

## Benefits 771

### Chapter 771: Flaws And All

"Yeah. You are right about that! Alright, then Kael, you've known Dora for a while, come on, there must be somethings that might rub you the wrong way, irritate you or something?"

His first instinct was to say that Dora was perfect, that nothing about her could possibly rub him the wrong way. But something in the way Olivia tilted her head, or the knowing smirk on Autumn's face, made him pause. They were waiting for something—perhaps honesty, or maybe just a slip-up they could pounce on.

So, what was he supposed to do? Be honest or be careful. What if they did not like if he was honest and took it negatively. Dam\* it! He needed a guide on how to handle this situation.

He breathed in deeply and then exhaled. Okay. He was going to go with his instinct and be honest. And if they did not like him for it... so be it.

"I want to say Dora is perfect... but she is not. If I'm being completely honest, there are a few things about Dora that can be... difficult to deal with." He saw the women exchange glances, and continued hesitantly, "For one, she has this obsession with making everything perfect. It's like she can't rest until every detail is exactly right. It's admirable, sure, but sometimes it feels like she's never happy with it..."

He noticed a few raised eyebrows, but no one interrupted him, so he pressed on. "And then there's the way she'll latch onto an idea and just run with it, no matter what. She doesn't always think things through, and that impulsiveness can be... challenging. She'll dive headfirst into something without considering the consequences, and it can be scary trying to keep up with her. And let's not forget her stubbornness. Once she's set her mind on something, there's no changing it. She'll argue her point to the bitter end, even when it's clear she's not going to win."

He could see the ladies sizing him up, waiting to see where he was going with this and he could feel their narrowed eyes even if they kept their gazes impersonal. He took another breath and continued.

"But," he added, his voice warming, "the truth is, those are the very things that make her who she is. Her need for perfection, her impulsiveness, her stubbornness—they're all part of what makes Dora so unique, so incredible. Yes, they can be difficult at times, but they also show her passion, her drive, her

commitment to the things she cares about. Take me, for example. Now, I am a work in progress... but she has accepted me as is- flaws and all.

And she has this idea in her head that she needs to protect me so she is very stubborn and that somehow makes me want to dote on her more. Also, if not for her stubbornness and impulsiveness, I don't think we could have been together."

"I wouldn't change a single thing about her, because those quirks, those challenges—they're what make her the woman I fell for. They're what make her Dora. And I wouldn't have it any other way."

As Kael finished speaking, he looked at the impersonal faces staring at him and felt himself turn red..Okay.. All this was probably not what they'd expected... He was about to say more when Nora laughed. " Good! This is good! I agree with you! Dora is too stubborn but she recognises the flaws in you and your relationship and so do you. This is perfect. We like your honesty! You know, Demetri had this annoying habit of predicting everything. It's like he's always ten steps ahead of me. As much as I love him, it drives me up the wall sometimes. But now he knows better than to let his predictions show that far ahead!"

Olivia nodded, adding with a rueful smile, "Seb dotes on us so much that sometimes I just want to shake him and tell him to back off a little. Let us dote on him for a change, you know?"

"And then there's Luc," Evana chimed in. "He looks so flirtatious all the time. I swear, even when he's just being friendly, people think he's flirting. It's maddening with all the girls throwing themselves at his feet!"

Kael's eyes flicked between the women as they shared their grievances, and he realized they had not been setting a trap—at least, not in the way he had feared. They were being real with him, letting him see the less-than-perfect sides of their relationships. It was a subtle way of approving what he had said. He breathed a sigh of relief at this. Thankfully, he'd decided to speak the truth and not claimed that Dora was perfect...

Catching onto something, he turned to Olivia Frost... "How then do you take care of your husband?"

The ladies all stopped chattering and blinked at him. It seemed they'd forgotten he was still here. Was he supposed to have slunk away?

But in the next moment, Olivia cocked her head and asked, "You're looking for ways to take care of Dora?"

Kael nodded. "She's kinda usually a step ahead of me... in everything... By the time I catch up, she's already ahead even more so."

"Well then, if she is charging ahead, just follow her. It takes a bigger man to follow his woman as she take the lead. Let her know that you're always with her." Nora pointed out while Evana nodded, "Yes! And romance her! While the words are important, just show her with the smallest of gestures that she matters. Sometimes people in relationships tend to take the other person for granted and forget to invest in that.."

"Yep. Relationships are like SIPs okay? Just keep investing little by little every time..."

"Exactly," Bella added. "Dora has always looked up to strong relationships, and she thrives on that kind of support. It's what she's seen from her parents and from all of us, so give her that foundation and rest will be fine."

Chapter 772: What Do You Mean?

"Good morning, Your Highness. Wakey, wakey."

Dora's brow furrowed at the absurd voice echoing through her mind. Who on earth was speaking to her like this, as if she were some useless damsel in distress? The words and the tone, grated on her nerves, dragging her further from the fog of sleepiness. Slowly, she realized that she wasn't being awakened but something else.

Her senses began to sharpen, and it dawned on her that she wasn't asleep—or if she was, it wasn't in a bed. Her body ached as if she'd been in an uncomfortable position for too long. Then, like a bolt of lightning, it struck her. The last thing she remembered was talking to Evana when she'd been suddenly called away. The memory was hazy, but the details were sharp enough to stir her from the remnants of her stupor.

Her eyes snapped open, and she blinked against the dim light. Panic surged through her as she realized she was indeed 'asleep' in a chair—but worse, she was bound to it. Thick ropes dug into her wrists, securing her hands to the chair's arms, while a rough cloth was tied tightly around her mouth, stifling

any sound she might make. Her heart pounded in her chest as she came to a terrifying realisation, that she had been kidnapped.

She shuddered. How had this happened? She'd been in her hotel, going down by the elevator... How did the person get past her security and the hotel's security? And then she hadn't even realized that she was in danger when her instincts were usually on point.

How had she ended up here? She forced herself to concentrate, pushing aside the rising panic. The last thing she could clearly recall was that conversation with Evana.

Somehow, Evana had learnt of Kael hiding Anna and not coming clean to her, as well as not doing anything against his master. Evana insisted that something like this might end up being a problem in their relationship as she'd been like that... and if he remained uncertain, he might end up hurting her the way Evana had hurt Lucien.

Though she'd been willing to fight and defend her relationship, Evana's words had struck her. She would have been blindsided in Anna's matter if not for Rafe sharing his doubts. And though she understood that Kael had been bound by a promise, it would not bode well.

And that is when she'd been called away by Tasha. So, probably because she'd been lost in the conversation, that she hadn't realized that something was amiss. But even so, just how careless had she been to not even remember even struggling or knowing where she'd been kidnapped.

As she closed her eyes, she remembered getting into the elevator, and smiling passingly at the waitress standing there with a covered trolley on the side, a cloche on the top. She stilled. It was the waitress.... she'd been on the top floor so if the waitress had come from below, then she should have gotten off at her floor or not at all. Then, the next thing she remembered was a sudden, overwhelming sense of dizziness.

She had felt weightless, her limbs going numb as if the world had tilted on its axis. Her eyelids had grown impossibly heavy, and she had struggled to keep them open, but it had been a losing battle. Truthfully, it had been no battle since she hadn't even had a thought to struggle before everything had gone black.

She struggled now, against the bonds, but the ropes held firm, biting into her skin even more when she struggled. "Good morning, princess."

The voice echoed in the room and she looked around, but then laughter echoed in the room, "There is no point in looking around, Princess. I am too far away from you. So, how does it feel to have your hands tied?"

"Who are you?" Dora managed to mumble through the gag, her words muffled but still clear enough to convey her demand. She needed to know who had taken her and why. What did they want? Money? Information? Revenge? A thousand possibilities raced through her mind as she tried to wonder what it could be. She'd been kidnapped once in the past, by her father's assistant. But unexpectedly, the man had simply left her with Olivia without even realizing how Olivia was not on his side.

But this was a woman. And kidnapping her could have some dire consequences this time, considering her position.

The woman laughed, a cruel, mocking sound that echoed off the walls. "Oh, sweet Princess," she crooned, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "you don't need to know who I am. That little detail is irrelevant. What you need to know is that I'm very thankful to you. Thanks to your cooperation in getting kidnapped, I'm about to make a tidy sum. What a perfect little toy you've turned out to be."

Look at you struggle! You are doing nothing but hurting yourself. Don't struggle too much," the woman continued, her voice almost casual. "Those ropes are quite sturdy. You won't be getting free anytime soon. But don't feel too bad about it. This is all for a good cause, after all."

"You really don't remember me, do you?" the woman asked, her tone suddenly colder, more focused. "I suppose that's not surprising. But me? I haven't forgotten. Not for a second. So you should know this: if you hadn't meddled in my life, if you hadn't created trouble for me, I wouldn't have been forced to take such drastic measures. You're the reason I'm in this mess, so it's only fitting that you're the one to pay the price."

"Anyway, it is only a few hours more. I've already contacted the prince and he is arranging the money. So, treat these next few hours as a staycation. I'll get my money, and maybe then, I can finally start over. I hope you don't mind my hospitality too much. It isn't too much but should suffice for you."

### Chapter 773: Kidnapped

"What do you mean she never came down?" Kael growled into the phone as he tried to make sense of what was happening. Just an hour ago, Dora had left the penthouse room to leave for a meeting with Rafe and the other investors in the hospital. However, according to her security, she'd never even arrived after the first reminder. And they had not thought to look for her because they didn't want to disturb her. They hadn't thought to search for her because they didn't want to disturb her. How could they be so negligent? If she never arrived at the meeting or even to the zero floor, then where the hell had Dora disappeared to?

"Pull out the surveillance tapes from an hour ago. I'm coming down there." As he disconnected the call, he was met with the questioning gazes of all the women and he frowned wondering what to tell them. But he didn't have to. They'd already stood up as Nora said, "Dora is missing? Let's go check on her whereabouts."

Together, they walked towards the security room and Kael felt his heart tremble. How could she have gone missing under the noses of the security personnel?

As they entered the security room, the guard had already prepared the tapes from the past hour and within minutes, they were able to pull up the footage of Dora leaving the room and entering the elevator.

"Switch the cameras. Move to the elevator ones."

There are no cameras in the elevator, Sir. These are the old style elevators, which lose signal when doors are closed and...

"Then switch cameras and show me the elevator going down. The security immediately pulled up all the floors from that time on different scenes and Kael watched. The elevator stopped at two floors below the penthouse level and a couple walked in.

They moved to the next screen then. The elevator's next stop was on the third floor where the kitchens were located and they watched as a waiter stepped inside and then the doors closed.

Finally, the elevator reached the lobby.

The doors slid open, revealing the hotel lobby, and Dora's security team could be seen waiting near the elevator's entrance, clearly expecting her to walk out. But no one did. The elevator doors closed once more and the security guards that had turned to greet her, simply stood back in their positions waiting for Dora.

"Rewind," Kael barked, "Go back and check every second—she has to be in there somewhere!" The feed was rewound, the team painstakingly reviewing each frame, each floor, but the result was the same. The footage clearly showed Dora entering the elevator, but she never walked out. The number of people who walked in and walked out were also the same other than Dora...

"Where is she?" Kael hissed through gritted teeth, his mind racing. How could she have simply vanished into thin air? As they stopped the feed again with the elevator doors closing and the guards returnngt to their positions, Nora spoke up, "Let this feed continue."

Kael looked at her then while the security guard gave a puzzled look. What was the point of watching the elevator go up again when the princess had already disappeared? However, not about to argue with the lady, he simply played it over again and then almost fell off the chair when the doors of the elevator opened again on the third floor and a waiter stepped out, pushing a cart with a cloche on top.

Soon, the waitress- who was finding it difficult to push the cart, was helped by the waiter who had earlier got on the elevator and they pushed the trolley towards the kitchen.

Nora sighed and pointed at the trolley, "Dora is there. Follow this cart on the surveillance footage. No cloche or cart is so hevay that two people have to carry it. Dora has to be under that cloth then, inside the cart."

Silently, the guard changed the camera angles to bring up the entire flow and that is when Kael's phone buzzed with a caller id showing 'Unknown.'

He answered immediately, already guessing that it had to be a kidnapping, "Who is this?"

A cold, mechanical voice came through the speaker, sending a chill down his spine as he couldn't make out if the person was a male or a female.. "If you want to see the princess alive, bring a hundred million dollars to the old warehouse at the docks. You have two hours."

Kael's grip on the phone tightened, his knuckles turning white. "If you harm her—"

The voice cut him off. "Do not try to threaten me. I have nothing to lose. And you have someone very special to lose. So. Prince Kael. No threats. No police. Not even your own or the princess' security team. You will not have anyone look for me or she will end up as fish food. You bring the money, and you get her back. Try anything else, and you'll be picking up pieces of what's left. Remember, two hours." The line went dead.

"How much do they want?" Nora asked quietly.

Kael sighed and shook his head, "A hundred million. I'll arrange it immediately."

"You are not going to investigate the person behind this and try looking for her?" Ava asked carefully, this position not sitting well with her. After all, if he gave the money once, who was to stop anyone from trying to pull such a stunt in the future again?

Kael shook his head slowly and walked away after sending a glance at the security personnel of the hotel. Instead, he said, "I am going to go arrange the money. But I doubt I can have that much in such a short while. Can you make up for the rest?"

Nora met his eyes and nodded, understanding the meaning. Since the hotel staff was involved, who was to say the hotel security was not? So, Kael would start arranging the money while he'd left the investigation to Nora.

As everyone filed out of the security room, Nora was already making a call...

#### Chapter 774: Ransomed

Dora was fuming, her anger burning at her own stupidity. How could she have been so careless? She twisted her wrists against the rope, glaring as the material dug into her wrist but the physical discomfort was nothing compared to the anger churning in her mind. She couldn't even remember who this person might be. After all, there weren't many people whose lives she had meddled in directly—or at least not many who would come after her like this. So, who could it be? And why could she not remember anyone? Only one suspect would make her feel better.

Her thoughts turned to Anna, the most recent person she had dealt with. But Anna? Dora hadn't done anything to her? She'd confronted Lord Rupert-Anna's father, but surely that couldn't have led to this. Unless Anna blamed her for having to reveal herself or being forced to marry Rafe...Or maybe being with Kael. The thought seemed far-fetched, but doubt started creeping in, making her question and revisit the entire conversations they'd held.

Then there was the foreign minister. He had tried to force her to resign because of those rumors of an affair between her and Rafe, but she had dealt with him fairly. As far as she knew, he didn't have a wife, daughter, or sister who would come after her just because she stood her ground. Yet here she was, gagged and bound, unable to figure out who would hold such a grudge against her.

The room around her was dim, the only sound coming from a fan humming somewhere above. Dust floated in the faint light seeping through a dirty window so that she could not even see anything outside. The place smelled also like an old warehouse or storage facility. But despite all this, she could not think of a way to escape.

Whoever her kidnapper was, they were, unfortunately too smart. They had her tied up and they'd even not deigned to speak again, giving her a chance to guess who could the person be.

She looked around the room, searching for anything she could use to escape—a rusty nail, a piece of glass, anything to cut the ropes. But the room was empty, with only the chair she was sitting on the piece of furniture.

Dora narrowed her eyes, glaring at the window as she weighed her limited options. Her legs were bound tightly, and if she wanted to escape, her only choice seemed to be hurling herself against the window. But that would likely just injure her further, offering little hope of freedom.

Suddenly, a faint sound broke the silence—a creaking noise, like a door opening somewhere behind her. Dora froze, her heart skipping a beat as footsteps echoed through the room. The door creaked shut, and then she heard someone approaching.

A shadow fell over her, and a man came into view, his face hidden by the dark. Without a word, he leaned down and removed the gag from her mouth. The sudden release caused her jaw to ache as she breathed in desperately, trying to feel her tongue again. Before she could speak, he pressed a phone to her ear.

"Your boyfriend wants to talk to you," the voice was muffled and she knew then that he was also probably wearing a mask. His hands that pressed the phone to her ear were also gloved. So, these people were probably experienced, leaving nothing to chance.

"Hello?" she managed to croak out, her voice hoarse from the gag.

But before she could say anything else, the phone was pulled away, the man ending the call without another word before she could even make sure that it really was Kael on the other line.

Once again she heard the sound of the door opening and closing as her eyes returned to the camera light that was blinking up there. She frowned. At least they'd left her mouth uncovered, but she didn't know who was watching still.

After breathing softly for a few minutes, she closed her eyes and started to talk in a soft almost taunting voice, "Who are you? Are you so scared that I will find you that you are not even going to talk to me?"

The answer to her questions was silence. Dora waited for a few minutes but continued, "It doesn't matter you know. Even if you don't talk to me, even if you hide in the furthest corner of the world, I will find you. And make sure you get your just punishment."

"The thing is," she continued, her voice low but clear, "this isn't my first time dealing with someone like you. I was kidnapped once before, you know. A long time ago, when I was just a girl. They thought they could use me for gains too. But you know what happened to them? They were caught. And the punishment they received... it wasn't pretty."

Dora smiled then, a smile so ruthless that it would have sent shivers down anyone's spine if they saw it and continued, "So you can hide behind your masks and gloves, but it won't protect you. I will find you, no matter where you run. And when I do... you will regret trying to exact revenge from me..."

As she paused, she was sure she heard a sound from the loud-speaker in the room. A hint of triumph came over in her eyes. She knew just how to goad someone. But before the other person would say anything, the crackling stopped and suddenly there was silence again.

The silence was deafening, but she sensed that her words were had an effect, so that was good too. She imagined her captor, sitting somewhere in front of a screen, watching her with clenched fists, seething with frustration that she wasn't crumbling under their control. And then reacting to the taunting. But now she knew one more thing. There were two or more people involved in this. And whoever was observing her, keeping a watch on her was not alone.. One of them was sensitive to her taunting while the other was not. Time to goad some more.

#### Chapter 775: Don't Do It

One of them was sensitive to her taunting while the other was not. Time to goad some more. So, Dora smiled and leaned in, her voice dripping with a mixture of mockery and cold resolve.

"You're scared, aren't you?" she said, her words sharp as a blade. "You can't even face me. You thought tying me up and tossing me into this filthy hole would break me, that it would be enough to satisfy your twisted desire for revenge. But look at me—I'm still here, still calm, still unbroken. And that terrifies you, doesn't it? Because deep down, you know that no matter what you do, even if you get your hands on the money, you won't be able to enjoy a single cent. You'll always be looking over your shoulder, haunted by the thought of me coming after you. Remember my words—once I'm free, there will be nowhere for you to hide. You'll spend the rest of your miserable life wondering when I'll come for you."

With that, Dora began to hum, a low tune that echoed off the walls of the place. She wasn't just trying to unnerve them—though that was certainly part of her strategy—she was also exhausted from talking and needed a breather. The hum was her way of conserving energy while maintaining the psychological pressure.

If one of them had the nerve to stay silent through her taunts, then they were stronger than she'd given them credit for. But she knew the truth: her words were not empty threats. If they let her go—no, when they let her go—she would hunt them down. She would not rest, even if it meant losing her sanity in the process.

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Unbeknownst to Dora, her tactic was working even better than she could have anticipated.

"What do you think you're doing?" the man hissed, his eyes narrowing at the woman who had been moments away from responding to Dora's taunting. He pushed her hand away from the microphone's switch with a forceful shove. "She's trying to get a reaction out of you. Don't you see that? Haven't you noticed the way she's been looking around?"

The woman shot him a glare, her hand trembling slightly as she pulled it back. "What do you mean?"

"She's not just sitting there for fun," the man continued, his voice low and tense. "She's studying her surroundings. She's memorizing every detail of this place so that she can find her way back when she escapes or when we let her go. I told you from the start, capturing Isidora Sterling was no small feat. You were lucky to catch her off guard, but dealing with the aftermath is going to be a nightmare. And the money—why did you insist on taking cash? Do you have any idea how difficult it's going to be to sort through that without raising alarms? It's not as if we've asked for change! If they are able to put a tracker on even a single bank note, we are dead! And we cannot possibly check each and every note!"

The woman frowned, and sent her ally a frustrated look. "Of course, I've thought things through. We're not going to send her back, and we're not going to take the cash either."

The man stared at her as if she'd just suggested they sprout wings and fly. "What do you mean we're not returning her or taking the money? I'm not a killer, and I only agreed to this because of the payout! But now you're changing the plan, and—"

"Will you shut up for a second?" the woman snapped, cutting him off with a sharp wave of her hand. "I already have a plan. And asking for cash was part of it. Just trust me. For now, call him and confirm that the arrangements are in place. Then, have him deposit the amount in four parts to these international accounts. With his status, he should not have a problem doing this."

She slid a piece of paper across the table, and the man picked it up, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the list of account numbers. "Whose accounts are these?"

"Mine," the woman replied, a sly smile creeping across her lips. "Alternate identities I've set up. The cash was just a diversion, something to keep him occupied so he wouldn't have the time or the focus to track us down. The longer he worries about her, the more desperate and irrational he'll become. And as that fear eats away at him, his judgment will cloud, and he won't see us coming."

The man looked at her, a mixture of doubt and reluctant admiration in his eyes. "You've really thought this through, haven't you?"

The woman leaned back in her chair, her confidence growing. "I am no fool. Now, make the call."

As the man nodded and made arrangements to turn on the voice changer, the woman glared at the screen. Dora Sterling! You were mistaken about one thing. I have no intention of letting you go and wait for you to come after me. I will simply leave you here and escape the country. Meanwhile, let your boyfriend keep looking for you until you starve to death.

"Prince Kael. Your time is up. Have you made the arrangements?" The woman listened as her partner started to speak and smiled. He would have of course.

"You have? Very good. Very good. There is a slight change in the plan, though."

A pause.

"Prince Kael. You know you are not in a position to make demands. You wanted proof that your woman was alive and you heard her voice. I've only guaranteed keeping her alive and not undamaged so I suggest you stop wasting your time arguing with me and instead follow up in the next part that we tell you. Once that is done, I will send you the location of the place where the princess is."

"Tsk tsk. Don't be angry. She is fine until now. How long she remains that is up to you of course.

Chapter 776: Possibilities

Kael stared at the zoomed-in pictures in his hands, shaking his head in frustration. How was it possible that they hadn't been able to find anything useful? The cart had mysteriously disappeared as soon as it reached the basement, and none of the other employees seemed to have any knowledge of these two individuals. He continued zooming in, desperately trying to make out the features of the person in the photo, but it was impossible to get a clear identification.

"Sir, we've started transferring the money into the accounts as per your instructions," his head of security reported. "Additionally, Prince Rafe has received your message and has initiated the process to freeze those accounts in the respective countries. By the time these individuals attempt to access the money and make their escape, their accounts will already be frozen."

Kael rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Unless they try to transfer it immediately," he murmured.

The security agent shook his head, quick to reassure him. "Even if they attempt to transfer the funds right away, the transaction won't go through. Evana Frost sent over a message that her husband has already hacked into the bank servers and flagged the accounts. Any movement will trigger alerts."

Kael couldn't help but shake his head in mild exasperation. He glanced at his security chief with a rueful smile. "It's tough trying to play the hero and rescue the damsel in distress when she's got that kind of support, isn't it?"

The security head hesitated for a moment before nodding in agreement. "To an ordinary person, the Frosts might come across as just simple, wealthy people—not too flashy, just rich. But when push comes to shove, you can feel the ripple effects of their influence and power. It's subtle until it isn't. They are quite deceptive."

Kael sighed deeply, his eyes lingering on the photos once more before he abruptly stood up. There was no point in just staring at these images; they weren't going to give him the answers he needed. Pacing across the room, he felt a restless energy building up inside him.

He needed to do something—anything tangible so that he would feel reassured that Dora would return to him soon. But what?

As if in response to his silent question, his phone rang, cutting through the tense silence. The screen flashed an unrecognizable number, and instinctively he knew, it had to be them.

The moment he answered, the same mechanical voice came through, "We've already seen the payment start to come through. Only half of it's done. What about the rest?"

Kael's jaw tightened. "No," he replied sharply, "First, you hand over Isidora to me or give me her location. I'm not releasing the full amount until I know she's safe."

A scoff echoed through the line, followed by a low chuckle. "And what guarantee do I have that you won't just take her and leave us hanging, huh? I want the full payment now, or you get nothing. I'm not playing games here."

Kael's fingers clenched around the phone, his knuckles turning white. "And you think I am?" he shot back, his voice icily biting. "I'm not risking handing over the rest of the money until I know she's alive and unharmed. You deliver her first, or this deal is off. And if you even think of harming a single hair on her head, I will hunt you from the bottom of the hell and kill you!"

There was a pause on the other end, then a cold voice spoke "You're not in a position to make demands. But fine—if you want proof she's alive, we'll arrange something. But don't push your luck."

Before Kael could respond, the line went dead. He stared at the phone for a moment, feeling the tension radiating through his body. Slowly, he unclenched his fists, exhaling a shaky breath. It was a dangerous gamble, but he knew better than to hand over everything without assurance. Until he was certain his Dora was safe, he couldn't risk it.

The security guard spoke up, "It was a good plan, sir. Now if they want their money, they will either share her location or send over some footage that we can use to track..."

"Let's just hope they don't have too many more tricks up their sleeves."

Just then, the phone rang again—this time, a video call request. It was the kidnappers. Kael stilled. He had not expected this. But quickly, he answered the call.

The picture was shaky, and the lighting dim, but he could make out Dora's familiar figure in the corner of a small, grimy room. She was tied to a chair, humming something and as the kidnapper stepped closer, she lifted her head, glaring at the camera.

And then, unexpectedly, Isidora's lips curved into a slow, deliberate smile. She leaned forward slightly, fixing her gaze on the camera lens as if she could see Kael through it. "Kael? Is that you?" Her voice was calm, almost teasing. "Look at how they've tied me up—like they actually think these ropes are enough to hold me down. They're terrified that if they untie me, I'll slip right out of here and jump onto one of the ships outside, as if I could just walk out the front door." Her tone sharpened, becoming more dangerous, a fire lighting in her eyes. "But they seem to have forgotten one thing: the moment they let me go, I'll drag them out to sea and feed them to the fish myself."

The man on the other side scoffed at that and answered in a low voice, "Your chances of escaping here are only based on Prince Kael paying the ransom. And nothing else, Princess. I suggest you stop trying to scare us and worry about yourself."

In reply, Isidora resumed her humming and closed her eyes while the man took off the camera from her face and growled, "You have your proof now. Now finish the deal, or this is the last time you see her."

Chapter 777: Half The Money

"What happened? Where did you go?"

The man jolted as he returned to their little observation room to find his partner had returned.

"You're back?" he asked, arching an eyebrow. "Did you handle everything? Have they increased security on the flights leaving the country like we discussed?"

The woman shook her head, a small chuckle escaping her lips. "No," she replied, waving a hand dismissively. "That won't be necessary. Here," she added, tossing a small envelope onto the table, "your tickets. And as promised, the money has already been transferred into your account. You can leave whenever you're ready. We won't be leaving together. They've discovered that a man and a woman are involved so they won't necessarily expect one person to leave earlier."

She watched as he casually pulled out his phone, swiping the screen until his bank balance appeared before his eyes. His grin widened.

"Twenty-five million dollars," he mused aloud, shaking his head in mock disbelief. "You're quite something, you know that? Already making tidy profits from this little endeavor... and now, it seems, you're trying to get rid of me, huh? Want me out of the picture so you can wring out a bit more ransom, is that it?"

His eyes glinted with amusement as he pocketed his phone. "But don't worry," he continued smoothly, raising his hands as if to show he meant no harm. "I'm not a greedy man. I've gotten my share, and I'm satisfied. So I'll take my leave now."

He turned on his heel, fully prepared to walk out of the room, his footsteps steady and unhurried. He didn't seem to care what happened next—his part in the deal was done, and he had no interest in

sticking around for the aftermath. The woman, meanwhile, remained seated, her eyes narrowing as she reviewed the footage from the last hour.

Just as the man reached the door, her voice sliced through the air, sharp and commanding. "Stop right there."

He froze mid-step, a flicker of irritation crossing his face as he turned back around to face her. "What now?" he asked, trying to keep his tone neutral but failing to hide his annoyance.

The woman stood up slowly, her eyes never leaving the screen in front of her. "Why did you go to her while I was gone?" she asked, her voice low but filled with suspicion.

The man's brow furrowed for a brief moment, but then he forced a laugh, shaking his head as if she was being ridiculous. "Go to her? You mean the girl?" He raised an eyebrow. "Oh, that. Yeah, I went to her. But it wasn't for anything you need to worry about."

Her eyes narrowed further, "Why?"

The man shifted slightly, his earlier confidence faltering for just a second. "I told you," he said, his voice a little too casual now. "Prince Kael stopped paying after he transferred half the ransom. You mentioned that yourself. So, I thought I'd do the smart thing—give him a little reminder to cough up the rest of the money. That's all."

But you know how these desperate types are. Kael was frantic. He was practically begging to see her, to make sure his little girlfriend was still alive and well. I figured there was no harm in letting him get a glimpse of her. It worked, didn't it? He's more desperate than ever now. He'll pay."

The woman stared at him for a long moment, her expression unreadable. "So you just... let him see her," she repeated slowly, as though testing his words for any signs of deceit. "Without telling me?"

"Like I said, it was nothing. Just a quick call. Kael needed to be pushed, and now he's on edge. It's a win for us, really. You'll get the rest of your money soon enough."

"And you didn't think that maybe, just maybe, you should have consulted me first before making a move like that? Do you realize how reckless that was?"

"Relax. I've handled my part. I'm out. You're the one who wanted the extra leverage, and now you've got it. What more do you want from me?"

For a moment, the room was thick with tension, both of them sizing each other up in silence. Finally, the woman let out a slow breath, though her eyes remained hard and calculating. "Just remember," she said icily, "the moment you stop being useful is the moment you become a liability. And liabilities are disposable."

"Are you threatening me? Have you forgotten that I already have nothing to..." Just then, the audio started to play... "ships outside... I'll feed them to the fish..."

The woman stood up abruptly and glared at the man. "You idiot. When you stopped me from giving in to her goading, I thought you were smart. But turns out you are a fool! I've been one step ahead of you this whole time, but apparently, even that wasn't enough. Do you even realize what you've done? You've helped Isidora give out our location to Kael. They know where we are. Or at least they know that we are in the docks! How long do you think it will take for them to get here considering that there are only two large dockyards in the country?"

"So what? Kael's on edge, sure, but we're miles ahead. They won't get here in time. And we've received the money! It simply ruins your plan to let her starve to death. Other than that, we are safe."

"We need to move, now," she barked, grabbing the nearest duffel bag and shoving their gear into it. "Pack up the equipment. We don't have much time."

The man blinked, "Pack? Are you kidding me? This is your mess to clean up. I'm not going to risk my neck for your mistake. I've got my money. That was the deal. You're on your own now."

"You've just doomed us both, and now you're running?"

"Doomed you," he corrected with a smirk, inching toward the door. "I'm not sticking around to clean up the mess. And I did tell you that I will stick by you till I have the money. Bye bye."

## Chapter 778: Kidnappers (1)

"Sir, we've already got teams combing the docks and have issued orders to stop all vehicles and individuals attempting to leave. But... I don't get it. The ransom has been paid. Why haven't they given us a location or even arranged for the princess' release? If it weren't for the small clue she left behind, we'd still be in the dark. Everything feels off."

"They never planned to let her go, I suspect. At this point, it's less about their motives and more about tracking down the people behind this. Focus on finding Dora. Every second counts—we're closing in on ten hours since she was kidnapped. Time is slipping away."

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Dora shook her head, struggling to stay awake. The hours had dragged on mercilessly. At first, the adrenaline had kept her sharp, her senses hyper-aware of every creak, every shifting shadow in the dimly lit room. But now, her strength was waning, and her body felt like it no longer belonged to her. The evening had already come and gone and now, the only light left was the moonlight filtering through the tiny window. She blinked, trying to concentrate but even that movement was getting heavier and heavier.

Her wrists had been tied too tightly for too long, and she had stopped feeling her hands hours ago. Every small movement made her wince, her muscles protesting after being left in the same position.

Her legs were numb too, tingling with pins and needles, but even the discomfort felt distant, almost irrelevant as her mind drifted in and out of focus. Fatigue was settling in, her thoughts getting fogger by the minute. It was getting harder to stay alert, to resist the heaviness pulling her under.

But she knew she had to. Because if she fainted, then there would really be no hope for her. The kidnappers had probably disappeared by now, if they'd received the money. She knew they were probably not watching her any longer. Maybe she really would need to go and hurl herself at the window. At least that pain might keep her awake or attract attention.

She tried to gulp but her throat was already too dry to be able to do anything else. Even as her eyelids felt too heavy and breathing got too difficult, she vowed to herself, "She was not going to let this person go easily. They would pay for it."

Dora's breath hitched as she shifted her weight, attempting once again to adjust her position, but it only sent another wave of pain shooting through her body. She swallowed a whimper, biting down hard on her lip until she tasted blood. She couldn't afford to give in—not to the exhaustion, not to the pain. She needed to stay strong, stay awake. Stay alive.

Just as she thought of the words, a thought entered her tired mind... The door...

The kidnappers were not watching her anymore which meant she could try her best for the door...wherever it was.

The man had come from behind her earlier, so the door had to be somewhere in that direction. Slowly, she started to edge her chair backward, the legs scraping against the floor. Her wrists were bound tightly, but her legs, tied to the chair, screamed with pain as the ropes dug into her skin. Every movement sent fresh jolts of agony up her body, but she bit down hard, refusing to make a sound.

She kept inching back, unsure how far the door was but desperate to make progress. She tried to turn her head to look back and see, but it was too dark. She winced. She'd barely moved back a few paces, when she felt her energy dwindling.

"If I can just hit the door hard enough... maybe someone will hear. Maybe I can get out of this". The idea gave her enough strength to keep going, inch by painful inch.

Her chair suddenly hit something solid. She felt a jolt of excitement. Was it the door? Hurriedly, she moved her hands behind her, trying to make out if it was the door or the wall. Unfortunately, it wasn't the door. But she refused to give up hope. She'd reached the wall, now all she had to do was move along the wall and feel for the door.

Gathering whatever strength she could muster, she took in a deep breath and started to edge towards. She thought she could see a sliver of light from under the door but could not be sure. Her only hope and focus was that she would eventually reach the door.

Every inch felt like a marathon, the ropes digging deeper into her ankles, her legs screaming for relief. Soon, for the first time, in her life, Dora started to cry as the helplessness of it seemed to overwhelm her.

She let the tears fall, taking in a moment to process this feeling of helplessness. The last time she had cried like this was when her dogs had died...She reminded herself that she could over come this. That Kael would come for her. He would understand her hint and find her.. But the docks were large. If they had to check the entire place, even if they did it day and night, it might take time... And she wasn't even sure if she was really in the docks.

Her only hints had been the sound of ship horns blaring outside and the musty-salty-fishy smell in the air in this room.

Finally, she felt the chair catch on something. Her heart leaped, but her hands trembled as they reached back, fingers desperate to feel what she hoped was the doorframe. But instead, they brushed over more rough wall. She groaned, slumping backward in frustration, her head pressing against that very wall. The energy she had left was draining too fast now. She didn't know how much more of this she could take.

She let out a shaky breath, her body shivering in the cold of the room. She had to keep moving, but her muscles were rebelling against her now, refusing to push any further. She was dangerously close to collapsing entirely. She sighed. "Just one minute... I'll rest for a minute and then try again..." Dora murmured to herself as she closed her eyes...

#### Chapter 779: Kidnappers (2)

"Sir, we've combed the entire premises—from the officers' quarters to the administrative offices. We even went through every container, both the ones prepped for shipment and those marked for return. We've even checked the ships that arrived today and were meant to leave. The same process was completed for the other dock too," the officer reported, his tone careful, yet edged with uncertainty. He hesitated, glancing at Kael before adding, "Could it be that the Princess was mistaken? After all, she had been unconscious when she was brought here. Or perhaps... there was some misunderstanding in the way the details were conveyed. Maybe she was not really trying to pass on a message and only been threatening the kidnappers?"

Kael shook his head firmly, "No. She specifically mentioned the ships—she was clear about that. And of course she was making threats to him but she wouldn't have specifically used that way." He turned to face the man, and edged out, "You were there when she said it. Call the patrollers and supervisors. I need to question them myself. Have everyone look all over again, if need be."

Within minutes, the dock supervisors and patrolling officers had assembled. Kael wasted no time. "You oversee these docks every day. You know every corner, every dark spot. Could there be any area we haven't checked thoroughly yet? Any place we've overlooked? I need you to think, and I need you to be thorough."

"Sir, Your men have already searched every visible part of the docks. But..."

Kael's patience was wearing thin. "But what?"

The man cleared his throat nervously. "There's... well, there's the old part of the docks, sir. Undergoing reconstruction for months now. Everything's broken down there. It's practically a wasteland of debris and half-built structures. I doubt anyone would use it for anything right now. It's a mess."

Kael's eyes sharpened. "Why wasn't that mentioned earlier?" he asked, barely containing his frustration.

The supervisor seemed to falter, stumbling over his words. "Well, with the construction going on, we didn't think—"

"You didn't think," Kael repeated coldly. "That area could be exactly where they're keeping her. It's isolated, it's broken down, and it's the last place anyone would think to search thoroughly. If they've hidden her anywhere, it's there."

"Get your men ready," Kael ordered, his tone sharp and urgent. "We're heading to the old docks. Now."

Without waiting for a reply, Kael had already started to walk towards the old docks, knowing in his heart that he was probably closer to her than he could have imagined. She'd been missing too long, almost ten hours now and each second felt like an eternity to him. The group of officers and dock supervisors followed close behind, their flashlights cutting through the shadows as they neared the old section of the docks.

Kael scanned the area as they reached the construction zone, his senses heightened. Debris littered the ground—shattered concrete, twisted metal beams, and piles of unused materials. The place looked like a forgotten wasteland, as the supervisor had said, but Kael knew better than to trust appearances. This was exactly the kind of place kidnappers would use. Hidden, isolated, and out of the way.

"Spread out," Kael ordered, his voice cutting through the thick tension. "We check every corner, every structure, every container. If anything seems off, I want to know immediately. And if you find anything... call me."

He then questioned the supervisor, "Which structure is probably the most untouched one?"

The supervisor shook his head, "Your highness, the old place was already crumbling. And only recently, Prince Rafe ordered that it be cleaned up and prepared for use. So, the only structure that would remain standing at most is the old warehouse at the other end. The engineer had been using it as an office previously. I'll take you there."

Even though the supervisor wanted to point out that it was probably useless and they might have brought down the building, he knew now that only once the Prince had made sure would he be satisfied. So, he simply started to walk quickly towards the place.

The old warehouse was at the far end of the site. It looked dilapidated, its metal walls rusted and crumbling, but the massive structure loomed ominously in the dim light.

As they approached, the sound of metal groaning filled the air. Kael glanced toward the officers, who were prying open a rusted door to one of the smaller storage units nearby. Dust billowed out as the door creaked open, but inside, it was empty—just more rubble.

"We'll have to keep looking," one of the officers muttered as he moved forward, shining his light into another dark corner.

Moving forward, they finally reached the warehouse and the supervisor looked shocked, "Why is it locked?"

Kael's jaw clenched as his eyes settled on the large padlock securing the door to the old warehouse. It didn't make sense for it to be locked, especially if this part of the docks had been abandoned during reconstruction. Without a word, he stepped forward and checked the door hinges. They were already weakened... he could simply break down the door with a little force.

He looked around and immediately honed in on the crowbar. Wedging it into the small gap between the hinges, he applied force and pushed at the tool. Almost immediately, the hinges gave way and the door shattered onto the ground with a loud crash.

Kael stepped forward, his flashlight casting long beams across the dusty, empty warehouse. His gut tightened as he scanned the interior. The place looked as deserted as the rest of the docks... which meant No Dora.

His chest tightened with disappointment as he stepped further in. His mind raced- could he really have been wrong?

Kael felt the weight of defeat slowly pressing down on him. His hopes, which had flared the moment they entered the warehouse, were beginning to flicker out. He clenched his fists, trying to keep himself from slumping in defeat.

Just as he was about to give up, to increase the aread of the search, his light caught something—something small, barely visible, lying underneath a pile of debris near the entrance. There, half-hidden beneath the twisted metal and dust, was a single shoe. Small, delicate, and unmistakably hers.

#### Chapter 780: Savior or Kidnapper

Dora felt something cool and smooth pressed against her dry, cracked lips—a straw. Instinctively, she sucked on it thirstily, drawing in water that tasted like heaven to her parched throat. She gulped greedily, desperate for more, the water spilling from the corners of her mouth as her body cried out for relief. She couldn't stop, couldn't think, only focused on quenching her burning thirst.

Finally, after what felt like too little, the man pulled the straw away, "Slow down," he said, "At this rate, you're going to make yourself sick."

The words barely registered at first, muffled by the fog that clouded her mind. She was still half-lost in a haze of confusion and disorientation. But the sudden absence of water snapped her back to the present. Slowly, almost reluctantly, she opened her eyes, blinking against the glaring light that assaulted her senses. Her head pounded, her limbs felt heavy, and her mouth was still dry despite the water she'd just drunk.

It took a moment for her vision to adjust, for her thoughts to align themselves into something coherent. When they did, dread settled over her like a weight. She realized two things immediately: she wasn't tied to a chair anymore, but lying on a bed. And she had not been rescued. The person feeding her water was none other than her kidnapper still wearing the dreary mask.

"Where is this? Why haven't you released me yet? I am sure that Kael already paid the ransom.

The man's eyes narrowed under the mask as he sat back, "Sigh! I would think it is obvious. You're my safety net. That woman... she fooled me. According to our plan, we were supposed to take you, get the ransom and then leave your location to the Prince while we made our escape. But she changed the plans at the last minute. She gave me a flight ticket to flee the country while she decided to leave you to die there."

"I may be a bad man and a kidnapper but I am no murderer. Also, do you know how confident she is that she will not get caught? She had no intention of leavign the country as planned. She simply took the money and returned home, pretty as you please. It took me a while to understand why she did that thought. She must have planned to pin the blame for the kidnapping and your murder on me. So, of course, I returned and brought you back from there."

"Now, with you in my possession, I can surrender and even help the Prince identify who tried to harm you, while negotiating appropriately to not be punished too severely."

Dora frowned and stared at the man who was looking at her expectantly, "Are you expecting me to praise you for being an upright bad man?"

The man shook his head, "I need you to call Prince Kael and let him know that he needs to make the arrangements for my surrender and the rest. I don't really have his number or anyway to contact him."

Dora blinked, her mind slowly piecing together the absurdity of the situation. Her kidnapper—this man sitting before her in his dreary mask—didn't have a way to contact Kael? The man who orchestrated her entire kidnapping couldn't figure out the final piece of his own plan?

She let out a dry, sarcastic laugh, shaking her head in disbelief. "So let me get this straight," she said, her voice weak but laced with a biting edge. "You went through all the trouble of kidnapping me, hiding me away, dealing with whatever crazy partner you had... and you didn't even think to get Kael's number for the ransom?" She raised an eyebrow, trying to ignore how weak she felt. "You're not exactly criminal mastermind material, are you?"

The man stiffened slightly, his posture rigid under her mocking gaze. "That woman was supposed to handle the contact. And she did give me a phone to make the contact but I didn't exactly memorize the number and she took the phone back when she left."

"Big mistake," she muttered, still trying to grasp the fact that she was sitting in the middle of a botched ransom deal with a kidnapper who seemed just as out of his depth as she felt. She could practically feel the irony hanging in the air. Her kidnappings were... just not normal..

The first time she was kidnapped, the kidnapper left her with Olivia who promptly took her back to the Frosts. the second time she was kidnapped? Her kidnapper wanted to surrender...

The man leaned forward, his tone growing more serious. "Enough. You need to call Prince Kael. We don't have time for games. I want to make sure my surrender goes smoothly, and you're the key to that. If he can see that you are not harmed..."

"And where exactly are we?" she asked casually, "It doesn't look like the kind of place anyone would find us easily."

The man scoffed, shaking his head at her attempt. "You think I'm that stupid?" he said, his tone condescending. "I'm not going to tell you where we are. The last thing I need is for you to leak our location to Kael the moment you get in contact with him. I barely managed to escape with you when that man arrived with his people."

That man? Did that mean Kael had really caught on to her clue and arrived there to rescue her? The man noticed her expression and scoffed," Yes yes. You're guessing correctly. Prince Kael caught onto your clue and arrived there. So, this time, don;t even think of giving him a hint! I may not want to kill you but that does not mean I cannot keep you my prisoner for as long as I need to ensure my safety."

Dora nodded and extended her hand, "Give me your phone. I will make the call."

The man shook his head,"Just rattle off his number and I'll talk. I will not be letting you say anything. If he needs to verify it is you,I will send a picture.