

KEY TO HAPPINESS:(My mute devil)

Chapter 92: 92

The smile on Nix's face refused to fade, it lingered like sunlight after a storm. The little one in his arms, tiny, curious, and entirely too expressive for her size was tugging at the button of his shirt again, giggling softly as though the simple act were the most entertaining thing in the world. Her laughter was infectious; even Nix, whose expression was usually as calm and composed as a marble statue, couldn't resist chuckling under his breath.

Then she looked up at him those round, innocent eyes gleaming with mischief and pouted adorably before blurting, "Pa... Pa."

For a split second, Nix froze. The word hit him with a strange warmth, threading through his chest like an electric current. Papa? The sound felt foreign yet... right. He wasn't her father he knew that. But the way she said it, with such certainty and affection, made something inside him stir, something he didn't quite understand. His usual logic failed him as his lips curved into a faint, bewildered smile.

"Do you want to see your dad?" he asked softly, brushing a stray curl from her forehead. She only tapped his cheek with her tiny hand, giggling again.

"I've really not met anyone as good-looking as I am," he teased, eyes twinkling. "But if your father managed to produce a damsel like you, then he must be almost as handsome as me, huh?"

She babbled something unintelligible in response, a stream of baby gibberish that sounded more like a spell than a sentence. Nix snorted under his breath, shaking his head. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Just then, a familiar voice rang out behind him.

"Did you kidnap someone's child, or did the universe finally decide you needed humility training?"

Nix sighed before even turning around. Only one man could sound that smug and ridiculous at the same time.

Tomline stood there, halfway out of his car, holding a slice of apple like it was a mic. His expression was priceless eyebrows raised, mouth half-open, confusion and amusement fighting for dominance on his face. For a brief moment, he had actually thought he was seeing someone else. The man in front of him looked too peaceful, too... soft, to be Nix Dean.

"Tom," Nix said dryly, giving him a flat stare. "Blink twice if the jealousy's kicking in."

Tom gasped dramatically, pointing the apple slice at him like a weapon. "So it is you! Oh, I see what's happening you've retired from crime and gone into childcare. Wow, the mighty have fallen. How's the babysitting business, Mr. Dean?"

Nix's lips twitched. "Pretty good, actually. I charge extra for annoying friends who interrupt nap time."

Tom chuckled, crunching into his apple with exaggerated slowness, eyes narrowed playfully. "You must be loving your new job. And you know what's funny? If I didn't know better, I'd have thought she was your daughter."

Almost on cue, the little girl turned in Nix's arms, clapped her hands, and beamed. "Pa pa!"

The apple nearly fell from Tom's mouth. He blinked rapidly, doing a double take. "Did she just.. wait, did she just call you Papa?! Nix, don't tell me oh my God, she's truly your daughter, isn't she?" His voice rose a pitch higher with every word.

Nix rolled his eyes, though his expression softened as he glanced back at the little one tugging insistently at his shirt again. "Relax, Tom. If she were my daughter, she'd have your eating habits by now."

Tom scoffed, taking another bite of his apple with mock offense. "Rude. I eat like a gentleman."

"She's staring at you like you just stole her toy," Nix muttered, nodding toward the baby.

Tom looked down and froze the child was indeed glaring at him with all the fury a toddler could muster.

"Wha.. why's she looking at me like that?" Tom asked, leaning back defensively.

Nix smirked. "Because you didn't share your apple, genius."

Tom blinked. "Oh. Well, she's got good taste."

Nix laughed quietly, shaking his head. "Yeah. She really does."

"Give me a slice of your apple," Nix said suddenly, his tone firm and authoritative enough to silence an entire room if it needed to. There was no humor in his voice, no trace of his earlier teasing.

Tom blinked, the apple halfway to his mouth. "Wow, the bossy gene's still alive and thriving," he muttered under his breath. "Next thing you know, he'll ask me to peel grapes for him too."

Still grumbling, Tom fished a small dagger from his pocket because of course, he'd never just use a normal knife like a regular person. "You know, one day someone's gonna see this and assume I'm preparing for a duel instead of slicing fruit," he said, sighing dramatically as he cut off a neat slice.

Nix didn't respond. He was already pulling a neatly folded handkerchief from his pocket. With the quiet efficiency of someone who had done this before though no one could imagine where he'd learned it, he folded it diagonally and tied it gently around the baby's neck like a tiny bib. The gesture was oddly soft and delicate even and Tom couldn't help but stare for a moment, caught off guard by how natural it looked.

"Here," Nix said, offering the slice of apple to the baby. She took it with both hands, bit into it with her tiny teeth, and then looked up at him, cheeks puffed, grinning wide enough to melt stone.

"I never knew you could speak baby language," Tom said with a crooked grin, trying to mask the amusement tugging at his lips.

"Apparently, she does," Nix replied calmly, still focused on the baby who was now drooling apple juice onto his sleeve.

Tom chuckled until his gaze shifted past Nix's shoulder. The color drained from his face in an instant. His eyes widened, and without thinking, he closed the small distance between them, his laughter dying faster than it had come.

"Don't look back," he whispered, his tone sharp and low.

Nix raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Just... please don't turn around," Tom muttered, lowering his voice even more as if the mere sound of it might summon a storm.

"Tom.. "

"Nix Dean."

The sound of her voice cut through the seaport's noise like the edge of Tom's dagger. Smooth, lilting, distinctly Italian and deeply unwelcome.

Nix's shoulders stiffened before he even turned. Tom closed his eyes briefly, muttering a silent prayer for patience. Of all places... why here?

The woman approaching them was the kind of beauty that demanded attention. She walked with effortless grace, the soft click of her heels barely audible over the gulls and sea breeze. Her long black hair cascaded in loose waves down her back, glinting like silk under the afternoon sun. Her eyes, a striking hazel-green, carried a kind of practiced allure that had charmed many but fooled none who truly knew her. She wore a white linen blouse tucked neatly into high-waisted beige trousers, cinched with a gold belt that gleamed with each step. Around her neck rested a delicate chain with a small diamond pendant, subtle but expensive.

Her perfume, a rich Italian blend of jasmine, vanilla, and something sharper hung in the air between them like an uninvited memory.

"Luciana," Nix muttered flatly without turning, his voice low enough that only Tom could hear.

Tom winced. "So much for not looking back."

Luciana Ricci had always been troubled sharp-tongued, manipulative, and far too accustomed to getting her way. And lately, "her way" had meant rekindling whatever flicker of a relationship that never existed between her and Nix. To make matters worse, old Aron had recently been making every effort to push a remarriage between them, insisting it would "strengthen family ties" and "secure the legacy."

In reality, it was a ticking bomb.

Luciana stopped a few feet away, her gaze sliding from Nix's face to the small child in his arms. The light in her eyes dimmed immediately, her painted smile faltering for just a moment before she caught herself. The baby's eyes large, clear, and oddly familiar had the same shade as Nix's. It didn't take much imagination for her to piece together an implication that burned her pride.

Still, she composed herself, lifting her chin slightly and schooling her features into polite surprise.

"Nix," she said with a soft, practiced smile. "What a coincidence. I didn't expect to see you here."

But Tom could see it the faint twitch in her jaw, the flash of jealousy she couldn't quite hide.

"Oh boy," he thought, biting into his apple again. "Here comes trouble in designer heels."

"What a pleasant surprise..." Luciana purred, her smile too sweet to be genuine, her Italian accent lilting off every syllable like she was posing for a camera.

"What an unpleasant sight you are," Nix retorted coolly, his tone slicing through her charm with surgical precision. His expression didn't shift not even a flicker of warmth but the contempt in his voice was undeniable.

Her smile twitched, the muscles at her jaw tightening before she forced another polite laugh. "Still the same sharp tongue, I see."

Before she could say more, a soft tap on Nix's chest interrupted her. The little girl in his arms tiny fingers clutching his shirt looked up at him, then pointed eagerly at Tom.

"Papa!" she chirped, reaching toward Tom with her other hand.

Tom, always quick to escape awkward tension, grinned. "Hey, don't look at me like that," he said, slicing another piece of apple with his dagger and offering it to her. "She just knows quality men when she sees one."

Luciana's smile faltered entirely. Her eyes widened, darting between Nix and the child like she was trying to solve an equation that made no sense. "You... have a daughter?"

Nix didn't answer immediately. Instead, he tilted his head slightly, watching her amused by how her perfectly arranged composure began to crumble.

Her eyes hardened. "Your grandfather never mentioned that being the daughter-in-law of the Arons would include being a stepmother," she said through gritted teeth.

"You're wrong about one thing, Miss Armani," he said finally, his voice calm too calm, the kind of calm that carried the weight of a threat. "I'm not an Aron..."

He took a single step closer, his presence alone forcing her to freeze.

"...I'm a Dean. And that old man has more grandsons than he can count none of whom have children. So don't worry, whoever he marries you to, you won't have to play stepmother."

He gave a cold, humorless chuckle. "Consider that my act of mercy for the day."

Luciana's cheeks flushed scarlet with humiliation. Her throat tightened as she tried to hold her head high, but the sting of his words clung to her like smoke.

By the time Nix turned his back, she could feel the weight of stares from those nearby the humiliation biting deeper than his words ever could. Her chest burned with a mix of shame and anger, but all she could do was stand there, silent, clutching her designer bag like a shield.

Nix adjusted the baby in his arms, his expression softening almost instantly as he looked down at her. She giggled oblivious to the tension and tugged at the collar of his

shirt again. The sight alone was enough to melt away the darkness that had flickered in his eyes.

He walked through the crowd, the baby's tiny hand resting against his neck, until he spotted a familiar figure scanning the port with worried eyes. Luna.

She looked frantic her hair slightly out of place, her phone clutched tightly in her hand as she turned in circles, clearly searching for someone. When her gaze finally landed on Nix, relief washed over her features. But that relief shifted quickly to disbelief when she noticed the child in his arms.

Her eyes darted to her phone again checking a picture, then back at the little one.

"Oh, thank God," she breathed, rushing toward them.

"How did you get Elisa's baby?" she demanded as soon as she was close enough, her voice firm but laced with anxiety.

Nix blinked, narrowing his eyes slightly. "Elisa's baby?"

The words rolled off his tongue slowly, like a puzzle he wasn't sure how to solve. The child looked up at Luna then back at him, her tiny hand still clutching the apple slice, her eyes wide and innocent completely unaware of the storm her presence was about to cause.

"Who is Elisa?" Nix asked, his tone low and curious, his brows knitting slightly as he shifted the little girl in his arms.

Luna's eyes softened with a mixture of understanding and pity. "Liam's sister... Carmela's twin."

The words hit Nix like a quiet explosion. For a moment, the noise of the seaport the crashing waves, the chatter of passengers, the distant hum of ship engines faded into nothing. His breath caught halfway, his eyes fixed on the little girl in his arms as the puzzle pieces that had been scattered in his mind began to align with agonizing clarity.

Carmela's twin.

That was why her eyes felt so painfully familiar. Why her laugh had tugged at something buried deep in his chest. Why the moment she called him "Papa," it hadn't just startled him it had hurt. It

He swallowed hard, his gaze softening as he looked down at the tiny girl now nibbling on the remains of her apple slice. The curve of her lips, the subtle dimple when she smiled

"You've grown a lot, little one," he whispered almost involuntarily, the words slipping out with a tenderness he hadn't felt in months.