

Benefits 861

Chapter 861: The Heat (R-18)

Arabelle seemed to realise that they were in public too and quickly walked out of the elevator, aware of his gaze on her. She could feel the goosebumps all over her where he had touched her and even now, she could feel his gaze on her... specifically her a** which she was sure he was checking out. Dam* it! Why did she have to wear her shortest dress today? She felt naked now.

Determined not to give him the satisfaction of how she found him irresistible as well, she opened her door and gestured for him to follow her inside. But before she could step in, he spoke again, his tone losing some of its edge.

"Wait."

She paused, glancing back at him warily. "What now?"

His gaze softened slightly, "Before we enter, I want to say something. Thank you, Arabelle. For helping me. You didn't have to, but you did. I don't take that lightly."

Her irritation about their attraction wavered at the sincerity in his voice, and she looked away, fiddling with her car keys. Why could he not be a jerk? Did he have to be so decent? "Don't read too much into it. I just don't like seeing people get hurt."

Arabelle stepped inside, tossing her keys onto the small console table by the door and as he stepped inside, she closed and locked the door behind him.

As Rafe watched her lock themself in, his sharp eyes roamed over the apartment, taking in the sterile decor—the untouched sofa, the blank walls, the barely-there personal touches. It felt more like a rental than a home.

"Nice place," he commented, "But it doesn't feel like... you."

She glanced at him, then shrugged as she slipped off her shoes. "It's not. Just temporary. I'll be moving back home in a few weeks."

His mind immediately drifted to her earlier comment about the "crazy guy" she lived with. Irritation prickled at the thought. Was she returning to him? Who was he? What kind of man was he that she was living with him?

"Moving back with the crazy guy you mentioned?" he asked, unable to keep the edge out of his voice.

Arabelle seemed to not notice the edge and nodded, " Yep! I've been out of the country for a few months now and that makes him worry even more."

Rafe followed her with his gaze as she moved towards the kitchen, his eyes tracing the curve of her back and the way her dress rid up as she moved. The frustration of not knowing her full story gnawed at him, but his body's reaction to her was far harder to ignore. Damn it. She was impossible to look away from.

She paused by the counter, pulling open a cupboard and as she went on tiptoes to pull out a cup, he could not help but stare. "Want something to drink? We've got an hour to kill, so you might as well make yourself comfortable."

Rafe didn't answer. Instead, he pushed off the wall and strode into the kitchen, stopping just behind her. Before she could react, his hands settled lightly on her hips, his body warm and solid against her back. The air between them shifted instantly, charged with unspoken tension.

He didn't give her space to get back on her feet, letting her be there on her tiptoes, as he held her in place with his own body.

"I know what I want," he murmured, his voice low and rough near her ear. "The question is... will you give it to me?"

Her breath caught, her pulse hammering as his words settled over her like a challenge. She froze, one hand gripping the edge of the counter for support, the other still resting on the cupboard handle. His fingers brushed her sides lightly, sending shivers down her spine.

"Rafe," she began, her voice steadier than she expected, "this isn't—"

He turned her roughly, so that she was now on the counter and stepped between her legs, exposing her to him. His hands sliding up to cup her face as he leaned closer, his dark eyes locking onto hers. "Tell me you don't feel this too," he whispered, his thumb brushing her cheek.

Her lips parted, the words she wanted to say tangling with the ones she couldn't. The intensity in his gaze made it hard to think, let alone respond. She wanted to push him away, to tell him he was crossing a line—but her body betrayed her, leaning just slightly toward him, drawn by the heat and the magnetism of his presence. She wanted him. But... at the end moment, she remembered. She could not get into relationships.

"You're impossible," she finally muttered.

"True," he admitted, his lips curving into a faint smirk. "But so are you."

Before she could argue, his mouth captured hers but even so, she pushed at him, and the moment he came up, she spoke, "Just for tonight."

Rafe nodded. He would have agreed to anything she had asked in this moment. "Just for tonight." He repeated the words before taking her hot mouth again.

His hands moved just as urgently, catching her dress as he pulled it down her shoulders. Wanting this as much as him, she tugged at his shirt, pushing off the jacket off his shoulders. "We can move to the bedroom..." Arabelle spoke breathlessly but he simply kissed her hard as he got rid of her satin lace panties, exposing her to him fully, "Next time."

His eyes trailed over her slim thighs towards her lips and a voice in the back of his screamed at him that one night was never going to be enough. But Rafe could only focus on him as he stepped closer and pushed himself against her, burying himself to the hilt in a single stroke.

Her legs locked around him and she pulled him closer still as they kissed each other all over again. Even with him all the way inside, Arabelle wanted more. Breaking the kiss, she panted and she commanded, "Give me more, Faster."

Chapter 862: Uh oh

"There's lust, and then there's... this," Rafe murmured, his voice hoarse as he reluctantly lifted his head from her shoulder. His breath was still uneven, his chest rising and falling against hers, but the rawness in his tone betrayed the depth of what he was feeling.

Beneath his hands, he felt her tense, her body suddenly stiffening against his. His frown was immediate, concern flickering in his dark eyes. Had he said something wrong? A pang of doubt crept in as he studied her expression. And then she pressed her hands against his shoulders, her movements urgent but not panicked.

"Arabelle?" he asked, his voice soft but questioning, as he began to ease away from her. Untangling himself from her was no simple feat and the unmistakable evidence of their passion lingered between them. The sheer intimacy of the moment made stepping back almost unbearable, but he did it anyway.

Once he managed to put a small distance between them, he finally got a good look at her face. Instead of the blissful satisfaction he had expected, he saw something else entirely—panic.

"What is it?" he asked again, sharper this time, his brows knitting in concern as he straightened up. Did she feel forced? Had he ended up doing something against her will?

Arabelle didn't respond immediately. Instead, her hands reached up to cup his face. Her fingers trembled slightly as they tilted his head, her worried gaze searching his eyes as he pulled the skin under his eyes.

"Arabelle?" he pressed, his confusion deepening.

She ignored him for a moment longer, her lips pressing into a thin line as her scrutiny continued. Finally, she spoke, her voice laced with worry. "You're not under the effect of the drug, are you?"

For a moment, Rafe simply stared at her, dumbfounded. And then, as her words sank in, a slow grin spread across his face, wide and almost boyish. She thinks this is because of the drug? Well, understandable. He'd have been doubtful too if not for the fact that he'd wanted her even before he knew her name.

"The only drug I'm under the effect of," he said smoothly, pulling her hands down from his face and threading his fingers through hers, "is you, Miss Arabelle."

Her lips parted, and for a heartbeat, she just blinked at him, as if caught off guard by his words. Then, a soft giggle escaped her lips, the sound airy and light, carrying just a hint of lingering nerves.

It was such a pretty sound from her, one that seemed to tug at something deep in his chest. But before he could fully process the effect it had on him, something else stirred—quite literally.

Arabelle felt it too. Her giggles came to an abrupt halt as her eyes widened in disbelief. "Wait..." Her gaze darted downward, then back up to his face, her voice rising with incredulity. "Isn't this too soon?"

Rafe's grin turned wolfish, his grip on her hands tightening slightly as he pulled her closer. His tone dropped an octave, low and teasing, as he leaned in just enough for her to feel the warmth of his breath against her ear.

"Too soon?" he repeated, his voice a silken challenge. "I don't think so. After all, you've given me only tonight.

Her cheeks flushed a deep crimson, and she quickly pulled her hands from his, jumping off the counter back to put some much-needed distance between them. But the effect was minimal at best, especially with the way his gaze followed her every movement, dark and hungry. Since her dress had been torn off, literally (What a beast!), she felt even more vulnerable.

"You're insatiable," she muttered, crossing her arms over her chest in an effort to reclaim some semblance of composure as she hurried away from him

"And whose fault is that?" he shot back, his smirk unapologetic as he watched her try and fail miserably to cover herself.

Her mouth opened, a retort clearly on the tip of her tongue, but she shut it again just as quickly, her cheeks puffing out in frustration. She turned on her heel instead, muttering something under her breath that he couldn't quite catch.

But Rafe wasn't about to let her escape so easily. Taking a step toward her, he grabbed her wrist, stopping her retreat.

"Hey," he said softly, his tone shifting, losing the teasing edge. When she hesitated, he tugged her lightly, pulling her just close enough that their foreheads touched. "Arabelle, I'm serious. Nothing about this is because of a drug. It's all you. Only you."

She stilled, her breath catching at his words. Instead of answering him, she looked at him for a moment and then gave a single nod of acknowledgement. And then, when she'd taken a few steps, turned to him and asked with a smile, "Since we are short on time, why don't you join me in the shower."

Rafe grinned and happily followed her. Of course, he would join her in the shower or anywhere else for that matter.

The warm steam from the bath clung to Rafe's skin as he stepped out, a towel slung low around his hips. He ran a hand through his damp hair, water dripping down his chest in lazy rivulets. Opting for the bathtub instead of the shower had been an excellent decision—it had allowed him to stretch out with Arabelle wrapped against him, her laughter bubbling over the rim as they splashed and talked about nothing and everything. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so at peace over a one night stand.

Usually, with other women, once they had done the deed, he would be in a hurry to escape, forget about going in for a second round. But here, he could not get enough of her...

As he reached for the bath robe draped over the chair, the shrill ring of his phone shattered the peaceful atmosphere. Rafe frowned, picked it up and glanced at the screen.

Kael.

Chapter 863: Lucky or Unlucky

"What is it?" Rafe asked directly into the phone.

"You're lucky, Rafe. Damn lucky," Kael's voice was tense on the other end, though Rafe sensed the relief there. He stiffened. "The bottle was not just drugged. If you'd had an entire glass, you'd be paralyzed by now and your organs on the way to shutting down. It's some kind of roofie. As it is, you must have only

had a sip, which explains why it didn't completely take you down. You were lucky whoever was with you recognized the drug for what it was."

Rafe's stomach twisted, but his voice remained even. "I thought as much. Any leads on who's behind it? Who would want to kill me this time?"

Kael exhaled sharply. "They'd already be dead if I knew, okay? Just thank the person who saved you. And, I checked the people who were following you. It was your security. So, whoever drugged the bottle probably did not stick around to watch the end. They were confident that you would go down and not bothered that the bottle might affect anyone else as well. Or they had any informants within your team. If they did, then they already know that you're not dead."

"But they would also know you're not suspicious because you've left with another woman."

"Thanks, Kael. You did a lot at such short notice."

"Hey! What are brothers for? But if you're so keen to thank me, you can give me a few of your vintage cars as a thank you gift." Rafe rolled his eyes at that. He'd give a few to Kael but like hell he was letting him have them easily.

"And as per your request, my team intercepted the security detail. They're already combing through everything, looking for moles or any suspicious activity. Officially, as far as the guards know, you've been kidnapped. We're trying to keep this as contained as possible. Now about those cars... I'd like them shipped to Estonia..."

Rafe pinched the bridge of his nose, frustration bubbling beneath the surface even as he almost laughed at Kael's insistence. "Kidnapped, huh? That's going to be fun to clean up later."

"We can find ways to clean up later. It's not as if anyone is going to go and announce that you've been kidnapped." Kael paused and then asked quietly, "Rafe. There is something more important for now...Are you okay? Where are you, and more importantly, can the person you're with be trusted? What if saving you was a way to getting something from you?"

Rafe's gaze drifted to the closed bathroom door. Beyond it, he could hear the faint hum of Arabelle's voice as she sang softly to herself. A small smile tugged at his lips despite the weight of the conversation.

"She's safe," he said firmly. "No connection to this mess."

He knew what Kael was going to say. It was somethign he would have said as well, but before Kael could protest, Rafe explained hurriedly, " She's Cai and Dora's friend- Arabelle."

Kael stilled and even over the phone he could hear the cautiousness in his tone as he asked him. "Arabelle? Gabe Frost's sister-in-law?"

"Yes." Rafe answered cautiously.

"Fuc*! Do you have a death wish, Rafe? What were you doing with her? Do you have any idea how protective Gabe is of her? From what I hear, the last guy she went out with almost had his head shot off because he brought her back late."

Rafe chuckled at that as he then realized. "Holy shi*!" Gabe Frost must be the crazy man she was talking about who was over protective of her.

"What about it? Please don't tell me you didn't buy the condome for her..." Kael groaned and Rafe stilled. Shit! They had not used condoms at all. Those things were still somewhere in his wallet...and in the car.

When he remained silent, Kael was about to let loose a string of curses when Rafe cut it, " She is a girl you know. Doesn't wear condoms."

His comment was met with silence at first and then he could almsot imagine Kael sighing in relief as his brother continued, " Send me your location. I'll come personally to pick you up."

Rafe's jaw tightened. "Kael, that's not necessary. I can handle—"

"Rafe," Kael cut him off sharply, "we don't know who's behind this, and until we do, staying there puts both of you in danger. Do you really want to risk her life for a few more hours of... whatever the two of you are doing?"

The words hit harder than Rafe expected. He glanced again at the bathroom door, conflicted. He didn't want to leave. Not yet. They only had one night together and he needed to convince her to see him more than that. Because he'd finally found someone who made him feel... something real. But Kael was right. Staying would only put Arabelle in harm's way, and he couldn't allow that.

"Fine," he muttered reluctantly. "I'll send you my location."

"Fine," he muttered reluctantly. "I'll send you my location."

"Good." Kael's tone softened again. "We'll get to the bottom of this, Rafe. Just sit tight. I'll be there soon."

Rafe ended the call and stared at the phone in his hand for a long moment. The thought of leaving her, even temporarily, left a bitter taste in his mouth. But he knew Kael was right. Whoever had gone to the trouble of drugging him wouldn't hesitate to use Arabelle as leverage if they discovered she was with him.

The bathroom door creaked open, and Arabelle stepped out, wrapped in a plush white robe that was a size too big for her.

Her damp hair clung to her cheeks, and her smile faltered as she caught the look on his face.

"What's wrong?" she asked worriedly.

Rafe hesitated for a heartbeat, then crossed the room to her. He cupped her cheek with one hand, his thumb brushing lightly against her skin. "You're so beautiful."

Chapter 864: Secrets

"You're so beautiful." Arabelle rolled her eyes at his murmured words and shook her head, "And you're just noting that, your Highness?"

Rafael smiled at the sassy reply and then unable to stop himself, leaned down and placed a kiss on her neck, trapping a water droplet as it slid down her soft skin. She shivered and arched and he felt gratified. Their chemistry really was off the chart.

"Call me Rafe. Like you did when I was inside you." She shivered again and almost moaned his name, "Rafe." He smiled in satisfaction. Suddenly he kind of liked his name better.

But then he spoke the words that would no doubt make her sad as well and as much as it made him ache, he said them. "Something's come up. I need to leave."

Her brow furrowed. "Leave? Now?"

"It's not safe for me to stay," he said carefully, "And it's not safe for you if I'm here." Despite knowing the risks, he was hoping that she would ask him to stay. Or offer to come with him.

And her lips parted, as if she wanted to protest, but she seemed to think better of it. Instead, she nodded slowly, her gaze searching his. She didn't even ask what had been discovered in the bottle. Simply said, "Be careful, Rafe."

He was disappointed. He wanted her to ask him to stay the night at least. It was supposed to be a one night stand. This was not that! But she simply turned around and walked into what he assumed was the dressing room. With a sigh, he walked outside, looking for his clothes.

Once dressed, he sighed. She had yet to come out of the bedroom. Did she want him to leave without even saying goodbye? Was she avoiding the awkward 'morning after' conversation?"

As Rafael reached for the door handle, the soft sound of her footsteps made him pause. His heart leapt with hope as he turned around, finding her standing there, a faint light casting shadows over her face. She looked hesitant, vulnerable even, and for a fleeting moment, he dared to believe she might ask him to stay.

But her words hit him like a cold slap.

"I'd appreciate it," Arabelle began, her voice steady but tinged with regret, "if we could forget about tonight. Pretend it never happened. Next time we meet, we'll just be... casual acquaintances. Nothing more."

Rafael's brows knit together in disbelief. "Forget about tonight?" His voice came out harsher than he intended.

She nodded, avoiding his gaze. "It's just... easier that way. You and I both know this—" she gestured vaguely between them, "can't happen again. I don't want to complicate my life, professionally or personally. And Cai..." She trailed off, inhaling sharply before meeting his eyes. "He'd probably see this as some sort of... betrayal, okay? I'm sure he did not introduce us for this to happen... And you would not want to lose Cai's friendship just for some se*ual pleasure, right?"

His jaw tightened. That's all this was to her? Se*ual pleasure? Heat simmered in his chest, equal parts offense and hurt, but he buried it beneath a cold mask. If that is what she wanted, then so be it. He was not one to beg.

Of course," he said curtly, his tone clipped. "Wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

Her lips parted slightly, as if she might say more, but he didn't give her the chance. Turning away, Rafael yanked the door open and stepped into the cool night air. He didn't look back, even as his pulse thundered in his ears and the weight of her words settled like lead in his chest.

It was supposed to be a one-night stand, nothing more. That was the agreement between them just now—a fleeting encounter, intense and thrilling, with no strings attached. That's what he had told himself when they'd now come together. And that's what she had reinforced with her parting words. But walking away from her now felt anything but simple. And he did not like that she was not as reluctant as him to see the end of this.

Just a few hours in her company had unraveled something in him. Maybe it was the way she challenged him and even protected him in the face of danger. It was the fact that, for the first time in years, he felt seen—not as the prince, not as the responsibility-laden man everyone relied on, but simply as himself. And she was someone he could rely up on.

Once he reached the bottom of her building, he paused and looked back up. The window to her apartment was dark now.

His lips pressed into a tight line as a flood of emotions surged through him—frustration, longing, and something dangerously close to anger.

She wanted him to forget? To pretend they were nothing more than casual acquaintances? He almost laughed at the absurdity of it.

He'd never been one to follow someone else's rules, and he certainly wasn't about to start now.

She thought this could be tucked away, swept under the rug like a harmless mistake. But he knew better. He'd felt the spark between them, the undeniable chemistry that couldn't be contained by a single night. Arabelle might think she could bury it, but Rafael had no intention of letting that happen.

"Too bad," he muttered under his breath, his voice low and determined. "I don't follow orders. Just wait for me, Belle."

Just then, Kael stopped in front of him, and he got into the car, moving away without a second glance.

"What are you going to do about it then?" Kael asked and Rafe frowned.

What was he going to do? Of course he was going to approach her and talk to her when he'd calmed down. Make her see sense that they could maybe go out on a couple of dates or something, explore the chemistry that they had.

"Hey! I'm talking to you? What are you going to do to punish whoever is behind this?"

Rafe frowned. Punish? Why would he punish her? And that was when he realized that Kael was talking about the people who had tried to drug him.

Chapter 865: Secrets and All

Rafael's thoughts shifted as Kael's words snapped him back to the present. Ahh. How had he forgotten about the danger he was in? The name Arabelle faded to the background, replaced by the weight of the danger he'd narrowly escaped.

"Did you find anything else?" Rafael asked, his tone sharp now, all traces of vulnerability gone.

Kael nodded, his gaze flicking between Rafael and the road ahead. "Since you mentioned that the bottle was already there, I asked Cai. Cai recognized the waiter who brought the bottle into the room. Cai didn't think much of it because of course he had no intention of drinking it. But he did say the man looked nervous.

Anyway, the staff member was apprehended about thirty minutes ago at his home where he was already packing his bags but is now already being questioned."

Rafael's brow furrowed as he processed the information. Kael was fast—Rafael had to give him credit for acting so swiftly. But that also meant the situation was spiraling faster than he anticipated. "And?"

Kael's lips thinned. "The waiter is just a pawn—claims he didn't know what was in the bottle. Says he was only told to deliver it to you. But he's scared and was trying to run away, which makes me think he'll crack soon."

Rafael leaned back in the seat, his fingers drumming against the armrest. "And the security team? Any mole from our side?"

Kael reached into the inner pocket of his coat and pulled out a folded sheet of paper, handing it to Rafael. "Here. This is the name and information of the security guard who was likely paid to pass along your details. We've been keeping tabs on him since the incident."

Rafael unfolded the paper, scanning the neat script. His eyes narrowed as he committed the name to memory: Matias Elric. It wasn't a name he recognized, but it didn't need to be.

"Where is he now?" Rafael asked, his voice was low but laced with steel.

Kael hesitated. "We haven't apprehended him yet. For now, he remains unaware that we're onto him. As far as I know the money is sitting in his account sweetly while he has passed the message that you've been kidnapped. I thought you'd want to deal with him personally."

Rafael's lips curved into a grim smile. Kael knew him too well. "Good call," he said, folding the paper and tucking it into his jacket.

For a moment, silence filled the car, broken only by the hum of the engine and the faint sounds of the city beyond. Rafael's mind churned. He'd been the target of assassinations before, but this—this felt personal. It was not just about killing him. Whoever had added the drugs wanted him to die slowly. Or probably they would have taken him and tortured him as well.

"He'll talk," Rafael said finally, his voice cold and resolute. "They always do."

Kael gave a nod. Of course, they would. "Do you want me to set up the meeting with the police, or would you prefer to handle it... casually?"

Rafael's smile was humorless. "Casually."

Kael chuckled under his breath, though there was no amusement in his tone. "Figured as much. Just don't get your hands too dirty, brother. People notice when royalty crosses certain lines."

Rafael shot him a glance, the faintest glimmer of amusement flickering in his eyes. "I'll try to behave." But he doubted his own words. He was frustrated and angry. They did not make for a calm interrogator.

Kael, though, knew as well as Rafael did—when it came to protecting himself and those he cared about, Rafael didn't believe in restraint.

Kael's voice softened as he added, "I'll stay on top of the situation with the waiter. If he gives us any leads, you'll be the first to know."

Rafael gave a curt nod, his jaw set. "Good. I want everything locked down. No loose ends."

As the car pulled into the private estate where Rafael's security team awaited, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. The moment Arabelle's face flashed through his mind again, he shoved the thought aside. There was no room for distractions now. Not when someone out there wanted him dead.

As Rafael reached for the door handle, Kael's hand shot out, gripping his arm firmly but not forcefully. Rafael turned his head, "What is it, Kael?" he asked.

Kael's expression was unusually grave. "Before you step out of this car, Rafe, you need to think. Not just about who tried to kill you—but about who would gain the most if you were out of the picture."

Rafael's hand froze on the handle. His gaze narrowed as he leaned back, studying Kael's face. "The next in line," he murmured, his voice low. "You're suggesting this is about succession?"

Kael inclined his head, his grip loosening as he leaned back slightly. "It makes the most sense. Someone is moving pieces on the board, and this attempt on your life? It's a bold move. One that only makes sense if they're playing for the throne."

Rafael's frown deepened, his mind racing. Then he barked out a dry laugh, though there was no humor in it. "That would mean you're suspect number one, brother," he said but Kael shook his head, his mouth forming a grim line. "Not anymore, Rafe. Not since my engagement to Dora."

Rafael froze. His eyes sharpened, the air between them suddenly crackling with tension. He stared at Kael as if willing him to spell it out. "You mean..." His voice trailed off, his words clipped.

Kael gave a slow nod. "It's worth considering," he said quietly. "Someone else has more to gain now. Someone who isn't bound by alliances like I am. And someone who's closer than you think. Because not anyone would have the knowledge about this. Some rules of succession are kept secret for a reason. To the avarage person, I am still next in line but you and I both know that is not true. The moment I was engaged to another royalty, I lost that right..."

Chapter 866: Again

Arabelle lay still on the couch, staring at the entrance to the kitchen. She hated how he had ruined it for her. Now, she couldn't even step inside without thinking about what had happened there yesterday. The memories made her shudder, her body betraying her with a faint ache that wouldn't go away. Damn it! Rafael Ignis was impossible. He had turned her life upside down in just a few hours.

Good thing she had sent him away so quickly. She couldn't imagine what would have happened if she had let him stay the night. Her kitchen, her bathroom, even her bedroom—they all felt ruined now. She couldn't be in those places without seeing flashes of him, of them, and everything they'd done. She could not even be in these places without imagining him and herself naked. And they had not even done anything in that bedroom... which was a shame really... She shook her head. Nope. Not going to digress there.

This was for the best, she told herself firmly. Letting things escalate with Rafael would only lead to disaster—for her career, and for her carefully constructed life. Rafael was a storm, unpredictable and consuming, and she couldn't afford to be swept up in it. Not when some things from her own past could end up ruining him and her.

But no matter how many times she repeated those words, they didn't make her feel better. Instead, her chest felt heavy, like something was missing.

She had felt something last night, something real and different. It wasn't just about how amazing he was with her physically, though that part was unforgettable. No, it was deeper than that. He made her feel seen, like he understood a part of her that she tried to keep hidden. And that scared her. It had been so easy to let him in, to let her guard down around him. Too easy.

"Stop thinking about it," she muttered, running her hands through her hair. "You told him to leave. You told him to forget everything. Now you need to do the same."

Still, his voice stayed in her head, as if he were standing right behind her. She hated how much she missed it, how much she missed him, even though she barely knew him.

With a sigh, she stood up and began pacing the room. She had come to Petrovia for work, not for distractions. Rafael was a distraction, nothing more. She had a life to focus on, plans to make, and goals to reach. She couldn't let herself get pulled off track because of one night—even if that night had been... incredible.

She paused, shaking her head as if to clear it. "This is ridiculous," she whispered. "I need to move on. I need to invite people over for the charity dinner, make plans, and focus on why I'm here."

And just as she started to feel a little more in control, a knock came at the door.

She froze, her heart skipping a beat. Who could be here at this hour?

Her first thought, as much as she hated to admit it, was that it might be him. Her pulse quickened at the idea, but she quickly pushed it aside. Rafael was gone, and she wasn't going to let him back into her life. And he wouldn't. She's seen the anger in his eyes when she had told him to not return.

Still, as she made her way to the door, a small, traitorous part of her couldn't help but hope or fear. She didn't know for sure what it was.

Her hand hesitated on the doorknob. Arabelle told herself not to open it, but curiosity—or maybe something more—pushed her forward. She twisted the knob and pulled the door open, her breath catching when she saw him.

Rafael stood there, his tall frame leaning casually against the doorframe as if he belonged there. His sharp eyes locked onto hers, and for a moment, neither of them said a word. He looked as calm as ever, but there was something in his expression that made her feel scared.

"Rafe," she said, her voice coming out steadier than she felt. "What are you doing here?"

His lips curved into the faintest smile, but his gaze was serious. "I need to talk to you. Can I come in? What I need to discuss, I don't think can be done here."

Her instincts screamed at her to say no, to close the door and end this. But instead, she found herself stepping aside, her body betraying her willpower yet again. She watched as he stepped inside, his presence filling the space.

They stood in silence for a moment, the tension between them thick enough to cut with a knife. He looked around, his eyes briefly scanning the living room before settling back on her.

"About last night..." he began...

She immediately shook her head, " I thought we agreed to forget about it. There really is nothing to discuss..."

But Rafael didn't back down. He never did. He tilted his head, his dark eyes narrowing slightly. "We need to."

"No, we don't." Her heart pounded in her chest. "I told you to leave. You shouldn't even be here."

"I'm here because we didn't take protection."

The words hit her like a slap. Arabelle froze, the air around her seeming to vanish. For a moment, all she could hear was the pounding of her heartbeat.

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, she stared at him, the weight of his statement sinking in.

"I didn't think about it at the time," Rafael continued, his voice still calm, though his jaw was tight. "But I realized afterward. And I thought... you should know."

"I..." she started, then stopped. What was she even supposed to say?

"You don't have to say anything," Rafael said, stepping closer. "I'm not here to pressure you or make this harder. I just wanted to be honest. Also, I am clean. I have never had unprotected se* and I am tested every six months so you don't have to worry about any diseases..."

Chapter 867: No Change.

"I'm not here to pressure you or make this harder. I just wanted to be honest. Also, I am clean. I have never had unprotected se* and I am tested every six months so you don't have to worry about any diseases..."

Even as Rafe's words echoed in her head, Arabelle shook her head and answered, " That is... I am also clean. I haven't been se*ually active for a while... About protection..." She took a deep breath. She was not on the pill. So, this could be dangerous for now. But there was still time. Maybe she could try and take a morning after pill. But they did not suit her. She was allergic to those hormones.

Arabelle swallowed hard, trying to gather her thoughts. Her life had been chaotic enough before Rafael. Now, with this... She shook her head, trying to make sense of it all.

"This doesn't change anything," she finally said, her voice barely above a whisper. Though whom she was trying to assure, she had no idea.

Rafael's gaze lingered on her, unreadable and steady. "Doesn't it? I know you are allergic to any medication."

Arabelle frowned. How did he... Rafe shrugged, "I have access to all medical records on people who enter this country, Arabelle. And you signed the allergy information form and declaration when you came to Petrovia.

Her chest tightened, and she looked away, unable to hold his gaze any longer as she felt herself almost consumed by panic. "I can't do this, Rafe. I can't..."

"You don't have to decide anything now," he said gently. "But running from it won't make it go away. I just wanted you to know. And that I am with you if there will be any... complications."

She knew what he meant. That he would be beside her if she did end up being pregnant. But she did not want that. Forcing herself to meet his gaze again, she said, "I need time to think." Needed time to pray and hope that she would not end up pregnant. She could not have a baby and definitely not a royal baby.

"I'll give you the time," he replied. "But we're not done, Arabelle. Not by a long shot."

She straightened; her shoulders rigid as she stared him down. Her voice was calm, but her words cut like a blade. "No, Rafe. We are done. Completely. It doesn't matter if there are consequences. I won't let there be any. No complications, no nothing."

Rafe's head snapped up, his expression hardening as her words sank in. "What are you saying?" His voice was low, tight, almost dangerous.

Arabelle crossed her arms, trying to hold her ground despite the storm she saw brewing in his eyes. "You know exactly what I'm saying. If—if something happens, I'll handle it. On my own. But it won't be your problem. I'll make sure of that."

For a moment, Rafe just stared at her, his jaw clenching. Then, his voice dropped further, heavy with disbelief and anger. "Are you telling me you'd...?" He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

When she didn't answer, his eyes darkened, his fury unmistakable. "You'd get rid of a baby? Our baby? Just like that?"

The air between them crackled with tension.

"There is no baby, Rafe," she shot back, her voice sharp, trembling with suppressed emotion. "And there won't be. But if there were..." Her throat tightened, but she forced the words out. "If there were, I wouldn't keep it."

His fists clenched at his sides, his whole body taut with barely restrained emotion. "I didn't think you'd take something like that so lightly, Arabelle. I didn't think you'd..." He shook his head, his voice rising.

"Well, you know me a few hours and you think you know everything. You just do not know me, Your Highness. We were just sex buddies for a few hours but that is it. We do not even know each other more than that! So you don't get to stand there and judge me. You don't get to act like you have the right to tell me what to do with my life or my body."

"This isn't just about you," he said sharply as he stepped close to her, "If there's a chance we created something together, that matters. To me, it does."

"Well, it doesn't to me."

That stopped him cold, his expression twisting into something unreadable. Hurt, maybe, but quickly buried beneath the steel of his resolve. He would not believe that. She could be kind to a stranger, couldn't she? So she would not be ruthless to a life inside her.

"You don't mean that," he said quietly.

"I do," she insisted, though her voice wavered. "I mean every word. Also, there is no point in discussing this. The point is, we won't know for another few weeks. So there is no need to invite anymore trouble. The entire discussion could be moot."

The silence stretched, thick with unspoken words and emotions too raw to name. Rafael studied her for a long moment, his jaw tight, his eyes searching hers for something she refused to give.

Finally, he stepped back, his hands relaxing at his sides. "You're scared about something. What are you scared of?"

She blinked, his words hitting closer to the truth than she wanted to admit. "You don't know anything about me, Rafe. Please leave now."

Rafe groaned. He could see he wouldn't get much more from her now. So, he stepped close to her and immediately pressed his lips against hers before stepping back just as quickly.

"You've hit some complications in your life now, Arabelle. Be prepared for that. I'll give you the time you need. And I won't interfere in any decisions you do end up making. But...I'm not walking away from this. From you. Not without a fight."

And with that, he was gone, leaving her standing in the middle of the room, her heart pounding and her mind a mess of emotions she couldn't untangle.

Chapter 868: Definitely Crazy

Arabelle stared at her reflection in the mirror, her brow furrowed in frustration. For what felt like the hundredth time that morning, she let out a long, exasperated sigh. That man was absolutely crazy. Completely and utterly crazy. And the worst part? No one had thought to warn her about it. Not Cai. Not Dora. She would definitely be having words with them later—stern, unrelenting words. But first, she needed to deal with the mess she found herself in and make sure there were absolutely no consequences. None at all.

Her lips twisted into a mockery of a smile as she mimicked his voice, low and smooth, almost theatrical. "Oh, I always carry some as well," she said, her tone dripping with sarcasm. Then, switching back to her normal voice, she muttered under her breath, "What's even the point of carrying things and buying more if you're not going to actually use them?"

With a huff, she tossed the hairbrush onto the table, the clatter breaking the stillness of the room. She pushed herself to her feet, pacing back and forth like a caged animal. She was late. By an entire day. And she was never late. Not once. Under any other circumstances, she might have felt a twinge of relief at being spared yet another round of cramps and discomfort. But not this time. Not today.

This time, the delay wasn't a relief—it was a warning. A blinking red light that screamed of potential consequences she wasn't ready to face. Consequences she was praying with all her might would never come to pass. "Please, please let this be nothing," she whispered to no one in particular, clasping her hands together as though the universe would hear her plea.

She flopped back onto the chair, running her hands through her hair in agitation. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. She was too young for this. Too unprepared. Too... everything. Her life wasn't supposed to take this kind of turn, not now, not when she was still figuring out where she stood.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, her voice thick with frustration and a trace of fear. "Now is not the time for consequences. Or complications. Definitely not complications." She clenched her fists, forcing herself to take a deep breath and calm her racing thoughts. Whatever this was, she would deal with it eventually. She had to. But that didn't mean she wasn't terrified of what might come next.

She needed to talk to someone, but the question was who. She couldn't possibly confide in Dora or Cai. Both of them were too wrapped up in their own love stories to offer anything helpful. If anything, they'd just tease her or call her foolish for over thinking about it. Plus, there was the awkward little detail that the person she was fretting over was Cai's friend and Dora's brother-in-law.

That made this situation far more complicated than her usual one-night stands. Walking away and never looking back wasn't really an option this time. The odds of running into him again were uncomfortably high, unless she wanted to avoid family get together in the future.

She could always count on Autumn for good advice, but right now, her sister had her hands full with work and the kids. And knowing Autumn, she'd probably tell her to "give it a shot" or "see where things go." That wasn't exactly what she wanted to hear. She wasn't looking for encouragement to dive deeper into this mess.

Then there was Gabe. Yes, Gabe. He was protective of her—sometimes too much so—but that might work in her favor. If she told him, he'd probably want to punch Rafe on principle alone. That was a good sign. Gabe would be on her side no matter what, and he wouldn't judge her for feeling stuck. He'd help her sort through her thoughts and figure out her next steps. Yes, Gabe was the best choice.

So, she did what she would not have done in her dreams if she'd been in her sane mind. She called Gabe and told him about her one-night stand and possible consequences... And he replied with silence...

"We are talking about Rafael Ignis? He is your one-night stand?" Gabe finally asked after what felt like an eternity.

"Yes." She breathed out, suddenly wondering if calling Gabe was a mistake. After all, he had almost shot that guy who'd taken her to an after party on prom night... She put her head in her hands. No... please let this not be a mistake too.

And then, he muttered something that almost shook her, " Hmm, he is not the type to have one night stands..."

She coughed. He is not the type? Hello? She was not one to have one night stands! Especially on first meetings with some hot guy. She'd usually go out a couple of times before sleeping with them! Why was Gabe not saying anything important or useful? Was something wrong with his brain?

She breathed in deeply and asked again, " Gabe! Help me! How do I handle everything? What if I take a test and it is positive?"

"Then you handle it the way you want." Gabe answered calmly, frustrating her even more.

She almost resorted to stomping her foot! He had to pretend to be obtuse today of all days. "Gabe! I am asking you for some help! Some advice! Something that you are not scared to hand out in abundance usually! Why are you being so... so dense right now!"

"Okay. Rafe is not good enough for you. You are not good enough for him. The two of you are not suitable for each other at all. So, take the next flight out of Petrovia. If you think he will try and stop you,

I can send a personal jet. He won't know. Get out of there and handle everything like you want. Get rid of him from your life."

Arabelle took the phone off from her ear and frowned. What was wrong with him? What kind of nonsense advise was he giving? And what did he mean by she was not good enough for him? And he not for her! He was a fine man!

With a harrumph, she disconnected the call and let herself fall on the bed. She was going to have to handle things herself.

Unknown to her, Gabe was grinning widely as she disconnected the call and he'd already packed a bag for himself. Petrovia sounded like a good place for an inpromptu family vacation.

Chapter 869: Disappointment

"What is your opinion on me forcing someone into marriage?"

Dora, Kael, Lily, and Cai all looked up at Rafe as if he had just sprouted another head. The mere mention of 'forcing' was enough to send a chill through the room. The thing about force, after all, was that it never carried positive connotations, no matter the context. Unless, perhaps, someone was forcing out toxic waste...

But marriage and force? Those two ideas did not belong in the same breath.

Kael, predictably, was the first to shatter the stunned silence as he stared at his brother with a look, "Are you talking about something similar to your previous situation? A Contract marriage? Because, let's be honest, you barely dodged a bullet last time..."

Rafe sighed, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck. "Something similar, yes, but also different. This girl... she's trustworthy. I know she is."

"Doesn't matter," Dora interjected sharply, her tone as crisp as a knife's edge. "If you're forcing her into a marriage, then you are the one who isn't trustworthy." She turned her sharp gaze toward Cai, clearly expecting him to echo her disapproval. "Well?" she demanded, folding her arms as if blaming him for Rafe's question.

After all, Rafe had been hanging around with Cai more and more. And the Frosts were definitely a bad influence. "What do you think, Cai? Or are you seriously about to side with him? Lily, has this guy tried to force you into anything?"

Cai, however, wasn't biting. He had his head tilted slightly, his eyes fixed on Rafe with a look of contemplative curiosity. Dora scowled at his lack of immediate response.

"Hey! Don't leave me hanging here," she said, snapping her fingers toward him. "Are you going to agree with him or not? Is it okay for him to force someone into marriage."

"It was a hypothetical question..." Rafe tried to speak up but Dora shot him a look that had him regretting ever speaking up.

Cai sighed, shook his head slowly, and then pointed a finger at Dora, his voice calm but firm. "Why are you always so impatient? Let me think, will you?" He turned back to Rafe, his expression thoughtful, and when he spoke again, his words were deliberate, almost weighty. "While, yes, force in its very definition is wrong—and, let's be honest, also illegal—"

"But I am the law in Petrovia," Rafe interrupted with a faint smirk, his tone only half-serious.

Cai snorted at him, unimpressed. "There's narcissism, and then there's you. Also, could you let me finish?" He rolled his eyes before continuing. "As I was saying, I do know of one instance where a marriage took place under less-than-ideal circumstances. The girl felt forced, —at least at first—but in reality, the only thing 'forced' was the signing of the papers. No threats. No coercion. Just... circumstances. Seb and Olivia Frost. You've met them. Olivia got pregnant."

Dora's eyebrows shot up. "And you're saying that makes it okay?"

"I didn't say that," Cai countered, holding up a hand to forestall her. "I said it happened. The difference here is that those two people were already in love, but they let misunderstandings and pride get in the way. They were separated because of it. The marriage—forced as it seemed—was just a way of cutting through the noise. And in the end, it worked. But..." He fixed Rafe with a pointed look. "That was an exception, not the rule. If you're talking about forcing someone into a marriage just to get a wedding out of it, by all means, go ahead. You'll get your ceremony and a wife in name."

He shrugged, his tone turning dry. "But if you want a life partner? Someone who's going to stand by you through all the ups and downs? Force isn't going to get you there. Not for long, anyway."

Rafe leaned back in his chair, Cai's words cutting deeper than he let on. Still, he smirked, masking the unease curling in his chest, and turned to Dora with a mock-injured tone.

"Hey! I didn't think you'd almost bite my head off over a hypothetical situation. Dora Sterling, I thought we were friends. We are almost family!"

Dora rolled her eyes. "Fine, I overreacted. I was touchy about the subject. I shouldn't have judged you so quickly. Considering mostly in the royal families girls are forced into marriage, I can be defensive."

Rafe grinned, easing the tension with a casual quip as the conversation shifted to lighter topics. Laughter returned to the room, but his thoughts remained dark, tangled in the weight of what he couldn't say aloud.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Cai watching him. Not idly, but with a sharp, knowing look as if putting together a puzzle. Rafe's fingers curled into fists.

Dammit. Has he figured it out?

The thought made his stomach churn. Cai was perceptive—too perceptive. Did he know this wasn't just a hypothetical? That this was about Arabelle?

She wasn't someone Rafe could simply pursue. If she chose to run, the Frosts would protect her with all their power, shutting him out completely. He couldn't risk that. Despite being royalty, he was not foolish enough to think he could handle the Frosts easily. He would if needed but he'd rather not. No, what he should do was to bind her to him before it was too late, to stop her from slipping through his fingers.

His gaze flicked back to Cai, whose faint smirk spoke volumes. Forcing himself to relax, Rafe asked lightly, "Something on your mind, Cai?"

Cai's smile was thin, his tone casual. "Not at all."

Rafe's chest tightened. Cai knew something—or suspected enough. He'd need to tread carefully if he wanted to keep his plans under wraps.

But even as Cai's gaze shifted to Lily, masking the man's thoughts, Rafe could not help but wonder if all this would be moot. Arabelle had not contacted him yet after that time. So, it could be that she might not be pregnant, and all his thinking and planning would be wasted.

Chapter 870: Conclusion

"Why are you still here? Don't you want to be with Lily? Or are you two already out of the honeymoon phase?" Honestly, he was worried about Cai coming here. Any other time and he would have welcomed his friend but tonight was an exception. Cai was dangerous.

Cai leaned casually against the doorframe, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. "Hmm. As long as Lily and me are together, every day's going to be our honeymoon phase," he replied confidently. He straightened up and stepped inside, his tone softening slightly. "I'll be heading back to her soon. I just thought we should have a drink together first. After all, the last time we were supposed to dine together, you were almost drugged and killed." He paused, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "And considering it was me who accepted that bottle, I can't help but feel a little guilty about it."

The excuse was flimsy at best, and they both knew it. Cai hadn't even bothered to craft anything convincing; he was here for one reason alone. To question him. Sliding into his usual chair with practiced ease, he cast a glance around the office, as if making sure everything was just as he'd left it.

It was strange, really. His friend always seemed to have this place in his office, a spot he'd claimed for themselves without ever formally asking. It was almost as if he'd marked his territory in that unspoken, Frost-like way—an enduring habit that was both amusing and vaguely territorial.

And Rafe knew he was thinking all sort of nonsense because he was nervous.

Cai draped an arm over the back of the chair, his demeanor relaxed but his eyes carrying an edge of something deeper—concern, or maybe curiosity. Rafe steeled himself. Nope. He needed to maintain that he had been talking about a hypothetical situation. "So, what do you say?" he asked, his voice light but expectant. "One drink? I am not on duty tonight."

Rafe poured the drink, and handed it to Cai before taking his own usual seat on the opposite side. "You don't have to feel bad. You could not have expected that. Heck, even I'd not expected that."

"Hmm." Cai sipped his drink and then questioned Rafe. "So, who caught your attention?"

Rafe frowned. Dam* it. Why was this man so direct. "Attention? What do you mean?" Rafe sipped his drink. Nope. He was going to stick to his guns and not reveal a thing. He was good at that.

"What do you mean?" He asked, acting his best to portray his ignorance.

Cai smiled knowingly as he swirled the liquid in his glass. "So, who's the lucky woman you're planning on forcing into marriage?"

"That was a hypothetical situation, Cai." Rafe's reply came too quickly, betraying the calm he tried so hard to maintain. His jaw tensed as he fought to keep his composure, but the damage was already done. Damn it. This was not going well.

Cai's smile widened, the kind of grin that said he'd already pieced together more than he was letting on. He took another leisurely sip of his drink, clearly enjoying himself. "Rafe," he drawled, dragging out the name like a teasing older brother, "you mentioned something about her being trustworthy. Now, I don't think your trustworthy woman is hypothetical at all. Which means," he leaned back in his chair, studying Rafe with amused scrutiny, "you're either planning to force her into something, offer her some kind of contract, or... something else entirely. But one thing's clear—you're interested in marrying her."

Rafe didn't respond, keeping his face carefully neutral even as he felt the weight of Cai's words settle uncomfortably in the air between them. There was no point in denying anything now—Cai was relentless when it came to sniffing out the truth, and Rafe knew better than to give him any more ammunition. Still, silence was his best defense.

Cai, however, didn't seem the least bit fazed by the lack of response. He simply stared into his drink, swirling the amber liquid thoughtfully before speaking again, as if he were musing aloud to himself.

"You know, it's interesting," Cai began, his voice calm but laced with sharp observation. "For someone like you, forcing her hand would be the easiest thing in the world. Yet, you're hesitating. That tells me a

lot more than you probably intended." He glanced up briefly, his gaze sharp and calculating, before turning back to his drink. "That hesitation narrows things down to a few possibilities. Indulge me, will you? Let's see if I've hit the mark."

Rafe stayed quiet, his grip tightening slightly on his glass. Cai, undeterred, continued as though his audience wasn't one heartbeat away from throttling him.

"The first possibility," Cai began, ticking the point off with a deliberate flick of his finger, "is that you like her, but she's either seeing someone else or in love with another man. You're jealous, naturally, and the only way you think you can have her is by forcing her hand. Messy, but plausible."

He paused, giving Rafe a moment to interject, but when no response came, Cai moved on. "The second scenario is a bit more... sentimental. You want her—badly—but you also care about her enough that you don't want to hurt her. Maybe you've made your advances, and she's turned you down, but instead of using your considerable power to get your way, you're hesitating because deep down, you know it's wrong. And you want her to be happy with you."

And the third option," he said, leaning forward slightly, "is that you want her, she doesn't want you, and the only reason you're holding back is because she has a strong enough background to make things... inconvenient for you."

He sat back with a satisfied smirk, letting the weight of his words linger while Rafe could feel his heart sink. Dam* this man. "So, Rafe," Cai said, his tone casual but his eyes gleaming with curiosity, "am I getting warmer? Or do you have a fourth possibility that you'd like to enlighten me with?"