



Passion and Deception

Author: *Elizabeth Lennox*

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: A serendipitous encounter. A web of misinterpretations. A smoldering attraction. And blackmail!

Maggie Dolton stumbled upon a dangerously handsome stranger who ignited an irresistible spark within her. She knew in her bones that he was “the one” – little did she realize he was none other than Sheik Ramit al Qadar, ruler of Ditra. Their lives soon tangle in a seductive dance of missed signals and untamed passion, as well as misunderstandings that tear them apart.

Fast forward a year, and Ramit discovers an even deeper secret – he’s a father! As the truth surrounding the pernicious blackmail and misunderstandings unravels, can Ramit and Maggie rebuild the trust they once scorched? Will they reignite the fiery love that had started to blaze, or are their passions forever entangled in a web of sensual confusion?

Total Pages (Source): 49

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

Chapter 1

"Why do the 'masters' always look like they got hit by a fugly stick?" Maggie Denault couldn't help but cringe at the sight of time-crackled portraits featuring bulbous noses, warts, and eyebrows hairier than a werewolf in a barber's nightmare. "I suppose, back then, they didn't have Photoshop to smooth out the unattractive truths," she muttered, eyeing the questionable artistic choices. Tapping the folded museum guide against her outer thigh, she sighed with despair at the world's ugly ancestors.

Moving on to the next masterpiece, Maggie found herself staring at a painting of a seemingly pretty young girl. With a head tilt that rivaled a confused puppy, she examined the artwork. Ignoring the girl in the foreground, she scrutinized the background, as if searching for answers to life's questions in the brushstrokes.

Then, it hit her like a Renaissance revelation: the proportions were all out of whack. The girl was rocking flawless symmetry, but the bizarre horse in the background looked like it attended the Picasso School of Equine Design. How did the same artist manage this odd artistic split personality?

Without getting too close, because triggering unseen security is a definite no-no, Maggie leaned in, captivated by the mysteries of the past, wondering if these painters had a secret pact to create the ugliest version of their subjects.

"Thank you, Your Highness! You're a true art angel!" Bill McGovern exclaimed, practically folding himself in half in order to perform an extravagant bow. Apparently, offering the guy rights to display a long forgotten Vermeer painting was like winning the lottery, but with more cultural sophistication.

Ramit al Quadar, Sheik of Ditar, graciously reciprocated, but with a significantly less enthusiastic bow. "It's my pleasure. I've always believed in spreading the joy of Vermeer," he lied, bored with the subject already. "My office will contact yours to arrange the final details."

The museum director, still recovering from his bow-induced vertigo, managed a wide-eyed, "That would be wonderful, Your Highness."

Ramit turned, fully prepared to head for the nearest exit. The museum visit, and offer to lend the paintings, was merely a diplomatic cover for the true reason for his visit to Philadelphia. As he turned, Ramit's thoughts went through the next steps of his purpose; to hunt down the person who had threatened his sister!

Ignoring the director's continued obsequiousness, the bowing and scraping becoming excessive, Ramit started to walk away. If Ramit had done his job correctly, the director would leak the news of the upcoming Vermeer donation to the public.

However, his momentum was abruptly halted, as if by a magnetic pull of profound allure. In the midst of the gallery's hushed elegance, Ramit's attention was hijacked by the shockingly lovely woman standing in front of a painting. Her gaze fixated on the Rembrandt, an intensity that transcended the ordinary reverence for art...and she was muttering to herself!

She seemed transfixed by the brilliant painting while Ramit's attention was ruthlessly captivated by the woman herself, casually clad in jeans and a tee shirt. The denim, though not a second skin, seemed to embrace her figure in an affectionate dance, showcasing a posterior that could rival a masterpiece itself. Her legs, not reaching supermodel lengths, possessed an undeniable allure, each curve a siren's call.

As if obeying the laws of attraction, her waist cinched in, turning her hips into an alluring landscape. The strands of her long brown hair cascaded down her back, a

waterfall of warmth with sparkling golden highlights. She was not just a woman; she was a dark-haired Venus, a living, breathing masterpiece in the gallery of his fascination.

“Your Highness?” his personal aide prompted.

Ramit ignored the man, unable to turn away from the woman who had just moved to the next painting, completely unaware of his rapt attention. Her legs were perfect. Everything about the woman was perfect! When she turned her head to look at the previous painting, he suspected he could see freckles on her nose. Yes, actual freckles! How adorable! And on such a sexually enticing woman, those freckles were even more tempting.

“Your next meeting is in...!”

Ramit raised a commanding hand, hushing his overeager aide. In the tumultuous storm that had recently become his life, this moment emerged as a rare haven of perfection, a sanctuary untainted by the chaos of what was to come next. This museum visit was merely concealing the true purpose behind his journey to Philadelphia but was a necessary cloak-and-dagger affair. He had scheduled several meetings over the next few hours. All of them more camouflage for his real purpose.

“Cancel my next few meetings,” Ramit declared quietly, without looking away from the vision before him.

Ignoring the startled glances from his guards and the horrified expression on his personal aide’s face, Ramit moved into the exhibit room.

“But, Your Highness,” his assistant started to argue.

Ramit turned to him, his eyes hard. “Not the one later. Just...,” he sighed and glanced

at the woman again. “Just fix it. Make it so that I have a few hours free.”

The harsh, overhead florescent lights were a boon, allowing Ramit to more fully appreciate those adorable freckles, which didn’t just decorate her nose. Now that he was closer, Ramit could see that those freckles traveled over her cheeks, one even highlighting the fullness of her lips.

“He used mirrors and projections.”

Startled from her reverie of one of Rembrandt’s most famous paintings, Maggie turned, then jerked backwards at the sight of the tall, broad shouldered man.

Under different stars, Maggie might have felt an ominous shiver travel down her spine as the shockingly large man approached, an unsettling force invading her personal space without the courtesy of an introduction. In the shadow of alternative circumstances, the instinctual alarms from her past would have likely sounded, painting men as potential threats rather than benign entities. The very air crackled with the potential for tension, and the unspoken script of her past played out in the charged silence between them.

However, this man kept a respectful distance. Plus, he was studying the amazing painting, not her. That eased her concerns slightly, calming her instinctive alarm, and allowed her to offer a slight smile.

Turning back to the painting, she examined the images. "Mirrors and projections, huh?" she replied, examining the way that the artist had painted several unique images off in the distance. “I didn’t know that but,” Maggie angled her head slightly, examining each image on the canvas with a new lens. “It’s lovely. And the use of paint strokes and various colors in order to evoke light, intensity, and emotions is truly breathtaking.”

"I concur," the tall stranger replied, his voice carrying a tone of intelligence and power. "I revel in the masterful way he cloaked the main subjects of his paintings in shadows, forcing one to contemplate the very essence of good and evil," the man lowered his voice as he continued, "navigating the realms of darkness and the sinister whispers of untold thoughts."

She smiled up at him. "I don't know who the people in the portrait are, but if they were wealthy, I'm sure that they were unscrupulous bastards."

The surprised amusement on the stranger's face made her laugh. She shrugged, waving casually towards what most art lovers considered an ancient masterpiece. "You disagree?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

Surreptitiously, Maggie surveyed his clothing. The khaki slacks and soft sweater were obviously of good quality, but she was used to being around powerful men who used clothing to announce their status. In her experience, wealthy men were basically insecure, most likely impotent, jerks.

A thoughtful hum lingered in the air, an echo of introspection. Maybe, just maybe, the dark, sometimes violent, tendrils of Maggie's past experiences with vicious and unscrupulous men were casting a long, sinister shadow over her present. Being employed as a waitress at one of the nation's most exclusive men's clubs, Maggie had witnessed a wide spectrum of behaviors from wealthy men, ranging from the commendable to the contemptible, the virtuous to the venomous.

Her gaze shifted, and she found herself reflecting on that bitter truth. In her job, the wealthy were not benevolent titans, but rather pitiful figures, their riches built on a foundation of deceit, manipulation, and a twisted dance with morality. Through her watchful eyes, she had seen the good, the bad, and the downright ugly of affluence. The wealthy were not paragons of success. They were usually pathetic puppeteers pulling the strings of a system rigged in their favor, where laws were crafted, and integrity was sold to safeguard their interests. Her observations painted a stark tableau of wealth tainted by the brushstrokes of deception and power.

This man, with his casual clothes and somewhat ruffled hair wasn't one of the wealthy elite of this world. He was obviously well-off, but he didn't inhabit the abusive realm like the men she came into contact with at the club every night.

He was just a good-looking guy who, apparently, appreciated extremely good art.

“I...” the mysterious stranger started, only to shake his head. “I haven’t recently contemplated the dire morality of the wealthy people in the world, to be honest.”

Maggie smiled. “That’s okay. I’ve done enough contemplation for several people.” Then she turned back to stare at the painting, her features shifting to an amused cringe. “Can you imagine wearing those ruffles every day?”

The man was silent for a moment as he contemplated the wide, lace “ruff”, then he chuckled. “No. I’m relieved that we aren’t living in the seventeen hundreds. Those collars look incredibly uncomfortable.”

She sighed, shifting her weight onto her other foot. “I think the dead guy on the wooden table is more uncomfortable than the people watching the autopsy.” She looked back up at the man beside her, wrinkling her nose. “All those the visible tendons? I know that some painters use shock value to sell their paintings but...ick!”

Maggie watched as the handsome stranger looked more carefully at the painting, then reared back as well. Obviously, he hadn’t realized that the painting was an image of an autopsy.

“That’s...disgusting,” he said, his dark eyebrows furrowing with his revulsion.

“I agree,” she laughed with a sigh. Then, because there wasn’t much more to say, she moved on to the next painting. She excitedly held her breath when the man moved along with her. “What do you think of this one?” The painting was called “Night Watch” and was enormous.

There was a long silence as they contemplated the image.

“I wonder if the men in white are good or evil,” he mused.

She considered that for a moment, then nodded. “Since this was an old portrait of the men who were tasked with guarding the city, I’m guessing that Rembrandt painted the Captain and his Lieutenant in lighter colors, perhaps to demonstrate their authority.” She pursed her lips before she said, “Or maybe to highlight their atrocities.” She shrugged. “Sort of like bringing light to the cockroaches of the town. The abusers, so to speak.”

Ramit looked at the woman carefully. Her comment was more revealing of her own life than that of the images in the painting. And there it was, the pain in her eyes. The resentment and distrust.

His hands were tucked in his pockets, but he felt his fingers curl into fists of outrage. Ramit wanted to know who had abused this woman. Who had broken her trust?

Pushing those questions aside for a moment, he turned back to the painting, looking for something else to comment upon. “I like the way the painter included the rapier and baton as symbolism to explain the man’s importance.”

There was another pause while they both appreciated the artistry. Then Maggie asked, “Do you notice what’s missing?”

The man looked startled and Maggie smiled.

The guy looked at the painting, even stepping back to take in more of the details. “No,” he finally replied. “What’s not there?”

She gave him a half smile. “There is only one woman in this picture.”

He looked back at the painting, his eyes scanning the details. Then he looked back at her. “Should there be more? These types of paintings were commissioned by the town to honor the guards that protected the city.”

Maggie's smile was sad this time. "You're right." And she moved on.

Ramit stared at the woman, then back at the painting. Why would women be in the painting? They didn't guard the city, they tended the households, the children, and the servants. Was he wrong?

He moved to catch up with her, easy enough to do with his longer legs. In her sneakers, she was about nine inches shorter than his six foot, three inch height.

Dismissing the sudden awareness of her height, he stepped a bit closer this time. "Why would the painter add more women to the picture?" he asked again.

She looked at the next painting, absently saying, "The lone woman in the painting showed that Rembrandt didn't consider women to be important to the city's security."

"Were they?" he asked, baffled.

Her gaze shifted toward him, and she shrugged, a somber motion that carried an unexpected weight, cutting through the air like a muted cry. "Seems like you don't hold much regard for the importance of women either," she remarked, the words carrying an undercurrent of disappointment and hurt, even in their seemingly casual delivery.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

Ramit's eyes dared to glance over her figure, then pulled his gaze back up, relieved that the woman hadn't noticed his perusal. "Women are vitally important."

She looked at him, tilting her head back and he couldn't help but notice the elegant line of her neck. "I agree. Why should the painter add women into a scene that is meant to showcase the men who were meant to protect the city?"

She smiled gently at him, and Ramit immediately knew that he was missing something significant.

"Care to enlighten me," he asked, amused now. And charmed! She really was adorable, but...sexy. No, he'd use the word sensual to describe this woman. Plus, he loved her freckles. Especially that one right on the edge of her lip.

"Now that women are entering more research fields, such as archaeology," she began, "women are reinterpreting clues from our past. It's becoming apparent that women were more than just the gatherers and attendants to the children that we've been told to believe. Viewing the same clues through a different lens, historians are discovering that women were just as likely to go out on the hunts and into battle." She gestured towards the painting. "The idea that women didn't help protect the towns, that they weren't part of a war is merely one man's interpretation of history. Even if men fought right alongside a woman, he would never admit that women were part of that effort." She shrugged. "Women were dismissed as being the protectees. In men's minds, women and children were the reason men went into battle. Men enjoy preserving the perception that they were bravely fighting to protect their wives and children."

The stranger's eyes narrowed as he absorbed her words. "Weren't there significantly more men in battle?"

"We don't know," she replied and moved to the next picture. "Take this image, for instance. What do you see?"

Maggie watched as the man looked at the image. She felt a burst of...something unexpected...when she realized that he was honestly trying to look at the image from her perspective.

"I see a man teaching a group of men. And a woman standing behind him holding a child."

"Exactly." She lifted her eyebrows and gave him a hopeful look. "And that's significant because...?"

Ramit contemplated the image again, ignoring the use of color as symbolism as well as the intricate folds on each man's clothing. Instead, he examined the painting in an effort to try to interpret the story being told by the images, trying to understand what the lovely woman was trying to teach him. But...? He didn't understand. What should he see? What hidden message was he missing?

Ramit pointed to the middle of the painting. "There!" he replied with excitement. "There's a woman in front of the man."

The pretty woman smiled, nodding her head, however, Ramit suspected that he was still missing the point. "And what is she looking at?"

He peered the image. "Something off in the distance."

She grinned. "And what are the men looking at?"

Her question warned him that he was still missing something significant. Ramit sighed in defeat, shaking his head, and looked down at her, enjoying the hope and excitement sparkling in those lovely brown eyes. “At the teacher.”

She laughed and the sound was sweet, pulling his focus away from the painting. “You’re saying that this is another example of sexism in the art world?”

“I am,” she replied, then waited.

Ramit sifted through her previous explanation as he examined the images once again. “Because it’s another example of how Rembrandt portrayed women as secondary and lesser.”

She nodded, gesturing to the woman looking away. “He portrayed women as not interested in education.” She sighed and turned to look at the painting...and he looked at her. “Honestly, I can appreciate the brilliance of the painting. I love the use of light and color. Plus, the detail that Rembrandt put into his paintings is...astounding.”

“But you don’t like the way he portrayed women.” It was a statement, not a question.

She nodded. “Every man who views these paintings is treated to more propaganda that women are ‘less than’. That we can be dismissed as fluttery, pretty things.” She shrugged. “Believe it or not, that is sometimes very useful.”

“In what way?”

She moved on and Ramit followed, intrigued. He tried to fight against his male bias, but he was fully aware that he thought of women as nothing more than sexual partners most of the time.

She leaned forward, a twinkle in her eyes. “Look at the dog in the crowd. Even the canine is more fully formed and interested in the lessons than Rembrandt’s women.”

Startled, Ramit turned back to the painting and...realized that she was correct! The dog was perched at the feet of the teacher, appearing to listen intently to the lesson. He tore his eyes away from the art to look down at her. “You’re right. And I never noticed that aspect of his paintings before.” He smiled at her. “I’m Ramit,” he told her, extending his hand.

“Maggie,” she replied, her smile brightening to the point that he was stunned for a full moment. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ramit.”

He shifted, facing her fully now. “Would you mind continuing with your lessons? I’ve never looked at art through a woman’s eyes before. I very much appreciate your perspective.” And her company, he thought.

She tilted her head and he was once again aware of the appealing line of her neck. He wasn’t sure why her neck so fascinated him. Usually, he noticed a woman’s breasts before anything else. And yet, with Maggie...and the name suited her...he hadn’t even glanced at her breasts.

Of course, that thought forced his gaze downwards. But he pulled them right back to her pretty, brown eyes after noting that she did, in fact, have very nice breasts. A little more than a handful, he mentally calculated. And he had very large hands!

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

She stepped away from him and he wanted to call out for her to stop so that he could savor this moment. In his position, Ramit didn't have many opportunities to simply relax and chat with an intelligent woman.

"What about this one?" she prompted, gesturing to a dual portrait of an elderly man and a woman. The man wore the white ruff around his neck, which Ramit knew was as an indication of wealth. Very few people during that time period had clean, white linen and, even if they did, they didn't have the time to starch the linen in that style. It took a dedicated laundress to make those precise folds, not to mention the cost needed to edge the collar with expensive lace was beyond the means of most people during that time period.

"This one seems easy," he replied, smiling smugly. "It's just a portrait of two people, right?" He glanced at her, then back at the painting. "The couple is obviously wealthy, but there's no sexism here, is there?"

She laughed. "Of course there is," she replied and stepped closer to him. He couldn't help noticing her perfume, citrus and something sweeter. However, it was difficult to focus on the painting when she was this close. Ramit wanted to wrap his arm around her, pull her to his side and feel her soft curves press against him.

Stranger, he reminded himself. The woman was a stranger. He'd just learned her name. This was not the time to pull her into his arms.

"One of the aspects of Rembrandt's paintings that I love is his ability to use color to add light and shadows to every image. The color in these paintings is amazing, but look at the shadow on the man's face."

“Half of it is darkened. In shadow.” He didn’t understand why that was a problem. How could a shadow convey sexism?

She grinned and Ramit felt like he’d just won a special prize, even though he still didn’t understand. Yet. “And the woman?” she prompted him.

He examined the woman in the painting, then shook his head. “No shading.” He glanced down at her. “Why is that bad?”

She smiled ruefully up at him. “It’s not bad or good. It’s just one man’s perspective.” She nodded towards the images. “Half the male is shadowed in darkness. In Rembrandt’s mind, men are both bad and good.” She nodded towards the woman. “The woman’s face is mostly in light. There are very few shadows. In the painter’s mind, women are innocent, pure.”

He looked down at her again, startled that this would be a problem. “Aren’t they?”

There was a slow, devious expression lighting Maggie’s eyes that transformed her from lovely, to fascinating. “Of course we are. Women are incapable of deceit. We are innocent beings that need the good and bad in a male to protect us and guide us through life.” Her tone changed, becoming breathy and softer and her hand moved to cup her cheek. Ramit admitted to a bit of fascination as she fluttered her eyelashes, but recognized it for sarcasm.

He grunted, amused. “You’re mocking the male half of the world.”

Her eyes widened and he looked back at the woman in the painting. Her eyes were wide and clear while the man’s eyes were heavy lidded. As if he were hiding something while the woman, presumably his wife, was open and easily read. The woman was uncomplicated. The man had secrets.

He turned away from the painting, looking down at Maggie, enjoying her scoffing gaze. “You’re not nearly as innocent and uncomplicated as you appear, are you?” he asked, his voice low and husky.

She laughed and he felt...powerful!

“No, I’m definitely not as sweet and innocent as most men think I am.”

“Tell me more, Maggie,” he ordered, putting a hand to her back and leading her into the next room.

Maggie glanced up at the man, not sure what he meant but moved with him into the next gallery. Surely, he wasn’t asking about...her. He merely wanted to learn more about the paintings. Paintings, she told herself firmly. “Well, the Van Gough exhibit is pretty...”

They went through several more rooms in the art museum, viewing each of the paintings together and discussing what they liked or disliked about the painter’s style or color choices. She laughed at some of his observations and nodded, impressed with a couple of his insights.

It was one of the most delightful afternoons she’d ever spent in an art gallery and Maggie didn’t want it to end. She started to say something, but stopped as he glanced at his watch, then at her again.

“Will you have lunch with me?” he asked. “I’d like to know more about you. I enjoy hearing your perspective on art, but I’m also interested in you, as a person.”

The glow of happiness those words created inside of her felt like a flow of warm, chocolate lava. Yet, despite the tempting offer, Maggie's past loomed over her like a haunting shadow. As a result of the tumultuous trials of her childhood, she had

acquired a keen awareness that refused to be dulled by the smooth, honeyed words of a man. She bore the scars of lessons learned the hard way, etched into her skin and soul through painful experiences of what unfolded when she allowed her guard to relax. The weight of caution, born from the crucible of past betrayals, added a moment of tension when she hesitated.

He clearly recognized her sudden wariness because he gestured toward the main hallway. “We could get lunch downstairs in the museum café. They have sandwiches and pizza.”

Maggie relaxed. The museum café was a safe place, she told herself. Safe and public. “I would be delighted to have lunch with you downstairs.”

She looked at his face, wondering if she was making a mistake. Was this some sort of trick? Was he going to scam her somehow?

She turned away so Maggie didn’t see the confusion, quickly followed by understanding in his dark, enigmatic eyes. She led the way down the stairs to the cafeteria. It was louder here, so it was hard to talk. Instead, Maggie smiled up at him, trying to tell him...what?

Efficiently, Maggie handed him a tray and, again, turned away before she noticed the confusion in his eyes. “The sandwiches are over there,” she said, pointing to the right. “I’ll meet you at the drinks station, okay?”

Maggie moved to the sandwich area and stood in line, waiting to put in her order. The teenagers working behind the counter were efficient and friendly, so the line moved quickly. She noticed that Ramit was still lingering in the doorway. It seemed that he was waiting, observing the process for the food lines. For a long moment, she just thought he was trying to decide what he wanted to eat, but after he walked over to the pizza counter, she noticed that he was hesitant about selecting slices of pizza. And he

only requested one slice.

For such a large man, she doubted that one slice would be enough. Which meant that he probably didn't have the money for two slices. That tore at her heart and she wanted to rush over to the pizza area and grab four more slices for him. But not wanting to embarrass him, she grabbed two bags of potato chips and two cookies, then waited until he joined her.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

“That looks delicious,” she told him, then led the way towards the cashier. They set their trays down on the sliding countertop, and by the time the cashier rang up her sandwich and sides, Maggie had her credit card out. “His pizza as well,” she told the cashier.

He took a breath to protest, but Maggie just smiled up at him over her shoulder. “Women’s equality, remember?” Her only response was a grimace but Maggie just laughed.

The café was busy, but she noticed that most of the diners were finished. Some were lingering at their table, chatting, while others were cleaning up and taking their empty trays to the trash bins. So it was relatively easy to find a table in the corner. Maggie noticed that Ramit looked around as if concerned about something, but she didn’t know what. The café wasn’t obnoxiously busy. It was a weekday, after all. If they’d come here on Saturday or Sunday, the place would have been packed.

“Is this okay?” she asked, glancing at him over her shoulder as she gestured to the empty table.

“Of course,” he replied, then waited until she sat down before choosing his own chair. “This is...a different experience for me.”

Maggie handed him a cookie and a bag of chips. “I didn’t think you saw them when you were deciding on what to eat so I grabbed some for you.”

He stared at the offering as if he’d never seen a bag of chips before.

Maggie wondered if he had. It seemed impossible that someone hadn't ever enjoyed potato chips in his lifetime, but she wasn't going to embarrass him by asking.

"The pizza is good. Wise choice," she told him, gesturing to his slice of pizza as she unwrapped her sandwich.

"Will you tell me more about yourself?" he asked as he fumbled with the slice of pizza.

Maggie laughed softly. "There's not much to know," she told him as she adjusted the bread on her sandwich, tearing off chunks because it was so thick. "I'm an only child. I work as a waitress at a place outside the city. I live alone. No pets or kids." She lifted her sandwich. "What about you?"

He might not have money for lunch, but the guy was an expert at eating pizza. He folded the wobbly slice in half, like a real Italian, and took a big bite.

When he put the pizza slice down, he said, "My life isn't particularly interesting. I work a lot. My downtime is spent appeasing obnoxious people that I don't particularly respect. I have a few hobbies, but not enough time to enjoy them."

"What are your hobbies?" she prompted, assuming that he worked several jobs. No judgment. Lots of people worked extra jobs to pay the rent.

"Nothing special," he replied. "How did you learn so much about art? From school?"

She shook her head. "I'm taking college classes at the community college, but I'm a long way from getting my business degree," she admitted. "I barely graduated high school." She twisted her mouth into a grim line. "My parents weren't overly enthusiastic about education when I was in school. So helping me get to class wasn't a high priority."

Hiding from my father's fists was a much higher priority, she thought to herself.

"How many classes are you taking?" he asked.

She told him about her classes and they discussed business for the next hour. Maggie was fascinated by the man's extensive knowledge about...everything! She had to reevaluate his financial status. There was no way a man with that much knowledge about business was struggling.

But what was his story? She chuckled at something he said about the quirks of the business world, then he told her a story about a guy who had failed miserably at his effort to open a diner.

"That's not true!" she gasped, covering her mouth as she laughed.

"Completely true," he promised, lifting both of his hands as if giving an oath.

They talked until the café closed down for the afternoon. It seemed like one moment, they were surrounded by art lovers grabbing a meal and the next, most of the tables were empty except for a few men sitting a few tables away.

She glanced at the time on her cell phone and gasped. "I didn't realize how late it was," she told him with a sigh. "I'd better head home. It's going to be a mess with the commuter traffic." But she lingered, not wanting to leave Ramit. He was handsome, intriguing, and...the whole package! They stood up and he took their trash to the bins and set the empty trays down on the stack waiting to be cleaned.

When he turned back to her, Maggie was trying to figure out how to prolong their encounter. But Ramit beat her to the punch, so to speak. "Will you have dinner with me tonight?" he asked.

Maggie's heart soared with happiness. "Yes!" she gasped, then covered her mouth. "Sorry. Was that too enthusiastic?"

He chuckled and put a hand to her back again as they walked out. "I'm eager for the opportunity to see more of you as well." He paused. "What is your favorite restaurant?"

Maggie thought about that for a moment, then grinned. "I know the perfect place," she told him. She pulled out her phone. "What's your number? I'll text you the address and we can meet there."

He hesitated and Maggie's heart ached. He didn't have a phone. She waved her hand in the air. "Don't worry about it. I can write it down for you." Maggie reached for a napkin in one of the holders set on top of each table.

Before she could dig a pen out of her purse, Ramit stopped her by saying, "Why don't you give me your home address and I will pick you up?"

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

Every bit of happiness that had been bubbling inside of her for the past several hours in his company vanished abruptly, leaving her cold. No, not cold. Terrified.

She tried to hide the sudden quaver in her voice, but failed. “No. I don’t...I can’t...I just...!” She shook her head and started to back away.

“Maggie?” he prompted, his voice gentle and soothing. “Just write down the address to the restaurant, then.” He offered her one of the café’s paper napkins since the one she’d grabbed a moment ago had fluttered to the floor.

She breathed a sigh of relief, but she couldn’t hide the tremble in her fingers as she took the offered pen. Writing down the address, she handed both the napkin and the pen back to him. “What time works with your schedule?” she asked, still stiff and trying to push the nightmare from her past out of her mind.

He took the napkin, stuffing it into his pocket. “How about six o’clock?”

She sighed with relief. “Six o’clock is perfect!”

He smiled, tilting his head. “You seem relieved by the time. Why?”

She shrugged and gestured towards the doorway. “In the movies, it seems like the sophisticated time to eat dinner is eight o’clock.” She stepped through the door and held it until he came through. “However, on my days off, I’m usually in bed with a good book by eight o’clock.”

He smiled at her. “That sounds pretty nice.”

Someone bumped into her and she had to step out of the way as a group of school kids meandered through the hallway, obviously on a school field trip.

When they were relatively alone again, she looked up at him self-consciously. “Well, I’d better get going if we’re meeting up in a few hours.”

He nodded. “I look forward to tonight, Maggie,” he told her, then lifted her hand, kissing her fingertips. “Until tonight.”

Then he turned and walked away. Maggie watched him, fascinated with the man in ways she couldn’t define. She felt almost compelled to watch him until he turned the corner. Only then did she turn and walk...skip...towards the parking garage.

Chapter 2

Maggie stood at the edge of the crowd that was milling through the park. There was a line of food trucks parked along the curb, so their dinner options were vast and delicious.

But would he be here? She glanced at the time on her phone again. It was two minutes until six o’clock. “Stop panicking, Maggs,” she whispered to herself. However, her luck with men had been pretty miserable. Even her father was a ham-fisted jerk.

So, when she saw a tall, dark-haired man striding down the sidewalk, Maggie felt as if her heart might just float away. He was here! Wow! The man had actually shown up!

“You thought I wouldn’t come,” Ramit observed in a deep, husky voice as soon as he was within earshot.

“I had my doubts,” she admitted, hoping that the heat in her cheeks didn’t show. “In my experience, men aren’t necessarily reliable.”

“In what way?” he asked, taking her hand and tucking it onto his elbow as he started walking.

She snorted. “In every way.” She indicated her favorite food truck. “I know the chef that works that food truck. He has the most amazing tacos. The shrimp tacos are marinated in his own special chili lime sauce, which is incredibly delicious.”

Ramit looked in that direction, then nodded approvingly. “Shrimp tacos it is. And while we eat, you can explain how the men in your past have let you down.”

She smiled, but inside, her heart pounded dangerously at the concern in his eyes. Maggie silently reminded herself to calm down. Men were liars and cheaters and, often, worse. If she hadn’t experienced so many men lying and cheating on her, not to mention smacking her around whenever they had a bad day, then her job gave her ample evidence of men’s true intentions.

They ordered their shrimp tacos and she noticed Ramit eyeing the paper “bowl” suspiciously.

“I brought a blanket,” she explained, smothering her laughter as she hefted her backpack higher on her shoulder. “Why don’t we head out to the park to eat?”

Ramit dubious expression indicated that he didn’t think that the idea was good, but he nodded. “A picnic it is,” he finally replied, then grabbed the bag filled with chips and guacamole while she carried their drinks.

Once she found her favorite spot, she set the food down on the ground and spread out the blanket. “How’s this?” she asked, looking up at him hopefully.

“Perfect,” he replied, then waited until she sat down before taking a seat next to her.

“Okay, I know that your doubtful about the food, so be prepared to apologize for your misgivings,” she warned, popping a corn chip into her mouth.

He chuckled and the sound warmed her. He wore jeans and a soft-looking sweater tonight. If she hadn’t noticed his hesitation about the price of food at the museum earlier today, she might suspect that his sweater was cashmere. But since she knew that he wasn’t wealthy, the sweater was probably made from a cheaper acrylic yarn that only looked like more expensive cashmere.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

“So, will you tell me about yourself?” she asked, then took a bite of the shrimp taco. “Oh, this is so good!”

Ramit watched, fascinated with Maggie. She hadn’t let him pay for their meal. Again! He didn’t understand her insistence on paying for everything, but he found it charming. Was this another trick? A new way to get him to lower his guard so that he would offer her everything?

Because he wanted to. She was so lively and beautiful. But there was a caution in her eyes. Another mystery, he thought. His guards had done a quick background check on her. He’d only listened to the assurance that Maggie was safe, with no criminal history. The rest, he wanted to learn on his own by talking to her.

“I think you should tell me more about yourself first,” he replied, then tentatively bit into his food. He didn’t believe that good food could come from a truck, but he didn’t want to hurt her feelings by not eating the dinner she’d so sweetly provided for them.

But as soon as he bit into the taco, he pulled back, staring down at the food. “Wow!” he muttered, chewing and trying to understand the wash of delicious flavors. “This is amazing.”

She laughed and he looked at her, charmed by the melodic sound.

“You’ve never eaten anything from a food truck, have you?”

“Never,” he replied staring down at the curious food as if he needed to make sense of it. But then he shrugged and brought the taco to his mouth for another bite. “This is

shockingly good.” He even glanced over his shoulder at the line of food trucks speculatively. “Are all the meals this interesting?”

Maggie nodded. “Most food trucks are really good. Some aren’t so interesting. A lot serve decadent foods that aren’t unique, just run of the mill fried foods or inventive desserts, but I haven’t run into a bad food truck yet.” She took another bite, then lifted her hand. Quickly, she swallowed, then said, “I take that back. I avoid the trucks that sell steak and cheese sandwiches. In my experience, the meat is always ridiculously overcooked, the runny cheese is skimpy, and the thick slab of bread usually overwhelms everything else.” She shrugged and examined her taco to figure out the best bite. “Just my opinion though.”

Ramit nodded as he took another bite. “Noted,” he finally replied. “Avoid the steak and cheese trucks. What else?”

She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. “The desserts are usually to die for. There’s a truck that sells a warmed brownie that’s covered with ice cream, chocolate syrup, whipped cream, then chocolate sprinkles.”

Ramit stared at her for a moment, his taco frozen in place. Then his head swiveled towards the line of trucks. “Which one provides this dessert?” he demanded, his tone grimly determined.

She laughed and pointed towards the end of the line of boxy trucks. “It’s over there. I’ll get one for us when we finish with the tacos.”

Ramit relaxed at that news, but there was no chance he was going to allow her to purchase the dessert. She’d already bought him two meals. That was the limit of his ability to step back and let someone else pay. Especially a woman.

Yes, he was aware of his sexist tendencies. He didn’t care. He treated women with

respect, and that included paying for their meals.

They finished off their tacos and it took a great deal of self-discipline to not jump up and get another order. The shrimp had been spicy, but the sauce covering the cabbage and salsa had somehow been creamy. And overall, the lime flavors came through, adding a bit of zip to the whole experience.

“You don’t like guacamole?” she asked, nudging the container of the green stuff closer.

“I’d prefer to get that dessert,” he told her. “Stay here.”

Then he was up and walking towards the truck she’d indicated earlier.

“Your Highness,” his guard called to him as he headed for the food truck. “Asti is calling for you.” Asti was the liaison for the problem he was trying to eliminate.

Ramit scowled, but didn’t slow his pace. He wanted to get back to Maggie as soon as possible, but he was never completely free of his responsibilities. It annoyed him sometimes, such as now, but knew it was a pointless reaction. It wouldn’t make the problems go away and leave him time to get to know Maggie better. Impatiently, he frowned at the proffered cell phone, not wanting to touch it. Accepting this call could mean the end to his time with Maggie. Still, he couldn’t avoid the problem forever. “Does Asti have new information?”

“I believe he does, Your Highness.”

The guard handed him the phone. With a sigh of resignation, Ramit took it, trying to tamp down on his frustration. “What?” he snapped. “Have you discovered anything new?”

“Your Highness, the men have asked for a meeting. They called five minutes ago.”

Ramit looked around, but didn't see the other diners strolling along the sidewalk or the park area. “Where? And when?”

“They agreed to meet you at TBC at eight-thirty on Friday night. They will explain their demands at that meeting.” TBC was known to the membership as “The Billionaires Club”, but Ramit knew the owners, Levi Harris, Sean Byrne, and Matteo del Campo. They were good men, but they were all illegitimate. Ramit suspected that the true name of the club was “The Bastards Club”, a sort of snub to the previous owner's hypocrisy. Levi Harris had inherited the place from his father. It had been a final slap in the face from the wealthy man who had left Levi to the untrustworthy whims of poverty while ensuring that his two legitimate sons received every possible advantage.

The irony there was that Levi was now wealthier than his father had ever been, while the legitimate sons were barely able to keep their remaining sporting goods stores open.

News of another day's delay caused him to clench his jaw. “They got me to Philadelphia just so that I could meet them, now they want to wait two more days?” he growled.

“That's all the information I have, Your Highness.” Asti hesitated. “If you could tell me why this meeting is so important, Your Highness, I might be of more help.”

Ramit ran a hand through his hair, furious that he was this situation. If his sister hadn't...! But she had. And now, he had to clean up the mess!

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

“Your Highness?” Asti prompted again.

Ramit growled. “This is a personal matter. I will handle this, but I appreciate your offer of assistance.”

The man said something more, but Ramit was too angry at being manipulated to listen. He ended the call and returned the phone to his bodyguard. “Tomorrow night at eight thirty at the TBC club.”

“Your friends own that place, correct?”

Ramit nodded grimly. “Yes, and I’ll have to apologize to them for putting their establishment into the middle of this mess!” He looked around, spotting his other guards. Two of them had gone up to the dessert truck while he’d been on the phone.

Apparently, a large number of other people meandering around the park had also decided to get dessert, so the line was relatively long. Thankfully, everyone’s order was efficiently taken by the food truck operators and prepared quickly, so it wasn’t long before his bodyguard took possession of several dessert bowls.

Even as he watched, Ramit’s mouth watered as he stared down at the enormous desserts.

“I didn’t know which she’d prefer, so I got an assortment,” the guard explained.

Ramit nodded his approval, then picked up a strawberry shortcake dessert and the brownie. “These will work. Thank you.” Then he turned and headed back to Maggie.

His irritation over his prime minister's incompetence disappeared as soon as he sat down on the blanket next to Maggie. There was something soothing about her presence.

Correction, her soothing manner helped ease his temper. But Ramit didn't consider her to be soothing. Not when he wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms, kiss her until neither of them knew what day it was.

As his body tightened at the images flashing through his mind, Ramit forced himself to think of something less salacious. If he didn't gain control, it would be embarrassingly obvious what he was thinking. And Ramit didn't want to scare Maggie away.

"Which would you prefer?" he asked, showing her the dessert options.

"Wow!" she laughed, pulling back slightly as she stared in awe at the strawberry and chocolate options. "How about if we share them both?"

Ramit had never shared food with someone before. It was such an outrageous idea, he hesitated for a long moment. When she looked embarrassed, he shook his head. "I think that's a perfect solution," he admitted. And he was stunned that it was the truth. He really did want to share this experience with her. Hell, he wanted to drizzle chocolate and strawberry syrup all over her body and enjoy her as his dessert.

Later, he vowed, not allowing his eyes to move over her curvy figure. And whipped cream! The decadent thought popped into his head before he could stop it.

"Oh, this is wonderful!" she whispered, licking the spoon after taking a bite of the brownie. "I love that they warm the brownies."

Ramit had to admit that he was more focused on her tongue as it licked the last bit of

whipped cream off her lip. But he forced his eyes to look away. It took a great deal of concentration to maneuver a bite of the chocolate brownie, ice cream, syrup, and whipped cream onto his spoon, but his reward was a mouthful of chocolate decadence.

Nodding approvingly as he relished the indulgence of the chocolate brownie dessert, he smiled. "That's fantastic!" he declared, gesturing toward the chocolate decadence. He repeated the gesture for the strawberry creation, finding it equally delightful.

"Oh wow!" she sighed, closing her eyes and tilting her head backwards.

Ramit's thoughts instantly went to her neck and how much he wanted to tease that soft, delicate skin, to discover all of the places on that neck that would cause her to sigh and moan.

Instead, he looked down and took another bite of chocolate. "We need some brandy with this," he thought out loud.

She laughed. "I'm not a brandy fan."

"You just haven't had really good brandy," he countered. "Next time we dine together, I will ensure that you can experience an excellent brandy."

He watched her stunned expression, then smiled at the soft blush that stole up her cheeks.

"That would be...nice," she finally muttered, then took another bite of the strawberry concoction.

For the next two hours, Ramit asked Maggie questions and she learned more about him. They walked along the riverfront, laughing at the kids playing nearby and

talking about anything and everything. It was one of the most delightful dates Maggie had ever had.

When it was over, Ramit walked her to her car. She looked up at him, having a terrible foreboding that she wasn't ever going to see him again.

"Thank you for meeting me tonight," she whispered, her eyes moving from his dark eyes to his lips. Was he going to kiss her? Maggie normally pulled back when a man wanted to kiss on a first date. It was silly, but she needed to know a man more than just a few hours before she kissed him.

But Ramit was...different. There had been that one moment of concern when he'd asked where she lived earlier today, but ever since then, he'd been nothing but gentle and respectful. And funny, insightful, and...just delightful to be with!

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

So when Ramit lowered his head and brushed his lips against hers, Maggie eagerly lifted her face to accept the kiss. It was so sweet and wonderful, she couldn't hold back the sigh.

Unfortunately, he pulled back, shoving his hands into his pockets. "This isn't over, Maggie," he told her with a husky, gruff voice. "I want to see you again."

"I'd like that very much as well."

"I have meetings tomorrow. But, will you have dinner with me again, soon?"

"Absolutely!" she replied with a laugh.

"Good. I'll call you." He opened the driver's side door and waited until she was settled in the car. After closing the door, Ramit stepped back, watching as she drove away, his body aching to call her back. But there was something...wounded about Maggie. He had to take things slowly with her. She was beautiful, but someone had hurt her. Badly. He could see the truth in the wariness of her gaze and the cautious way she allowed him to touch her.

Soon, he vowed. Soon, he would gain her trust.

Chapter 3

"How do people make this?" Maggie groaned. "Ouch!" The fat pasta strips were hot! "Duh. They'd just came out of boiling water!"

When Ramit had called earlier, asking if she'd have dinner with him, Maggie had been thrilled! Then she'd stupidly asked if he wanted to come to her place for dinner. When he'd agreed, Maggie had ambitiously thought to impress him with her culinary skills.

However, her plan wasn't working as well as she'd hoped.

Unconsciously, she stuck her tongue out as she carefully laid each piece of pasta out on the casserole dish. "Gotcha!" Smiling, she lifted the bowl of cheese, pausing to taste the ricotta, parmesan, and garlic mixture. "You're good!" There was a bit of a struggle to get the thick cheese layer to spread out over the now-sticky pasta, but eventually, she managed it. If the cheese looked a bit...lumpy and uneven, well, it was going to be covered by more layers.

The spaghetti sauce was easy and she used the sauce to hide the cheese lumps, then repeated the process again.

Once all of the layers were completed and the mozzarella cheese sprinkled on top, Maggie beamed with triumph. "Done!" She spun around and... "No!"

She hadn't pre-heated the oven. Glancing at the lasagna, then at the oven, she shrugged. "It's cooked already. What's the harm?" So she stuck the casserole into the cold oven, then turned on the heat. "Now, we make the bread."

Maggie wasn't ambitious enough to make fresh bread. Instead, she'd bought a loaf of crusty bread at the grocery store along with extra garlic and butter. "This is the easy part." She melted the butter, crushed the garlic, then mixed the two together. Then, she added some parmesan cheese to the mixture and poured it over the bread, smoothing it out with a knife. "You're fabulous." Maggie laughed at how silly she felt at the moment, but she like it. She realized that she hadn't been this excited for a date in years. Maybe ever!

Looking around, she noted her kitchen was a disaster. “Now, we clean.” It took her over an hour to wash the dishes. Lasagna wasn’t a simple meal to prepare. There were pots from cooking the pasta and browning the meat, then two mixing bowls for the cheese and red sauces. Plus, she’d messed up on several pieces of the pasta and it took her a while to scrape them off the countertop.

Maggie’s kitchen didn’t boast the luxurious granite countertops that had become a common upgrade for most people. No, she had deliberately opted for simplicity when outfitting her kitchen in this modest house. Her choice reflected a strategic decision to allocate more of her tip money towards investments. Her co-workers and best friends, Emily and Ann shared the same mindset, and now the trio had cultivated a substantial nest egg which they’d all invested. Their money was now poised to grow steadily for emergencies and retirement.

And kids? Maggie hadn’t ever thought she’d want to have children. But at the prospect of a gorgeous, sweet, kind man like Ramit in her life, a family wasn’t a horrible prospect. In fact, the idea held a great deal of appeal. It would be nice to come home to a husband and a baby. Maybe two?

And a dog!

Goodness, she’d always wanted a dog. A big, fluffy dog that loved to play catch with a tennis ball.

“You’re losing it, woman,” she told herself as she wiped down the countertops and gave the now-immaculate kitchen one last glance. Everything looked clean and orderly. “Now, time to shower.”

She glanced at the clock on the microwave and nodded. “Plenty of time to shower, then relax.”

Maggie took an extra-long shower, reveling in the freedom she had. Normally, she'd be running around doing errands on her days off. But she'd left her house earlier than normal to get groceries for tonight and had picked up other ingredients for the week's meals. Plus, there would be leftover lasagna that she could heat up over the week.

She'd just pulled on her favorite pair of jeans when she smelled something. Sniffing the air, she looked around. "What's that horrible smell?"

That's when it hit her. "The lasagna!" she gasped, then rushed out of her bedroom. Sure enough, the kitchen was filled with smoke. As soon as she realized what was happening, the smoke alarm started blaring. Quickly, Maggie whipped open the back door as well as the window over the sink to let the smoke out. Then she rushed to the stove and turned off the heat. When she opened the oven door, more smoke billowed from inside. Maggie was nearly in tears when she reached in with potholders to retrieve a black mess that used to be lasagna.

"No!" she whispered, taking it outside to her back stoop. She set the smoking "dinner" on the cement stairs and hurried back, waving one of the potholders in front of her face to help disburse the smoke.

The smoke detector was still going off, so Maggie walked to stand directly underneath the blasted thing. Jumping up and down, she finally got the smoke alarm dislodged. Yanking out the batteries, the blaring continued for another moment, then stopped.

Blessed silence.

Maggie breathed a sigh of relief, then looked around. "Now what am I going to do?"

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

With a groan, she realized that she had only one option.

Rushing back into her bedroom, she finished dressing, then hurried out, grabbed her keys and purse, then raced to the grocery store.

In the frozen food aisle, she considered the options. “This will have to do,” she muttered to herself, grabbing the most expensive one. It took her another fifteen minutes to get through the checkout line and drive back home. The lasagna was still frozen, so she put the lump into the oven, but didn’t turn it on.

Maggie tapped a tapered fingernail on the counter as she contemplated her next move. “Go get fixed up, then turn on the oven later.”

Thirty minutes later, Maggie felt a bit more in control. She’d blow-dried her hair, put on makeup and felt that she looked pretty good. Inside, her stomach was doing flip-flops, but she inhaled deeply, trying to calm herself down.

Chapter 4

“I don’t care if you haven’t done a thorough background check on Maggie,” Ramit told his guards. “I’m going to her house and I’m going to enjoy dinner with her.”

His head bodyguard nodded. “Yes, Your Highness. I had two guards watching her house all day and another two have been monitoring the neighborhood. Everything is secure.”

Ramit nodded and started to walk away. Then the man’s words hit him and he did a

double take. “You’ve been spying on Maggie all day?”

The guard nodded, completely unrepentant. “Yes, Sire. She went to the grocery store to purchase ingredients for lasagna.” He kept his features completely expressionless.

Ramit noticed the man’s blankness and narrowed his eyes. There was something the man wasn’t telling him. “What?”

The guard lifted his hands. “Nothing, Your Highness. I’m sure that you will enjoy your evening.”

“Of frozen lasagna,” another one mumbled with a quiet chuckle.

There were a few chuckles from the other guards, but none who were willing to reveal their amusement to their boss.

“What aren’t you telling me?” he demanded of his head guard.

The man tried to maintain his silence, but Ramit’s narrowed gaze warned him that now wasn’t the moment to ignore a direct question. With a heavy sigh, the guard relaxed his pose as he explained, “There was a bit of a...mishap...during the preparation of the homemade lasagna, Your Highness. But the issue was resolved with another trip to the store. This time to procure a frozen lasagna. I believe to replace the charred mess that is currently sitting on her back stoop.”

Ramit stared at his guards, shocked at this bit of news. He was warned that Maggie had tried to make a meal for him, but...? “She burned the meal?”

“The first time, Your Highness,” the man replied with a carefully blank expression.

“The first time,” Ramit parroted. He considered those words, a slow smile curling up

the corners of his mouth as he nodded his understanding. “So, she went to a great deal of trouble for tonight’s meal?”

The man opened his mouth, hesitated, then tilted his head slightly. “I believe she did, Your Highness.”

Ramit nodded, feeling that warmth heating up his chest area once again. “I don’t think a woman has ever cooked for me before,” he commented lightly, then turned to the butler assigned to the hotel’s penthouse suite. “I’ll need a bottle of red wine.”

The butler bowed and immediately disappeared. He appeared moments later with two bottles of red wine as well as a bouquet of flowers. “For the lady, Your Highness,” the man explained, then bowed low.

“Thank you. I should have thought about flowers too. Good idea.” He turned, nodding to his head guard. “Let’s go!”

Thirty minutes later, Ramit stepped out of the black SUV and looked at the cottage style house lit up from the inside. It looked cramped and tiny. And adorable! There was a pretty wreath on the front door and gardens that were slowly fading with the cooler nights. Maggie had obviously gone to a great deal of trouble to decorate the house. Nothing was expensive, but it all looked quaint.

Just like the woman herself.

Ramit tightened his grip on the bottle of wine, then looked down at the flowers. Were they too much? He didn’t care. Maggie deserved flowers. And she’d obviously gone through a great deal of trouble to make dinner for them tonight.

“Good luck, Your Highness,” his head guard whispered.

Ramit turned to glare at the man, who merely lifted his eyebrows in sarcastic silence.

Chapter 5

Maggie stared at the blackened mess sitting on her oven. “What happened this time?” she whispered to herself, fighting back tears of frustration. “I hadn’t even turned on the...!”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

She looked at the stove and, sure enough, the oven temperature was still set to where she'd left it. When she'd taken the burnt homemade lasagna to her back stoop, she'd forgotten to turn off the oven. So when she'd put the frozen lasagna into the oven to defrost, the temperature had still been hot.

Thinking back, she tried to remember if the heat had hit her in the face when she'd shoved the frozen lasagna into the oven. But for the life of her, she couldn't remember anything other than her nerves at seeing Ramit soon.

And now she had no dinner to serve him, nothing to impress him with, and her house smelled like burned food! Looking around, she realized that her house was neat and tidy, but the overwhelming description would most likely be "small and smoky". Would he actually notice the small details that she'd worked so hard on? Or would he only notice the smell?

Maggie didn't have a chance to contemplate her options because the doorbell rang. For a long moment, she stared at the closed door, knowing that Ramit was on the other side of it.

She must have stared too long at the door because the doorbell rang a second time. With a heavy sigh, she walked over to the door and pulled it open.

As soon as she saw him, tall and handsome, holding a bottle of wine and a bouquet of beautiful flowers, Maggie burst into tears.

For a long moment, Ramit stared at the crying woman and wondered what he'd done wrong. Stepping into the small house, he pushed the front door closed and dumped the wine and flowers onto the nearby sofa. Then he pulled her into his arms, holding her as he tried to figure out what had upset her.

He didn't speak for a long moment, not until her sniffles and sobs eased. When she sounded as if she were back in control, he pulled slightly away from her and looked into her tear stained features. "What happened?" he asked softly, ignoring the mascara now streaming down her cheeks. She still looked lovely and he could tell that she'd gone through a great deal of trouble to look nice for him.

He was charmed by her efforts, even though they were unnecessary. Ramit thought she'd looked beautiful the previous few times they'd met up.

"I just...I wanted to make you something special for dinner tonight," she told him, wiping at her eyes. She pulled out of his arms and grabbed a tissue from the bookcase nearby. She wiped away the tears and the mascara stains, then sighed as she crumpled the tissue in her fist. "I wanted to impress you with my cooking skills."

"What did you make for dinner?" he asked, trying to stop the smile as her tears erased the powder she'd used to cover up her freckles. She looked so adorable. Besides, he was impressed just by her effort. He didn't care what they ate. Hell, he doubted he would taste anything as he gazed down at the pretty, pink sundress she'd donned. The straps were wide on her shoulders, but the neckline was lower than what she'd worn for their previous dates. It wasn't revealing, but offered him a hint of the cleavage he would find underneath the pretty fabric. And the enticing shadow between her breasts was making his mouth water.

She sniffed as she looked down at the crumpled tissue. "I spent all morning making lasagna. It looked perfect until I put it in the oven."

He was confused. “What happened to the lasagna?”

She shrugged, tearing at the tissue now. “The first one is out on the back stairs.”

He remembered his guard mentioning something being on the back porch. Taking her hand, he led her through the small house. It was simple enough to find the kitchen since there were only four rooms in the house; a kitchen, living area, and two bedrooms.

The backdoor was closed, but there was a window covered by a pretty, flowered curtain. As he peered out through the window, he saw a black rectangle that was in no way recognizable as food. “Is that the lasagna?” he asked gently, still holding her hand.

She sighed, looking deflated, but at least she’d wiped her teary mascara away with the tissue. “That’s the first one.”

Startled, he looked around. He loved Italian food, although lasagna wasn’t his favorite. It was generally too heavy on the pasta without enough sauce for his preference. But he wasn’t going to tell her that. “Where’s the second one?” he asked, looking around.

Maggie’s shoulder drooped as she sighed. Then slowly, she pointed at the garbage can. He walked over to it and pressed his foot against the bottom lever. The top popped open and he looked down at...another blackened rectangle. This one was in a paper-like container, and underneath, he noticed the box.

Turning his head, he looked at her. “You threw this one away?”

Maggie’s whole body sighed. “I didn’t realize that the oven was still on. So I didn’t notice that it was cooking while I finished getting ready.” She pointed towards the

fridge, sudden hope on her features now. “There’s salad!”

He couldn’t help himself. He valiantly tried to hide his amusement, but it was hard when she looked so delightfully crestfallen. Pulling her into his arms, he kissed the top of her head. “I’m so sorry that the lasagna didn’t work out, but I would be more than happy to make a phone call and have dinner delivered.”

Maggie laughed and hiccupped at the same time. “You don’t have to do that.”

“It would be my honor.”

She shook her head, stopping his hand when he pulled his cell phone out, ready to dial a number.

“No! Goodness, don’t do that! It will be crazy expensive!”

Ramit lowered his phone to look at her, confused. “Maggie, I promise I can afford to have dinner delivered.”

She scoffed with a pretty snort. “Ramit, I’m sure that it’s every man’s claim that he’s drenched in money, but I don’t want you to waste your limited funds by having food delivered. The delivery fees are outrageous!” She sniffed, then walked over to the fridge. “I’ll make something else.” She glanced over her shoulder at him. “I promise I am a very good cook, all evidence to the contrary. I can just...!”

Ramit heard her words, stunned by what she was saying. Maggie thought he was poor! She thought he was so hard up on funds that he couldn’t afford to have a meal delivered. And yet, she still wanted to impress him! She still wanted to be with him even though she thought he was a pauper!

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

The next moment hadn't been planned. Ramit had thought to woo Maggie, to take her out to dinner several more times, to get to know who she was as a person and let her get to know him slowly. He hadn't yet figured out how to do that with his responsibilities, but he'd had a vague idea about working here in Philadelphia for a few weeks to get to know her better.

But at her words, he spun her around and kissed her. He poured all of his awe and amazement into that kiss, teasing her soft, amazing lips until she responded. When he felt her arms loop around his neck, Ramit pulled her closer to him, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her against his body.

The shock of feeling her like this, all soft and pliant, kissing him back with a passion equal to his own, was like a spark to an inferno. He groaned, pulling her closer, lifting her so that they matched more perfectly.

When her fingers trailed down over his shoulders to his chest, Ramit shivered slightly with the sensation. He wanted to tell her how much he liked it, but his voice was lost when she slipped a finger between the buttons on his dress shirt. He groaned and moved his hands lower, enjoying the perfect ass as Maggie wiggled closer to him.

Lifting her into his arms, he considered his options. They couldn't have sex tonight. It was too soon. So the bedroom was not an option. Instead, he carried her over to the sofa and sat down. In this position, she straddled him and his imagination nearly exploded with all the possibilities.

"Ramit!" she groaned, kissing him again while her hands caressed his shoulders and chest. With small, fumbling movements, she unbuttoned his shirt, pushing it out of

the way so that her soft, wet mouth could drive him wild. She was so hot, so sweet and amazing, he lost control. Stupidly, Ramit assumed that Maggie wouldn't want to have sex on her sofa, so he stopped thinking.

Chapter 7

Maggie reveled in the sensation of his warm skin under her fingertips and his voracious kisses. This was the kind of man she could lose herself in. When he cupped her breasts, Maggie's eyes nearly rolled into the back of her skull. Leaning forward, pressing herself more firmly into his heated hands, she sighed with the need for more of whatever he could give her.

She took his wrist and moved his hand to her nipple, pressing his fingers to the puckered tip. "Yes!" she sighed when he teased that nipple. His other hand repeated the movement without prompting, making Maggie whimper as she ground her hips against his hardness.

"I love the way you feel, Maggie," he groaned as he nipped at her throat. He wrapped his hand around her hair, pulling her head back so he could better enjoy the silken skin there.

"More," she whispered, leaning into him. With one hand on her breast and his other hand in her hair, he was intoxicated by the sounds she made as he explored and found more places that made her moan with pleasure.

He muttered a curse under his breath, mindless with desire now. She pushed his shirt out of the way and he shifted, shrugging the shirt off. Bare chested now, he groaned when she shifted so that her mouth could explore his chest. He closed his eyes, savoring the experience. But when she moved to the floor, he looked down at her as she fumbled with the zipper to his slacks.

“Maggie!” he hissed, knowing that he should stop her. But before he could form the words, her soft, pretty hands were stroking his shaft. The sight of her sweet hands moving over him, exploring him, treating his body as if the sight fascinated her, evaporated any words that might have slowed this down.

But when she started to lean towards him with her mouth, Ramit knew that he was too turned on to take it. He would climax in her mouth and he didn’t want to do that. He wanted to be buried deep inside of her. So instead of allowing her to touch him that way, he lifted her up onto his lap again. With a swift twist of his fingers, he tore her panties away, then shifted her body, his fingers exploring her, teasing her, sliding his fingers into that soft, wet heat of her core. He watched as her eyes drifted closed, her hips thrusting against his fingers. He doubted she was even aware of her body’s movements, but he was. Her breasts were right in front of him and the soft mounds were tempting him to taste them again. Pulling her closer, he sucked on her nipple as his fingers continued to stroke her, bringing her closer and closer to that climax.

But right before she found her release, he stopped and replaced his fingers with his shaft, sliding her down, slowly, still sucking on her nipple as he stroked that sensitive nub. He heard her gasp, then looked up at her, taking her moans into his mouth this time. His free hand took over her nipple where his mouth had left off as she lowered herself onto him. When she started moving, he continued stroking her, bringing her closer and closer, their tongues echoing the mating ritual that their lower bodies were enjoying.

Too soon, he felt her body tighten around his. She was moving faster, shifting herself against him, taking him deeper into her body before lifting up again so that they could both enjoy the increasing excitement. She pulled her mouth away from his, gasping for breath now as she thrust against him, the friction driving them both wild until...!

“Yes!” she cried out, her arms tightening around his neck as she throbbed around him. He climaxed a moment later, his arm tightening around her hips as they rocked

and moaned, the blinding pleasure washing over them until it slowed to a sweet, breathy sigh.

“Wow!” Maggie whispered against his mouth.

Ramit chuckled, then used one hand behind her head to pull her closer for a sweet kiss that he hoped demonstrated his pleasure.

“Thank you!” she whispered, her body soft and relaxed against his.

He tightened his arms around her, not sure how to convey his happiness at the moment. So instead, he kissed her again.

Chapter 8

Maggie couldn't believe what she'd just done. She'd had sex with Ramit and it had been...incredible. Better than anything she'd ever thought possible! She hid her face against his neck, afraid that he would run from her home if he saw the happiness on her face.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, kissing his shoulder simply because she couldn't stop herself.

“Yes,” he replied. “Are you too sore?”

She giggled at his seductive tone. But then gasped when she felt his body stir. He was still intimately connected to her and she jumped, her eyes wide as she gasped, “Again?”

“Not if you are too sore, love,” he told her, his voice deep and husky again. He stroked down her sides, shifting her dress out of the way. It had been bunched around

her waist, but his deft hands found the zipper on the back, releasing the material. Then he lifted it up and away, laying it carefully beside them on the sofa.

“Pretty dress, but you’re more beautiful like this.”

She blushed, fighting the need to cover herself. “I’m a mess,” she said, remembering her crying fit earlier. “What time is it?”

He lifted his hand and she noticed the nice watch. It was simple and elegant, without all of the extras that the men at the club required. She stroked a finger over the face of the watch.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

“I heard a rumor that some of the men who come to the place I work spend over a hundred thousand dollars on their watches.” She laughed, shaking her head. “I heard one guy brag about how his watch would still work under five hundred feet of water.” She rolled her eyes, then shivered when she felt Ramit’s hands stroking her back before curling around to her stomach. “The man weighs over three hundred pounds.” She closed her eyes, sighing as her head fell backwards. “I can’t see him diving anywhere except into a hot tub.”

He laughed, then leaned forward to take her nipple into his mouth again. “Watches are a way for men to flaunt their wealth and status. But I’ve found, the bigger the watch, the less power a man actually has.”

“I agree,” she laughed, then hissed when his teeth scraped gently against her nipple. “Do that again,” she pleaded. He did and she shifted against him, his erection stroking her gently. At the moment, she enjoyed the sweet movement. But she knew that, very soon, it wasn’t going to be enough. “Should we move to the bedroom?”

In response, he picked her up, his shoulder muscles bunching as he shifted their positions so he was on top. “No time,” he claimed. Hovering over her, he started thrusting and Maggie groaned, lifting her hips to meet his thrusts. This time, their movements were slow and easy, the climb to their ultimate release more of a smooth journey instead of the frantic need of their first mating. And in the end, their mutual climax was just as intense, both shuddering to a release so complete, she nearly cried with the beauty of it. And afterwards, when he finally carried her into the bedroom, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and sighed with delight.

Later that night...much later...Ramit made a phone call and two delicious meals of

lasagna, garlic bread, and salad were delivered. They ate in the kitchen, still naked and laughing as they talked about their preferences and the foods that they hated or loved. And finally, he took her back into the bedroom and made love to her all over again.

Chapter 9

“What has you smiling like a loon?” Ann asked, sidling up to Maggie.

Ann Fuller was another waitress at The Billionaires Club, an exclusive, nearly secret, club for the wealthy men of the world. It was located on a large piece of land outside of Philadelphia, protected from the street by trees on one side and rolling hills on the other.

Ann, Maggie, and Emily, the club manager, had been working at the club for years. They were the only remaining staff left over from the previous owner, Jerry Harris, who had passed away. Levi, Sean, and Matteo used to spend more time at the club, but since each had found the love of his life, they’d shifted their responsibilities to others, especially Emily.

“She’s got a boyfriend!” Emily sing-songed, grinning at Maggie.

Maggie rolled her eyes while she quickly stocked the napkins at the bar. “I do not have a boyfriend,” she argued. But the blush staining her cheeks warned her friends that she was lying. Emily and Ann snorted with disbelief.

“Maggie, darlin’, I’ve known you for seven long years. We’ve been through a lot together,” Ann replied affectionately. “And I have never seen you glow like this. So, stop trying to convince us that you don’t have a new beau, because there’s zero chance we’re gonna believe you.”

Maggie smiled, enjoying Ann's sweet, southern drawl.

Maggie opened the jar of olives and dumped them into the canister so that they were ready to plunk into martinis. "I don't—"

"Stop," Emily interrupted, leaning her elbows against the polished bar, her eyes alight with eagerness. "Just spill!"

Maggie laughed and, because she was so happy after last night and this morning, she couldn't stop herself from gushing. "His name is Ramit and he's in his mid-thirties. He's very tall and distinguished looking." She sighed and looked around at the luxury of the gaming room of the club, shaking her head slightly. "He's not wealthy, thank goodness." She glanced at the poker tables. "After working at this place for so long, I know the cheating, manipulative, merciless, usually illegal tactics that rich people use to grow their wealth. Ramit is just a really nice, average guy that...makes me smile!"

"And how is he in bed?" Emily whispered.

Maggie rolled her eyes. "I don't kiss and tell," she said, then laughed when Ann and Emily screeched with excitement.

"No way!" Emily laughed when they'd finally calmed down. "Margaret Denault, did you finally have sex last night?"

Maggie's face was going to be in a permanent state of redness with all these questions. "As I said, I don't kiss and tell."

Ann snorted. "That means she had sex last night AND this morning!"

The three of them laughed as Levi walked in. "What's going on?"

The trio smothered their laughter and continued prepping the bar for the night. “Maggie finally found a man!”

Levi’s eyes narrowed, his big brother-protective instincts kicking into high gear. “What’s his name?”

Maggie shook her head, still smiling but determined to keep her private life private. “Not this time,” she told her boss. “This guy is truly nice.”

Levi stepped closer, leaning his arms on the bar next to Emily. “Maggie, just let Hendrix run a background check on him, please?”

Maggie shook her head, clutching the napkins to her chest. “Really, Levi? I know that you put a lot of faith in your head of security. But this guy,” she paused, trying to figure out how to explain. “He’s special. And I don’t know where it’s going yet, but I don’t want everyone in my business. Not this time.”

Levi watched her for a long moment, then sighed. “Fine. I’ll keep Hendrix out of your love life.” He pointed a finger at Maggie. “But if this guy lays one finger on you in anger, I want to know. Understand? Violence is never acceptable.”

Maggie beamed, then levered herself up over the bar to kiss his forehead. “Got it, boss.” Then she jumped back to the floor and spun around. “We need more napkins. I heard that it’s going to be a busy night tonight.”

Maggie moved to the storeroom right behind the bar. She was loading up one of the carts with supplies when Emily walked in and closed the door.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

“What’s up?” Maggie asked, nervous about the determined look in the manager’s beautiful face.

“I just wanted to congratulate you, Maggs. I know that you don’t date often, and when you have in the past several years, it’s been a miserable mess. But this guy...are you sure that he’s on the level? He’s not going to break your heart?”

Maggie smiled and leaned a hip against the cart. “Yeah. He’s sweet and kind and I think he’s pretty...special.”

“You’ve said that. But Maggs, you’ve been through a pile of miserable men. Including your father. I know that he smacked you around until your mother rescued you. Then your high school boyfriend liked to use you as a punching bag.” She moved closer, enfolding Maggie in a gentle hug. “I really hope that this man is different because you deserve some true happiness.”

“Thanks Em,” she whispered back, hugging her friend tightly. “I agree.”

Emily pulled back, then laughed at the tear trailing down her cheek. “Good grief! I don’t understand why I get so emotional!”

A grunt came from behind them. Both women turned as Hendrix Piralti, the head of the club’s security team, walked by. Maggie suspected that he and Emily were in love with each other, but...well, that was none of her business. When Emily was ready to confide, Maggie would be there for her friend.

Ignoring Hendrix’s indecipherable grunt, she turned back to Emily. “Because you’re

a good person,” Maggie replied.

Emily added a furious sniff towards the man who had disappeared down the hallway, then sighed heavily, turning back to Maggie with a stern look. “You are too!” She looked around, noting the other wait staff moving about the room, getting everything ready for a night of drinking, gambling, and secrets. “We’d better get moving and finish up the pre-opening tasks. But I want to meet your new guy as soon as you decide that things are getting serious.”

Maggie nodded, omitting the fact that she’d spent the night in Ramit’s arms and had the wildest, most uninhibited sex she had ever experienced! Because Maggie knew that, even though the sex was amazing, to a man, a sexual interlude, no matter how wonderful, did not necessarily indicate “serious”.

They moved through the tables set up in the gambling room, checking to ensure that everything was ready. Emily moved off to inspect the other rooms while Maggie surveyed the gaming room, which would be her station for the night. She’d be in charge of four waitresses, all of whom were moving efficiently about the room, doing last minute cleaning.

Maggie nodded to each of them, adjusted a tie on one, tucked in a stray curl on another, and nodded approvingly at the other two.

“Ready?” she whispered as the first group of arrogant, entitled billionaires stepped into the gaming room. Their raucous laughter warned the staff that they were going to want drinks immediately.

“Good evening, Mr. Stilton,” she greeted the leader of this group. “Can I get you a bourbon on the rocks?”

Joseph Stilton clapped his hands together as if he’d just been presented with a sweet

treat. “Maggie, Maggie, Maggie!” Joe called out. “I was hoping that you’d be working tonight!” He turned and laughed to his buddies and they all joined in, chortling as if Joe had just said something hilarious. Maggie winked at the man, playing along. She glanced at the others as she said, “I’ll bring your drinks while you settle in at your favorite table. Sound good?”

The men all nodded, eagerly heading to their favorite corner table where some would lose and others would win thousands of dollars over the course of the evening.

Chapter 10

Ramit glared at his head of security. “I hate this!” he growled to Nittan. The image of Maggie popped into his mind. He wanted to go back to her tonight. He wanted to hold her in his arms and lose himself in the glory of her body as he’d done last night. He smiled, thinking about the shock on her face last night. She’d been so beautiful as she’d learned to release herself to her desires. Every moment was etched in his mind. Last night had proven that she was a relative innocent. Oh, she hadn’t been a virgin, but she’d been uneducated in the ways of desire.

Until he’d shown her what her body could do, he reminded himself smugly.

He wanted to show her more. He still chuckled at the crestfallen expression in her eyes as she’d admitted her failure at cooking last night.

Not that he’d given a damn about the food. It had been a heady moment when he’d taken her into his arms.

“Your Highness?” his guard prompted.

Ramit turned, unaware of the smile lightening his features. At the confused expression on his guard’s face, Ramit remembered the reason they were all here in

Philadelphia.

“Right,” he grumbled. “We have six hours to figure out a plan.”

He and Nittan worked through the details, examined the building’s architectural plans and figured out all of the ins and outs of the building.

“What if he comes in through this doorway?” Ramit asked, pointing to a door over to the left of the layout.

“I can have two guards stationed here,” the guy replied, pointing to an alleyway that flanked the doorway. “We can surveille him from there and capture images of anyone helping him.”

Ramit nodded, but he asked more questions. They went over the plan again and again, refining the details until they were both confident that the night would end with the culprit caught and the threat eliminated.

Chapter 11

The night was just as busy as anticipated. Maggie worked the tables efficiently, moving swiftly from the club members to the bar, then back again. Thankfully, the poker room only served drinks, so she didn’t have to deal with food orders. Also, most of the guests in the room were regulars tonight, which meant that she knew their preferred drinks and knew when to get them another, not to mention, when to leave them alone.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

“Everything okay?” Hendrix asked, walking to the bar where she and Nick, the bartender, were working. Nick was pouring drinks and she was restocking napkins and entering the orders into the computer system.

“So far, so good,” she replied, shifting around the drinks Nick had finished to balance her tray.

“Good. We have another sheik coming in tonight. We’re not sure when he’s scheduled to arrive.”

Maggie shrugged. “We have several VIPs already here, but I know that royalty need a more effusive greeting.” He made a face that told both of them what he thought of royals. Maggie laughed at Hendrix’s expression. “I’ll make sure to bow and scrape and feign awe when he arrives.”

Hendrix chuckled and turned away. “You do that,” he said and walked through to the next room.

“Thanks Nick,” Maggie said when he placed the last drink on her tray. She hefted the full tray, pretending that it didn’t weigh a ton and pasted a smile on her face as she moved to the first poker table to deliver three drinks, then to the next, and the next. When she’d delivered all ten drinks to the appropriate guests, Maggie did a sweep of the room. No empty glasses, no one trying to get her attention.

She moved to the corner, pressing her shoulders against the wall and just...observed. Everything was going smoothly tonight. Maggie smiled, but it was a fake expression, one designed to lull the club members into thinking that she was impressed by their

social status or financial prowess.

About a half hour later, she noticed an odd commotion. It wasn't the bigwig. Not yet, anyway.

She glanced towards one of the side tables. Barney Mathis and Humphrey Todras were speaking in hushed tones. Mathis and Todras were property developers. However, from some of the conversations between the other club members that she'd overheard, she knew that the duo had been struggling recently. They'd bought a big parcel of land near the Annapolis, Maryland harbor, but they couldn't seem to tempt new investors to finance the planned condominium project. From some of the comments she'd overheard, Maggie knew that Mathis and Todras were hemorrhaging money to the point where they were starting to miss bank payments on the land purchase.

Maggie hadn't ever been impressed with the pair. They tended to brag about their exploits and, from what she'd learned while working with the "elite" financial titans, the louder the bragger, the less truth there was to their bragging. In other words, Todras and Mathis were idiots who'd burned through the inheritance they'd received from Mommy and Daddy. Now they were trying desperately to prop up their lifestyles. She'd seen that happen over and over again in this crowd. Men got snippy when they were about to lose their status as one of the rich and entitled of this world.

At the moment, Todras and Mathis looked...nervous? Interesting, Maggie thought as she surreptitiously moved closer. Still pretending to survey the room, she meandered closer. Mathis was pounding his finger on the green felt of the poker table to emphasize whatever he was whispering. Todras nodded silently for the most part, bobbing his head in agreement.

Todras' beer was nearly empty. An excellent excuse to get closer. She was approaching the table when a hush fell over the room. Maggie looked up just as a tall,

gorgeous man with deliciously broad shoulders and dark eyes stepped into the room.

And took Maggie's breath away.

For a moment, she simply stared at Ramit, struck all over again by the impressive power in his demeanor. The man was just...delicious in so many ways. And in that moment, she wondered how he'd gotten through the front doors. Hendrix was adamant that only club members or prearranged guests of members were allowed through the double doors.

She wondered if he was a delivery person. If so, she should hurry over and warn him to go through the back delivery doors. Standing in the poker room where the guests could see him would get him banished from the property.

But before she could take a step forward to offer a warning, Maggie's eyes moved over Ramit's body. Tuxedo? Not just an ordinary tuxedo. This suit was tailored specifically for Ramit. There was no way that an off-the-rack tuxedo could fit so perfectly.

As she slowly processed these details, including the gold cuff-links and the obvious phalanx of bodyguards that stood just behind him, their grim eyes taking in every detail of the room...Maggie realized that the man she'd thought was just an average guy, someone she could maybe have a future with, the man who had laughed with her, teased her, made her feel special, made her scream with pleasure...was a fake!

Ramit was...? She didn't know exactly who he was, but the fact that he was here in this club that everyone called "The Billionaires Club" meant that her average guy was anything but average. In fact, he was rich and powerful.

And most likely a jerk!

As soon as the thought formed, his eyes landed on her. She recognized the surprise in his gaze because she was feeling the same stunned shock. And what was that sound? Oh, probably the sound of her heart shattering.

It took a great deal of effort to break the connection. She turned away and walked over to the bar.

“What’s going on?” Nick asked in a muted hiss.

Maggie blinked rapidly, trying to stifle the tears that had suddenly formed in her eyes. “Nothing. Just another ass striving for world domination, right?”

Nick glanced over her shoulder. “He’s coming this way. And he doesn’t look happy.”

“Cover for me!” she whispered.

“Not a chance. Not with that guy,” Nick countered, then turned away, pretending to rearrange the alcohol bottles.

“Traitor!” she hissed. Then turned and...nearly ran into Ramit’s hard chest.

“What are you doing here?” His deep voice was raspy, as if he were angry about her presence.

“Good evening, sir,” Maggie greeted him. “Can I get you a drink? We have a wide variety of excellent scotch.”

“Maggie!” he growled.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

Maggie shook her head, blinking again. “I’m your waitress tonight,” she replied, trying to sound professional, but she knew that some of her hurt was leaking out in her tone. She sounded wobbly and...and weak!

Maggie was not weak! She’d had to cower and tremble in the past. Too many men had betrayed her trust. Her father! Her boyfriends! The previous owner of this damn club! And now Ramit! He’d betrayed her, pretending to be a good, honest, hardworking man.

He’d lied! He wasn’t good. He wasn’t honest or hardworking. He was obviously a wealthy jerk who was going to enjoy bossing her around!

“My boss had a particularly excellent Glencairn bottle of scotch. I highly recommend it.”

Chapter 12

Ramit glared down at Maggie, not sure what the hell was going on. She worked here? He knew Sean and Matteo, and had dined with the third owner, Levi Harris, but the other men in this room, especially the two he was supposed to meet tonight, were mostly bastards of the worst kind! Plus, he didn’t like the thought of Maggie, his Maggie, serving other men.

“Your Highness,” someone called out, interrupting whatever he might have said next. Ramit turned and found a short, stout man coming towards him, followed by a bland fellow with brown hair and grey eyes.

“Gentlemen,” he replied, trying to eliminate the irritation from his voice. “If you don’t–”

“Have you traveled west to see our prairie lands? They are spectacular.”

Prairie! That was the code word. His eyes narrowed on the short guy. “I haven’t. What are they like?”

He’d been to the prairies of Nebraska. They were extraordinary. But he didn’t want to talk about scenery right now. He waited for the confirmation code word.

“Lots of sunshine and grass.”

Bingo.

“Gentlemen, I’d love to hear more about these prairie lands. Would you care to take this conversation outside where we can enjoy the stars?”

The three men moved off, unaware of Maggie’s confused gaze following them.

Ramit continued walking until they were at the edge of the stone patio. They were in the shadows here despite the strings of overhead lights.

He waited only long enough to ensure that they were alone before he turned his furious gaze on the short, pathetic “men”. “Okay, gentlemen, tell me what the hell you want!” he replied with as calm a tone as possible.

The shorter man, Humphrey Todras, shuffled his feet. He was the key, Ramit sensed. He was the weaker of the pair. “We aren’t going to release the pictures of your sister, Ramit.”

His eyes narrowed on the short, pudgy man and fury simmered inside of him. “I have not given you leave to address me so informally,” he pointed out flatly. He’d use his anger later. Right now, he wanted to let these two worms think that they were in control.

“I apologize,” the cockroach replied with a slight bow. “Your Highness, we only used the pictures of your sister to get your attention.”

The taller man, still short by Ramit’s standards, spoke up now. “Your Highness, we have an amazing opportunity to build a highly profitable, mixed-use building at a site right on the Annapolis Harbor. We’d like to let you in on the ground floor of this project as one of the primary investors.”

Ramit knew that these men didn’t truly want him to invest in their project. This was a shakedown. These men had sent him salacious pictures of his sister and a man, then engineered this meeting in order to blackmail him.

“And how much is this...honor,” he tried to keep the sarcasm out of his tone, but suspected that he’d failed, “going to cost me?”

They named a figure that made Ramit want to laugh. But the stout fellow continued, describing the building project. “We’re not trying to blackmail you, Your Highness.” He looked at his friend, then at Ramit. “This is a genuine business relationship.” He gestured with his half-filled glass of beer, moving it around the small circle formed by their bodies. “The three of us will be the primary investors, however, we have several more business people who are fighting to get in as well.”

Right! Ramit clenched his jaw tightly in a valiant effort to smother the disbelief. “So, why was I selected as one of your primary investors?” he demanded. Now that he had the names of his blackmailers, and the reason, he could get his security team to look into the issue.

And then he would then crush these termites!

Both men looked at each other, then back at Ramit. “We read an article about a condominium site that you sponsored two years ago. It’s a raging success and we were hoping that you could lend your expertise to our project.”

Ramit gritted his teeth, but sipped his scotch to hide his fury. When he lowered the glass, he looked out at the darkness. He knew that there were beautiful rolling hills in the distance, dotted with trees and horses. The horses were probably secured in the barn on the other side of the house overnight, safely tucked away in their stalls and happily full from their evening meal.

Ramit wished that he was tucked away. With Maggie. Hell, he wanted to be back at her place, enjoying whatever culinary disaster she might make instead of dealing with these two buffoons.

Looking back at them, he nodded. “So, let me get this straight. You two couldn’t find any other investors, so you hired someone to follow Princess Ciara, my only sister, and found her in a compromising position, took nude photos of her, then sent copies to me in order to blackmail me into financing your project. Am I missing any salient details?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

The two men swallowed heavily, but the shorter one shook his head. “The pictures were merely to get your attention, Your Highness. They weren’t to blackmail you. They were a favor, actually,” he replied, glancing at his friend, then quickly looking back up at Ramit. “Yes, we sent those pictures to you as a favor. Not as blackmail. We knew that the pictures could damage Ciara’s...I mean, Princess Ciara’s,” he corrected quickly, “reputation. We’ve heard that she’s looking to marry and pictures like that could hurt her chances, right?”

Ramit didn’t bother to respond to that. “And my appreciation in your valiant efforts will be reflected by the size of my donation to the project you just mentioned,” he replied dryly. “How generous of me. My gratitude is very expensive.” He swished the scotch in his glass, not really seeing the moonlight reflected in the liquid. “Gentlemen, I arranged to meet some friends,” he emphasized the word, “to justify coming to this club tonight. I will get back to both of you on my answer.”

And with that, he walked away, ignoring the fumbling bows that the two men attempted to offer. He wasn’t going to accept their bows. Besides, as Americans, they shouldn’t be bowing to a foreign leader anyway, the imbeciles! Bowing implied that one acquiesced to the other person’s authority.

He stepped back into the clubhouse and looked around. Levi Harris, one of the owners, was standing off to the side of the main room. Levi caught his attention, but didn’t approach. Good man, Ramit thought. He was smart. Levi knew when to leave things alone and when to intercede.

Ramit considered his options for a moment, then made a decision.

Chapter 13

Maggie peered through the window, trying to watch the conversation. Unfortunately, there was no way she could go out there to better hear what was being said. Their drinks were full and even an amateur would realize that they'd gone out to the edge of the patio for privacy.

Turning back, she watched the other group of men, who were laughing and drinking, tossing gambling chips onto the table that were worth more than most of them paid their employees in a year.

That only made her desire to hear what each of these bastards were saying more intense. She saw movement from the three men outside. But a moment later, she sensed that one of them was coming back inside.

"What's going on?" Emily asked, efficiently surveying the room as if she were simply checking in on Maggie.

"I don't know," Maggie replied back with a fake, professional smile. "I can't hear them out there, but I can tell that they're saying something that Ra..." she stopped herself from using his first name. "Sheik al Quadar doesn't like. She knew his full name now since the other club members were all whispering about him. "He looks rather grim."

But she should have known better than to expect Emily to miss something important. Emily noticed everything. It was one of the reasons she was such an excellent club manager. She caught issues before they became a problem.

Emily's gentle gaze moved over Maggie's features. Sure enough, Emily understood. "He's your man!" she hissed. Emily's head swiveled to look through the windows, then at Maggie, her jaw slack in the first moment of shock that Maggie had ever seen

on her friend's face. "You're dating Sheik al Quadar?" She didn't give Maggie time to answer. "How? How did you meet him? When? And for how long?"

Stunned, Maggie stammered for a moment. She thought about lying, but no, Maggie respected Emily too much to do that to her.

"Remember when I mentioned I was going to the art museum in downtown Philly on my day off?"

"Yeah."

Maggie nodded. "Well, he was there as well. We discussed art and the various painters." Her shoulders sagged and she tried to hide her hurt. But she felt...betrayed. "He's quite knowledgeable about art in some ways." There was a long silence, then Maggie's lips trembled as she added, "I suppose one gets an excellent education when one has private tutors."

"Oh Maggie," Emily whispered, inching closer so that her shoulder touched Maggie's. It was a sign of support amidst a wildly busy night. "Maybe he's not one of the bad guys. Maybe..." she thought for a moment. "Maybe he's a good guy that...?"

Maggie waited, hoping that Emily could come up with an explanation.

But then Maggie pointed out, "He's out there on the patio with Humphrey Todras and Barney Mathis."

Emily couldn't stop her grimace at the mention of the two slime balls. "Oh dear," she sighed.

"Exactly." Maggie straightened up and forced her sadness away. She'd have plenty of

time to cry about yet another lying bastard when she got off work. Until then, she had a job to do. “I’d better get back to work,” she told Emily. “But I’m going to find out what Todras is up to. I know it has something to do with that land purchase in Annapolis. I just don’t know what.”

“Be careful,” Emily warned.

“Always am,” Maggie replied, starting to step forward. But she paused, her body trembling suddenly. “Except when it comes to my love life.” Then she moved towards a table where she noticed that several of the drinks needed to be refreshed.

The night was busy, but Maggie was able to keep an eye on Todras and Mathis. They were slimy, trust fund boys who thought that the world owed them something. If they hadn’t been born into money, the two of them might have contrived to be adequate, contributing members of the world. Unfortunately, their gambling habits, not to mention their addiction to various illegal substances, had drained a great deal of their inherited wealth. Obviously, they were not convincing Ram...Sheik al Qadar...to finance their lifestyle.

The thought of Ramit being a sheik, a man who ruled a very important and powerful country, hurt more than she wanted to admit. Apparently, he was just like all the rest. He’d gotten her into bed with lies and omissions, and Maggie had fallen for it. She’d believed he was just a regular guy.

“What a rat bastard!” she whispered, then plastered on a professional smile as she greeted the men at the table and asked if they wanted a refill.

Three hours later, the club was calming as the club members headed home for the night. The poker tables were only half filled now and Maggie was relieved that Ramit was playing pool in another room. He, Levi, and Sean were having a conversation, according to Ann. However, Ann couldn’t get close enough to hear what was being

said.

Maggie was using one of the back hallways to get to the kitchen so she could pick up a food order. The quiet moment was a relief from the tension in the main rooms. She waved to the cameras, wondering if it was Hendrix watching the monitors in the security office. There were obvious cameras and not-so-obvious cameras throughout the club. She had her head bowed, wondering how she could avoid speaking to Ramit again tonight. Maggie suspected that he was going to try to talk to her, maybe explain? Or maybe not. Wealthy bastards assumed that they didn't need to explain their actions. In her experience, the rich thought that they could just do whatever they wanted with impunity. The laws literally did not apply to them.

She, Emily, and Ann had overheard enough conversations in this place of illegal activities. She smiled faintly, thinking of the numerous times that they had arranged for an anonymous tip to be delivered to the appropriate authorities. However, there were many illegal conversations that never resulted in any punishment.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

Because her head was bowed, her thoughts focused on how to avoid one man in particular, and because only staff members were supposed to be in this hallway, Maggie didn't see the man lurking around the corner until it was too late. Before she knew what was happening, the man had already grabbed her and pushed her against the wall.

"Hello, beautiful!" Barney Mathis slurred in what he probably thought was a sexy voice. His breathing was heavy, as if he'd just run a marathon, and there was a line of sweat beaded on his upper lip. Ick!

"Mr. Mathis, please back away," Maggie replied flatly, looking straight into the man's eyes. He was short enough that their eyes were even with each other's and she refused to let him bully her.

Mathis was oblivious to the security cameras.

He grinned, shifting his bulk so that she couldn't get away. He even pressed his groin against her thigh as if needing to demonstrate the strength of his erection.

"Ah, but sweetie, I think we should go find a private place for a bit of fun!" he suggested, then lifted a hand to touch her hair, playing with a strand that had fallen down during the evening.

"Absolutely not," she replied succinctly and started to duck under the creep's arm.

Unfortunately, he was faster than she'd expected. And stronger! He blocked her attempt to move away, shifting so that he had her pinned against the wall, trapped by

his arms.

“Darling, I’m very wealthy,” he coaxed. Then added a chuckle. “And in a few weeks, I’m going to be even wealthier. So why don’t you be...nice...to me so that I can spoil you a little?”

Maggie lifted her hand, giving the signal to the security team that she needed help. She should probably try to soothe the guy to get more information about his upcoming wealth. Whatever he was planning, she might need to alert the authorities.

A sound at the far end of the hallway alerted her that the club’s security team was nearby. So she felt more confident and tried again to put some space between herself and Mathis.

“Sir, I have a job and I don’t want to be pressured to offer sexual favors.”

“But...Maggie!It’s me!” Mathis slurred.

She rolled her eyes when the jerk shifted closer. She turned her head, eager to see one of Hendrix’s guys coming around the corner.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t Hendrix, or anyone on his security team standing in stunned silence at the other end of the hallway. It was Ramit! And the dark, forbidding look in his eyes warned her that he’d already assumed the worst.

His look of fury and disgust hurt Maggie. She looked away, focusing her attention on Mathis, trying to get away from him. What did she care if Ramit thought the worst of her? She felt the same towards him!

Nor did she care that Ramit thought she was actually entertaining this guy’s disgusting offer. When Ramit turned and walked away, not even bothering to ask her

if she needed help, it solidified her hurt and anger.

“Good man,” Mathis said with a chuckle. “Apparently, even sheiks know when to leave things alone.” He shifted again and had no idea that he’d just put his family jewels in danger. “So, how about it? We could get a drink and I could drive you to my place. Or yours,” he offered. “I want you to feel comfortable.”

“Really?” she asked, tilting her head to the side. “You want me to feel comfortable when you refuse to let me walk away?” She lifted her hands, letting them rest on his shoulders. “I feel very threatened by the way you won’t let me leave. Furthermore,” she paused just long enough to slam her knee into his groin, feeling a sense of intense satisfaction when the man’s face turned an interesting shade of purple, “I don’t appreciate you propositioning me,” she finished as the man slowly sank to the floor, cupping the throbbing part of his anatomy with both hands.

A split second later, Hendrix and Jim rushed around the corner, both coming to a halt as they took in the scene before them.

Hendrix squatted down, his large hands dangling between his knees as he eyed the downed man. “Damn, Mr. Mathis, that probably hurt!”

“Fire her!” Barney Mathis squeaked out.

Levi came around the corner. He’d obviously heard, and saw, the whole scene on the security cameras. “Not going to happen, Mathis,” Levi announced. “In fact, your club membership has just been revoked.”

Barney was struggling to breathe through the pain. He stumbled to a semi-sitting position, shifting his back so that he was propped against the wall. Levi turned to Maggie. “I’m so sorry we didn’t get here sooner. Do you need to head on home? Are you okay? Did he hurt you in any way?”

“No,” Maggie replied, smiling tightly up at the club owner. “He just wouldn’t let me pass.”

Levi nodded. “Yeah, we saw it all. I’m glad that you kneed him.”

Maggie’s appreciation for her boss, and for Hendrix’s team, went up several notches. “Thanks for backing me up.”

“Always,” Levi replied.

She pointed towards the other end of the hallway. “I was heading to the kitchen to pick up a food order.”

“Go,” Levi assured her. “We’ve got this covered.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

Maggie gave him a resigned nod, executing a strategic about-face, then casually walked down the hallway towards the kitchen. Her inner victory dance was because she'd successfully resisted the tempting urge to give the guy another kick. A woman needed to celebrate her triumphs!

Chapter 14

Hendrix looked up at Levi who nodded. Focusing on the guy, Hendrix frowned into the man's bland features. "Here's the deal, Mr. Mathis," he began, not allowing any inflection in his tone. "As I said a moment ago, you are now banned from the club and your membership has officially been revoked."

"Why?" the man whined, cupping his still-throbbing testicles. "Because I made a pass at some bitch?"

Hendrix hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. "You didn't just make a pass at her. You restrained her from doing her job, cornered her in a private hallway, sexually harassed Maggie and made offensive suggestions to her."

Mathis' chubby lips opened and closed, as if trying to find an adequate explanation for his actions. In the end, he went with a lie. "I did not! She'd been coming on to me all night! And besides, she made the offer, not me! I'm the innocent one here. I was minding my own business and just...got lost in this hallway!"

Hendrix sighed, annoyed that the imbecile would continue to lie through his teeth. "Sir, please look up at the ceiling."

Barney lifted his gaze up towards the ceiling in the direction in which Hendrix was indicating. “Is that...?”

“Exactly,” Hendrix replied. “There is a camera there and,” he pointed behind him, “there, as well as cameras at the entryway to this hallway. We watched as you purposely followed Maggie into the hallway. You didn’t make a wrong turn and you certainly aren’t lost. Plus, we also have video evidence of Maggie trying to get away from you. Several times.”

There was a long silence, then Barney huffed. “Whatever. I was just looking for a bit of company tonight. No harm, no foul. She didn’t need to attack me like that!”

Hendrix clung to his patience. “Sir, you have violated the terms of your membership. If Maggie wants to press charges against you, then we will provide the video evidence for that trial.”

“Charges?” Barney exclaimed, his chubby lips opening and closing, almost trembling with shock. “What charges?”

“Unlawful detainment, for starters,” Hendrix continued. “Solicitation as well.”

“That’s...!”

Levi motioned for Hendrix’s guards to come forward. They surrounded Barney and grabbed his arms, hauling him to his feet.

Hendrix stood as well, looming over the wretched man. “And if you don’t leave the club immediately, we will have you arrested for trespassing.”

“This is bullshit!” Barney bellowed, fighting in a futile attempt to jerk free. “You can’t kick me out of the club! I’ve paid my dues!”

Hendrix led the way down the hallway towards the back exit. “You signed the club membership agreement, Mr. Mathis,” Hendrix explained. “And one of the terms that you agreed to is that you will not harass the staff in any way. Another is that you won’t enter any of the employee only areas of the clubhouse. A third is that you won’t insult, offend, or touch any of the staff members for any reason.”

“That’s....!” he sputtered, looking around as if needing to find someone to help him.

“You’ve violated three of the terms of your membership agreement.”

They literally lifted him off his feet when he started to pull back. “You’re not seriously going to kick me out of the club just because I made a pass at a pretty girl!” he snarled. “She’s just a waitress! She’s nothing!”

Levi snarled as he came around to the front of him. “First of all, she’s not a girl. She is a woman! Do not try and infantilize someone just so that you can feel bigger, you pathetic loser!” He calmed down, then reached out to adjust Barney’s tie. “Secondly, she is a valuable member of our club’s staff. And you abused the privilege of being a member by insulting an employee.” He leaned closer. “Don’t even turn into the driveway of this club ever again. Because, if you do,” he lowered his voice, “I will have you arrested in the most public, and humiliating, manner possible. Do we understand each other?” he asked, his voice a silky whisper now.

Barney swallowed noisily. “Yes.”

Levi nodded sharply. “Good.” Then he turned and walked back into the club.

Hendrix led the way to the man’s car and waited as he got into the vehicle. As Barney reached to close the door, Hendrix leaned in and gave the man a final warning. “Just so you know, we don’t just have security cameras here at the clubhouse and all around the property, we also have security at each of our employees’ residences.

Those security cameras are monitored twenty-four hours a day.” He let that information sink in. “If anything happens to Maggie, even if you aren’t at fault, then I will come after you with everything I’ve got. Do you understand me, Mr. Mathis?”

Barney nodded weakly, terrified of that last threat. He wasn’t sure what “everything I’ve got” might mean, but Hendrix was a very large and muscular man. Rumors around the club were that the man was ex-special forces, which meant that he knew how to kill a person with a paperclip and hide the body so no one would ever find it.

“Good.” Hendrix straightened and tapped the roof of the car twice. “Have a nice rest of your evening, sir.” Then Hendrix calmly closed the car door and walked away.

Chapter 15

Ramit stepped onto the plane that would take him home but paused at the entrance. He’d thought yesterday morning that Maggie would accompany him home this time. Instead, he was leaving the cheating woman behind. He’d seen the little tête-à-tête in the back hallway of the club last night. His fury was still boiling at Maggie’s betrayal.

“Your Highness?” the flight attendant prompted.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:44 am

Ramit looked around and realized that he'd stopped moving towards his office. A line of his staff members were waiting behind him, trying to board the plane.

"Right," he muttered, then proceeded down the long hallway towards his private office. "Just another woman with no morals."

Ramit knew that women were generally out to make the best of their situations. And Maggie was a waitress. She probably didn't earn much money. She worked for tips and, for some reason, that angered him. Although why he should be concerned with the wages of a woman who would sell herself to a man, he wasn't sure.

He sat down behind his desk and found the seat belt, then stared out through the small window. The airport employees were rushing about, trying to clear the airways so that his pilot could take off. But Ramit didn't see any of that. He was thinking about that night with Maggie, the way she'd sighed in his arms, snuggling closer to him.

He should be thinking about the absolutely best night of sex that he'd ever had. But it was the conversation afterwards, the soft touches and her curvy body pressed against his that really lingered. He'd loved the way her round bottom had fit perfectly in his hand, the tender way she'd looked at him when she'd offered him waffles the next morning. She was a pretty good cook, he thought, despite the lasagna debacle.

"Your Highness, the energy commissioner is on the phone."

Ramit looked up at his assistant, blinking as he tried to process what he'd just heard. Commissioner? Energy?

Right! Work issues.

With a sigh, Ramit leaned forward and picked up the phone.

Chapter 16

Maggie was sick of crying. She'd felt betrayed and abused, but she shouldn't have given her trust away so easily. It had been twenty-four hours since she'd seen the disgusted look on Ramit's face, and she'd been crying ever since.

"You okay?" Emily asked, sidling up beside Maggie at the bar. "You look sad."

Maggie shrugged and took the box of napkins, storing them away in the correct place for later that night. "I'm fine," she lied.

Emily was silent for a long moment, then she shook her head. "You're not fine. What's wrong? Last night, you were all smiles and energy. Today, you look like you've been crying ever since you left." She pulled out a jar of olives but hesitated before opening them. "Are you upset about Mathis' assault last night?"

Maggie thought about that for a split second, trying to figure out what Emily was talking about. A moment later, she remembered the incident with Barney Mathis and shook her head, snorting with disgust. "Nah, that guy is a slime ball. Plus, Hendrix said he wouldn't ever bother me again. His membership was revoked and Hendrix said something to the guy to ensure that he wouldn't bother me in the future."

"Good. So, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she replied, pasting on a bright smile. "Everything is just perfect. Exactly the way it should be."

Emily popped the lid off of the jar of olives. “When are you seeing your man again?”

She shook her head and turned away. Over her shoulder she said, “I was mistaken. The guy isn’t who I thought he was. We’re over.”

Maggie felt better just saying those words aloud. Nothing was different. Her life was just fine. No worries. She’d had a wild few days with a glorious man who made her body sing with happiness. It had been wonderful, but it’s over now. She could go back to her normal routine and forget about Ramit.

Two weeks later, Maggie was cursing those words. Staring at the plastic stick, she struggled to breathe. “I can’t be pregnant!” she whispered.

Still staring at the strip, she shook her head. “No! Impossible!”

And yet, she knew that it was possible. She hadn’t thought about the aftermath of that night, but she’d felt sticky the following morning. It hadn’t occurred to her that they’d completely forgotten contraception! She hadn’t dated anyone for...years! So, she hadn’t been on birth control. And...obviously...Ramit hadn’t thought to use a condom. Nor had she thought to remind him of that little detail. She’d been more interested...emphatic...about him continuing with the pleasure.

Not so pleasurable now!

Maggie sighed and dropped onto her bed, staring up at the ceiling. “What am I going to do?”

She’d have to tell Emily. Would she be fired? It would be difficult to serve drinks to the club members while she was pregnant. She didn’t think that Levi would fire her. Nor would Sean and Matteo, although those two hadn’t been around as much lately. Sean spent a lot of time down in Georgia so their children could spend more time

with their “grandparents”. The older couple wasn’t technically related, but they’d helped Sean’s wife, Kennedy, after she’d given birth, treating her more as a daughter than an employee.

And Matteo still worked in Philadelphia with his wife, Bailey, but Matteo was working on building a stronger relationship with his half-brother, the current Marquesso del Campo. So Matteo and Bailey traveled to Spain with their kids often.

That left Levi here to pick up the slack, but he didn’t seem to mind. In fact, Levi seemed to enjoy the role. Or maybe he just enjoyed keeping his two pathetic half-brothers out of the club. Levi’s two older half-brothers had inherited their father’s chain of sporting goods stores, then proceeded to run them into the ground with stupid marketing and worthless product decisions. For a while, the brothers had tried to gain membership to the club, but Levi had turned them down repeatedly.

Maggie remembered the club before Levi’s father had “bequeathed” the old house to his bastard son. The inheritance had been an insult, but Levi had turned things around. Now, it was a pleasure to work at the club. The members had resented most of the new rules, but they’d more than enjoyed the increased membership. The club had become an old boys’ network that allowed the heads of industry to trade secrets and make more money.

What they didn’t know was that Maggie, Emily, and Ann listened in on those old farts’ conversations. They knew when to invest in a company and when to sell their shares. Which meant that Maggie was a relatively wealthy woman.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

If she lost her job at the club, Maggie had enough money saved up. She wouldn't need to work for many years. That meant that she could stay home with her baby.

A baby! Wow! Her hand fluttered to her stomach as she pictured herself with a big, swollen belly. A baby! She hadn't really considered having kids because of her traumatic childhood, Maggie hadn't thought to ever have a family. No kids, no husband, and no pets. That had been the plan.

Well, she was going to have a family now!

She thought about calling Ramit and letting him know about the pregnancy. But she remembered the expression of disgust on his face when he'd seen her in the hallway being assaulted.

Instead of coming to her rescue, the asshole assumed that she'd welcomed the advances of that slimy bastard, Barney! He'd actually thought that she'd go from being with him in the morning to finding a new man for her evening!

How dare he insult her that way! Plus, he'd lied to her about who he was. Oh, not in words, he hadn't lied. But he'd deliberately given her the impression that he was just an average guy. That he didn't have a lot of money.

Resentment burned like acid in her throat. Because that memory was so painful, she pushed it out of her mind. "I'm not going to think about him! Never again!" And with that vow, she pushed off of her bed and stepped into the shower. She had a few more months before she'd need to tell anyone about her pregnancy. Maggie wasn't exactly sure when she'd start to show, but until then, she had time to figure out what to do

with her life and her future.

Chapter 17

Ramit stared at the report in front of him. Maggie's beautiful image stared back at him from the photograph. She was smiling, her brown eyes bright with that sparkle that had warned him she was about to tease him about something.

Sighing, he reached for the report.

"She's fine, Your Highness," Nittan explained. "The man you mentioned," he looked down at his notes, "Mr. Barney Mathis, hasn't bothered her in any way." The man looked up, his eyes curious. "As requested, I also did a deep dive into Mr. Mathis' financials and his businesses. He doesn't actually have any, Your Highness. He inherited several businesses after his father's passing, but he sold them. There was a period in which he'd become heavily involved in drugs, specifically cocaine, but he seems to have that under control. At least for the moment."

Ramit nodded, then noticed an email come in on his personal cell phone. He knew that the message was from Mathis and Todras. He looked at the message, unaware of his features turning grim.

"Is that something I need to work on, Your Highness?" his guard asked.

Ramit shook his head and lowered the phone to his desk. "No, it's a personal issue. Thank you. That will be all."

The man bowed, but Ramit could see the concern in his eyes. The man turned and left Ramit's office, but there was a hesitation in his steps. Ramit considered asking Nittan to help with this matter, but at the moment, he didn't want Ciara's images, even if they were false, to be seen by anyone. It was difficult enough for Ramit to see his

sister naked and locked in an embrace with another man. He didn't want anyone else to see those images.

Not yet. If it came down to the wire, he'd go back to Nittan and have him resolve the issue.

Again, the thought of talking to Maggie popped into his head. She would have listened and, for some reason, he knew that she wouldn't have mentioned the pictures to anyone.

The thought startled him. If he was so sure that Maggie wouldn't say anything, if he trusted her so implicitly, then why had he so easily believed she would betray him with another man so soon after their night together? What exactly happened in that hallway?

Ramit rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache coming on. Memories of seeing Maggie in another man's arms had really gotten to him. If it had been any other woman from his past, Ramit might have simply banished her from his mind. What was it about Maggie that was different?

With a sigh, Ramit answered his own question.

He wanted to believe that she'd been innocent.

He wanted to convince himself that he hadn't seen her accepting another man's advances. But the images in his mind were too vivid for him to ignore. He'd seen her body shift, almost inviting the man to move closer. He'd seen the way the man had pressed her back against the wall. It had been a very intimate moment.

Sighing, he rubbed the bridge of his nose, reminding himself that he had a blackmailer to deal with. He shouldn't be thinking about Maggie. He should be

figuring out his next step.

Picking up his phone, Ramit read the message again.

“Your Highness, Please send the money so that we can break ground on the project. We need to get the financing in place immediately.” And there was an attachment. Ramit didn’t want to open the attachment, afraid that he knew what he’d find. But he had to know. So instead of ignoring the attachment, he clicked on the image. Sure enough, he saw Ciara nude and straddling an unknown man. It was just the back of her head, but Ramit recognized her hair.

“Ealayk alleana!” he muttered, then dropped the phone. Rubbing his eyes didn’t help remove the erotic image of his sister from his mind. Unfortunately, nothing would.

Chapter 18

Maggie ignored the exhaustion that was creating a throbbing headache over her right eye. Pushing through the pain, she smiled as she delivered the scotch and bourbon to two club members. “Enjoy, gentlemen,” she said, then turned and walked towards the wall where she’d stand until she noticed someone needed her. She was working the pool room tonight. Someone had called in sick, so Emily had shuffled everyone around.

“Do you have the...trophies?” a man asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Maggie heard the question, but didn’t turn her head, didn’t flinch, blink, or move in any way to indicate that she’d heard something that wasn’t meant for her ears. It always amazed her and her friends how much these men revealed when they thought no one was listening. Idiots! As a waitress, Maggie knew she was invisible to these men.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

“Yeah,” a second voice replied. “I have them here.”

“Can I see them?”

Todras chuckled. “Not a chance. You haven’t bought into the project.” He snickered. “These trophies are for members only.”

“Come on, dude!” the voice whined. “Just a peek!”

“Nope!” Todras replied. “You don’t have enough money in your trust fund for a peek.”

Maggie couldn’t help herself. She turned her head, pretending to survey the room. She noticed two men sitting in brown leather club chairs to the right of her post. They had their heads close together and they were looking around warily, as if trying to ensure that their conversation was not overheard. Quickly, Maggie looked away, but not before she noticed that the man had tapped his jacket pocket over his heart. That was Humphrey Todras, she realized. Humphrey had been with Barney several weeks ago. That miserable night that Barney had attacked her was still painfully vivid in her mind.

Because it was also the night that Ramit had seen her and done nothing to help her!

Reminding herself that Ramit was no longer in her life, and shouldn’t be allowed to take up space in her thoughts, she focused on the present. She’d read the news and discovered that he’d gone back to his country.

Shifting slightly, she angled her body so that she could see the two men more easily in her peripheral vision. The idiot rubbed his chest again, as if he needed to feel the object hidden in his pocket to assure himself that it was still there.

Interesting! So...the man had something in his jacket pocket. Because it was Humphrey, she wondered if the hidden object had something to do with what he and Barney had been talking to Ramit about on the darkened patio on that fateful night.

“You keep the...trophies...with you?” the other man asked. Maggie didn’t recognize him, and assumed he must be Humphrey’s guest.

Humphrey laughed and Maggie kept her body as relaxed as possible. Obviously, they weren’t talking about actual trophies. At least, not the plastic kind handed out to kids after they won a soccer tournament.

Maggie looked around as Emily walked through the room. Maggie drifted slowly away from her place on the wall and intercepted Emily at the far end of the bar.

“What’s up?” Emily asked quietly, looking down at the papers attached to the clipboard she carried.

In a low voice, Maggie explained, “There’s something in Humphrey’s pocket. I think we should get a look at whatever he’s hiding.”

Emily looked up and smiled, also pretending to scan the room. “Why do you think so?”

Maggie grinned. “Because he’s calling it a trophy and, I know him too well. He was with what’s-his-name, Barney Mathis, that night that...well, the other night.” She shuddered at the memory.

“Wasn’t Barney the guy you had to knee a couple weeks ago?”

“One and the same,” Maggie confirmed.

Emily nodded. “If you suspect Todras of conspiring with someone for nefarious purposes, that’s good enough for me.” She carefully surveyed the room. “I’ll get Ann to help out. Standby. She’ll be through in a few minutes. We’ll do the coat-switch.” She looked down at her clipboard. “Any idea how large the item is?”

“Nope. It’s in his right front pocket and it’s not creating a bulge.”

Emily grinned, a shimmer of excitement sparkling in her eyes. “No worries. We’re on it.”

Maggie nearly laughed as endorphins surged through her. Or was it adrenaline? She wasn’t sure, but knew that the excitement caused by these kinds of “raids” was always a little thrilling.

Maggie returned to her place beside the wall when Ann rushed into the room. She looked around as if searching for a particular person, her eyes looking a bit frantic, and her tray held a single drink.

The woman was a good actress! Maggie smothered her smile as she pretended to look inquiringly at Ann.

“Do you know where...oh my gosh!” Ann gasped as the drink tumbled from her tray onto the shoulder of the man in question.

“What the hell?” Humphrey yelled, standing up and looking down at the liquid dripping down over his jacket. With his arms held out by his side, the man glared at Ann. “What kind of idiot are you?”

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Todras!” Ann gasped, doing a great impression of a flighty woman. Emily and Maggie knew that Ann was extremely intelligent!

Maggie hurried over with a rag that she’d grabbed from the bar. Dabbing at the man’s sports coat, she tried in vain to mop up the liquid.

Maggie stepped back, shaking her head at the mess and tsking her co-worker. Ann was standing a few feet away, looking appropriately chastised. “My apologies for my co-worker’s clumsiness, sir,” she said. “If you give me your coat, I’ll procure another one for you for the evening. While you finish your game of pool, we’ll have this one cleaned and pressed so that it will be perfect before you leave for the evening.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

The man shrugged his shoulders, still trying to avoid having the droplets spill onto the rest of his clothes. Humphrey shot Ann a malevolent glare, then slipped off the sopping jacket. “What an idiot!” he snapped.

“I’m so sorry, sir!” Ann repeated, clutching the tray against her chest and pretending to look worried.

“I’ll get this fixed up for you right away, Mr. Todras,” Maggie replied.

Emily walked into the room and pretended to take in the scene. She hurried over to the man and took his drink. “I’m sorry, Mr. Todras. Drinks for tonight are on the house.”

They wouldn’t be “on the house”. Ann, Emily, and Maggie had a slush fund for adventures like this. They knew that sometimes it took resources to figure out what these rich guys were up to. So the drinks would be paid for out of that money.

“Damn straight!” Humphrey grumbled, then accepted the other sports jacket that Maggie whipped out of one of the many secret supply closets hidden throughout the club.

“Here you go, sir. We’ll get your jacket cleaned up right away.”

“See that you do!” he spat out, jerking the new jacket on before he turned to his “friend”. The two of them chuckled over the stupidity of the working class, then resumed their seats on the leather chairs.

Emily already had a fresh drink ready for the man and set it down on the table. “Here you go, Mr. Todras. My apologies again.”

The three of them turned, Maggie clutching the other coat as she hurried to the back of the room where she disappeared through the employee doorway. Emily and Ann left through separate doorways, but all three met up in the room they always used for these kinds of missions.

“What’s in there?” Ann asked, peering over Maggie’s shoulder as she pulled the envelope out of the man’s pocket. Inside were pictures of two nude people in various compromising positions. “Wow!” Ann gasped.

Emily hummed. “Beautiful woman.” She tilted her head, eyes narrowed. “I’ve seen her face somewhere before.”

Maggie turned to look at her boss. “Where?”

Emily tapped her finger thoughtfully against her chin. “I’m not sure, exactly. But it will come to me.”

Maggie stared at the images, not sure if...? Shaking her head, she stuffed the pictures back into the envelope. But as she was trying to fit them all back in, she noticed some writing on the back.

“This is a phone number,” she noted, glancing at the digits. “And...!” She gasped, looking at the numbers. “I...recognize this number.” Her heart ached as she flipped the pictures over again. Suddenly, the penny dropped.

“What?” Emily prompted.

“She knows something,” Ann blurted out. “What do you know?”

Maggie blinked back sudden tears. She wasn't sure if she was just emotional because of her pregnancy, or if the ache in her heart was because she recognized the phone number. "This is Sheik al Quadar's personal cell number," she whispered to her friends. There was a second number under the first. But this wasn't a phone number. It was...? "Is this an amount?"

Emily took the photo, her eyes narrowing. "No, not an amount." She tapped the information with her finger. "That looks like a land site's plot number. It's the kind that a municipal government uses to identify various plots of land." She turned to Ann. "We know that Todras and Mathis had purchased a piece of land in Annapolis, Maryland. Could this be the plot number for that land?"

Ann examined the writing, then nodded. "It's the right length, but what are the odds that someone would be stupid enough to write that kind of information on the back of a picture of a naked woman?"

"And why?" Maggie asked. "What's the connection between the woman and the land number?"

Ann crossed her arms over her chest, leaning one shoulder against the wall. "Maybe there's no connection between the two. The guy could just have pictures of a naked woman and he wrote some information on the back of one of the pictures."

Emily shook her head. "I doubt it. But it's curious that the pictures have been printed out. In this world, photos are digitized and stored on hard drives. So the fact that these are printed and with information written on the back...I think both are significant." She turned to Maggie. "And I suspect that these images are somehow connected to your man."

Maggie's heart ached, but she pushed aside that pain. "He's not my man," she asserted firmly. "But whatever the cause, if these are Sheik al Qadar's pictures, we

should return them to him.”

Ann and Emily agreed. “But what are we going to say to Todras? He’ll be suspicious if we hand him back his jacket without the envelope of photos.”

Emily bit her lip, trying to figure something out. “What if we replace the photos? Then we could...?”

A male voice sounded behind them. Hendrix stepped into the loose circle, his eyes narrowing on the photos. “I’ll get one of my men to create some new pictures and we’ll change the numbers on the back. We can switch out the pictures for fake ones.” He looked at the printed images. “I can also go through the guy’s computer. If he’s using these photos to blackmail someone, then I can delete the photos.”

Hendrix must have seen Ann and Maggie switch out the jackets and realized something was going on.

Maggie noticed Emily’s reaction first. Her face turned bright red and there was a strange mix of anger and...hope?...on her features. But...Emily and Hendrix hated each other! Didn’t they? Yes, Maggie had heard Emily grumble about Hendrix on several occasions. In fact, now that she thought about it, Hendrix and Emily sat as far away from each other as possible during staff meetings. And during those meetings, they rarely looked at each other.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Maggie glanced at Ann, wondering if she was seeing the same thing. Sure enough, Ann's gaze was curious as she watched the scene unfold.

Intriguing, Maggie thought. Perhaps she wasn't the only one struggling with romantic issues lately.

However, there was no time to ponder the issue. They had to get back out to Todras. "Whatever we're going to do, we need to act fast," Maggie announced.

"I'll clean up the coat." Ann grabbed the still-damp jacket and headed out of the room right behind Maggie. They heard Hendrix snarl, "You should have come to me about this!" as they closed the door.

Outside, Maggie and Ann paused, staring at each other. "What's going on?" Ann whispered.

"No clue!" she hissed back. "I'll get this one out to Todras."

Ann grabbed Maggie's arm right as Maggie turned to head down the hallway. "What are you going to tell him if he asks about the contents of the pockets?"

Maggie bit her lip, pondering the question. Then she perked up and said, "I'll just tell him that we don't go through pockets. And the jacket will be back with him by the end of the evening. Can you work miracles on that spot?"

Ann looked down at the jacket, then nodded. "Yeah. It's mostly just damp. I'll dry it up and put some of the dry cleaning spray on it. The stuff that makes everything

smell like it just came out of the dryer.”

“Good plan,” Maggie replied. “See you later.”

The two women moved off in opposite directions. Maggie walked out to the room and gave Humphrey Todras a professional smile as she held out another drink. “Here you go, sir.”

The man grumbled as he took the drink. “Make sure she doesn’t steal anything from me.” He grumbled the comment as he adjusted his temporary jacket. It was actually a better quality wool and Maggie suspected that the man was contemplating how he could walk out with both sports jackets at the end of the night.

However, Maggie’s heart was aching too much for her to stand there. What was Ramit’s phone number doing on the back of naked photos? And why did Todras even have Ramit’s private phone number in the first place? They hadn’t looked happy with each other when they’d appeared to be arguing out on the patio.

None of this made sense. But she was going to send a message to the Annapolis land development commission and suggest that they investigate the land purchase and proposed development. Something wasn’t right.

Beyond that, she wasn’t sure what else she could do.

Chapter 19

Ramit stared at the contents of the envelope. The naked pictures of his sister were there, spread out over his desk. They’d fallen out of the manila envelope with a note that said, “The land deal is off.”

Just like that? The idiots returned the photos and called off their demands that he

finance their building project?

And why the hell had they sent him printed photos? What had they done to the digital images? The ones that Todras and Mathis had sent to him via email?

What the hell was going on? He wasn't sure, but he would ask his security team to investigate Todras and Mathis. Ramit needed to figure out what those two idiots were up to. Their blackmail scheme had obviously gone ridiculously wrong. Were the two men as bad at blackmail as this seemed? Surely no one was this stupid!

However, Ramit wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. But who had sent him the incriminating pictures and why? He couldn't compare handwriting since Todras and Mathis had only communicated with him via email.

His thoughts flashed to Maggie. Had she done this? Had she somehow realized that he was being blackmailed and addressed the situation?

No, that didn't make sense. Maggie was...?

He was going to say that she was a self-centered bitch. But that wasn't true. Maggie was soft and sweet and...and she'd just wanted a bit of spoiling. Was that why she'd sidled up to Barney Mathis? Or was there something more going on?

He'd never know.

With a heavy sigh, Ramit picked up the scattered pictures, stuffing them back into the envelope, and walked out of his office.

"Where's my sister?" he asked of his assistant, Hamud.

Hamud jumped to his feet, and bowed quickly before he replied, "I believe Princess

Ciara is in her office, Your Highness.”

Ramit nodded, then turned down the hallway. Ciara had set up her personal office outside of the administrative wing of the palace. He’d never understood why she’d chosen to be so far away from everyone else. Nor had he ever figured out exactly why she’d needed an office. What did she do all day? Years ago, he’d thought that his sister shopped for a living. Ciara was always well dressed in the latest fashions. And she traveled to all of the fashion capitals around the globe. Hell, she’d just returned from Milan two days ago.

Is that where she’d met the man in the pictures? Did she have other lovers? An even more important question; did her fiancée know about the other men?

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

And why the hell wasn't Ciara married yet? She'd been betrothed to her fiancée over ten years ago on her seventeenth birthday. She'd looked star-struck on that day.

However, he hadn't seen that expression on her lovely features since then. In fact, the last time Falk bin Alon, Sheik of Itim, had come for a visit, Ciara had been mysteriously absent.

Why hadn't Ramit realized that something was off with his sister's engagement? How had he been so oblivious about his sister's happiness? And why hadn't she set a date for the wedding? Was she waiting for him to give her the go ahead? She'd been betrothed for ten years! If she was waiting for Falk, it was well past time for her to move ahead with the plans!

Ramit paused in the middle of the hallway. Images of Maggie laughing at him as he'd stared at a painting in the art gallery, attempting to see what she saw. He'd been such a misogynistic ass! He'd viewed the images through a male perspective, never questioning the women in the paintings. He'd arrogantly assumed the same beliefs as the artist; that women were for marriage and child rearing.

Was he doing the same to Ciara?

Maggie. His body ached every time he thought of her. It had been months since he'd last seen her. Why did it still hurt when he thought of her?

Banishing the image of Maggie's soft, sweet smile and the way she'd felt when he'd held her in his arms...Ramit shook his head and forced his thoughts to focus on the present. Maggie, as beautiful, soft, and lovely as she'd been...Maggie was in the past.

She'd betrayed him with another man, and he wasn't able to forgive that.

"Ramit?" his sister called out.

Startled, Ramit realized that he'd been lost in his thoughts outside of his sister's office. Shifting, he found Ciara standing in the hallway with a cup of coffee, looking amused as she watched him.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded brusquely.

She laughed and he was surprised by the lovely, musical sound. "I could ask you the same thing. It's not often that we find you in this part of the building."

Building. Not palace. She'd said "building". Was that significant? He suspected that it was, but for the life of him, he couldn't put his finger on why.

"I came to speak with you."

She waited, her eyebrows lifting as if prompting him to speak.

"Alone. In private."

They both looked around. The hallway was wide and open, but there were guards and servants hurrying about.

Ciara gestured to the door. "Why don't you come into my office, then?"

Ramit nodded and followed her through the doorway. In her office, he was surprised to discover that there wasn't just a personal assistant sitting at the reception desk. There were several people moving about as if they had important tasks to complete.

This wasn't what he was expecting. And that, again, raised the question of what his sister did all day. He was starting to suspect that Ciara wasn't the bit of fluff that he'd assumed.

"Ramit?" she prompted again, leading him towards a set of double doors. She pushed through, waited for him to follow, then leaned out of the doors and said to her assistant, "Would you push my next meeting back fifteen minutes?"

Ramit paused, startled that she had meetings, but also wondering if his conversation with her was going to take longer than fifteen minutes. But that's when he realized that he rarely gave anyone more than that allotment of time during his day. There were just too many people who needed some of his time, so he had to be strict about boundaries and time limits.

She smiled politely at her assistant, although he didn't hear the other woman's response. Ciara nodded, then softly closed the doors and turned to face him. She walked over to the white desk and sat down, gesturing to one of the visitors' chairs in front of her desk as she sipped her coffee.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

Ramit glared at her for a moment, wondering why he suddenly felt like a guest in his own damn palace! Why was his sister treating him as if he were...a client!

Pulling the pictures out from under his arm, he tossed them onto her desk. "I retrieved these for you."

When she leaned forward to examine the pictures, Ramit stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched for her reaction.

It wasn't what he'd been expecting.

“Well...uh...thank you?” she offered, blinking up at him. “I’m not sure why you wanted to retrieve someone’s sex pictures for me, but...?” she paused, tilting her head. “Should I thank you?”

He stared at her, stunned by that question. He was also surprised at how lovely his sister was. When had she changed from an obnoxious elf that had chased him around the palace to...this stunning beauty?

Shaking his head, he reminded himself of the current problem. With a tilt of his head, he asked, “Are you seriously going to tell me that isn’t you in those pictures?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Ciara blinked, then leaned forward again, staring at the images again. “I can guarantee these aren’t pictures of me,” she told him, her tone icy now. “And I have no idea who this man is either.”

Ramit stared at her, stunned. “Are you sure?”

Ciara leaned back in her office chair, lacing her fingers over her stomach. That’s when he realized that his sister was painfully thin. Was she not eating well? When was the last time he’d shared a meal with her? He couldn’t remember.

“Yes, big brother. I’m quite certain I’ve never had sex with a stranger and allowed another person to take pictures. But thank you so much for your belief in my integrity and morals.” She flipped one of the pictures around, examining it more closely. “Plus, I have a small birthmark on my shoulder right here,” she said, pointing to an area of creamy skin that clearly didn’t have any mark.

Ramit flushed, then sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. Turning, he started pacing. For a long moment, he ran through the thoughts in his mind, trying to work out the details and figure out where he’d gone wrong with this situation. Had he been blackmailed by fake pictures of his sister?

But his mental flagellations were interrupted when Ciara asked, “Do I need to participate in this conversation any longer?”

He turned and stared at her. Yes, she was too thin, but his baby sister was...beautiful! Not just pretty, but her soft gaze and full lips, long, thick hair, and...just everything about her comprised a woman who was truly beautiful.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out. Those words were a surprise. He’d never apologized. Ever! Hell, no one had actually told him that he was wrong before. That realization made him cringe inwardly. Because he was human, and that meant that he was fallible.

“Sorry about what, big bro?”

He smiled at the casual nickname. “I’m sorry for believing those pictures were of you.”

She lifted one of her dark eyebrows and Ramit chuckled, suddenly understanding her silent rebuke. “Okay, I’m also sorry I’ve been a horrible, absentee brother for so long that I didn’t even recognize that the images weren’t of you. Have I abandoned you?”

Ciara rolled her eyes and leaned forward, propping her elbows on the desk in front of her. “You’re not a horrible brother. You’ve been an absentee brother, but that’s okay. However, I’m an adult, in case you haven’t noticed, and can take care of myself.”

He looked around as he realized he felt free, almost weightless. He hadn’t realized how much those pictures had bothered him.

“What is it that you do around here?” he asked.

Instantly, her expression turned wary. Even her body tightened. He noticed the tension in her shoulders when, before, she’d been amused and relaxed.

“Does it matter?”

He narrowed his eyes and considered her question. “I think it does,” he finally replied. “I suspect that it matters very much.” Moving closer, he stopped about a foot from her desk. “How do you spend your time, Ciara?”

She shifted in her chair, her hands tightening around her coffee mug. “Are you going to try to stop me if you don’t like what I do?”

“No!” he replied rearing back slightly. Immediately, he pictured Maggie’s angry demeanor if she ever heard him trying to limit a woman’s careers. Hell, he could picture her pretty lips pursing with anger, that one freckle mocking him. He was even shocked that Ciara might think he was that much of an autocrat. “Why would I?”

Ciara picked up a pen, idly spinning it with her fingers. “Well, you assumed that I’d have sex with a man and allow a third person to take pictures. So clearly, you don’t have a very high opinion of me.”

He glanced down at the images, confused by her comments. “A third person?”

“Of course,” she replied and sifted through the photographs spread out across her desk. “Look at the different angles. It would be one thing if the camera stayed in one place and the couple moved. However, the camera angle moves but the couple remains on the bed. You can tell by the background. These images were probably taken by a professional photographer.”

Ramit looked more closely at the images now that he knew that they weren’t of his sister. Sure enough, she was right. The camera angle moved. A third person was in that room while the couple posed.

“Damn, you’re right!” he hissed. “I was—”

“Fooled?” Ciara offered, smiling. Her expression was indulgent now. “That probably happens more often than you think.”

He glared at her and Ciara laughed, delighted with his angry façade. He didn’t admonish her for that though. It sounded nice to hear her laughing. Hell, it felt nice to

just talk with her. He'd missed her over the past several months. No, that wasn't right. Ramit wondered how long it had been since he'd actually had a conversation with his sister. A real conversation and not the annoying murmured comments during official ceremonies.

"How have you been, Ciara?" he asked without thinking.

She stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "Fine," she replied, but wariness returned to her eyes. "And you? Are you okay?"

He pushed away from her desk and nodded. "Yes. I suppose." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Busy."

She smiled and he relaxed slightly. "Obviously." She stared at him for what felt like a long moment. Then she added, "I think you're doing an excellent job running the country, Ramit. I don't agree with your transportation policies, but otherwise, I like the direction your government is going."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

His eyes widened at her comment. “What’s wrong with my transportation policies?”

She shifted slightly, getting more comfortable. “The ten year road plans heavily favor the wealthy parts of our cities at the expense of those who are most vulnerable. The wealthy people don’t need more roads as much as the poorer sections of the cities. For instance, the plan for Ostra,” she continued, mentioning a city in the south of the country, “takes road-repair funding away from the most critical areas that need improvements. Your plan transitions that funding to resurfacing roads in areas that are relatively fine. I don’t know why.” Her eyes narrowed on him. “Property values in the poorest areas of the cities are severely impacted by neglected, rundown roads. A community can be transformed by a clean, new road. Plus, your policies require that the poorest areas be demolished to make way for new road development. The residents of those areas are forced to find new homes and that’s not fair. They don’t have the voice to argue against the road plans. Also, they don’t have the income to easily move to a new place. It’s not just the financial burden of moving. The people your plan displaces are the citizens that have the least amount of time to find a new place to live, meaning you’re putting them further at risk of falling into poverty by forcing them to take whatever new housing they can find quickly. In contrast, wealthy people have the ability and resources to investigate housing options instead of taking whatever is easily available.”

He was shocked by her knowledge of his transportation policy. “How do you know all of this?”

She rolled her eyes, but smiled and leaned back in her chair. “I’m not just a pretty face, Ramit.”

He felt...humbled. Again. "I'm sorry," he told her, trying to convey his sincerity through his eyes. "I guess I just assumed that you...?"

"Shop for a living?" Ciara finished for him when he didn't finish his statement.

He sighed, feeling slightly defeated. Again, Maggie's sparkling, brown eyes popped into his head. "Yes."

"Nah," she laughed again. "I do more than shop."

He hesitated, aware of the back-to-back meetings he had on his schedule for the rest of the day. He'd allotted only fifteen minutes to speak with his sister and he'd already gone well over that. Plus, Ciara had meetings as well. He'd interrupted her day and that was...rude, to say the least.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight?" he asked.

The surprised happiness on his sister's face made him smile in return.

"I have a dinner meeting planned. How about tomorrow night?"

He nodded. "Wonderful. I look forward to it." He didn't know what was on his agenda for tomorrow, but he'd have his assistant move things around so that he could dine with Ciara. He realized now that he needed to make his sister a priority.

On the way back to his office, he stopped by the security office. "I need you to..." he considered the possibilities for a moment, "punish two men." When Nittan leaned in, bracing his hands on the desk, Ramit explained what Barney Mathis and Humphrey Todras had done.

Chapter 20

Ten Months Later...

“Levi!” Ramit called out, hurrying towards his friend. “Good to see you! It’s been...what? A year?”

Ramit knew exactly how long it had been since he’d last seen Levi Harris. Because it had been the last time he’d seen Maggie. After a whole year, Ramit should be over her. He shouldn’t still be thinking about her.

Why the hell couldn’t he stop thinking about her? Why did he still dream of her soft, silky skin and her sweet laugh? He even missed her flashing, brown eyes as she sweetly explained how he was a complete ass.

“Almost exactly a year,” Levi replied, then turned to his friend. “You remember Edward, Duke of something or other.” Ramit chuckled as Levi continued. “He’s going to help us with our next project.”

Edward rolled his eyes, but he was much more mellow these days now that he was married with a young son. He didn’t punch Levi’s shoulder for the insult to his ducal title. Instead, the tall man extended his hand to Ramit. “Ignore him. He’s just pissy because his wife and kids couldn’t come with him this time.”

Levi huffed a bit, then nodded towards Edward. “He spent the entire flight over here showing me pictures of his son. So don’t let him fool you. We’re here to discuss business, then we’re both heading right back home to our ladies.”

Ramit laughed, even as another image of Maggie flashed through his head. He didn’t miss her, he reminded himself for the millionth time. They’d had only a few days together.

And yet, it was on the tip of his tongue to ask about her. He knew that Maggie

worked at Levi's club. Yes, he was a member of that club, but he was considering canceling his membership. The idea of seeing Maggie again didn't seem appealing.

"Come into the dining room. Falk from Itim is already here."

"Isn't Falk engaged to your sister?" Levi asked, walking beside Ramit down the long hallway.

"Yes. They've been engaged for..." Ramit paused to think about it. "More than ten years now."

"Wow!" Edward whistled. "That's a long engagement. They aren't rushing into anything, eh?"

The three men laughed, but Ramit started to wonder. He'd ask Ciara about it during dinner tonight. They'd both been working on their sibling relationship over the past several months, sharing more meals and talking about various subjects.

Ramit led them into one of the salons and he introduced the fourth member of their partnership. "Gentlemen, this is Falk bin Alon, Sheik of Itim. He's a brute of a man, but underneath all those muscles he's a pussycat."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

The man in question growled more like a panther than a kitten, but he didn't say anything until they sat down to discuss the proposed business plan.

Several hours later, after the business details were ironed out and sent off to the lawyers, Ramit led everyone into the dining room for dinner.

"How are things going at the club?" Ramit asked, knowing that Edward was also a member. They all sat down and the waiters immediately strode in, placing a salad in front of each man.

Levi sipped his wine, then answered, "Good. The schedule is tight, but Maggie comes back next week, so things should smooth out. The other wait staff have been covering for her."

Ramit's hand froze, his knife nearly tumbling from his fingers. He turned, trying to feign casual interest as he asked, "What's wrong with Maggie? She seemed like a vigilant employee when I visited last year."

Levi glanced at Ramit with amusement. "If you'd come back more often, you'd be up to speed on the gossip. Maggie had a baby a few months ago. There are bets on who the father is, but she won't tell us."

Ramit's body went cold at that news. "What are the odds on Todras being the father?"

Levi burst out laughing and slapped his knee. "I doubt that Todras is still capable of fathering a child. Not after what Maggie did to him last year. And then, a few months

later, both Todras and his annoying buddy, Mathis, were attacked. They were mugged and beaten pretty badly.” He took another sip of his wine, shaking his head. “Plus, the banks foreclosed on both of their homes. From what I’ve heard, they’ve both been mooching off of acquaintances for a place to stay.”

Ramit was aware of the knowing silence from the other two men at the table, but he had to know. “What happened to Maggie? What did she do?”

Levi looked surprised. “Todras tried to corner her in a hallway last year. He wouldn’t let her pass and was making insulting innuendos. So, Maggie kned him in the groin. He was down for the count and my security guards had to literally haul him out of the club.”

Ramit absorbed that information, his fingers tightening on his knife and fork as he pictured Maggie being pinned to the wall. Had he completely misread the situation?

Clearing his throat, he tried to concentrate on the...he had no idea what he was eating. All he could think about was Maggie, her soft, brown eyes as she’d glancing pleadingly at him in the hallway so long ago. What the hell had he done?

“So who are the other men that could potentially be the father?”

Levi shook his head. “That’s the thing. Maggie never showed a preference for any of the club members. Emily, the club manager,” he explained for Falk, “mentioned that Maggie was really excited about some guy she’d met at an art museum last year, but apparently, he betrayed her somehow, but she refuses to tell us what happened.”

A litany of epithets blasted through his mind. “Why is she so close mouthed?” Ramit demanded, hearing his voice rasp and unable to control it.

Levi took another sip of his wine and shrugged. “No one knows. Maggie never

mentioned his name. She was pretty sad for a while, but she was happy about being pregnant. And she's an amazing mother. Emily and Ann, her best friends at the club, go to her house all the time to help out. They both say that Maggie is literally glowing. She's exhausted, but happy. My wife Clarissa has visited as well and says that Maggie and the baby are thriving."

Edward chuckled. "I'm guessing that she's been inundated with gifts from you, Matteo, and Sean?"

Levi shrugged. "I might have sent over a few things."

Edward and Falk laughed, seeing the truth behind the man's casual tone. Maggie had probably been smothered with gifts from the club owners.

"It's not just me," Levi defended. "All of the club members have sent her stuff. She's one of our best employees and everyone misses her."

Ramit was vaguely aware of the rest of the meal being served and he might have eaten some of the food. But after he took his leave from the men, he had no memory of what had been served or what they'd talked about beyond the news of Maggie's pregnancy.

Could it be...? Could he be the father? He'd been the man at the art museum. And she'd been happy afterwards? So happy that her co-workers had noticed and commented on her happiness? Then Levi's other comments came back to him. Betrayal? How the hell had he betrayed Maggie? Simply because he'd shown up at the club?

That didn't make any sense!

Still, he couldn't get rid of the nagging suspicion that Maggie had given birth to his

child!

He walked into his office later that night and sat down in his leather chair, contemplating the possibility. So many questions popped into his mind. The first one; if he was the father, why hadn't she called him? She had his private cell phone number. If he was the father, then she should have told him!

The second idea was just as infuriating. If that was his child, then the babe needed protection! Holy hell, the babe might be in danger! The thought sent him surging from his chair and storming into the security office.

"I might have a child!" he announced to his head of security.

Nittan stared at Ramit for a long moment, too stunned to speak. Then he shifted into gear. "Who?" he demanded.

"The woman I met at the art museum last year. She gave birth to a child several months ago. How soon can you find out if the child is mine?"

Nittan lifted his cell phone and dialed a number. "I need you to get DNA from a child." A moment later, he gave Maggie's address, which he'd pulled up on his computer. "As soon as you have the DNA, send it to me. I need it by tonight."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Then he turned to his deputy. “Call Dash Phillips in Nevada. Tell him to get his people out to this address,” he sent the information via text, “until we can get our people out there. It has to happen in the next five minutes.”

The deputy turned and rushed from the room.

Ramit breathed a sigh of momentary relief, gripping the counter in the center of the security office. “Thank you!”

Turning, he strode out of the office and headed for his own. Hamud was there, waiting for him with a worried expression in his eyes.

“You heard?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” he replied, adding a small bow.

“Does everyone know?”

“No, Sire. There are very few people who know and I will contain the gossip.”

“Thank you.” He paced his office, running his hands through his hair.

Hamud stood there, watching silently for a moment, then he offered, “Perhaps I should cancel your other appointments today, Your Highness.”

Ramit swung around, staring at the man for a moment as the words slowly processed. When he was able to make sense of what the man had suggested, Ramit nodded.

“Yes. Thank you, that’s probably for the best.” He started pacing again, as his frustration grew. Then he stopped abruptly and called out, “Have my plane prepped. I’m going to Philadelphia to wait for confirmation.”

Hamud paused for a startled moment, then nodded and bowed. “I’ll have that arranged immediately.” And then he left, leaving Ramit to simmer in his confusion and fury.

Chapter 21

“Oh, so you are awake and trying to give me a few more minutes of sleep, eh?” Maggie cooed as she stepped into her daughter’s bedroom. Bending over the crib, she scooped Nadia into her arms. The tiny girl wiggled with delight, blowing spit bubbles in anticipation of her breakfast. “Are you going to be impatient while we change your diaper? Or are you going to live up to your name and let me do the deed as quickly as...”

Nadia squealed with anger as soon as Maggie laid her down on the changing table. “Ah, I see that you will not be cooperative, my little lady.” She tickled Nadia’s tummy, which only eased the squealing for a moment, then little arms and legs resumed their wiggling in protest.

Maggie had become quite adept at changing Nadia’s diaper, but her daughter’s morning impatience was still a challenge. Thankfully, today wasn’t too bad. With a clean diaper efficiently strapped on, Maggie carried Nadia over to the chair near the corner. “Okay, we’re ready now. And yes, I know you’re hungry. I know,” she whispered, adjusting her clothing and the ugly maternity bra to reveal her breast. Immediately, Nadia latched on and started suckling, eager to fill her belly.

The doorbell rang and Maggie looked through the small window in Nadia’s room, then down at her daughter. “I know that you’re not finished, love. Do you think the

person at the front door is more important?”

In response, Nadia’s dark eyes stared back up at Maggie but there was no cessation of her breakfast.

Maggie smiled softly, madly in love with her little girl. Especially after a full five hours of sleep. Before Nadia’s birth, only five hours of sleep a night would have made Maggie feel like a zombie. Post birth, five hours of sleep was equivalent to winning the lottery.

“Apparently, no one is more important than your next meal. And it’s probably Ms. Iverson next door checking in. No one else would come this early in the morning.” Maggie ran a finger down over Nadia’s soft cheek, smiling at her daughter. Her friends at the club as well as the overly generous owners, Levi, Sean and Matteo, were constantly sending her care packages. Sometimes, it was a package of diapers, and other times new toys or clothes. “Aunt Emily and Aunt Ann are coming for a visit today. Are you looking forward to seeing them?”

The pounding on the door was more emphatic this time.

“Goodness, someone is impatient!” she whispered, but didn’t bother to pull her daughter away. Nadia wasn’t silent when denied a meal. “Whoever is out there can just wait, right?”

Thankfully, there was no more knocking on the door and Maggie relaxed against the cushions of the rocking chair, assuming that whoever had been knocking had gone. “We only have a few more days alone together and I’m not letting anyone interrupt us before I have to go back to work.”

Chapter 22

Ramit stood back, waiting for his bodyguards to give the okay that the residence was safe. They were currently surrounding the small house, and Ramit wanted to rush inside and find Maggie and his daughter!

Nadia. What a beautiful name. Would she look like him? Or did she have soft, pale skin like Maggie?

“There’s no answer, Your Highness.”

Ramit turned to look at one of his other guards. The man nodded confirmation before adding, “There’s a car in the garage, Sire.” He cupped his hands around his face as he peered in through one of the windows. “And there are stacks of baby supplies.” The man turned around, looking strange. “I think there are enough diapers in that garage for three or four babies, Your Highness.”

Ramit clenched his teeth, trying to figure out where Maggie might be. “Can you get inside? Maybe we can find out where she is. It’s essential that my daughter be protected.” And yes, he knew that the baby girl was his daughter. The DNA evidence proved that Nadia was his child.

He was a father! That thought kept echoing through his head. He still couldn’t quite wrap his mind around the reality that he had a daughter.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Would Nadia grow up to look like Ciara? His sister was a truly beautiful woman. And more importantly, she was intelligent. He'd gotten to know her over the past year and was astounded by her intelligence and empathy. He definitely hoped that Nadia resembled Ciara. And Maggie.

Damn, he'd really failed when it came to his treatment of Maggie. She'd gone through so much all on her own.

No, she hadn't gone through this pregnancy on her own. She'd had friends and Levi to watch out for her. She had an excellent support network. But she hadn't had anyone to lean on during the scary hours of the night. She hadn't had someone beside her during the doctor's appointments or someone to run to the grocery store at the last minute.

"Go in!" he commanded, stepping back but remaining on the front lawn, watching as one of his men pulled out some tools and, within seconds, had the front door unlocked.

The ease with which his men were able to disable the lock on Maggie's front door was just more evidence that she and his daughter were in danger! Ramit wanted both of them on his plane and back home, where he could keep them safe. Once there, he could spoil both of them! Just as Maggie deserved.

As he stood there, surrounded by his guards, Ramit watched as several of his men silently entered the house. They just needed to look around to find some hint as to where Maggie might be. She wasn't at the club and her car was in the garage. Had someone already discovered that Nadia was his child? Did they have Maggie and

Nadia...?

A scream sounded from somewhere in the house. Ramit didn't wait for an explanation. He rushed inside, ready to battle his guards because he recognized that terrified voice. Maggie was inside! She was inside and she was terrified!

As soon as his eyes adjusted to the darker interior, he discovered Maggie holding a tiny infant, who was also shrieking. Maggie was using her whole body to shield the infant while kicking at his guards, who were keeping their distance.

"Maggie, relax," Ramit soothed. "It's just me. We were worried about where you were because you didn't answer the door." He used a calming tone, but Maggie's eyes were still wild, terrified, and rightfully so. Damn it, he'd messed up again! In his zeal to protect his future wife and child, he'd put them in danger!

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled, her hand covering the baby's head as she cradled the baby against her chest. "Get the hell out of here! This is my house and you had no right to break in! I'm calling the police! Every one of you will be arrested for this!"

"Maggie, I know that we scared you, but please listen."

She wiped a tear with her shoulder, never taking her eyes from him and the men who were now filtering out of the small house. One of them closed the front door, but she watched from the large picture window as one of the men stood sentry outside, right in front of the window.

Turning back to Ramit, she glared at him, bouncing Nadia as she tried to soothe the little girl. "What's going on? Why are you here?"

Ramit took a deep breath, as did Maggie, but she still looked frantic. "Will you come

sit down and let me explain?”

She pulled the still-screaming baby closer. “No! Get out of my house Ramit!”

“I can’t do that, love.”

She shook her head and wiped another tear, still bouncing to try to soothe their daughter. “Don’t you dare call me ‘love’, you bastard! You are a lying, hateful ass! And look what you’ve done to Nadia! She was fine before your goons broke into our home and terrified us!”

“I know. That was wrong of me. And I’m so sorry, but we were worried about you when you didn’t answer the door.”

Maggie shifted the baby, still trying to soothe her. “Go away, Ramit. I don’t want you here. And Nadia doesn’t either. We’re fine all by ourselves.”

He was shaking his head even before she finished her statement. “I’m sorry, love, but I can’t do that.” He tilted his head towards the baby. “That’s my daughter. And she can’t be left unprotected.”

The bouncing stopped and Maggie’s eyes widened. “Wait! How is she in danger? Other than from your goons?”

“She’s my heir, honey. She has to be protected. As do you. I have many enemies in the world. As soon as word gets out about you and Nadia, my enemies will use either, or both of you to try to hurt me. Or my country.”

Maggie was silent for a moment, still bouncing and Nadia’s fury seemed to be easing somewhat as well. Maggie stared at him, her big, brown eyes wide with confusion. Slowly, she shook her head, tightening her hold on the baby. “Wait...why would they

use Nadia? Or me, to get to you?’

Ramit hesitated for a long moment. Sighing, he gave her the truth. “Because both of you are important to me. They will use my feelings for you to get what they want from me.”

“No!” she whispered, shaking her head.

“It’s not only possible, but probable. Even if someone doesn’t try to extort money from me, my political enemies might use Nadia, or you, to manipulate my country’s policies.”

Obviously, Maggie didn’t quite believe him. “No! That’s not possible!” she gasped, resuming the bouncing. The baby was still crying, unresponsive to Maggie’s touch.

“It’s possible, love.” He nodded towards Nadia. “She’s sensing your feelings, isn’t she? That’s why she won’t settle down?”

“Yes,” Maggie replied, then pulled Nadia back from her chest and looked into her daughter’s red and tear stained face. “It’s okay, honey. Momma’s here. Everything is perfectly fine.” The baby didn’t seem to believe her, but Nadia stopped crying. She looked over at Ramit distrustfully, her tiny mouth still twisted into an angry moue. “See? No bad men. Everything is good.”

Chapter 23

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

When Maggie looked up at Ramit, she was stunned by the awe in his eyes. The big, powerful sheik was staring down at their tiny daughter with a look of absolute surprise. The two stared at each other without moving.

“This is your daddy, Nadia,” Maggie said to their daughter. Then she looked up at Ramit. “Unless you are going to argue against her paternity?”

Ramit’s eyes flicked up at Maggie. He quickly shook his head, then stared back at Nadia. “No. She’s my daughter. I know this.”

Maggie noticed that his voice sounded a bit choked now. For some reason, that charmed her. However, she wasn’t sure what to say. In her head, she’d pictured her life without this man. She’d expected to raise Nadia on her own. So now, suddenly having him in front of her, was...confusing, to say the least.

“Okay,” she finally replied.

He seemed to relax slightly. “Okay?”

What was she supposed to do or say? Maggie shrugged. “Okay.”

Nadia still looked confused and unsure. Maggie looked down at Nadia and her heart ached. But she knew what she needed to do. “Would you...like to hold her?”

The tension in his large body increased tenfold. He actually stepped backwards and that amused her.

“No!” he rasped, even as he stared at the little lady hungrily. “She’s too...small. And delicate.” He backed up another step. “No. She’s safer in your arms.”

His fear seemed to ease her terror several notches and she actually smiled. “She won’t break, you know.”

Ramit’s dark eyes stared at the tiny bundle that gazed right back at him with identical dark eyes. “She might.” He stared a bit longer. “I won’t risk it.” Ramit cleared his throat and Maggie noticed that he clenched and unclenched his fingers.

She smiled at him, momentarily forgetting the anger she’d felt at his betrayal so many months ago. Right now, Ramit wasn’t the sheik with all of the power and money. Power that could truly devastate her life. Instead, he was just a man who wanted to get to know his child. A man who was afraid of hurting this tiny, precious life that they’d created together so long ago.

“Why don’t you sit down and I can put her in your arms? She might cry, but she’s actually used to being around other people. She has lots of visitors.”

Ramit looked up at her hopefully. “Will that work?”

She smothered a chuckle and nodded. “Yes. If you sit down in that chair, I can put her in your arms. Then you can hold her without fear of dropping her. Will that make you more comfortable?”

He glanced at the chair in question, then back at Nadia. She wasn’t angry now. Instead, her dark eyes were curious. Even a bit confused. Her little mouth was open as she stared up at him, both of them waiting for him to decide.

Ramit sat down, then stared longingly at the small baby. “How do I hold her?” he asked.

Slowly, Maggie lowered Nadia into his arms, releasing her daughter just as Ramit's strong, gentle arms wrapped securely around her.

"Just...hold her. Support her head."

"Why?" he asked, nervously looking up at Maggie.

She smiled gently and perched on the small ottoman. "Because babies aren't born with muscles. In fact, most of their bones are all mushy."

"That's...wrong!"

She laughed and shrugged. "I don't think that any woman would want a baby coming out of..." she blushed when his eyes moved to her eyes, then down to her hips. "Well, you know. A baby's bones are soft when they come through the birth canal so that a woman's...body...isn't torn up. We're flexible, but the softer bones help."

"I thought that a baby was...well, stronger."

"Nope. Not even their skull is fully formed until several months after they are born. And they aren't born with muscles. They don't need them in the womb since they are surrounded by amniotic fluid. They're basically swimming until they are born. So, when they come out, they have to build up their muscles. And their head is the heaviest part of their body at this age. It takes a while for them to build up enough muscles to hold up their head."

He held Nadia with one arm, then stroked the dark fuzz on the top of her head with his other hand. "Got it," he replied, his tone revealing his awe. "She's beautiful."

Maggie smiled, then laughed softly at her...their...daughter's fascinated stare. "She's not crying," she told him. "I have this theory that babies sense when they are safe. If

I'm right, she feels safe in your arms."

"She is," he replied, and the words sounded like a vow. "She will always be safe!"

Maggie smiled, charmed by this side of him. "How did you find out about her?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

He shifted slightly and Nadia's hands bobbed with the movement.

"Levi was in Ditar a few days ago. He mentioned that you were still on maternity leave." He looked up at her. "I put two and two together and realized that you'd given birth to our child."

Maggie shrugged, feeling a slight bit of panic. "Levi has been good to me and Nadia over the past few months. Emily and Ann come by pretty often to help me as well."

"I ordered my staff to start interviewing for a nanny. And we'll begin the process of hiring tutors as well."

Maggie didn't like the sound of that. "A nanny? And why is Nadia going to need tutors? First of all, she'll be perfectly fine in public schools. The school district here is excellent. The high school in my neighborhood has a very high graduation rate and a high college acceptance rate."

His large fingers touched Nadia's tiny ones. The contrast was shocking. So were the similarities. Nadia definitely had Ramit's dark eyes and his darker hair. Her skin was also a little darker than Maggie's. It was a stark reminder that Nadia was no longer her daughter alone. Now that Ramit was in the picture, she'd have to share her tiny daughter with Nadia's father.

The big question was how they'd accomplish the sharing.

"She will attend boarding school," he announced.

Maggie's eyes widened. "Um...no! She won't!" Maggie announced and stood up, stepping away from the ottoman.

Chapter 24

Ramit looked up at Maggie, noticing the panic and determination in her eyes. He suddenly realized that, again, he'd gone about this the wrong way. Instead of working with Maggie, proposing to her and convincing her to come back to Ditar with him, he'd acted in his usual brusque manner and issued edicts and commands.

Time to soften his words and approach this situation differently.

"Maggie," he soothed, starting to stand up, but then heard a squawk and looked down at his daughter. His daughter! Those words still stunned him.

"Don't you dare 'Maggie' me!" she hissed, careful not to raise her voice. She was aware that any startling sounds would alarm Nadia all over again.

"You know that we can't stay here."

Maggie huffed. "I don't know anything of the sort!" she replied back, folding her arms under her breasts. The movement pushed her breasts higher and he was suddenly very aware of the more voluptuous silhouette. His mouth went dry at the sight of those soft, full mounds.

Maggie snapped her fingers in his face. "Eyes up, big boy!" she snapped. "They aren't for you any longer. These," she said, waving her hand in front of her breasts, "are for the exclusive use of our daughter."

He almost laughed out loud at that assertion, but decided it was probably better to not argue that point.

Yet.

“Maggie, you don’t understand the situation.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. Like I haven’t had to figure out every part of being a single mom over the past twelve months!”

He stood up, cradling his daughter carefully, but he was angry now. “You know damn well that all you had to do was call me and let me know that you were pregnant and I would have helped you!” He reigned in his anger. “But you chose not to tell me I had a daughter.” He tried to suppress the fury and anger at that, but it was difficult.

Unfortunately, his anger sparked her own. She stepped forward, poking him in the shoulder. “I might have informed you if I’d trusted you! But apparently, you decided to lie to me. To fool me into believing that you were just regular guy! That we could have a real future together!” She took a deep breath and waved him off as he opened his mouth. “I fell for you, Ramit! I fell for all the sweet, wonderful words that you spewed in my direction. I believed you when you pretended to be a normal guy! It wasn’t until you walked into TBC that I realized what you really were! That you’d lied to me!”

“I never lied, Maggie,” he assured her.

“Oh yeah?” she challenged. “What were you doing at the museum a year ago?”

“The museum?” he echoed, not sure what she meant.

“The day we met?”

Oh, right! He decided to be honest with her. “On the day we met, I was pretending to be in Philadelphia to offer the museum several pieces of art from my collection.

Pieces that have been in my family's private collection for decades. The museum director was very interested in winning the right to display those pieces. It was all a ruse so that I could slip into the country without alerting your government."

That stopped her cold. She stared at him, her mouth opening and closing. "Why?"

"I needed an excuse to come here to deal with someone who was trying to blackmail me."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Ramit watched her expression and noticed the softening of her stance. She even stepped forward, her arms dropping to her sides. “Blackmail?” she whispered, her pretty brown eyes concerned now.

“It’s an ugly business, but yes.”

“Who?” she whispered. “And why?”

“Barney Mathis and Humphrey Todras tried, and they almost succeeded,” he emphasized. “They tried to use what I thought were naked pictures of my sister in order to convince me to fund a project for them. Apparently, they’d burned through all of their inheritance and needed to find a new way to finance their decadent lifestyle.”

Maggie remembered the pictures in Humphrey’s sports jacket. She turned away, wringing her hands as she thought about those pictures. “A dark haired woman having sex with a dark haired man? In a room with blue walls?”

His head snapped up and his eyes narrowed on her. “How the hell do you know anything about those pictures?”

She turned to face him. “Because I know how Barney and Humphry lost them,” she admitted quietly. “Ann, Emily and I have a sort of...system...at the club. When we...uh...think one of the rich bastards who frequent the club...is doing something wrong, we...um,” she shrugged. “Well, we do what we can to stop them.”

There was a long moment of tense silence. Then he said, “What did you do,

Maggie?” Fear was choking him now. “Did you...?”

“I overheard Humphrey Todras whispering to a guest at the club. They said something about a trophy, patting his jacket. That was a couple of weeks after Barney Mathis...well,” she sighed, running her fingers through her hair at the horrible memory. “Barney is an entitled ass and he...!”

“Made a pass at you. And you kneed him in the groin.”

She stared up at him, her eyes wide. She didn’t say anything, remembering the look in his eyes when he’d walked away from her.

“That’s the night that I saw you two. I thought you were flirting. I saw you in the hallway that night. And I thought,” he paused and stared down at Nadia. Shaking his head, he looked at Maggie and admitted, “I thought that you were accepting his advances.” He sighed and pulled Nadia closer. “I’ll admit that jealousy at seeing you with that...man...caused me to act...precipitously. I was jealous and walked away.”

Her eyes were wide after that admission. “That’s why you walked away?”

“Yes. Because I thought that you...welcomed his advances.”

Maggie bowed her head, nodding her understanding even as she ignored the stab of pain. “You thought that I wanted him to...assault me.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I was completely wrong.” He closed his eyes. “I know that you can’t forgive me for believing the worst without evidence.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. “Maggie, I’m learning. At the art gallery, you started the process of showing me how to look at...activities and situations differently. I can only apologize for viewing that situation at the club through my own lens and not understanding. But I’m trying to learn and be better. It’s a slow, pathetic process, but I’m getting there.”

Maggie nodded, not sure if she was livid that he'd assumed something so awful about her, or amazed that he'd admitted he was wrong. Not just wrong, but actively trying to fix his perception of certain situations. It was a sort of evolution, wasn't it?

"You're learning?" she asked softly, wanting to believe him. But still wary. She had always been too trusting. Was this the moment to step back and protect herself? Or embrace her hope?

"Apparently, that's the night that you kneed him in the groin."

She shuddered. "Barney Mathis is terrifying. And he's angry now. Not to mention, wildly unethical. Humphrey is even worse. A couple of weeks after that night, Ann spilled some wine on his sports jacket so that we could see what was in his pocket. It was the pictures. We switched them out with fakes and now, I think he's really angry with us."

Ramit moved closer, his eyes wide at her admission. "You...confronted him?"

She shrugged. "Indirectly," she replied, not sure why he was so upset.

Before he could respond, a bad smell permeated the air. "What the hell?" Ramit growled, looking around, then his eyes landed on the infant in his arms. "Please tell me that smell isn't coming from Nadia!"

The tension created by their conversation evaporated in the face of his horror. Maggie couldn't stop the burst of laughter. She even covered her mouth as she turned towards the hallway. "I am happy to inform you that our little girl is a very healthy baby. And that means that she has very stinky poop."

Maggie felt Ramit following her and tried to find that small kernel of self-discipline. However, she could feel the heat from his body and her own reacted to his nearness.

It had always been like this. From the first moment she'd met Ramit, he'd been a force to contend with. Just his mere presence sent her into a tizzy.

Stepping into Nadia's room couldn't be avoided. All of the supplies were on the changing table. "Help yourself," she told him, sweeping her arm to indicate the changing table with all of the diapers, wipes, and powder.

He stared at her. "You don't actually expect me to change her diaper!" he asked, stunned.

Maggie shrugged, then tilted her head to the side when she realized that he was serious. "Why wouldn't I expect you to change her diaper? You're holding her."

He looked down at Nadia, who had a blissful expression on her tiny features.

Ramit looked back at Maggie, extending his arms towards her, trying to hand their daughter over to her. "I have never changed a diaper."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Maggie crossed her arms over her chest. “So, you’re going to let our precious daughter sit in her poop? Not very fatherly of you. What happened to your evolution to a more enlightened man? Are you seriously going to tell me that only women are supposed to change diapers? Aren’t you trying to convince me that you’ve evolved?”

He shook his head, his jawline grim. “You can change her,” he said, then walked purposefully towards her as if he was going to hand her over.

Maggie backed up and lifted her hands into the air. “Nope! This is all you. Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

Ramit looked at her, then at the changing table, horror dawning on his handsome face. “But I don’t know how to change a diaper,” he admitted quietly.

Maggie rolled her eyes. “Ramit, you are a highly intelligent man. I googled you. You have overseen peace negotiations with your neighbors, managed very promising trade agreements, and have managed your country’s economy with brilliance.” She paused, one eyebrow raised. “Are you seriously going to tell me that you can’t figure out how to change a diaper?”

He blinked at her , then asked, “You researched me?”

She felt the heat stain her cheeks, but shook off the pleasure. “Ramit, your daughter needs her diaper changed. It’s a bonding experience, believe it or not. So go ahead and help her by wiping her butt and then put on a new diaper.”

Ramit looked as if he wanted argue further, but Nadia cooed slightly, grabbing

Ramit's attention. He looked down at his infant daughter and something tugged at his heart. He could no more ignore that adorable smile than he could cut off his own arm.

"Fine!" he grumbled and headed over to the changing table. "What do I do?"

He watched Maggie smother another laugh, but she walked over and positioned herself at the end of the changing table while he stood beside it.

"You're going to help me, right?"

Maggie shrugged, leaning a shoulder against the wall. "Only because the nurses in the hospital helped me. Otherwise, I'd let you learn the same way I did – by searching the internet for answers."

He glanced at her with those dark eyes and her heart turned over in her chest. "I'm sorry, Maggie. I truly am sorry that you've had to learn to do this all on your own."

Maggie's mouth softened. She was such a sucker for this man! She'd had a year of heartache, and he stormed her home, literally and figuratively, and offered a few kind words, and she was ready to forgive him.

Shaking herself, she gazed down at Nadia. Their daughter had to come first. "First of all, keep a hand on her belly the whole time so that she doesn't roll off and fall."

Ramit did a double take at that instruction and his hand flew to Nadia's tummy. Instantly, the little lady's arms and feet started dancing and he heard Maggie chuckle.

"She...enjoys this process?" he asked, not sure that he could believe what he was sensing. Surely changing a baby's diaper wasn't fun for the baby any more than it was for the parent!

“Sometimes she hates it, sometimes she loves it. We play a lot while getting cleaned up,” Maggie explained. “So yeah, generally she likes it unless she’s hungry and impatient.”

He felt like an imbecile as he carefully unsnapped her onesie, keeping his hand on her belly the whole time. “Okay, what do I do?”

She verbally walked him through the process and Ramit had to concentrate to understand the instructions. He wished he had six or seven hands, but finally, after two ripped diapers, he got one perfectly wrapped around her adorable butt.

When it was all over, with Nadia’s legs snapped into a clean onesie, he sighed with relief. “I’m never doing that again,” he vowed.

“Sure you are,” Maggie replied, reaching out to lift Nadia into her arms. She lifted her daughter higher into the air and Nadia giggled and shrieked happily as Maggie kissed her round tummy. When Nadia was settled into Maggie’s arms, she continued, “Nadia poops several times a day, plus the wet diapers. She’ll need your help several more times today.”

Ramit shook his head. “No, that task will be delegated to the nanny that my staff will hire. They’ve already set up interviews for the next few days and a temporary nanny will meet us at the airport.”

Maggie heard the words, but they didn’t make any sense. “Airport? And what nanny?”

Ramit stared at her and her stomach tightened at the sudden tension in his features. Whatever he was going to say next, Maggie knew she wasn’t going to like.

“Maggie, you and Nadia need to come back to Ditra with me.”

“Why? What would be the point? I have only one more week before my leave is up.”

He shook his head. “No, Maggie. I need both of you to come to Ditra with me. You’ll be safe there.”

“Safe? What’s the danger here? Other than you and your team breaking into my house!”

Maggie held Nadia close now, stroking the back of their daughter’s fuzzy head. She kept shaking her head as Ramit took a deep breath and kept going.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

“Maggie, I am ruler of Ditra, a very powerful country. That means everyone in my family, including you and Nadia, are in danger from my enemies.”

Enemies? She'd never considered that Ramit could have enemies. Hadn't he said something along these lines earlier? “Who would want to hurt me or Nadia? She's just a baby!”

“I told you earlier, Maggie. Many people would use one or both of you to get to me, to influence my decisions or the direction of my country's development. I don't mean to scare you but...”

“Well, you're doing an excellent job of it!”

“...but I need to keep you both safe. And...” he sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

“And what?” she snapped, not enjoying this conversation at all. “What, Ramit? You've already broken into my house and told me that we have to come with you, fly off to a foreign country. What more could you say that would be worse than that?”

He smiled grimly. “We need to marry. Immediately.”

Marry Ramit? She had no idea how to respond to that. All she knew was that...nothing. At this moment, she wasn't sure of anything anymore.

“No, Ramit. I need you to leave, and I need to get ready to return to work in a week.”

“I'm afraid that's not possible.” He took a step forward, and Maggie backed up,

startled and overwhelmed. “Maggie, you are in danger. Nadia is in danger.” He looked towards the hallway. “You just told me that I needed to do something that I didn’t like because it would benefit our daughter. Now I need you to do the same.” He stepped closer, relieved when she didn’t step back again. “I promise, I will make this transition as easy as possible.” He tilted his head slightly. “Or as easy as I can. Once you are back in the palace, in Ditra, then you will understand that this is a good thing. I will ensure that you have everything you could possibly want.”

Maggie stared up at him, her heart thudding. “I want to stay here.”

He smiled faintly, but the expression flitted away. “Except that.”

“But...why?”

“Because you, and our daughter, have power over me.”

She shook her head, confused. “You said that before and it didn’t make any sense! What does that mean? I don’t feel powerful. If anything, I feel that you’re dictating everything.”

“It might seem like it now, but once we’re back in Ditra as my wife, you will have enormous power.”

Maggie stared at him, unsure of what he was talking about. “What if I don’t marry you?”

“Then you will still be showered with everything you could possibly want. And you would still have a great deal of power over me.” He glanced at Nadia cradled in Maggie’s arms. “But our daughter will be ridiculed and rejected.”

“No!” she whispered, pulling Nadia closer. “Absolutely not! I won’t allow Nadia to

be hurt!”

“Then come with me. Marry me and I will guarantee that you will never want for anything in your life.”

“What about my house? What about my friends?”

He looked around, then at her. “You won’t lose your house or your friends. And you can see them whenever you’d like. They can come to Ditra to visit, or you can go to them. I’m not imprisoning you, Maggie. I’m offering you riches beyond anything you’ve ever imagined.”

“But...why?” she pleaded. “And why the rush? If you want to marry me, then why can’t we get to know one another better first?”

“Because of Nadia. We need to marry so everyone will accept her. My culture has very strict views about children born out of wedlock. So, the marriage has to be done in secret. My people will ensure that the world will assume that Nadia was conceived after our wedding.”

“That’s...crazy! The world doesn’t care about children conceived out of wedlock anymore. This is all just...overwhelming. I need more time.”

He sighed. “Unfortunately, we don’t have time. That’s the one thing I can’t give you. We need to leave, Maggie. Now, before my enemies discover the existence of you or Nadia.”

Nadia started fussing, obviously sensing the growing tension. Automatically, Maggie started bouncing, trying to soothe the fretful child.

“I don’t understand, Ramit.”

He moved closer, but didn't touch her. "Maggie, I need you to trust me."

She snorted. "I trusted you a year ago and look how that turned out." She moved around him, walking down the hallway to the family room. "No, I can't trust you. I don't really even know you, Ramit."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

He nodded slowly, acknowledging the truth of her words. “Fair enough.” He moved over to the window and pointed outside. “Take a look, Maggie. See the guards?”

Maggie warily moved towards the window, searching Ramit’s handsome features until she finally looked through the glass.

Then she gasped!

Her tiny yard was filled with men in dark suits, wearing grim and determined expressions. If any of her neighbors noticed, she would have a lot of explaining to do. And how could they not notice? There were four...no, five...men just in her front yard! She spun around and peered through her small kitchen window. Sure enough, there were more men in the back!

“What’s going on, Ramit?” she whispered, terrified now. “Why are so many men standing around my house?”

He turned her so that she was facing him, lightly gripping her upper arms. “Those are my personal bodyguards, love. They follow me everywhere, even when I’m in the palace. Every moment that we remain here in this house, you and Nadia, and me, are in danger.”

“No!” she hissed, still bouncing as she continued to try and understand. “This isn’t happening! I thought you were just a regular guy!”

“Why is my financial status such an issue?”

She was silent for a long moment, and Ramit dug deep to find a well of patience. What was it about this woman? Maggie was the only person he would give this much leeway to. His day was filled with decisions that he had to make quickly and he expected every person on his staff to follow through with those commands as effectively as possible.

But Maggie had the ability to spin him around, to make him want to give her...everything. Including patience. And explanations! Hell, when was the last time his commands had even been questioned?

Never, he thought.

“Maggie, please, help me understand. If I can understand why you are so wary of me and...” he stopped, looking stunned. “That night at the club! You looked at me with fury in your eyes. Is this...are these issues connected?”

The reminder of that night so long ago seemed to spark something inside of her. She nodded, pressing her lips together for a moment. “Yes,” she finally replied.

He waited, but she couldn’t speak. Her throat clogged up with the memory of how betrayed she’d felt that night.

“Please, Maggie.” He touched her arm, then brushed his hand over Nadia’s head.

Maggie cleared her throat, but before she could speak, Nadia let out a loud squawk. This was her hunger cry and Maggie groaned.

“I need to feed her again. She...wasn’t finished when you burst in here earlier,” she told him. “Will you...give me some privacy?”

He blinked, then looked at their daughter who was making angry faces and nuzzling

Maggie's chest.

"You're nursing her?" he asked, his tone sounding stunned.

"Yes. I'm lucky that I'm able to nurse her. There are a lot of women who can't." She moved over to the rocking chair with all of the pillows around it. She settled herself and Nadia into their normal position, then started unbuttoning her shirt. "I'd only gotten halfway through feeding her when you and your men burst into the house. So, she's probably angry." She glanced at him again. "You need to leave."

"Not a chance," Ramit replied and settled onto the ottoman where Maggie had sat while he'd held their daughter. "This is our child and I've missed a great deal over the past year." His eyes narrowed on her. "Including the surprise at knowing that I was even a father, wouldn't you say?"

Maggie swallowed, then nodded at the truth. "You're right. That was selfish of me. I'm...sorry. I should have figured out how to contact you."

"I'll forgive you, if you'll explain while you nurse Nadia," he replied.

Maggie settled Nadia into position, adjusted her clothing, then Nadia's greedy mouth latched onto her nipple. Immediately, the pressure in her breast eased as Nadia sucked.

"Maggie?" he prompted.

"Right," she sighed and looked up. Nadia had figured out the whole nursing thing. She was an expert now and knew exactly what to do. Taking a deep breath, she looked over at Ramit, grateful that he was looking at her face and not at her uncovered breast. "I grew up very poor, Ramit." When he didn't react, she continued. "I don't mean that we had to scrounge for things. I mean, we literally couldn't afford

food sometimes. I was a good student, but my father...wasn't the best role model. I got a job immediately out of high school. Eventually, my waitressing skills improved and I got a job at TBC." She brushed Nadia's fuzzy head as she continued. "The Billionaire's Club was the best job I thought I could ever hope for."

"It's an excellent place to work. Levi is a good boss."

Maggie snorted. "Levi is wonderful." She shifted, getting more comfortable. "It was his father that was truly horrid." Maggie shook her head at the memories. "Jerry Harris loved having his female employees prance around in skimpy outfits and painfully high heels. The tips were great," she continued, then shook her head. "But the sexual harassment was rampant. The club members thought that the female waitressing staff were barely a step above prostitutes." She gazed down at Nadia. "In truth, some of them were." She lifted her head and stared hard at Ramit. "I wasn't. After leaving my father's house, where he thought it was okay to smack me around whenever he was in a pissy mood, I shifted to being smacked around by the club management and the various club members."

"I want names," he replied with a smoothly lethal tone.

She chuckled, but there wasn't any humor in the sound. "I could give you a list of names, but me, Emily, and Ann have already gotten our revenge."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

“Interesting. Could you give me details?”

She shrugged. “That’s not the important part of the explanation, Ramit.”

He tilted his head in acknowledgement. “Fine. Please proceed.”

She almost laughed at the formality in his voice now. “We didn’t just get back at the members who cornered us or pinched us, trapped us in awkward places around the club,” she continued. Then grinned, an unconscious twinkle to her dark eyes now. “We listened. The club members are rich, entitled, unethical jerks, who think that they should be able to manipulate people without regard to the legality of their actions. They don’t even care that they are breaking the law because they know they can wiggle out of whatever legal consequences might threaten them.”

“I’ve noticed that among many of my peers as well.”

She sighed. “I don’t think that a person can become a billionaire without breaking a lot of laws.” She shifted Nadia to her other breast, ignoring the awkwardness of revealing her body so she just plowed forward with her point. “And my experience listening in on various conversations between company leaders validates that opinion. Their morals are...” she shook her head. “I don’t think they even have morals. From what I have heard and witnessed, they will happily lie, cheat, and steal in order to crush any kind of competition.”

“I know that there are some unethical leaders out there, Maggie. But I’m not one of them. I think once you get to know me better, you’ll understand that I genuinely put the benefit of my people at the crux of every decision.”

Maggie shrugged again. “Yes, well, now you know why I was upset when you walked into the club a year ago.” She looked down at Nadia, stroking her soft, fuzzy head. “When I met you at the museum, I thought you were someone I could believe in. I thought you were just a normal guy that I could...have feelings for. Not like those men from the club.” She lifted her eyes, staring right back at him. “I was wrong.”

“You weren’t wrong!” he snapped back, then stood up, impatiently running a hand through his hair. “And I’m going to prove it to you.”

She smiled gently at him, then adjusted her clothing as Nadia nodded off, her belly full. Thankfully, the little darling always took a mid-morning nap and didn’t seem to be overly concerned about the voices around her.

Ramit turned to look back at her, his eyes fierce with determination. “Maggie, I know that you don’t believe me, but I’m going to prove it to you.”

She stood up, gently cradling Nadia in her arms. “How?”

He looked down at the baby then at her. “First, I need to get both of you to safety. Will you trust me that far?”

She gazed thoughtfully out the window, then glanced up at Ramit. “Are we truly in danger?”

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation.

Maggie sighed, then nodded. “Okay. I’ll go with you. But I’m warning you, I’m not easily convinced.”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. “We’re

coming out. Is the car seat installed?" After a pause, he nodded. "Good. Be ready to move. I want the plane in the air as soon as we're strapped in."

Ramit ended the call, then turned to look at her. "Let's go."

She pulled back, startled that he wanted to leave now. "Ramit, I can't go right now! I need to pack a bag for myself and for Nadia!"

"You don't need to pack anything. There are supplies on the plane for both of you and more at the palace. I instructed my staff to ensure that everything was ready for your arrival."

"Ready for us? How?"

He put a hand to the small of her back, gently urging her out the front door. But before he opened it, he looked down at her. "As soon as I open this, I need you to hurry out of the house and into the vehicle. I'll be right behind you. Strap Nadia into the car seat quickly, but we must keep moving, no matter what happens." He paused and looked at her carefully. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she replied, swallowing back the terror his words generated inside of her. This was real? There was a genuine threat? Was this world truly so crazy that someone would harm an innocent child?

Mentally, she rolled her eyes at herself. Of course people were cruel enough to harm a baby. She'd overheard one of the executives of an investment company talking about how he shut down production of a baby food factory simply to ramp up the scarcity of the product. When the factory was re-started, the price of the product had doubled. Since there was no competition for it, they were able to get away with it.

So as soon as the door opened, Maggie carried a sleeping Nadia out of the house and

dove into the big, black SUV. The door to the vehicle closed as soon as she was inside and the driver started moving within moments. Maggie secured Nadia into the car seat, a feat that wasn't very easy since the little baby had been startled awake and wasn't happy about the change to her normal routine.

As they wove through the busy highways of Philadelphia, Maggie wondered if she'd made the right choice. Had she just jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire?

Chapter 25

Ramit walked into his apartment and looked around, a deep sense of satisfaction washing over him as he noticed Maggie and Nadia's things scattered around. His family. He'd married Maggie within a half hour of returning to the palace yesterday. She'd been so frazzled, he wondered if she even remembered the ceremony.

It didn't matter. Maggie was his. His wife! The records for his daughter were already fixed and submitted to the palace records room and an announcement of his daughter's birth was released to the news outlets. The country was celebrating his marriage and his daughter's birth, and everyone seemed to have accepted that he'd done it in secret in order to protect his family.

Ramit didn't understand his intense need to marry Maggie. On the surface, it was all about legitimizing Nadia's place in his country. But deep down, he knew it was more significant.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

However, now, he had the even larger task of convincing Maggie to give their marriage a proper chance.

With that goal in mind, he walked deeper into the suite, looking for his wife and daughter.

He found them in the courtyard playing in the shallow end of the pool. Maggie wore a floppy hat with a wide rim to protect her delicate, pale skin from the harsh sun. The temperatures would be in the triple digits again today, but right now, it was only in the low eighties.

“Good morning,” he called out softly, not wanting to startle them. “May I join you?”

Maggie looked up at him, those pretty, brown eyes contemplating rejection. Ramit waited, willing her to allow him time with both of them.

“Of course,” she replied, then looked away, splashing more water on Nadia who was wearing an adorable blue bathing suit with ruffles around her chubby legs and arms. Nadia was barely visible under a collection of floating devices, which were probably unnecessary, since she was also lying on an inflatable “swan”.

Ramit paused only long enough to smile at the pair. Nadia obviously loved the water and Maggie looked magnificent in the sleek, black bathing suit. It wasn't nearly as revealing as he'd like, but it would do. For now.

He hurried into the changing rooms. Five minutes later, he emerged wearing a pair of swimming trunks, praying that he could keep his body's reaction to Maggie under

control.

He walked around to the deeper end and dove into the chilly water, feeling instantly refreshed as he swam towards Maggie and his daughter.

Chapter 26

It took a great deal of concentration to remember to close her mouth as Maggie watched Ramit swim towards them. How had she forgotten all those rippling muscles? Or the power that emanated from him constantly?

Keeping her hand on Nadia, she watched with fascination as Ramit emerged from the water, shaking his head like a puppy to shake off the water from his hair.

Puppy. Maggie mentally snorted at the description. There was nothing puppy-like about Ramit. He was more like a wolf. A predator. He swam closer, then abruptly stood up, the water dripping down over all of those amazing muscles.

He sat down next to them, close enough to feel the heat emanating from him. Was steam coming from his body?

Ridiculous, Maggie told herself and tried to focus on Nadia.

It took her a moment to tamp down on the jealousy when their baby daughter giggled and wiggled with delight at the sight of her daddy. Then Ramit carefully lifted her out of the floating swan, kissing the only part of her belly that was accessible underneath the life preserver.

Nadia's tiny hands gripped Ramit's face and he held her close, allowing her to explore. Another wave of jealousy hit Maggie. She wanted to explore. She wanted to rediscover every part of this man that had haunted her dreams almost every night for

the past year.

“Maggie?”

Maggie jerked, blinking as she lifted her eyes to his. “Yes?”

“I asked if you and Nadia had eaten breakfast.”

Maggie tried to remember, but her brain had short circuited as soon as he’d emerged from the dressing room clad in the relatively tight bathing shorts.

“Yes,” she replied, not sure if that was true. Then she smiled at their daughter and tickled the bottom of her foot. “Nadia isn’t patient when it comes to breakfast.” She laughed when Nadia jerked away. “Or any meal, for that matter.”

Ramit chuckled as well, then cradled Nadia closer. “Would you mind if I took her into slightly deeper water?”

Maggie swallowed, quietly pleased that he’d ask permission. “Ramit, she’s your daughter, too. You don’t need to ask me for permission to do anything with her.” She grinned. “Especially when it comes to changing her diaper.”

He snorted. “I guarantee that I’ll pass that task off to the nanny,” he told her as they all moved into deeper water. The swirling water fascinated Nadia. It was apparent that she wasn’t certain if she liked it, but Ramit held her closer, giving her the security that she needed in order to enjoy the new sensation.

“And miss out on such a wonderful bonding opportunity?” she teased.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Without any remorse.” He kissed Nadia’s cheek. “Changing my daughter’s diaper isn’t something I’ll ever miss doing.” He twirled her

around, smiling at the delight in her eyes. “But I really love moments like this,” he admitted and leaned forward, kissing Maggie lightly before pulling away.

Maggie was so stunned by the sudden caress, she wasn’t sure that it had happened for a long moment. When she looked up at him, it was to find him watching her, gauging her response. Abruptly, she dropped her fingers that had been touching her still-tingling lips.

“It’s still there, isn’t it?” he asked, his voice husky with desire.

“What?” she asked, her voice too breathless.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

“I feel it too, Maggie. I won’t deny that I want you. Badly. But I’ll wait until you are ready.”

And with that, he focused on Nadia and her delight at splashing.

Maggie moved further away from Ramit, watching him as she tried to figure out what was going on in her head. She and Nadia had been at the palace for three days. It had been delightful and she had to admit that she enjoyed having “staff”. Having been one all of her life, it was difficult to shift roles, and she made sure to thank the palace servants for everything. Being the “hired help” usually meant that they were invisible to the people that served them.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, floating back to the shallow end.

Maggie followed, looking at the water as her fingers trailed through the ripples. “You,” she replied with honesty.

He looked down at her, Nadia still in his arms. But the little lady was getting cranky, tired of being wet and probably hungry.

“That’s progress,” he replied, handing Nadia to Maggie.

She looked at him curiously, then moved over to one of the chairs, putting Nadia down and taking off her flotation devices, then the adorable bathing suit. With deft movements, she changed Nadia’s diaper, then smiled gratefully at the servant who appeared with clean clothes.

“Why don’t you let Nadia’s nanny put her down for a nap while we talk?”

Maggie sighed and lifted Nadia into her arms. “I need to feed her. And change.” She mentally sifted through the activities in her day, looking for another reason to avoid a private conversation with Ramit.

“Okay, then how about if we talk after you put her down for her nap?”

Maggie bit her lip, then nodded, realizing that she couldn’t avoid the conversation forever.

“Fine. I’ll...find you.”

He smiled and shook his head. “I’ll be around.”

He turned and went into the dressing room, giving her space and a moment to breathe. It was difficult, because Nadia was so impatient, but it was enough to give her a bit of equilibrium.

She carried Nadia into the dressing room with her, and changed back into her clothes quickly. It felt good to be dry, but Nadia was furious now. Maggie didn’t leave the dressing room. Instead, she sat down in one of the comfortable chairs and adjusted her clothing, giving Nadia what she needed. When her daughter quieted down, Maggie looked around. The dressing room of this palace was larger than her living room back in Philadelphia. And the furniture was better, more comfortable. Plus, there was a pitcher of fresh water with cucumber slices and ice, as well as crystal glasses.

She could get used to this. It was incredibly nice not having to cook for herself. Or even go shopping for the ingredients! Ever since she’d stepped into the palace next to Ramit, her every wish was taken care of. If she wanted macaroni and cheese for

dinner, it appeared on the table. If she wanted grapes or strawberries for breakfast, a bowl of, not just green or red grapes appeared on the table, but a variety of grapes in different shapes, sizes, and colors. She hadn't heard of moon-drop grapes before, but apparently, they were a thing. Long, finger-like purple grapes that were deliciously sweet. Oh, and cotton candy grapes? Yup – those were always included. And they really did taste exactly like cotton candy. Her favorite were the champagne flavored grapes, but all of the incredible possibilities made her feel very...spoiled.

“Maggie.”

The soft voice startled her and she looked up, right into the eyes of Ramit as he stood in the doorway.

She glanced down at Nadia and realized that she'd fallen asleep. “How long was I in here?” she asked, shifting to quickly hide herself.

“A while,” he replied. “Why don't you give Nadia to her nanny? Ezbel will stay with her until she wakes up and bring her back to you, unless you'd like more time alone.”

Maggie stood and smiled to the kind, experienced nanny who was hovering behind Ramit. “Thank you,” she told the woman as she transferred the infant into the other woman's arms.

A moment later, Maggie stood in front of Ramit, self-consciously fingering the skirt of the sundress that had magically appeared in her closet this morning.

“Do you hate me?”

That abrupt question brought her eyes up to his. “No!” she blurted. She might hate the man, but she didn't want him hurt. And to be honest, she didn't hate him. Not anymore. It was hard to hate a man who loved their daughter so intensely.

“Good.” He moved closer, his tall form towering over her. “Are you no longer attracted to me?”

Oh, that was a tougher question. She glanced at his shoulders and chest, remembering the water from the pool highlighting those muscles. She didn’t want to be attracted to him. Maggie wished that she was immune to all of...him. But no matter how many times she thought about the past, about the expression on his face when he’d watched her be assaulted, Maggie couldn’t deny that the attraction was still there. Still powerful. Maybe more powerful, if she were being perfectly honest with herself. A man who had so much tenderness for his tiny, infant daughter...a man who gave her everything she hadn’t even thought to ask for...that kind of a man was hard to resist.

“No need to answer that,” he replied with a chuckle, then took her hand and led her outside. He gestured to one of the cushioned chairs set under a pergola that had an overhead fan that circulated the slowly warming air. “Why don’t we talk here? You probably know by now that the summer months here in Ditra get pretty hot.”

She snorted. “Yep. That was evident as soon as we stepped off the plane.”

He nodded, watching her carefully. There was a long silence, then he said, “You’re using Nadia as an excuse to avoid me, Maggie.” He ran a hand over his jawline. “I understand it though. You’ve gone through so much, events that I could have, should have, protected you, and I didn’t.” He leaned forward. “I was an ass, but Nadia...you can’t hide behind her for long.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Maggie thought about it for a moment, then sighed and nodded. “You’re right,” she sighed and looked at the sparkling pool, the flowers blossoming in the gardens, at the lemonade someone had brought out. Maggie’s eyes drifted anywhere but at him. In the end, she had no choice. She lowered her lashes, staring at her linked hands in her lap. “I’m terrified of you, Ramit.”

Ramit leaned forward, his own hands dangling between his knees. “Can you tell me why?”

Maggie fiddled with the folds on her dress, then sighed and looked directly at him. “Because last year, when we were first together, I...fell for you pretty hard.”

Ramit shifted his body, looking at her intently. “And that’s a problem?”

Ignoring the fold on her dress, she lifted her eyes and looked directly into his. “Yes. Because when I realized that you’d li...that I was wrong about you,” she quickly corrected, “I was devastated. The pain I felt, the feeling of betrayal that hit me when I realized that you were ‘one of them’ as we call the wealthy club members, was difficult to recover from.”

“Maggie, I honestly didn’t realize you thought I was...” He paused, smiling slightly. “Normal? Is that your word?”

“Average,” she replied with a twisted smile. “I’ve been thinking a lot about our few days together.” She sighed and looked out at the distance. “You didn’t try to deceive me.” She looked at him again. “However, that merely reinforces the fact that I don’t really know who you are.”

He lifted his hands, spreading them out wide. "I'm eager to let you get to know me now. No subterfuge from either of us." He leaned forward slightly. "And no hiding." When Ramit leaned back again, he asked, "Does that sound fair?"

She considered that for a moment, then nodded her head. "Yes. That sounds...very fair."

He nodded. "It's not like I can hide who I am to the world or to you this time around. We're already married."

She laughed, then looked down at the diamond ring and platinum wedding band on her finger. "That's a good point."

"You don't like the ring?" he asked.

She chuckled, rubbing her finger over the diamond, still amazed at the way it sparkled in the sunshine.

"I know that I should be embarrassed by the enormous diamond." Her thumb brushed against the stone as her lips twisted slightly. "I should be humble and say that I'd prefer something smaller."

"But you like it, don't you?" There was intense satisfaction in his tone now.

She smiled and nodded. "Yeah. Coming from a background where we didn't always have food, and I definitely didn't have jewelry," her lips twisted again, "the ring is nice." She looked at him. "We lived in a trailer, Ramit. Growing up, I was so poor, we didn't even have a real home. Just one of those pre-fab places, and not the nice ones. The ceiling leaked when it rained. The oven didn't work so we used a microwave. The door didn't lock, but," she laughed, "no one would bother breaking into the trailer because our neighbors knew there was nothing worth stealing."

“I’m sorry that your childhood was so rough, Maggie.”

She shrugged. “My childhood plus my experiences with the members at the club, the way that the wealthy men were so entitled, obnoxious, amoral and unethical adds to my whole distrust of wealthy people, Ramit.” She looked off into the distance, not sure what else to say. So when she looked at him this time, there was sincerity in her gaze. “I hope that helps you to understand why I’m so untrusting of rich people.”

He covered her hands with his. “Maggie, you are one of those rich people now.”

That statement startled her so much that she jumped. “I’m...” she stopped, then looked down at the ring on her finger. As much as she wanted to deny his assertion, the ring, her outfit, her surroundings all pointed to the opposite. “That’s...frightening.”

He considered her for a moment, his head tilting, but he pulled his touch away. “You’re worried that your morals and ethics are going to change now that you have unlimited wealth?”

Her eyes widened, her mouth falling open in horror. “No! Absolutely not!” She stared at him, but he merely lifted a dark eyebrow. “I’m not wealthy, Ramit!” She huffed a bit. “I’m just a waitress with a baby. Nothing more.”

He laughed, his eyes twinkling and Maggie knew that she wasn’t going to like whatever he said next.

“I set up a bank account for you. And one for Nadia. I’ve changed my will so that both of you will never want for anything for the rest of your lives if anything happens to me.”

Maggie stared at him, too stunned for words. She opened her mouth to say

something, then shook her head. For a long moment, they simply stared at each other. That's when her manners kicked in and she very primly said, "That's...very generous of you."

Ramit laughed again, shaking his head at her obvious dislike of his wealth. Her wealth now. "You're my wife, Maggie. It's not generous, it's necessary."

Maggie sighed, nervously twisting the ring on her finger. "Ramit, it's going to take time to get used to all of this," she explained, gesturing to the pool and the expansive sitting area. Well, the whole palace, actually. "And I hate to sound ungrateful, but..." she paused, looking into his eyes. "Actually, I'm painfully bored. I don't have to cook or clean. My primary job is to take care of Nadia and that doesn't take up all of my time. I don't have anything to look forward to, nothing to anticipate other than her next feeding."

"What would you like to do?" Ramit asked, leaning back in his chair and watching her carefully.

That question startled her and she paused. After several moments, she shook her head. "I don't know," she replied. After a huff, she pushed her hair out of her eyes and slumped down slightly in the chair. "I've never had the opportunity to explore some of my latent interests."

He shrugged and smiled at her. "Well, now you do. So, if you could do anything, what would your dream job be? What does your heart say?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

She laughed and leaned back as well, trying to imitate his casual demeanor. “I don’t know. Can I get back to you on that?”

He shrugged one of those impressive shoulders. “Sure. You can take all the time in the world.” He then grinned. “And in the meantime, I’m going to pamper you.”

Despite her frugal soul, Maggie loved the sound of that and blushed at his intent gaze. “No one has ever pampered me.”

His expression was startled, then he asked, “You’ve never had boyfriends who wanted to...?” He stopped his question at her amused expression.

Her jaw tightened at his question. “I’ve had two boyfriends over the years. They were both so sweet at first, but as soon as I became emotionally involved, they stopped trying. Worse than that, they started lashing out at me when they were angry or drunk.” She sniffed. “And yet, they were more than happy to accept the services I offered as their just due.”

“What services?” he asked, his tone suddenly angry and he leaned forward, tense and ready to battle those past romantic partners.

She rolled her eyes. “Not what you think.” Then looked at him with mock primness. “And don’t ever assume that again, Your Highness,” she teased, not angry for some reason. She should be offended. Maggie supposed that she should at least be irritated that, again, he was assuming the worst of her. But somehow, his jealousy and outrage on her behalf felt...sweet. “You’ve obviously had lovers in your past, Ramit. It’s the same as me.”

“You could try to be jealous of my past lovers,” he grumbled at her smiling expression.

“Don’t you dare tell me anything about the women in your past,” she warned him, her tone still teasing, but Ramit knew that she was serious. “If I ever meet one of them, I might just have to scratch their eyes out!”

Ramit’s satisfied expression soothed the green monster inside of her.

“I’m serious!” she warned him.

He lifted his hands. “No other lovers in my life, Maggie. That position is all yours.”

Lover? Goodness, that sounded delectable.

But she was mad at him. Right?

Yes. She was angry with him. He’d deserted her, assumed the worst and left her to deal with the consequences of their brief affair.

And yet, he’d also been incredibly sweet over the past week. He hadn’t pressured her for anything more than occasional conversations. Plus, those conversations had given her insight into the man. Not a full picture, she thought. But glimpses. And those snapshots felt...really nice.

Still, she wasn’t going to dive right back into a sexual relationship with the man. Sex made one vulnerable and she was sick of feeling vulnerable!

When she looked at him this time, her chin rose up slightly, defying the nearly tangible sexual tension between them. “Maybe we should get to know one another more thoroughly before we jump in bed this time around.”

He shrugged. "You're in charge, love. Just know that I desire you very much."

Maggie felt her cheeks heat up and she looked away. He was just so...raw! So willing to put his desires front and center. There was no hiding anything with Ramit.

"You don't want my desire?" he asked softly.

Her head snapped up and her mouth fell open. "What?"

"You looked away when I mentioned my attraction to you. Is that not something that you want from me?" He moved closer, taking her hands in his. "Be honest Maggie. If you don't want me, then say so openly. There have been too many secrets between us. We need everything out in the open."

He was right. She stared at their tangled fingers, trying to decide what she truly wanted. For so much of her life, she'd ignored her desires, either because she couldn't afford them or she didn't think she deserved them. Now, here was a man who was blatantly telling her that he wanted her. And she felt...aroused every time he was near. And anger. There was resentment too. But also an undeniable awareness of him as a man.

Did she want him? Yes. Did she believe that she deserved him?

Wasn't that a loaded question!

After a long, tense silence, she nodded. "I want you, Ramit," she finally replied, her innate honesty not allowing her to prevaricate. "And yes, I'm thrilled that you still want me."

"However?" he prompted when she fell silent again.

She flashed him a smile, but it was quickly gone as the weight of their conversation pulled her back to the present. She looked at his large, tanned hands. Taking a deep breath, she opened herself up to him. “Rami, I appreciate that you want me now. But what happens if you...change your mind in the future? What happens to me and Nadia? I would be devastated if I got used to this,” she said, waving her hand to encompass the pool and the palace, just as he’d done moments ago. “If I get used to this, used to your attention, but then you grow tired of me?”

He moved closer to her, his fingers tightening on her hands. “Maggie, are you under the impression that you are not lovely enough, fascinating enough, enticing enough to hold my attention over the long term?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

She bit her lip, debating how honest she could be with him. “Yes,” she finally blurted out. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.” She closed her eyes briefly, then continued. “Ramit, you’re...handsome and amazing and...” she let her eyes move over his shoulders and chest. “And every part of you stimulates my senses in ways that overwhelm me. You terrify me! But I will grow old. My body is different than what it was a year ago. It’s gone through a massive trauma.” She blinked back tears now. “What if you...don’t like what you see?”

He moved closer, pulling her onto his lap this time. “Maggie, there has been no one over the past year. Not a single woman caught my eye.” He kissed her softly. “If I can say that when you aren’t around to entice me, consider what that means for my feelings towards you when you are around to tempt me.”

She stared up at him. Finally, she said, “Is that true?” And she could feel her resistance melting. Maggie tried to revive her resistance, but Ramit...he was charming and handsome and...and she’d missed him so terribly over the past year!

He shifted her bottom, his hands gripping her hips. “Can’t you feel how much I want you, Maggie?”

The hardness pressing against her thigh was real and heady. “Yes!” she finally whispered.

“And are you in doubt about what that means?”

She might have laughed, but her mind was too focused on that part of him pressing against her leg. “No!” she breathed back, licking her lips.

Her eyes dropped to his mouth. “This is what happened last time. We...”

He stopped her with a kiss. It was soft at first. But when she didn’t pull away, he deepened the kiss, his hands tangling in her hair as he gently tugged her head towards his. “Maggie!” he groaned, kissing her again and again until her head spun. Maggie clung to him, shifting against him in an effort to feel more of him, to feel all of him!

The rush of desire was both familiar and terrifying. But also undeniable. She shifted on his lap, letting her hands move slowly over his arms and shoulders. With a moan, she relaxed against him, gasping when he, stood up, carrying her in his arms. Maggie wasn’t sure where they were going. All she knew was a heady, intense happiness now that she was back in his arms. Maybe she should protest, tell Ramit that she needed more time. But she didn’t. Only time would tell her if she was being a fool. For now, she’d trust him because there was nothing else she could do. Ramit was her husband now. And for some silly reason, that meant something to her.

He carried her into her bedroom and laid her down on the bed. Without hesitation, he stripped her sundress off, his hands caressing her skin as he explored every part of her. “You’re beautiful, Maggie!” he hissed, then stood back and stripped off his clothes.

She reached for him, but he grabbed her hands. “No, it’s been too damn long since I’ve held you in my arms. I can’t take it this time.” He kissed her, absorbing her moan of frustration into his mouth.

His mouth moved to her neck, her breasts, kissing and teasing, making her cry out as her hips shifted against his. She tried to push him back against the mattress so she could take control, but he wouldn’t allow it.

Both of them were frantic with need now. Since he’d pinned her hands, she could only lift her head to kiss him, taste him with her mouth. But Ramit moved lower,

teasing her nipples, then moving lower. And lower still! She gasped when his tongue teased those pink folds. She wanted to close her legs because the pleasure was so intense. But his broad shoulders were there, blocking her efforts.

“Don’t hide from me, Maggie!” he groaned, then released her hands so that he could spread her wide, pressing one hand down on her stomach as he laved and teased, sucked that nub into his mouth.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him in place as her hips lifted and rolled to give him better access. There were no thoughts of stretch marks or pregnancy weight now. Every part of her was focused on his mouth and that tongue doing delicious things to her body until...she cried out, arching her back as her first orgasm swept over her.

Ramit didn’t relent until she tried to pull away. And only then did he soothe her body, pulling back just enough to prolong pleasure.

When he lifted up and looked down at her, he realized that he didn’t have a condom. “We can’t...!”

“My purse!” she gasped, pointing to her leather purse that was still sitting on the bedside table.

“You have condoms?” he inquired.

She smiled up at him, still floating with the endorphins from her climax. “I never make the same mistake twice,” she admitted.

He chuckled and shoved off the bed. He pushed through the contents of her purse, coming up with a condom. “You’re smart,” he told her, then pulled her back into his arms. He lifted her against his chest, then handed the condom to her. “I remember the

last time you were on top. It was hot!”

She smiled, then fumbled with the foil package. It took longer than she would have liked, and in the end, he had to take over, but eventually, the condom was on and he lifted her hips until she hovered over the tip of his erection.

“Are you sure, Maggie?” he asked.

She laughed, bracing her hands on his chest. “This isn’t the best time to ask that question.”

“I’ll stop if you aren’t completely sure,” he assured her.

In response, she gripped his wrists and pulled his hands away. Then slowly, gasping with every inch of him that she accepted into her body, lowered herself down onto his shaft. When he was fully embedded inside of her, she closed her eyes, savoring the pleasure of being fully connected to him again.

“It’s been too long,” she whispered.

He flipped her over onto her back and took control. “Too long,” he agreed, then surged into her. Over and over, he stroked her body from the inside, shifting his hips so that every stroke rubbed against that nub.

She shuddered when he sped up, gripping his shoulders as her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him deeper into her body. It felt so good. “Don’t stop!” she gasped, moving her hands from his shoulders to his hair, tangling her finger in the dark, soft tresses.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

He leaned his head towards her fingers, wanting more of her touch. When he shifted his hips, she gasped and tugged at his hair

“Damn Maggie, I love it when you do that!”

He shifted again and she tugged harder. He groaned as she lifted her hips, needing more!

Both of them scrambled, writhing together on the bed as they tried to give each other pleasure while taking it for themselves. In the end, their climax washed over them at the same time.

When he collapsed on top of her, their breathing was hard, fast. For a long time, Maggie was content to simply stroke his hair as she stared up at the ceiling, shocked at how good it still was.

But then, Ramit rolled over, causing Maggie to gasp.

“Don’t move!” she whispered, still straining to catch her breath.

He laughed, then swatted her bottom. “You’re the one that’s moving.”

She laughed back then shivered, her body still shimmering from the insanity of her climax. It had been so intense. So overwhelming. So beautiful that she didn’t have words to describe her happiness at this moment.

For several minutes, they stayed intertwined, trying to catch their breath and to

reconcile what had just happened.

Finally, Ramit said, “I know that you don’t completely trust me yet. I didn’t mean for this to happen so soon, Maggie.”

She lifted her head from his chest and looked at him, a small smile curving her lips. “Neither did I.” She stroked his cheek, enjoying the roughness from his beard. “It happened just like this the first time too.” She kissed him. “At least this time, we remembered protection.”

He chuckled, sliding his hands over her back. “It feels good, holding you like this.”

“I agree,” she sighed, kissing his chest.

“Any chance we could get to know each other while also doing this again?”

She laughed and slid off him. Maggie looked around for her clothes, but they were on the far side of the room. “How about if we take it one moment at a time?” she offered, smiling at him over her shoulder.

“That’s not a no, so I’ll take it.”

Maggie laughed and stood up, then hurried to the bathroom where she knew the cleaning staff stored her robe. Instead of getting dressed, she slipped into the shower, feeling Ramit step in behind her. As they showered, Maggie asked him, “How do you have so much time off?”

He explained about his morning meetings and how he’d ordered his assistant to ease up on his schedule for the next few weeks. “I don’t normally have this much free time during the day,” he admitted, his hands resting on her hips. “But I wanted to get to know you and Nadia.”

Maggie tipped her head. “Why aren’t you mad at me for not telling you about Nadia?”

He sighed, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “I was, at first. Livid, actually.”

“What changed?”

He stared at her for a long moment, then said, “My security team doesn’t know where Mathis is.”

She considered that for a moment, then gasped, understanding coming to her in a flash. “That’s why you wanted me to come here so badly! Your comments about someone trying to get to me...that wasn’t just talk, that was a real threat!”

“Yes.”

She didn’t say anything for a long time, the only sounds were the water splashing over both of them. Finally, Maggie nodded. “Thank you!” she whispered, then wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her cheek against his chest.

“Thank you for coming with me. For trusting me.”

Chapter 27

“Where the hell is she?” Humphrey demanded, pouring himself a full glass of scotch. “I want revenge on her for humiliating us!” He stomped back and forth across the worn carpet. “After our idea with the naked pictures being discovered as fakes, everything blew up on us and it’s all Maggie’s fault!”

He paced back and forth over the cheap carpeting, disgusted with the substandard, tacky décor that he had to endure these days.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Barney glared at him. “Because of your stupid plan, we’re humiliated!” He paced and huffed again, his fury increasing now that he had an audience. “The bank foreclosed on our homes, our cars were impounded and,” he threw a hand in the air for dramatic effect, “I’m forced to drive a Honda!” He turned, glaring at his long-time friend. “A Honda, Barney! I’m driving a freaking Honda!”

Humphrey rubbed a hand over his thinning hair, trying to ignore the panic. “I know!” he grumbled and shot up from the lumpy chair. “Don’t you know that I get it!”

He breathed in deeply, thinking about the men who had invested a large amount of funds into a bank for their condo project. Barney wasn’t aware of that pot of money, nor was Barney aware of the dangerous man who had provided that funding. Antonio Bendito was a terrifying man, with connections to the criminal element that weren’t as concerned about legality as some other investors might be.

Humphrey wasn’t sure how he was going to resolve paying that man back now that Sheik Al Qadar had backed out. Unfortunately, Bendito wasn’t a man who could be ignored. He’d convinced the mafia boss to get in on the “ground floor” because Sheik Ramit Al Qadar was going to invest in the project as well, which would bring in many more investors to the project. For the past several months, he’d assured himself that Antonio Bendito wasn’t expecting his money back soon. However, the man was starting to ask questions about the project’s start date.

Because there were no other investors, and the project hadn’t been approved by the local government, Bendito was becoming suspicious.

“Do you?” Barney demanded, leaning forward as Humphrey poured himself more

scotch. “Do you really? I’m sleeping on my grandmother’s sofa!” He huffed with indignation. “We’ve become a punch line with our former friends!”

Humphrey spun around, his eyes tight with anger and suppressed fear. “I know!”

“Then what are we going to do about it?” Barney demanded, taking another long sip of his drink, feeling the burn as well as the numbing effect that he craved. Damn, he needed to feel numb. A good shot of something stronger might help, but he didn’t have the money for anything stronger. Plus, his grandmother would toss him out onto the streets if he came home stoned. The woman didn’t mind him being drunk, most likely because her husband had been drunk most of their married life. She just considered it one of those “boys will be boys” issues and pretended to ignore it.

“I told you,” Humphrey snapped. “I have a plan!” He downed more scotch. “And it’s a good one.”

Barney walked over to the other chair. They were threadbare and some of the springs had died two decades ago, but after trying to blackmail a sheik...and failing...he was now a beggar. Until he could figure out how to resuscitate his bank balance, he wasn’t going to gripe about not having a comfortable chair to sit in.

“We were going to steal that damn baby,” Humphrey exploded, lifting his hands, one of them holding the glass now half-filled with liquor. “I still think that the Maggie-bitch was the one who messed up our plans with the photos.” He groaned, bracing his hands against the window frame as he looked out at the perfectly manicured courtyard below. But he didn’t see the topiaries or the pansies. His only thought was the memory of those dark, intense eyes of Antonio Bendito and the unspoken threat that now hung over him.

“We messed up, Humph,” Barney stated, staring into the last few drops of scotch in his glass. “We messed up big time.”

Humphrey spun around, furious with his friend's comment. "It would have been the perfect punishment to steal that stupid baby and sell it back after the bastard had paid dearly to get the brat back." He sighed, rubbing his palm over his forehead. "Sheik al Qadar would have paid millions to get the annoying snot-maker back!" Just as suddenly as his anger erupted, it left him.

Humphrey stared at his friend. Barney slumped deeper into the pathetic chair, frustration emanating from every cell of his body. He lifted the crystal glass to his lips and gulped the alcohol down like it was apple juice, then slammed the glass down onto the desk.

"Yeah, I agree that it was a good plan," Humphrey replied, the alcohol smoothing out his fury and humiliation. He flung one leg over the arm of the chair and snorted. "But you can't find the baby. Hard to extort a man when one doesn't have the baby."

"I know!" he sighed, then shook his head. "Unfortunately, I have no freaking idea where they've gone! Maggie was scheduled to go back at work on Monday and I was going to snatch the kid from her house while the babysitter was sleeping." He rubbed a hand over his face again.

Barney roused himself slightly, glaring at his friend through bleary eyes. "What the hell, Humph! You said you could deliver! After the photo fiasco, I never asked exactly how you were going to get us out of the land deal mess, nor did I actually care! I just wanted revenge for that bastard messing with us." He lifted his glass up, but then realized it was empty. How had that happened? He turned his gaze back to his friend. "Plus, I figured you were going to talk to al Qadar when he came to visit Maggie or when he visited the club again! You were supposed to have the upper hand!"

Humphrey shrugged, matching drunken glares with his friend, but the effect wasn't nearly as effective as it might have been if he'd been sober. "We were both evicted

from the club, remember? And that bastard, Levi Harris, refused to refund the eighty-five grand in annual dues! He just kicked us out and I have nothing now! Nothing! I've lost my home and all of my connections!" He sighed, dropping his chin so that it was resting on his chest. "I was counting on this deal going through more than you!" he grumbled, shoving a finger towards his only friend. "I tried everything to make this deal go through! I paid that prick on the zoning commission ten grand to push the zoning permits through! I tried to get a really powerful investor, which would have lured other investors. What have you done over the past twelve months other than flaunt your ability to play poker with idiots that don't have nearly the intelligence that I have? Huh?"

Barney's eyes widened. "You think you're so smart?"

"Yeah!" Humphrey sneered back. "Yeah, I know I'm pretty damn smart! And what about the guy we brought into the club after you were kicked out? I thought he had some sort of 'in'!"

Barney shrugged. "He got pissed when the pictures didn't work." He sighed heavily and shook his head. "That's why you should have come through with al Qadar!"

The two glared at each other, then out the dingy window. "Kidnapping the baby would have been a good plan," Humphrey commented.

Barney sighed, all the fight burned out of him. "Yeah. It would have." He lifted his empty glass, contemplated getting up for another round, but the bottle was too far away and this ugly, previously uncomfortable chair was now pretty nice.

Humphrey stood up and grabbed the bottle, pouring the last bit into his own glass. Before he sat down again, he turned to look at his friend. "Are we in hiding?" he asked.

Barney snorted. “Hiding from what? Al Quadar doesn’t know anything about our plan to kidnap his kid.”

Humphrey narrowed his eyes, trying to focus on the two men walking into the house. “Then...why are two big, burly men coming up the steps of my grandmother’s house?” They looked vaguely reminiscent of the men he’d seen at Bendito’s office.

For some reason, the alcohol wasn’t giving him the numbness he’d been craving anymore. Something about the determined, resigned expressions on the men now speaking to his grandmother warned him that something very bad was about to happen.

Chapter 28

The next two weeks were blissful for Maggie. They were a bit like a honeymoon...but not a honeymoon. Although, Maggie wasn’t exactly sure what to call this time with Ramit. She and her new husband ate nearly every meal together and Nadia was thriving. Ramit spent a great deal of time with her while Maggie delighted at Ramit’s adoration for his tiny daughter.

When they weren’t spending time with Nadia, Ramit encouraged her to spend time alone with him. It was almost as if he were courting her, which was silly, since they were already married. Granted, they were married strangers, which was sometimes awkward. Still, his undivided attention felt...nice. Especially after he’d left her so suddenly a year ago. His efforts to “court” her now were like a balm to her wounded soul.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Maggie accompanied him to the stables to meet the horses and a few of the stable cats. He took her to the palace gun range and taught her to shoot a pistol, then a rifle. They laughed as she attempted to shoot a bow and arrow, missing the target by a wide margin each time. Several of the palace trees became victims of her efforts, but no one seemed to mind.

When Maggie noticed that she was starting to gain weight with all of the palace delicacies, Maggie joined him in the gym each morning, thrilled with the state of the art work out facility. She didn't compete with Ramit on weight lifting, but she avidly watched him while working out on the cardio equipment.

It wasn't until the third week that things started to change. She woke up in the morning to him kissing her shoulder. When Maggie rolled into his arms, looking forward to another deliciously slow morning with him, she was disappointed to notice that he was already dressed.

"What's going on?" she asked, pulling back and staring at his charcoal suit and red tie.

"I have to work, Maggs," he explained, using the nickname he'd started using after he'd overheard a phone conversation she'd had with Emily and Ann. "I have several meetings today."

Maggie had known that this blissful time with him was coming to an end, but that still didn't stop her from wishing she'd had more time with him.

"I understand," she told him. Leaning forward, she kissed him, trying to be a good

wife. “Go!” she told him and even gave him a soft shove on his shoulder. “Go rule the world!”

He winked at her and she noticed that he looked relieved. “I’ll see you and Nadia at dinner, okay?”

Ramit was gone before she could answer, and she sighed at the thought of not sharing breakfast and lunch with him, as they’d done over the past couple weeks.

Then, she heard Nadia squeal. Sighing, Maggie pulled on a silk robe and padded barefoot into the next room. Nadia was sitting up and grabbing toys more easily. She was chubby and happy and Maggie adored her more every day. Especially when she had a break with the nanny who was always standing by, ready to watch her little lady for a few hours.

However, those free hours had been consumed with getting to know her husband over the past two weeks. Now that she didn’t have Ramit to talk with, Maggie was at a bit of a loss as to how to fill her time.

In fact, the extra hours of free time were...boring. And with that boredom came thoughts that were probably irrational, but without Ramit around, Maggie became...not nervous but...?

Okay, she was nervous. Especially since she didn’t see Ramit at all the first day he went back to his normal schedule. The second day, he was already gone from their suite by the time she woke up. Maggie knew that he’d slept next to her because his side of the bed was rumpled. But he hadn’t pulled her into his arms and he hadn’t bothered to wake her up with a kiss before he headed out to do whatever it was that he did during the day. She’d gotten only a phone call from him that night, during which he’d quickly explained that he wasn’t going to make it back for dinner.

“Is it over?” she whispered to herself over a bowl of fruit and some tea at breakfast on the third day.

“Finally!” a female voice interrupted her contemplation of her breakfast isolation.

Maggie jerked around to find a gorgeous woman in a slim-fitting white dress stepping into the breakfast room. Maggie’s flowered sundress looked frumpy in comparison to this woman’s glorious beauty.

“Excuse me?” Maggie asked, jumping to her feet out of habit.

The beautiful woman smiled as she came closer. “You’re Maggie, right?” she asked.

Maggie nodded, completely intimidated by this beautiful woman’s presence. “Yes. And you are?” she asked softly, trying not to ruffle any feathers in her new home until she knew who was who.

“I’m Ciara,” the woman explained, gesturing to the chair. “Please, don’t stand on ceremony, Maggie. We’re family. I’m your sister-in-law.”

Maggie’s mouth fell open. Yes, Ramit had mentioned that he had a sister, but he’d said she was on a tour of some of the Asian countries. Apparently, she was now aback.

“You’re Princess Ciara?”

The woman shook her head as she gestured to a servant for coffee. “Please, don’t call me by my title,” she said, grinning cheekily. “Or I’ll have to call you Queen Maggie.”

Maggie stared at the woman who laughed delightfully. “Oh, you didn’t know that was your new title?”

Maggie shook her head in response.

Ciara clapped her hands, then grinned at Maggie over a porcelain cup of coffee. “Well, please let me be the first to congratulate you on your wedding. I understand that I also have a beautiful little niece?”

Maggie tried to lift the cup of herbal tea, but her hands were shaking so badly that she set it back down on the saucer, not wanting to spill on her dress.

“Yes. Her name is Nadia,” she explained.

Ciara’s smile widened. “What a delightful name. I can’t wait to meet her.”

Maggie eyed Ciara’s white dress with trepidation. “Whenever you have time, I’m sure that Nadia would love to meet her aunt,” she said, praying that the woman wouldn’t mind wearing something to protect her dress. Nadia wasn’t very discerning about her drools. Or when she burped.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Maggie tried to change the subject. “I understand that you are engaged. Have you and your fiancée set a date for the wedding?”

“No!” a deep, masculine voice replied. A tall, terrifyingly man stepped into the dining room. He walked over to the buffet and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Apparently, you still need to do that, don’t you, Princess?” he snapped. He looked at Maggie. “I’m Sheik Falk bin Alon. And you are Queen Margaret al Qadar.” He kissed her fingers. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Ciara’s eyes flashed and her smile turned brittle. “I could have introduced you.”

Falk lifted a dark eyebrow. “Still irritated that your wedding isn’t progressing, Princess?” he asked, his deep voice rumbling throughout the room. “

“I don’t think that my wedding is any of your business.” She looked towards the doorway. “Where’s Tara?”

The man’s lips compressed. “My assistant is off doing assistant things,” he said.

A moment later, another man stepped into the room. This man looked just as authoritative, but there was a softness in his eyes when he realized that Ciara was sitting at the table.

“Good morning Ciara,” he said as he walked over to her, lifting her hand and kissing her fingers. Then he noticed Maggie. “And you must be our illustrious hostess,” he guessed, taking Maggie’s hand and lifting it to his lips as well. “I am Sheik Zayed el Mastrion of Pitra. And it is a pleasure to finally meet the woman who has stolen our

friend's heart.”

“Sit down, you ass,” the first man growled. “You’re making me lose my appetite.”

Ciara glowered at the grumpy man, then forced a smile to her features. “Maggie, allow me apologize for our guest’s rude behavior.” She lifted her cup of tea to her lips. “Zayed and Falk are here for meetings with Ramit.”

Ciara and Falk glowered at each other and Maggie wondered if there was some way to protect herself from the fireworks sparking between those two. Why was Ciara betrothed to Zayed when she was obviously attracted to Falk?

Goodness, palace politics were complicated, she thought, sipping her tea.

Falk sat down next to Ciara and the two took a moment to conspicuously ignore each other. Ciara cleared her throat and continued her explanation. “As I was saying, they are here for a meeting with my brother, your husband. The three of them get together every few months to pretend to discuss the issues between their countries, but in reality, they just play poker and trade insults.” She looked at Zayed. “Some are more effective at that pastime than others.”

Maggie smothered a smile and glanced at Zayed, but the handsome man was staring at the doorway. And wowzah! That man couldn’t seem to pull his gaze away from the gorgeous woman standing in the doorway clutching a stack of folders.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your breakfast, Your Highness,” she said to Falk, then glanced furtively at Zayed...and back to Falk. “However, I have new information on several of the issues you asked me to monitor. Would you like me to discuss them later? Once you’ve finished sharing a meal with your fiancée?”

Zayed turned and looked at Ciara. “Would you excuse me, Princess?”

Ciara smiled politely at the man. “Of course. Go do what you need to do.”

“I should head out as well,” Falk replied, looking grumpy.

But it was Zayed who paused to put a hand on Ciara’s. “Are you okay?”

The beautiful woman smiled, but there was a tightness to her expression. “Of course,” she replied. “Good luck today.”

The tall, handsome man chuckled. “We really do more than just play poker.”

Ciara snorted, amused but more relaxed. Plus, she didn’t watch Sheik Zayed leave the room like she’d done when Sheik Falk had exited.

There was a long moment of silence after the man left and Maggie watched everything with amused fascination.

When Zayen had departed, Maggie watched as Ciara fiddled with her coffee cup. The previously confident, daring woman was now...nervous? Of course, Maggie didn’t know her new sister-in-law very well yet, having just met her, but there was definitely something going on between the powerful sheik and the lovely princess.

“Well, I really should get back to Nadia. I’m sure that she’s had her bath by now.” She paused and looked at Ciara. “I’d love to introduce you to your niece, whenever you have time.”

Ciara’s lovely features bloomed into a genuine smile at the offer. “I would be honored to meet your little girl. I’ll stop by as soon as I’ve had a conversation with Ramit.”

Maggie was startled by that comment. Ciara was going to speak with Ramit? Was

that possible? Maggie had been wondering when she'd get to see her husband again, vowing not to bother him since she'd had precious weeks of his time.

She left the dining room, still confused about what she's just watched and what she was allowed to do. This was definitely a new world. And a confusing one!

Chapter 29

Ramit smothered his irritation when his sister stepped into his office. Ciara was lovely, but she was planning out a future that was wrong and he couldn't seem to get her to see that.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

“How was your trip?” he asked, not showing any of his irritation. “Did you destroy any new trade agreements?” He poured them each a cup of coffee. He didn’t want coffee though. He wanted to see Maggie. Why hadn’t she stopped by? Or sent a message that she wanted to see him? Was she finished with him? Had their two weeks together been all that she wanted?

Ciara accepted the cup and held it in long, slim fingers. “First of all, I’d like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to represent our country. It’s nice that you trusted me with the trip.” She took a sip of her coffee, then set the cup down. “I spoke with the leaders of all six countries. I also worked out deals with several new manufacturers. They want to build factories here in Ditra, but warned them that our minimum wage was going up in six months.”

“And what did they say?” he asked, settling down in the leather chair as he listened.

“They were more hesitant, which is a good thing. We don’t need low wage jobs, Ramit. You’ve improved the university system here in Ditra. We want the research jobs. We want to attract the higher paying companies that will allow the people here to have more power for their voices.”

“I think they have a powerful enough voice in you, dear sister.”

Ciara rolled her eyes. “I don’t know all of the battles that need to be fought. And don’t be sarcastic. You want the higher paying jobs too.”

He sipped his coffee, wondering if he should switch to tea. It would be a sort of mental support for Maggie, since she still couldn’t drink caffeine. Were there other

ways he could support her? He made a mental note to tell his assistant that he wanted to cancel any meetings tonight. He needed to see Maggie more than he needed to speak with anyone else. Plus, what would she think about a position as an advocate for those who don't have a voice? Maybe she would feel more useful if she had a mission? She was certainly passionate about women's rights, he thought, remembering her impromptu lesson at the museum the first day he'd met her.

"Zayed and Falk are here. Did you forget about them?" Ciara asked, bringing his attention back to the current issue.

Ramit groaned. "No, I haven't forgotten about them. We're talking about the bridge system over the Yazee River this afternoon."

Ciara snorted. "You're playing poker for the rest of the night," she countered.

Ramit tilted his head slightly. "That might have been our plans in the past, but I want them to meet Maggie tonight. Will you join us for dinner as well?"

She contemplated that offer for a moment, then nodded. "Sure. I can bore all of you with news from my trip." With that, she stood up and grinned down at her brother. "And since I'll be seeing all of you tonight, I'll take my leave and go meet my new niece."

Ramit was jealous. He missed Nadia, ached to hold her in his arms. He'd have to tell his assistant that he needed time with Nadia every day. That had to be non-negotiable. These back to back meetings that took up eighteen hours of every damn day had to stop. He had a wife and a daughter now!

Speaking of wives, he called out, "When are you setting the wedding date?"

That stopped Ciara's momentum. She turned, opened her mouth to say something,

then changed her mind. “Soon,” was her only reply, then she headed out of the office.

Ramit sighed with frustration. Did she not know that she was engaged to the wrong man? Ciara was a smart woman! Why was she persisting in hiding behind this ridiculous betrothal to Zayed? Falk was becoming impatient as well. He wondered if the other man was finally going to take matters into his own hands.

Or maybe there was a way to make that happen sooner, Ramit thought. Perhaps if he created a project where Falk and Ciara had to work together...?

Before he could come up with a plan, his assistant pushed into the room. “Your Highness, the matter you asked me to monitor...!”

“Yes?” he demanded, turning to the shorter man. “What’s happening with Todras?” The man had been threatening to hurt Maggie. He’d made several very distinct threats, which was why he’d had to get Maggie and Nadia out of harm’s way. The pictures Todras had been threatening him with were gone, the idiot was deeply in debt, and his social circle was made aware of the man’s lack of funds. Unfortunately, Humphrey and Barney were desperate and desperate men made bad decisions.

The shorter man hesitated, then said, “Mr. Humphrey Todras stumbled down a flight of stairs yesterday evening, Your Highness. His blood alcohol level was twice the legal limit.” There was a pause, then the man said, “He was killed instantly but...”

“But what?” Ramit prompted, his shoulders tense as he waited for whatever his assistant was hesitating to say.

The man took a deep breath, then said, “There is some speculation that the fall wasn’t...accidental,” he finished.

Ramit stared at the man for a long moment. Yes, he should be saddened by the loss of

life, but he was also intensely relieved that Maggie and Nadia no longer had that pathetic excuse for a man threatening their lives. Not that Ramit would have allowed the slime to get close to his family.

Then he thought about the information that his security team had discovered about the man. “That’s very unfortunate. Please send flowers and condolences to his grandmother. I know that they were close.” Actually, Ramit didn’t know that fact at all. He knew that the man was living with his grandmother, but he wasn’t aware of the extent of their personal relationship.

His assistant nodded and looked down at the tablet in his hand. “I will have flowers delivered immediately.”

Ramit sighed, relieved that the threat was over and saddened that the man hadn’t done more with the life he’d been given. Except that the man had threatened his family. Still, he nodded his acknowledgement of the news. “Thank you for telling me.” He thought for another moment, then made another snap decision. “When is my next meeting?”

“It is in five minutes.”

“Push it back thirty minutes. I need to inform my wife of this news.” He didn’t. Telling Maggie about Humphrey was merely an excuse to see her.

When he walked into their suite a few moments later, it was to find her holding Nadia on her lap, clapping the little girl’s hands together and making silly faces. Nadia was happily laughing and playing along.

“Maggie,” he called, his tension easing when she looked up and he saw the excitement in her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

“Ramit!” she exclaimed and lifted Nadia into her arms as she stood and hurried across the room. But halfway to him, she stopped and looked at him. “What are you doing here? I thought you had a whole pile of meetings today.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “I was told that you had a meeting right now.”

He closed the distance between them. He’d seen her excitement as well as her hesitation. Now he needed answers. He needed to understand Maggie. “Is that why you haven’t come to my office to visit me?”

“Visit you?” she asked, startled by his question. “I was under the impression that I wasn’t to disturb you during the day.”

Ramit lifted Nadia out of Maggie’s arms, cradling his daughter to his chest. “Not only are you allowed to interrupt my schedule at any time during the day,” he told her. “You are highly encouraged to do so. I would love to see you.” He looked at Nadia. “And you too, my little darling.”

“Really?” Maggie whispered. “I just...I didn’t want to be a distraction.”

“You wouldn’t be a distraction. Not even a little,” he vowed. His features shifted then. “I have some news.”

“What’s that?” she asked, following beside him as he led her to the sitting area.

“Humphrey Todras is no longer a threat.”

Maggie blinked at him, not sure she knew what he was talking about. “Humphrey?”

she repeated. “The jerk from the club?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Humphrey Todras was the man who had threatened your life and wanted to kidnap Nadia.”

She stood up and moved away. Maggie thought about what he was saying. When she turned around, she looked down at Ramit. “So Humphrey is the reason you swept me away? The reason I was in danger?”

“Yes,” he replied. “But that threat is gone now.”

There was a sudden shine to her eyes as she blinked at him. “So...are you saying that you want me to leave?”

Ramit’s eyebrows shot up. “Hell no!” he snarled and stood up, holding Nadia securely as he moved towards her. “Maggie, that’s not what I’m saying at all!”

Maggie rubbed her forehead, sighing and her shoulders slumped forward. “I don’t understand, Ramit. What does all of this mean?”

“It means that Todras is no longer a threat. It doesn’t mean that I want you to leave me.” He paused, anger simmering now. “And I’m not letting you go, Maggie!” He walked over to one of the bells. Instantly, a servant appeared. “Would you take Nadia to her nanny?”

“Of course, Your Highness,” the servant replied, taking Nadia into her arms and cooing to the little girl as she carried her out of the suite.

When they were alone again, Ramit turned to Maggie. “What the hell is this about, Maggs? I thought you were happy here. I thought that we were finally working things out.” He didn’t wait for her response. Ramit fisted his hands on his hips, glaring

down at her. "I'm not letting you go. Not this time."

She stared at him for a moment, then a slow smile started to appear. "I don't want to go anywhere, Ramit. I just thought...since you were back at work and I didn't get to see you, that you weren't interested in me any longer."

"Not intere...!" He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "Maggie, I am in love with you! You drive me wild whenever I'm around you. How the hell could you think that I'm not interested?"

Maggie huffed impatiently, fisting her hands on her hips. "Because, for the past several days, you've left before I wake up in the morning and I don't see you unless I wake up in the middle of the night!" she snapped at him, tired of being subtle. "If you want me to stick around, then you need to put in the work, Ramit! I can't read your mind. If you aren't around to tell me, then I can't know what you're feeling or thinking!"

Ramit stared at her, stunned by her angry reaction. But at the fire in her beautiful eyes, he nearly laughed with relief. "Oh Maggie," he groaned, then pulled her into his arms. He buried his face in her neck. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to do this."

She tried to pull out of his arms, but he wouldn't let her go. She shifted so that she could look up at him. "What don't you know how to do?"

"Relationships," he replied. "I don't know how to do relationships."

She snorted. "And I do? I spent my whole life avoiding an abusive father. Then I worked at a job where I learned to dodge lascivious men's wandering hands!" She grabbed his shirt. "Ramit, I avoid conflict."

He sighed, leaning his forehead against hers. "And I confront conflict, expecting

everyone to do the same.” He smiled down at her. “How are we going to figure this out?”

She slid her hands against his chest. “How about if...I...invade your day a little more often?” she suggested. “And you make time to join me for breakfast and dinner?”

He thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “Deal.”

“And...” she continued, slipping a finger in between the buttons on his shirt. “Maybe you could...skip some of your evening meetings as well?” She laughed when he lifted her into his arms, already hurrying towards their bedroom. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t skip my evening activities tonight, so I’m going to show you how to be more confrontational right now,” he explained, as he kicked the door closed behind him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:45 am

Maggie thought that sounded wonderful. And no, he didn't make it to his next meeting. In fact, he missed several of his afternoon meetings that day!

Epilogue

Maggie waddled into her husband's office and slumped into the leather chair, putting her swollen feet up on the opposite stool. "All my meetings are done. Another safe house for abused women has been selected and we're halfway through the selection process for the next one," she announced, feeling both relieved that she'd wouldn't be around to help with "Women's Refuge", a group of shelters for survivors of domestic violence, and eager to give birth to her second child. "How many more weeks?" she asked, rubbing her swollen belly with both hands.

Ramit tossed the contract he'd been reviewing aside in favor of watching his very pregnant, very beautiful wife contemplate her belly.

"I believe the doctor said another two weeks or so," he replied.

She shook her head and groaned. "I'm not going to make it that long."

"You loved being pregnant a couple of months ago."

She blushed and watched as he pushed out of his chair and came over to the sitting area. He didn't sit next to her. Instead, he sat down in front of her and pulled her legs onto his lap. He tossed one shoe away, then the other, then started rubbing her feet in the way that he knew she loved.

“That was when my hormones were going wild and...oh, my gosh!” Her head fell back against the cushions behind her, Ramit’s fingers pressing into the tension in her feet. “You’re getting better at that!”

“I’ve had plenty of practice and instruction,” he replied with a chuckle, pressing his thumb into the arch of her foot. That pressure elicited another moan of pleasure and Ramit tried to suppress his immediate surge of lust. Even after all these years, Maggie still had the ability to drive his body wild with need for her.

“Where’s Nadia?” he asked, pressing his knuckle against her toe.

“She’s at her riding lesson.” Maggie lifted her head to frown at him. “Do not get her another pony!”

He laughed, shaking his head. “No more ponies. Not until she’s bigger and can handle this one.”

Maggie groaned. “Ramit, I caught her trying to ride standing up two days ago! The girl is fearless.”

“Standing up on what?” he demanded, his fingers freezing.

She wiggled her fingers, silently ordering him to continue. “Her saddle, my love. She’s standing on the saddle while her pony cantered around the corral.”

“Tell me you’re kidding!” he growled.

Maggie sighed, realizing that her foot rub was over. Ramit, her wonderful, amazing husband was now in what she lovingly referred to as ‘Papa Mode’.

“No, I’m not kidding. And that pony loves it when she tries these dare devil tricks.”

“She’s grounded for a month!” he snarled, standing up and starting to walk away. But he only made it a few feet before he turned back and, offering both of his hands, helped Maggie up from the sofa. “Let’s go rescue our daughter,” he told Maggie.

She sighed and waddled next to him. “She’s just like you, Ramit.”

He wrapped his arm around her round waist. “And you love me.”

She laughed and leaned her head against his shoulder. “I really do,” she sighed.

He kissed the top of her head. “I love you too.”

And they walked out to the stables where they found their beautiful daughter trying to ride upside down on her pony.