

Benefits 871

Chapter 871: Guesses Too Close

Cai 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?" Rafe's jaw tightened, his silence becoming heavier with every passing second. Cai, still unbothered by the lack of response, tilted his head slightly, as if considering his next move. "Are you really going to keep quiet?" Cai asked thoughtfully, his voice calm but layered with challenge. When Rafe didn't budge, Cai merely shrugged, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "Alright then," he continued, leaning forward slightly, "I guess I'll just keep going. Now that we've narrowed it down to a few possibilities, it shouldn't be too hard to compile a list of women around you who could've caught your attention."

Rafe's breath hitched, his pulse spiking as he stared intently at Cai. The calm yet calculating demeanor of his friend sent a fresh wave of unease through him. He had no doubt now—Cai had figured it out, or at least suspected the truth, and was merely toying with him. But what unnerved Rafe even more was the question of Cai's reaction. Was he angry? Disappointed? It was impossible to tell.

Rafe couldn't forget Cai's manipulation when he discovered what Kael had done to Dora. The memory of Cai nearly punching Kael flashed vividly in his mind. And this... this situation was much worse. At least Kael and Dora had been dating and claimed to be in love later, Rafe and Arabelle, on the other hand, had shared only a fleeting, reckless moment—one he had been trying, and failing, to remedy ever since. Every attempt to get close to her, to explain or apologize, had been thwarted by her deliberate avoidance.

As Rafe's mind spiraled with all sorts of thoughts swirling in his head, Cai continued his methodical analysis, making him panic even more. "You don't have anyone you've been in love with—or even a one-sided infatuation. That much I know. Unless," Cai paused, a note of mockery creeping into his tone, "we count the mistake you almost married out of guilt. But even you admitted that was never about love. So, this person... she's either new in your life or someone you've known for a while who has suddenly caught your attention."

Rafe felt his throat tighten. Cai's words were cutting dangerously close to the truth. He clenched his fists, willing himself to stay composed, though the effort was Herculean.

"But you're not someone who meets new people often, are you?" Cai mused, tapping a finger against his chin as though deep in thought. "You keep your circle small. And given that you specifically mentioned she's 'trustworthy,' I'm going to assume she's female—just to rule out any surprises." He

smirked, his gaze flicking briefly to Rafe, who sat rigid in his chair. "Now, the female staff in direct contact with you... there are only two, and both are old enough to be your mother. And you're not into that sort of thing as far as I can guess."

"That narrows things down to outsiders—journalists, diplomats, or perhaps someone you've crossed paths with recently," Cai continued, his tone as measured as ever. "But even that seems unlikely, considering how little you engage with people outside your usual circles these days—and how many of them are filtered out before they even get close."

"So," Cai said, his voice dropping to a more pointed note, his gaze sharpening, "are you going to tell me yet?" The shift in his tone sent a jolt through Rafe. Gone was the friendly teasing; now Cai's eyes held something more calculating.

Rafe hesitated, his mind racing for an out. "Cai... That... Umm... Look, it's nothing. Really. If I do go ahead with something, I'll definitely let you know." He forced a strained smile, hoping the evasion would be enough to satisfy his friend.

But Cai's knowing smile in response sent a fresh wave of panic coursing through Rafe. This time, he was certain—Cai had pieced it all together. The man wasn't guessing anymore; he knew.

And then, just as Rafe braced himself for the inevitable confrontation, Cai did something unexpected. He changed the subject.

"You know my Uncle Gabe, right?" Cai asked casually, as if they hadn't just been locked in a tense game of cat and mouse moments ago. "He's my second uncle."

Rafe blinked, caught off guard by the abrupt shift. "I know you have a lot of uncles, but I don't know Gabe Frost much."

Cai nodded, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Out of all the brothers, he's the least outgoing. A homebody through and through. Happier at home playing with his kids or working on his projects than taking holidays or vacations."

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"I see," Rafe said, though he didn't. Not really. Where was Cai going with this?

But Cai, it seemed, was in the mood for storytelling today. "Anyway," he continued, "the only time he ever takes vacations is when his children convince him to. He's the type who'd rather stay put, but this time..." Cai paused, his eyes flicking briefly to Rafe before he added, "he's pulled the kids out of school early and planned a trip."

"That's good, right?" Rafe said, still trying to follow the thread. "You Frosts are big on family vacations and all that."

Cai leaned back, folding his arms as his smile widened. "He's coming to Petrovia."

"Well," Rafe replied, feeling slightly more at ease, "just let me know when the family is arriving, and I'll arrange for some staff to—"

"Ah, I wouldn't worry too much about their tourism needs," Cai interrupted smoothly, his tone dropping into something more pointed. "But there's something else you might want to consider."

Rafe frowned, his unease returning. "What's that?"

Cai's eyes gleamed as he delivered the next piece of information, the words carefully calculated. "You see, Uncle Gabe's family consists of him, his wife Autumn, their two children, and... his sister-in-law. Someone he practically raised as a daughter."

Rafe's chest tightened. He didn't need to hear the name to know where this was going, but Cai, didn't leave it unsaid.

"Her name," Cai said with deliberate clarity, "is Arabelle."

With that, Cai finally stood up, placed his glass on the table and with a piercing look at Rafe he muttered, "I hope my uncle's sudden desire for vacation here is not related to you, Ignis. Good night."

Chapter 872: Pregnant Or Not?

Arabelle stared at the pregnancy test in front of her as though it were a demon summoned straight from hell. In truth, she would have preferred an actual demon, horns and all. At least she knew how to deal with those. This, though? This was terrifying on an entirely new level.

She was only a week late, barely enough time to panic—or so she had told herself for days. Gabe, ever the calm voice of reason, had simply shrugged when she'd brought it up. "Just go with the flow," he had said. As if that were an option when her brain refused to think straight.

And then there was Rafael. Why did he keep asking to meet her? It had been three weeks since that night, and she'd been certain he would move on by now. Men like Rafael Ignis, with their princely titles and flawless reputations, had no business lingering over someone like her. They were supposed to have better things to do, important lives to lead, and distractions to chase after.

Still, she knew better than to expect such luck. Rafael was nothing if not persistent. Of course, he'd want to know. He was principled like that, annoyingly so. If there was even a chance she was pregnant, he'd insist on answers—and worse, involvement.

The only way to shake him off was to take the damn test, confirm she wasn't pregnant, and chalk all this up to some hormonal fluke. Simple enough.

Or it would have been, if the sharp ring of the doorbell hadn't echoed through her small apartment just as she reached for the test. Arabelle froze, the sudden noise jolting her out of her thoughts. Her heart stuttered in her chest as her gaze darted to the door. Midnight. Who in their right mind would show up at her door at this hour?

She crept closer and peered through the peephole, only to stagger back as if burned. Him.

Had Rafael somehow discovered she'd just bought a pregnancy test? The idea was absurd, but her mind spiraled anyway. There was no way he knew... right?

Get rid of him. Fast. The thought propelled her into action. She grabbed the test and shoved it under a random book on the table. It was a flimsy attempt at hiding it, but it would have to do. Swallowing hard, she straightened her shirt, buttoned it all the way, brushed a hand through her hair, and forced her legs to move toward the door.

She paused just a moment longer than she should have before unlocking and pulling it open.

And there he stood.

For a brief, charged moment, they simply stared at each other, neither speaking. The air seemed to shift.

Rafe stared at the woman who had opened the door, and his stomach clenched tight, a visceral reaction that he hadn't been prepared for. He had spent the entire drive here convincing himself that the burning attraction he felt for her was nothing more than leftover adrenaline from that night. A fleeting, chemical reaction—temporary and meaningless.

What a joke.

Because now, standing in front of her, with her brows furrowed in a scowl and her hand gripping the edge of the door as if debating whether to slam it in his face, that same attraction roared to life, consuming every rational thought. He couldn't look away.

Her hair was mussed, like she'd run her hands through it one too many times. Her shirt, buttoned to her neck, should have made her look composed. Instead, it only made him imagine ripping those buttons open, one by one, and kissing every inch of skin he uncovered.

He swallowed hard, forcing the ridiculous thoughts out of his head—or trying to. This was insanity. Absolute insanity is what it was.

And then she spoke, her voice sharp and tinged with exasperation.

"Rafael." His name on her lips in that low voice of hers was like dagger aimed at his resolve. Except it didn't pierce his head. No, it hit the wrong one entirely, stirring a heat that made him want to curse some more.

He cleared his throat, fighting to keep his tone even. "Arabelle. May I come in?"

Her hesitation was written all over her face. She looked like she was two seconds away from telling him to turn around and leave.

But Rafe wasn't in the mood to be refused. He didn't give her the chance.

With a firm step forward, he brushed past her, ignoring her weak attempt to block his way. And then he walked over to the dining table and took a seat. "We need to talk."

"What is there to talk about? I already told you the last time we talked that I would let you know if there are any consequences." Arabelle asked defensively as she glanced at the place where he'd gone to sit. Darn it! Of all the places around the table, he sat on the chair where she'd been sitting! The only thing hiding the pregnancy test from his was a book about... chimpanzees.

"That is not what I am here to discuss. I think we should start dating. Even if there are no so-called consequences." Rafe blurted out.

That is not what he had planned to say. Definitely not. He'd planned to ask her to come with him to the doctor to confirm things and then calmly discuss the future course of action. But all that careful planning and wording flew out of the window the moment he saw her.

Of all the things she'd expected Rafael to say, this hadn't even crossed her mind.

"Dating?" she repeated, her voice laced with disbelief. "Why? Why on earth would you suggest that?"

Rafael leaned back in the chair, his gaze fixed on her.

"Because," he said, "we're still attracted to each other. Deny it all you want, but you feel it too."

Her jaw tightened, and she folded her arms across her chest as if shielding herself from his words. "That's ridiculous. Whatever you think you're feeling, it's... it's just leftover adrenaline. A... a momentary lapse in judgment. And I definitely don't feel it."

Chapter 873: Dam*

"This is not some leftover attraction, alright." Rafe's voice echoed with frustration as his hand came down hard on the table, the loud thud breaking the tension-filled silence between them. He watched as her eyes widened, her expression shifting into something he couldn't quite place.

A pang of regret hit him immediately. Had he scared her? The sudden burst of anger felt like too much now, too overwhelming, even to him. He opened his mouth, an apology forming on his lips, but before he could utter a word, her gaze flickered downward. Her focus wasn't on him anymore but rather on something on the table.

Curious and a little unnerved, Rafe followed the direction of her gaze. His chest tightened when he saw it.

There, lying innocently next to his hand, was a pregnancy test. Unused, but unmistakable. The sight of it brought an abrupt stillness to him, as though the air had been sucked out of the room. His throat felt dry as he slowly lifted his gaze back to her, his voice tight when he finally spoke.

"You were going to use this?"

Arabelle's sent him a smirk that didn't quite reach her eyes as she stared back at him. "Nope. Thought I'd frame it as modern art. Really ties the room together, don't you think?"

Rafe narrowed his eyes, unfazed. "So, you're saying you have doubts that you're pregnant."

Her smirk faltered, but she recovered quickly, shrugging with exaggerated nonchalance. "What? No, of course not. I just love to keep these around for emergencies. You never know when one might come in handy as a paperweight or maybe a doorstop."

"There's no other reason to get a pregnancy test," he stated flatly, crossing his arms as his gaze bore into hers.

"I just..." Arabelle floundered, rolling her eyes as if the question were absurd. "Maybe I was curious, okay? Or maybe I'm just a sucker for the pretty pink packaging. What do you want from me, Rafe?"

Without answering, he stood abruptly, the scrape of his chair against the floor cutting through the air. He reached for the test, holding it out to her like it was a peace offering—or a challenge. "Do it."

She blinked at him, then at the test in his hand, her brows shooting up. "What? Are you serious right now?"

"What's crazy about that?" he shot back calmly. "We're both in this, right? If you're pregnant, you'll have to tell me anyway. This just spares you the awkward 'Hey, by the way' conversation later."

Arabelle crossed her arms and tilted her head, her voice dripping with faux sweetness. "Oh, right. Because nothing says 'mutual support' like waving a pregnancy test in my face and telling me to go pee on it."

Rafe exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair as his lips twitched with the hint of a smirk. "I'm not waving it in your face," he said, shaking the test lightly for effect. "I'm holding it, very politely, I might add. But hey, if you'd rather wait until you start craving pickles and ice cream, that's fine too."

Her jaw dropped, a mix of disbelief and amusement lighting up her features. "Pickles and ice cream? Wow. What a modern man you are, throwing out every pregnancy cliché in the book."

"Arabelle," he said, his voice softening but still insistent, "if there's even a chance—"

"Yeah, yeah. 'We need to know,'" she interrupted, waving a hand dismissively. "Fine, Prince Responsibility. But don't think for a second this means you get to boss me around. Or have a say in my life."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he said in a tone that was definitely saying that he was lying. "But maybe this'll save us both a little sleepless night or two."

Her fingers brushed against his as she took the test, her expression a mixture of defiance and something softer she wouldn't let him see. "You're lucky I don't make you take it just to prove a point," she muttered under her breath, spinning on her heel and marching toward the bathroom.

"Good luck with that," he called after her, the faintest hint of a grin tugging at his lips. "I assure you if I do take it, will come out negative."

He watched her walk away, her shoulders squared, the pregnancy test clutched in her hand like it was a battle flag. He sighed, running a hand down his face as he sat back down in his chair. Okay. This was it. He was here now waiting for the result that could change everything.

And finally, after all this anxiety, he had one answer—one truth that had settled deep in his chest, no matter what the test revealed. He had fallen in love with her at first sight. The realization hit him like a punch to the gut, as undeniable as the air he breathed. And yet it did not make him panic.

It had shaken something loose in him that he hadn't even realized was locked away, almost giving him a sense of peace.

Because, honestly, what other explanation unless one could explain insanity, could there be for the fact that he was sitting here, silently praying for the test to be positive? Not because he was ready. Not because he wanted the complications that would inevitably follow. No, it wasn't logic or practicality driving this strange hope.

It was her.

The thought made his chest tighten, his heart beating harder than he liked to admit. He wasn't naïve—he knew a positive result would open the door to a whole new world of problems. She'd already said that she might not keep it. It wasn't as though either of them was in the best place for this, and he could already hear the avalanche of arguments they'd have to navigate.

But still, the thought of it, of something tying them together permanently, made him want to kneel down and pray harder than he ever had before. He wasn't even sure what he was asking for—certainty? Connection? A chance to prove he could be something more to her?

Whatever it was, he couldn't deny the truth of it. He wanted her in his life, tied to him in a way that couldn't be easily unraveled. Maybe it was selfish. Maybe it was crazy. But that was it.

Chapter 874: What?

She walked out of the washroom, and all he could do was stare, trying to read her expression. But her face gave away nothing—it was utterly blank. What was he supposed to make of that? Was she happy? He highly doubted it. Was she angry, sad, or confused? Nope. Nothing. Just a perfect poker face.

"Are you okay?" he ventured cautiously.

She looked at him, her lips curling into a sarcastic smirk. "What could possibly happen to me after peeing?" she replied, her tone dripping with mockery.

He winced. Okay, so sarcasm was her coping mechanism. Noted.

Still, he pressed on, his nerves barely holding. "Is it... good news?"

Rafe couldn't help but smile then, a cautious but genuine curve of his lips as she nodded her head. "It is, right? That's great! I mean, I know this whole thing must've been unexpected for you—an unplanned pregnancy and all—but listen, I can support you. Whatever you decide, I'm here. And, well, we'd probably need to get married before the baby's born, but that's okay. We'd figure it all out—"

"Rafe."

Her voice, sharp and cutting, brought his rambling to an abrupt halt. Arabelle stared at him, her expression still unreadable. Then, shaking her head slightly, she interrupted him. "It's good news because I'm not pregnant. The test was negative."

For a moment, silence engulfed the room.

"You're... not pregnant?" Rafe finally repeated, his brows furrowing as if trying to make sense of the words. "You're sure? Could it be that the test is faulty?"

Arabelle let out a small, incredulous laugh, but it wasn't amused. She crossed her arms, fixing him with a stare as he moved toward the washroom, his intent all too clear.

"Wait, where are you going?" she demanded, stepping in front of him.

"I just want to check," he said, his voice earnest, as though inspecting the test himself might somehow change the outcome.

She planted herself firmly in his way, her eyes narrowing. "What is wrong with you?" she snapped. "Are you seriously upset that I'm not pregnant? You're disappointed? Really? You'd be stuck with me—a stranger—for a lifetime. And you were already planning a wedding? Are you out of your mind?"

Rafe stopped in his tracks, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

"Well..." he began tentatively, scratching the back of his neck, "...I wouldn't exactly call it being stuck. And we're not really strangers anymore, are we?"

Her eyes widened, disbelief and exasperation flickering across her face. "Unbelievable," she muttered under her breath.

He winced again, realizing that maybe he hadn't chosen his words particularly well.

"I just meant..." he started, but her raised hand silenced him.

"Don't," she said, shaking her head. "Just... don't. Trust me, you do not want to be entangled with me. Now, since we are done with this entire anxiety inducing thing, I think it is time for you to leave."

Rafe gulped, his throat tightening at her blunt dismissal. Oops. He'd almost forgotten that the potential pregnancy had been his only real excuse to stick close to her, at least for now.

"Well, since the anxiety thing is over," he began, forcing a casual grin, "how about we start over? A clean slate. What do you think?"

Arabelle arched a brow, her skepticism clear as day. "I think you need to get your head checked."

Rafe's grin widened. "Perfect. Let's go, then."

Her frown deepened, her arms crossing defensively. "Go where? If you think I'm going out on a date with you, you're—"

"I meant let's go and get my head tested," he interrupted smoothly.

She stared at him for a moment, her expression caught between disbelief and reluctant amusement. Finally, a grin broke across her face, softening her features. No wonder this guy was friends with Cai. Ugh. He was just as insufferable—and, unfortunately, just as endearing. Unable to stop herself, she shook her head and collapsed onto the couch, her exasperation giving way to a small chuckle.

"Trust me, Your Highness," she said, gesturing vaguely in his direction, "when you get to know me better, you'll be relieved we never went out on any real dates."

Rafe tilted his head, feigning offense. "Hey, who said we haven't gone out on a date?"

"Oh, really?" Arabelle shot back, rolling her eyes. "What are you saying now? Did you take me on imaginary dates without my consent?"

He smirked, leaning back against the armrest like he had all the time in the world. "Actually, we did have a date. That almost-dinner we had the other night? Totally counts. I'm declaring it our official blind date, thank you very much."

She snorted, shaking her head. "Your definition of a date is... wow. Truly inspiring. Getting almost murdered qualifies as a good date? Man, I think Cai needs to crack open your head and double-check if there's a functioning brain in there."

Rafe burst out laughing.

Without a second thought, he stood and walked over, plopping himself down on the couch right next to her.

"Hey!" Arabelle exclaimed, her eyes narrowing as she scooted an inch away. "There are literally a dozen other empty spots in this room. Why are you sticking to me?"

"I like this spot," Rafe replied shamelessly, grinning as he settled in comfortably, throwing his arm over the back of the couch.

Arabelle started to shift further away, intent on creating some distance, but Rafe was faster. He reached out, catching her hand gently, and before she could protest, he brought it to his lips.

Her breath hitched, her mind momentarily blank as she stared at him. "What... what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I am doing, Arabelle?"

Arabelle blinked, " Well, it looks suspiciously like you are trying to seduce me."

"Well, you are a smart girl. Now..."

"There is a problem though...." Arabelle interrupted him and he frowned as he looked at her. Something was wrong with her. And he had the answer in the next minute, when she sent a glassy look his way and announced, " I think I'm going to faint..." And after that announcement, she did exactly that."

Chapter 875: What What?

"Your Highness, your friend is pregnant."

Rafe froze mid-step, his gaze snapping to the doctor. He coughed, caught off guard. "What?"

The doctor's tone remained calm, though her words carried significant weight. "She is pregnant, Your Highness. Judging by her condition, it seems she has not been eating well or has been under considerable stress. Her blood sugar dropped, which led to the fainting spell. But yes, I can confirm that she is expecting."

Rafe blinked, struggling to process the news. "But... she just took a test," he stammered. "It came out negative." The words slipped out before he could stop himself, and his expression tightened, realizing he might have said too much.

The doctor, merely offered a small, understanding smile. "That's likely because it's still very early in the pregnancy. At this stage, some tests might not detect it. In another week or so, the result would likely have been positive. These things take time to show conclusively."

He took a calming breath. Dam* it! This was like sitting on a roller coaster ride. And he did not like those. Once he'd taken a moment to calm himself, he cast a warning look at the doctor, "Doctor, you do realise the importance of discretion, correct?"

The doctor stiffened and nodded, "Of course, Your Highness. The news will not be leaked."

Of course the doctor did not reveal her thoughts. There was no news of their crown prince dating so of course this child might not be 'welcome.' It was something common among the rich.

But before she could continue with her thoughts, the man asked her in a concerned tone, "Is she okay? This won't affect her and the baby in the long term? Is she awake? Does she know?"

The doctor gave a reassuring nod even as she blinked in surprise. Okay. She might be mistaken. Maybe they were dating and had managed to hide things from the media. Curbing her need to gossip, she spoke up, "Yes, Your Highness. She and the baby are alright as of now. She's awake and has been informed. She's resting now. As for the future health, both should be fine as long as they eat well and the lady takes care of herself."

Rafe exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, his hands clenching at his sides. "Can I see her?"

Rafe hesitated briefly, his hand hovering near the doorframe. He drew in a deep breath, steeling himself, before giving a soft knock and pushing the door open. The moment he stepped inside, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Her glare hit him with the force of a thousand daggers. If looks could kill, he was certain he'd have collapsed right there, lifeless on the cold, sterile floor. The intensity in her eyes was enough to make even the most battle-hardened warrior take a step back.

She leaned slightly forward on the hospital bed, her expression thunderous, her voice low but seething as she ground out a single word: "YOU."

Rafe felt the corners of his mouth twitch upward in what he hoped was a reassuring smile, though it likely came across as more sheepish than confident. Raising his hands slowly, palms out in mock surrender, he replied with deliberate emphasis, "ME."

She closed her eyes then and leaned her head back, "Just don't say anything for now. I don't want to hear your future plans, okay?"

Rafe sighed and carefully walked over to her, sitting by her bedside as he took hold of her hand, "Okay then," he said in a calm, measured tone. "We can discuss the future plans later. There's no rush."

For a moment, the room was quiet, then Arabelle slowly opened her eyes and cast him a wary glance. Her lips pressed together tightly before she finally spoke, her voice trembling just slightly. "There might not be a need for future plans," she said, her words deliberate and heavy. "You know... I might... I might decide to have an abortion. I never planned to have children and this is too soon."

Rafe froze, the weight of her statement settling over him like a heavy blanket. His hand, still holding hers, tensed reflexively. He wanted to protest, the words rising quickly to the tip of his tongue. But he stopped himself.

After a beat, he exhaled slowly, "Whatever it is you choose to do, I just hope you take your time to think it through, really think about it." He paused, searching her face for any sign of what she might be feeling. "And no matter what you decide," he continued, giving her hand a gentle squeeze, "I'll support you. I'll be here, for whatever you need."

She looked at him for a long moment, her expression unreadable, before turning her gaze toward the ceiling. "I thought you would protest an abortion. I mean you need an heir and all, and you even sounded excited earlier..."

"I want to protest," Rafe admitted, his voice steady but carrying an edge of frustration. He let out a sharp breath and leaned forward slightly, his hands clasped together tightly. "Believe me, it's not easy to hold back. I could give you hundreds of reasons—hundreds of points—to argue against this decision of yours."

He paused, letting the words settle in the air before continuing in a softer tone. "But considering the fact that I fought long and hard in the council to make abortion legal in Petrovia, I'd be the biggest hypocrite if I turned around now and pressured you into a pregnancy you don't want."

He looked up at her then, his gaze steady and sincere. "So, as much as I might have my own thoughts, I'm choosing to stand with you in whatever you decide. This is your choice, and I'm keeping my opinions to myself, no matter how hard that might be for me."

Arabelle stared at him then, piercingly and he wondered what it was she was thinking. Honestly, he did want to tell her all the reasons she should keep this baby, so he tried to hold himself back and instead started to talk about

Chapter 876: You

"Why are you here? How did you even... Did he call you?" Arabelle's voice faltered, her unease evident in the way she avoided his gaze as he stepped into the room.

Cai rolled his eyes, closing the distance between them with casual ease. He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head before sinking into the chair that Rafe had vacated earlier. "You mean Rafe? No, he didn't call me," Cai said, his tone matter-of-fact. "But don't worry, I'll deal with him later. Do you really think my sister could be admitted to a hospital, and I wouldn't find out?" He gave her a pointed look, one that wordlessly called her a fool.

Arabelle sighed, and stiffened her shoulders. "I'm not really your sister, you know," she murmured, as if the words could create some distance between them.

"It makes no difference," Cai said without hesitation, his voice firm. "You're my sister in every way that matters. And, besides, my name is listed on your emergency contacts. So even if Rafe was the one to bring you here, the hospital still had to call me first. The only reason I'm late is because I was in surgery when it happened." His sharp gaze swept across the room before returning to her. "Speaking of which, where is he?"

Arabelle hesitated, then relented. "He just went down for a few minutes. I told him he didn't have to stay, but he seems adamant about staying the night."

Even though her words carried a hint of complaint, clearly hoping Cai would back her up, he simply nodded in approval. "Good," he said, his tone decisive.

Her head snapped up, her brows knitting in disbelief. "Good? What do you mean good?"

"Exactly what the word means, Bell. He is the father of the baby, isn't he?" Cai said, his expression calm yet watchful.

Arabelle's eyes widened in shock as her breath hitched. "Did the hospital tell you that?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"It was a guess," Cai admitted with a shrug. "But now I know for sure." He leaned back, studying her reaction carefully. "So, what are you going to do about it?"

Arabelle pressed her lips into a thin line and turned her gaze away. "I don't know yet. I'm still... thinking." She hesitated before looking back at him, her eyes pleading. "Cai, can you please keep this to yourself? For now?"

Cai raised a brow, giving her a look of mock offense. "When have I ever betrayed your secrets, Bell?"

She exhaled in relief, but her comfort was short-lived as Cai continued, "But this time, I have a few conditions."

Her shoulders tensed again as she frowned. "Conditions? Why?"

"Multiple reasons," Cai said, his tone softening slightly. "The biggest being that the last time I kept one of your secrets, I saw how much it hurt you. And you're still dealing with the consequences of those decisions."

Arabelle's jaw tightened as she looked away. "That was the past," she said firmly. "There's no need to dredge it up now."

"There is every need," Cai countered, his voice unwavering. "Because all of your choices today are still influenced by what happened back then."

She let out a frustrated sigh, her fingers curling into the blanket on her lap. "Fine. What are your conditions?" she asked, her voice clipped.

Cai didn't hesitate. "Give Rafe a chance."

Arabelle blinked, stunned. "What?" she asked, her voice rising in disbelief. Of all the things he could have said, this was the last thing she expected. "What are you talking about?"

"Rafe is a good man," Cai said simply, as if that explained everything. "And he understands that everyone makes mistakes. He's made plenty of his own, hasn't he? He might understand your pain better than you think. He could even help you heal."

Cai scoffed, shaking his head. "The only plan I had was to help you with the donations, Bell. I wasn't the one who pushed you into his bed."

Her cheeks flushed with anger, and she glared at him. "But now you want me to stay there? Is that what you're saying?"

Cai winced at her bluntness. "There's no need to be so... direct, okay?" he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "All I'm saying is don't run away from this relationship like you always do. You have a habit of running, Bell, and maybe it's time to stop. I am sure no one would have expected this outcome but sometimes we need to take fate's signal."

Arabelle shook her head and glared at him," Cai. I think falling in love has lowered your IQ. Are you serious? Have you forgotten who Rafe is? Is he a simple man whom I can have a relationship with? He is a bloody future king. And you are aware of my background..."

"See! This is the thing! The influence of your past. What background are we talking about, Bell?" Cai burst out before taking a calming breath and finishing it off with a warning, " Uncle Gabe was going to be here tomorrow. But he has been called away due to the bomb threats at the resort in country B. He should be back in a few weeks. Bell.. this time either tell Rafe everything and come to a settlement or find a way to get rid of the shadows in your eyes and heart."

"Cai! Are you really threatening me?" Arabelle asked incredulously.

Cai sighed and stood up," You've forgotten the promise I made you in the past, Arabelle, when you made me keep my mouth shut then. I will fight you for your happiness as well, if need be. So, this is me fighting for you. And you know I fight dirty. So prepare yourself."

Just then, before Arabelle could say anything, a slight knock sounded in the room followed by Rafe coming in and pausing at the doorstep as he glanced at the two people in the room. "What is going on?"

Chapter 877: A Chance

You. Me. Outside." Cai's voice was sharp, leaving no room for argument as he gestured toward the door.

Rafe raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed, but complied nonetheless. "I'll be back right away, Miss Arabelle," he said, his tone overly polite as he pushed back his chair and stood.

Cai mimicked Rafe's words under his breath in a mocking tone, earning a faint scowl from Arabelle, who looked like she wanted to intervene. But one pointed look from Cai silenced her, leaving her biting her lip in frustration as the two men stepped outside.

Once in the corridor, silence stretched between them like a taut rope. Cai crossed his arms, his posture radiating authority, while Rafe leaned casually against the wall, seemingly unbothered. The tension in the air was palpable as they stared each other down, neither willing to break first.

Finally, Rafe sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "If you're planning to punch me, may I politely request that you avoid my face? I have a press conference tomorrow. It wouldn't do for the citizens of this country to think I'd been in a brawl. It's bad optics."

Cai let out a derisive scoff, his glare intensifying. "Don't flatter yourself," he snapped, though he made no move to strike. Instead, he stood his ground, arms folded, his gaze unwavering.

Rafe shifted, clearly growing uncomfortable under Cai's scrutiny. After another few moments of silence, he threw up his hands. "I thought we had an understanding," he said, exasperated. "You gave me your blessing earlier, didn't you? When you told me about your uncle's plans? So why exactly are we here now?"

Cai's jaw tightened, and he shook his head. "What were you thinking, Rafe? She's like my sister."

Rafe blinked at him, then straightened up. "Your sister," he said slowly, as though testing the words. "Your sister happens to be a beautiful, intelligent, and captivating woman, Cai. You can't expect me—or any man, for that matter—to not notice that."

Cai narrowed his eyes, his voice dropping dangerously low. "Oh, I'm aware you find her attractive. Soon enough, the whole world will too, no doubt."

Rafe winced at the jab but held his ground. "Look," he said, his tone softening, "I know things didn't exactly progress in the... traditional order. But I care about her, Cai. I'll take care of everything moving forward. Trust me."

Cai's lips curved into a smile then, but it was far from friendly. There was something cold and calculating in his expression, a sharpness that made Rafe uneasy.

"Trust you?" Cai stepped closer, forcing Rafe to straighten up. "Rafe, let me be very clear. Bell has... issues. Things from her past that she's still grappling with. I'm trusting you to protect her—not just from the ghosts of her past, but from all the problems that come with being involved with someone like you."

Rafe stiffened but remained silent, sensing there was more to come.

"And another thing," Cai added, his voice cutting like steel. "My hands are far too precious to waste punching you. But if you hurt her—physically, emotionally, or in any other way—I won't hesitate to use my scalpel. Do I make myself clear?"

Rafe swallowed hard, his usual charm faltering under his friend's icy gaze. "Crystal," he replied, his voice steady but quieter than usual.

Cai stepped back, satisfied, though the edge in his demeanor hadn't dulled. "Good," he said simply, turning on his heel and striding away from the room with one last sentence, "Take care of her, okay?"

Rafe exhaled slowly, running a hand through his hair as he watched Cai disappear.

A few minutes later, Rafe entered the room and could already feel Arabelle searching his face, looking for signs of a scuffle for sure. "Where is he?" She asked eventually when she did not find him hurt.

"What? Do you want to check him for injuries as well?"

Arabelle blushed. Well, she was worried about the men punching each other. She'd seen more than her share of 'brawls' between her uncles who seemed to think a few punches were the best way to solve things.

"Well, don't worry. We didn't hit each other."

Arabelle nodded and exhaled slowly, "Well, that is a relief."

But then Rafe continued, "He's only threatened to use his scalpel on me if I hurt you."

"I'm sorry," she murmured, guilt creeping into her tone. "Cai's just... he means well. He's always been—"

Rafe cut her off with a gentle wave of his hand. "No need to apologize," he said firmly. "Honestly, I'd expect nothing less from someone who cares about you. Besides," he added with a lopsided grin, "I'm planning to make sure the threat stays purely hypothetical. I have no intention of hurting you, Arabelle."

"Now, it's really late. Should we sleep? You will be discharged tomorrow." Rafe closed the distance between them and leaned over her. Arabelle stiffened at the sudden closeness, her breath catching in her throat. "I can do that," she protested weakly, leaning back to put some distance between them.

Rafe ignored her attempt to pull away, his hands steady as he adjusted the incline of the bed and fluffed the pillows. Once satisfied, he reached for the blanket and tucked it around her snugly, his movements careful but firm.

"There," he said, stepping back slightly but still hovering close. His voice dropped to a murmur. "Let's get some sleep, okay?"

Arabelle's heart raced as she nodded, unable to find her voice. He was indeed a kind man. She could not burden him with the past. That would be wrong. Having a baby with him would mean tying him to her forever. And once he knew of the past, he would be in complete favour of not keeping ties with her. So, it was for the best if she did not get herself too attached.

On the other hand, as Rafe went to lay down on the visitor bed, he could not help but keep stealing glances Arabelle. Tomorrow would be a new day and they might have a new beginning. He'd thought about it. He might not want to pressure her but his child still deserved a chance of someone speaking up for it. Whatever she chose, he would accept it but he was going to try and convince her at least once.

Chapter 878: Breakfast

Arabelle woke up with a jerk, her breath catching as she tried to orient herself. It took her a moment to remember where she was. Then, the sound of light snoring brought it all back. She was in the hospital.

And in the same room with her was a certain future king.

She shook her head, correcting herself silently—not with her, just in the same room.

Carefully, she sat up in the bed, trying not to make too much noise. Turning her head, she glanced toward the source of the snoring. Sure enough, it was him. For a moment, she just stared, surprised at how different he seemed. In the interviews she'd watched, he'd always appeared so sharp and intimidating. Now, though, he looked... almost peaceful.

Her lips twitched in a faint smile. It was strange to think that the man who could command a room with his presence could also seem so unguarded in his sleep. But her smile faded quickly as his snoring stopped. She froze, wondering if he was about to wake up.

When the sound started again, she let out a silent sigh of relief and quickly tiptoed toward the washroom. Her heart thudded in her chest, and she couldn't tell if it was from the near miss or the strange way her thoughts lingered on him.

It took her a little while to return, and when she did, she was relieved to see him still asleep. She crept back into bed as quietly as possible, settling under the covers.

As she stared at the ceiling, her mind drifted back to the decisions she'd been mulling over all night. The sleep had helped clear some of her confusion, and now everything felt more certain.

She knew what she wanted to do. Keeping this child might not be the most practical choice, but it was the one she would make. She wouldn't abort it.

As for Rafe... she sighed softly. She would let him meet the child if he wanted, but she couldn't imagine having a relationship with him. That wasn't something she could allow—not after everything.

But deciding that brought another realization. If she was going to do this, she would have to tell him everything.

How did someone even begin to explain something like that? How could she tell him about the kind of man her father was? Or the mistakes she had made when she was younger?

The thoughts swirled in her mind, heavy and unrelenting, but she knew there was no avoiding it. Eventually, she would have to tell him the truth. For now, though, she simply lay there, her thoughts

spinning as the soft sound of his snoring filled the quiet room, until she actually fell asleep with the snores acting as some sort of a lullaby.

The next time she woke up, was to the scent of some delicious food wafting from the cart in the middle of the room and a smiling Rafe standing next to her bed, his hand extended. Her eyes widened when she saw his hand and she moved away, while he retracted his hand, "I was about to wake you up. Let's have breakfast before you are discharged."

She wanted to protest, tell him that she could have breakfast later. But considering the fact that skipping meals was what had landed her here, that seemed a bit too much. And she needed to talk to him so this would be a chance.

"Okay." She nodded slowly and stood up, letting him escort her to the table.

The breakfast actually turned out to be a silent affair with each of them lost in their own thoughts until finally both decided to break their silence at the same time, their voices overlapping.

"Rafe—"

"Arabelle—"

Their eyes met across the table, and Rafe leaned back in his chair, a small, indulgent smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He gestured with a slight wave of his hand, as if conceding the floor. "Okay then. Ladies first."

Arabelle hesitated, shaking her head quickly, her fingers clenching in her lap. "No, you go ahead. I'd like to hear what you were going to say first."

Her voice was steady, but inside, her heart beat a little faster and she clenched her hands in her lap. She'd been planning to tell him that she would keep the child and then discuss the future. But what if he was about to ask her to abort? Of course she wouldn't abort but that would give her justification to keep things for them.

Across the table, Rafe nodded, not pushing back against her refusal. Instead, he straightened and met her gaze, his tone thoughtful as he began to speak. "Look, Arabelle," he started, his voice carrying a quiet sincerity, "I know I told you that I'd support whatever decision you make. And I meant that—I still mean it. But I'd be lying if I didn't tell you what I'm really hoping for." He paused briefly, searching her face. "I hope you'll decide to keep the baby."

Rafe leaned forward slightly, his hands resting on the edge of the table, his words picking up pace as though he feared she might cut him off. "I know it's a lot to ask," he admitted quickly, his voice tinged with urgency. "And I know it changes everything for you—for both of us. But I just... I keep thinking about what it would mean, Arabelle."

He paused, running a hand through his hair, as though trying to steady himself. But his gaze never wavered, holding hers as he pressed on. "We can take our time till the baby comes and get to know each other during this time, so you don't have to worry about compatibility or anything. I don't want to make you feel pressured. This is your choice. Always your choice. But I needed you to know how I feel before you decide."

Her throat tightened, and she had to swallow hard before she could respond. "Rafe..." she began, her voice faltering slightly.

Chapter 879: Revelation

Her throat tightened, making it difficult to breathe, and she had to swallow hard before finding the courage to speak. Her voice trembled with uncertainty. "Rafe..." she began. She inhaled deeply, gathering her resolve. "If I decide to keep the baby," she said, her words coming out slowly, as if each one had to be carefully weighed before it was spoken, "what do you see our future looking like?"

Her heart pounded as she continued, the vulnerability in her voice impossible to mask. "Will this child be your heir? The next to inherit the throne? What happens when you eventually marry? Will your wife be able to accept you having an heir out of marriage? You're already in a position where expectations are placed on you—responsibilities, alliances, legacies..." She trailed off, her eyes searching his face for answers. "The future as you have imagined would be much different..."

Rafe sighed. Well, now that they were having this discussion, he would have to lay all the cards on the table. "Would you be open to marriage?" he asked gently, almost worried that she would faint or something at the 'M' word. "We could try to make this work—build a relationship, see where it leads. For the sake of the child and for us."

Arabelle blinked. Did he just ask her to marry him? A marriage of convenience or something? Wow. That was not what she had imagined for sure. She was about to refuse when something stopped her and she did not outright reject as she should have. Instead she decided to try a different approach and maybe explain things to him, "I like you, Rafe. I really do. And under different circumstances, I would have liked to try and build a relationship for us... However, your position makes this next to impossible. But there are things about me—things you don't know yet—that you might have a problem with, in the future. Things that could make all of this... complicated."

His gaze sharpened, his curiosity piqued, but more than anything he felt triumph and happiness. She was actually willing to consider a relationship. After her reaction from the previous time, he'd thought that she would simply reject his overture.

In his relief, he almost forgot about the last part. He might have a problem with her past. But before he could ask further, a sharp, hurried knock echoed through the room.

"Your Highness?" a muffled voice called from the other side of the door, urgent and insistent.

He frowned, standing and crossing the room in a few long strides. Opening the door, he found his assistant, Marcus, standing there, his face pale and tense.

"Apologies for the interruption, Your Highness," Marcus said, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation. "But you need to see this." He held out a tablet, the screen lit with a news broadcast.

Rafe took the device, his jaw tightening as he read the bold headline beneath the anchor's image:

"Scandal in Petrovia's Royal Court: Crown Prince Accused of Explosive Misconduct."

The anchor's voice was steady, but the content was anything but. "Recent rumors surrounding Crown Prince Rafe have raised serious questions about his private life. From reports of an abandoned engagement to the daughter of a senior minister, to new allegations of coercing a woman to terminate a pregnancy, the claims paint a troubling picture." Critics are questioning whether these alleged actions tie into the Prince's previous vocal support for progressive abortion laws in Petrovia, casting doubt on his ethics and intentions."

Rafe's grip on the tablet tightened as the anchor continued, her words cutting through the air like a blade. "What does this mean for Petrovia's future? And can the Crown Prince maintain the public's trust amidst these damaging allegations?"

"This is absurd," he muttered, handing the tablet back to Marcus. "Who's behind this? What sources are they citing?"

Marcus shook his head grimly. "The claims seem to be coming from anonymous informants. They're vague, but they've spread fast—already trending across social media. I've already started to look into this. The journalist who exposed the news also received payments from the same foreign bank account that the people who tried to kill you, received."

"The news outlets are already speculating whether this scandal will lead to you stepping down, Your Highness. There are calls from opposition figures and royal critics for you to abdicate your role as Crown Prince until these allegations are resolved. They're painting a narrative of instability and questioning your ability to lead."

Rafe's stomach churned at the implications, but Marcus wasn't finished.

"To make matters worse," Marcus added, his tone more urgent, "the press has already gathered outside the hospital. They're hounding for confirmation, demanding to know if the rumors are true. Worse yet, some are trying to uncover Miss Arabelle's identity. If they find her before we act, things could spiral out of control."

"And their evidence?" he asked, his voice low.

"Flimsy," Marcus admitted, "but damaging enough to stir public sentiment. And the worst part is a few people did see you walking into the hospital with her in your arms. So, it is all the more convincing. This isn't a coincidence. Someone is orchestrating this."

"We need to move swiftly, Your Highness. The press conference scheduled for later today will need to happen today. If we wait, this narrative will solidify, and we'll lose the chance to control the story. You also need to leave the hospital immediately—if they spot you here, it will only fuel speculation about Miss Arabelle. And they might even find her identity."

Turning back to Marcus, Rafe gave a curt nod. "Give me a moment."

And then, he walked back to Arabelle and sighed, "As you heard, I need to leave immediately. But I won't let them drag you into this. Whatever happens, you and the baby will be protected."

"Rafe..." Arabelle began but he cut her off, "I know the circumstances are not ideal for the discussion." He paused and then continued, "Despite all this, just remember, any decision you make, you have my support."

With that, Rafe turned around, leaving Arabelle shocked. For a moment, she could not help but wonder if she was misunderstanding his parting words but it could not be clear enough. In the middle of all the scandal, he was still willing to support her if she wanted to terminate the pregnancy?

Chapter 880: Chaos

The room buzzed with chaotic energy as the journalists huddled in the press conference area, their murmurs intensifying with each passing second. Marcus stepped up to the podium and immediately the journalists started firing questions.

"Assistant Marcus? Where is High Higness? Will he be joining us?", one voice demanded.

"Is it true the Crown Prince was seen entering the hospital with a woman last night? Who is she?", another interjected.

"Does this tie into the allegations of coercion for abortion? Was the woman unwilling or was it His Highness who did not want to tie himself with someone?"

"Will he be stepping down from his position if his character is proven to be troublesome?"

"Can you confirm the pregnancy rumors?"

"Why won't the Prince face us directly?"

"Does he have something to hide?"

"Is it true there are pictures of the Crown Prince taking a woman to the hospital last night?"

The questions came fast, blending into a clamor of accusations and speculations. Marcus held his ground, his expression unyielding, but before he could respond, the room fell abruptly silent.

Prince Rafael entered the room and immediately, despite the rise in excitement, a respectful silence was maintained as the reporters all respectfully stood up.

Rafe greeted the room with a nod, his voice steady as he began. "Ladies and gentlemen of the press, thank you for being here today."

The tension in the air was palpable, but his calm demeanor seemed to hold the chaos at bay. "I understand there are many questions, and I assure you, I will address them. But I ask for your patience and respect. Let's conduct this with decorum, as the circumstances demand."

Before anyone could interject, he raised his hand, continuing smoothly, "This press conference was scheduled long before the recent events came to light. I must insist that we first address the original agenda before discussing anything else. The matters on our docket are important, not just to me but to the people of Petrovia. I will not allow those issues to be overshadowed entirely by unverified allegations and scandals.

The reporters bristled, murmurs breaking out again, but Rafe's authoritative tone left little room for protest.

Just as a few were gathering the courage to object, the door behind him opened again. Another figure stepped into the room, their presence causing an audible shift in the atmosphere.

It was Arabelle.

It didn't take long for the journalists to recognise her as the woman who had been taken to the hospital by Prince Rafael. They might not have had a clear picture of her but they did have a side profile. Immediately, the camera lights started to flash and the journalists seemed to itch to throw their questions at her, making the room buzz with electric energy.

For a moment, there was nothing but the clicking of shutters as she came to stand next to Rafe who was as shocked as the others, though thankfully his expression did not reveal this detail. He smoothly extended his hand and brought her to stand next to him on the podium. With only a look, she seemed to be telling him to step away from the podium.

Without a word, he did as she wanted, curious to see what she was doing here.

Arabelle's calm gaze swept over the room as she stepped forward, taking control of the moment. Her voice, though soft, carried a firmness that commanded attention.

"Good afternoon, everyone," she began, her words slicing through the cacophony of whispers and the whir of camera shutters. "My name is Arabelle Frost."

The room collectively inhaled as she continued, her tone unwavering. "I am Prince Rafael's fiancée."

The declaration sent the gathered press into a frenzy. Questions erupted like a tidal wave, voices overlapping in their urgency. And since all eyes and cameras were directed at her, everyone missed the momentary stunned expression on Prince Rafael's face.

"Fiancée? When was this announced?"

"Miss Frost, were you the woman seen at the hospital last night?"

"Are the rumors of pregnancy true?"

"Is this an attempt to deflect from the allegations against His Highness?"

"How long have you been engaged?"

"Why wasn't the engagement made public sooner?"

The barrage of questions came fast and relentless, decorum entirely forgotten in the rush to capture the scandal's latest twist.

Arabelle raised a hand, her composed demeanor refusing to waver in the face of the onslaught. "I understand your curiosity," she said firmly, her voice cutting through the noise, "but I ask for your patience."

She turned to Rafe then, as if asking his permission to answer the questions and he gestured for her to go ahead. Even he was curious about how she was going to handle this.

"To answer some of your questions," she began, her tone laced with just enough irony to soften the tension, "Yes, Prince Rafael and I have been engaged for a while. Today, as it happens, was supposed to be the day we officially announced it. We had a lovely plan—a press release, a photo session, perhaps even a few candid moments where you'd all catch us looking adorably in love. You know, the usual royal engagement fanfare."

A ripple of laughter spread through the room, the tension loosening just a fraction.

"But life, as we all know, is rarely predictable," Arabelle continued, her smile widening just slightly. "Instead of sharing the news with you over champagne and charming anecdotes, we were greeted last night by a surprise of our own."

She glanced at Rafe, her eyes twinkling with mischief, as though sharing an inside joke. "And as if that wasn't enough to keep us on our toes, we woke up this morning to... well, this," she said, gesturing lightly to the press-packed room, her tone teasing but gracious.

The journalists chuckled at that and continued to be enchanted.

"I understand the curiosity and concern," Arabelle went on, her voice softening, "but I must clarify: this moment is as unexpected for us as it is for you. Prince Rafael and I had hoped for a little more time to plan our future, but fate has a way of speeding up timelines, doesn't it?"

"In the coming days," Arabelle concluded, "we'll take the time to discuss the possibilities, weigh our responsibilities, and make the decisions that are right for our family and this country. When we have those answers, we'll share them with you, as transparently as possible."

She paused, offering the crowd a final warm smile. "Until then, I ask for your understanding and patience. After all, the best stories are the ones that unfold naturally instead from scandals, don't you think?"