners of my lips as I settled back into my seat, the promise of the day ahead tinged with excitement. A wedding may traditionally take months, if not years, to plan, but with Alaric by my side, anything seemed possible.