

Benefits 781

Chapter 781: A Shoe

"She was indeed here. We've found the camera, Sir," the guard reported, his voice low and cautious. "It's a streaming camera, but it does have a recording feature. We should be able to piece together what happened." He hesitated, his eyes flickering nervously toward the Prince, whose attention seemed distant. "Though it might take us some time to trace who bought the camera."

Kael barely paid any attention to the man, his gaze fixed on the monitor as the footage began to play in a fast forward speed. He watched as a man directly brought a chair into the room, with Dora's hand and legs tied to it and her mouth covered. After placing her right in the middle of the room, the man turned to look at the cameras, and showed a thumbs up sign.

Even though his face was covered by a mask, Kael could not help but look at him carefully. The man then turned around and left the room. Dora came back to consciousness almost thirty minutes later and even though the camera did not record any audio, Kael could already guess that something was being said over the speaker that they'd found in the room.

Later, he saw the man return to the room and this time, he took off the gag from her face as he sent a picture of her.. Eventually, Kael had the team fast forward it to the time when he'd already made the payment to the kidnappers and he realized that they'd never returned to the place...

Eventually, he watched as Dora's eyes started to close from exhaustion and how she continued to hold on.. And then as she pushed and dragged her chair backwards, determined to reach the door. He sighed. If only she'd reached the door, she might have been able to break free.

By this time, the kidnappers had already escaped. Kael had already guessed that.. And so, as he watched Dora lose consciousness, he could not help but frown. Dora had not been able to escape then how did she... As if in answer to his unasked question, soon, the door to the building started to open.

He stopped abruptly, his body jerking in surprise when he saw Dora lying unconscious against the wall instead of in the centre of the room where she'd been left. After a moment of hesitation, he rushed toward her, kneeling beside her. His hands hovered over her still body as if confirming she was alive.

The man then worked quickly, untying her restraints with trembling hands. He glanced around, his actions hurried but careful, before lifting her gently and slipping through the door. As he disappeared, he pulled the door shut behind him and locked it.

A few minutes later, the Kael and his security team burst into the room on the footage, just moments too late.

"Dammit!" the head of security cursed under his breath, his fists clenching as he watched the footage play out. "We missed him by minutes. But I don't understand. He never gave us a location and then later, he returned to take the princess away again. Why? Does he suddenly want more money and got greedy?"

Kael shook his head, "It seems more likely that he had a disagreement with his partner and thus decided to return. I guess, we will be receiving a call from him soon."

As if on cue, the phone started to ring as soon as Kael finished his words. Spotting the unknown number, Kael answered it hurriedly, "Yes?"

"Prince Kael. We talk again." The man on the other side of the phone spoke causally. "Naturally, you know by now that we have a few more demands before we can talk about handing over the princess."

TKael's grip tightened on the phone, his voice steady but icy. "You've already received your payment. The deal was that you release her—unharmd."

A cold chuckle echoed through the line. "Ah, Prince Kael, you must understand that things have changed. Let's call it... unforeseen complications. She is unharmd still so you can put away the angry expression and now, well, we'll need to renegotiate the terms."

"And how do I know that this time, you will stick to your terms?"

"Because this time, I am willing to negotiate. I know you won't stop looking for me if I escaped here. So, I decided I'll make things easier for me. This time, other than a ten million, I am willing to surrendered and give forward the name of the main mastermind of this game. In return, you will make sure that I am

released as soon as possible and then allowed to leave the country without anyone chasing after me. So, what do you say?"

"And how do I know you are not the master mind?" Kael asked softly as he honed in on the noise outside. This man was still somewhere around the docks because he could hear the ship horns in the background. And he'd already guessed that this man was not the mastermind because he was not using any voice changers for now. This time, Kael's only motto was to get the information about the so called master mind.

While on the phone, he wrote down a few words on a paper and passed it to the head of security who quickly nodded and walked out of the room.

"Because I have nothing against the princess. My only motive is money. However, the person behind the kidnapping, she wanted the lady here to die and you never to be able to find her. It is why I took the princess out of there. So that she wouldn't die and I would not be implicated in someone's wrong doing. Let me warn you, Prince Kael. That person who wants to harm your lover is closer to you than you think. It is better to be wary. I'll disconnect for now and then we can continue our discussion."

With that, the man disconnected the call, leaving Kael in shock. Someone close to him? Why would someone close to him want to harm Dora?

Chapter 782: A Rescue Attempt

"Why is there no news of her death or even of her being missing? Shouldn't they be looking for her?"

The woman paced the floor as she muttered to herself, her anxiety growing as she stared at the flickering news on her phone and the muted television. The world outside seemed to carry on as usual, but within her, a storm of dread brewed. It had been more than a day since she had received the money from Kael, and despite that, Isidora Sterling had remained missing without a trace. Shouldn't Kael, who had so casually handed over a staggering hundred million as if it were mere pocket change, have been worried? After all, this was a woman he had deemed worth such a fortune. One would expect that he would be desperate to find her, that he would mobilize every resource at his disposal to uncover her whereabouts. But instead, all remained ominously quiet. Why?

She glanced at the papers strewn across the table, though her mind remained elsewhere. Was he still looking for the kidnappers, or had he shifted his focus solely to searching for Dora? Either way, there should have been something on the news—any hint of action, any indication that Kael was stirring the

pot. Perhaps heightened security at airports and places where one might want to escape or even photos of Dora circulating in case someone had spotted her. But there was nothing. No alerts, no reports, no increased surveillance. Just silence. And that, more than anything, unsettled her.

She paced a few more steps before stopping abruptly, her heart racing as she considered the possibility. What if something had gone wrong? What if Kael had found out more than she anticipated? What if he was playing her, letting her think everything was under control, all while quietly closing in on her? Her chest tightened at the thought. She had been so careful, so meticulous. But now, that lingering silence felt like a trap, slowly tightening around her. She ran a hand through her hair and forced herself to take a deep breath.

With a sigh, she wondered if she should leave. If something had really gone wrong... then leaving now was the best option.

"Leaving now would only make him sure that it was me," she muttered under her breath, her voice thick with frustration. "And that would only create more trouble." She glanced back at the papers on the table, her fingers brushing over them as if to reassure herself. These were the key to her freedom. Once Prince Rafe had signed them, she would be able to leave Petrovia, if need be, without fear of being caught, without the threat of any consequences. It would be the end of her years of struggle, her constant need to look over her shoulder.

As she reached for her phone, preparing to make arrangements for her meeting with Prince Rafe, a sudden vibration interrupted her thoughts. Her heart skipped a beat. A message.

She hesitated, her thumb hovering over the screen as she unlocked it. Her eyes scanned the text, and the world seemed to tilt. It was from him. The pit in her stomach deepened as she read his words, her pulse quickening with every line. "I rescued her. What should I do now?"

Her fingers tightened around the phone, her knuckles white with tension. What was the meaning of this? She'd arrange for his escape. She'd made sure that he should have been half way around the earth by now. Why then was he with Isidora in a hospital? And what did he mean by sending this message to her? Was he trying to blackmail her?"

Without thinking, she dialed his number, each ring heightening her anger. When he finally answered, his voice was cool, mocking, as if he had already won.

"What is the meaning of this?" she spat, barely able to contain her fury. "You were supposed to disappear. Why didn't you stick to the plan?"

"Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing," he replied smoothly. "But I see you're still in your comfortable little palace, while I'm about to become a ghost. Was that your plan all along, dear partner? Grab the money and continue to live without any tensions while I become the person who orchestrated the kidnapping, received the money and disappeared?"

"I've done everything according to plan. If you had followed through, we wouldn't be having this conversation. I am going to leave soon enough," she snapped, her voice sharp.

"Ah, but plans change, don't they?" His tone was sickeningly sweet, grating on her nerves. "See, the thing is, I don't want to be your scapegoat anymore. And I want some more money of course."

Her blood ran cold. She knew she couldn't trust him, but now he was leaving her no choice. She couldn't afford to let him turn on her, not when she was this close to freedom. But she also couldn't let him win. For now, she would have to stall him and pretend to agree to his demands.

She clenched her jaw, forcing herself to speak in a calmer tone. "Fine. I'll give you more money. But you need to follow through and disappear completely. This is not the time for games. And bring Isidora to me."

A beat of silence followed on the other end of the line before his voice returned, laced with satisfaction. "That's more like it. I knew you'd see reason. But you better hurry, because I'm not waiting around forever. Also, I've already contacted the Prince. So whoever comes first..."

She gripped the phone tightly, the words burning in her throat. "Give me time and send me your location. Once I see Isidora, you pass her to me and I transfer the money to you. Until then, be quiet. No more contact. And do not even think of contacting Kael. I will not let you go, if you do that."

A low chuckle came through the line, making her stomach twist. "Don't worry. I'll be waiting... but not too long."

Chapter 783: A rescue attempt

"You are quite a greedy man," Dora muttered as she overheard the man talking to his partner in crime.

"Of course I am. See, I'm going to become a ghost soon. Gotta make preparations in advance, don't I?" His voice was cold, almost amused by his own twisted logic.

Before he could continue, the doors to the room burst open with a deafening crash. Startled, the man whirled around just in time to see officers flood in, guns drawn. His smug expression vanished, replaced by shock as they swarmed him, pinning him to the ground with swift, practiced precision.

"You... How did you—"

The question died on his lips as Prince Kael appeared at the threshold, his figure regal and imposing. He ignored the commotion around him as the guards quickly grabbed the man, and his gaze zeroed in on Dora lying on the bed.. His eyes softened, and without hesitation, he crossed the room in a few long strides.

"Dora," Kael breathed, wrapping his arms around her in a tight embrace. Relief radiated from him as though he'd been holding his breath this entire time worried that he wouldn't be able find her.

Dora barely had a moment to react before he pulled back his gaze searching, checking for any sign of harm.

"Are you alright?" His voice was low, urgent, concern etched in every word.

Before she could answer, he leaned in again, only to cup her face tenderly. His lips met hers in a desperate kiss, as he tried to reassure himself that he'd finally found her.

Kael pulled back slightly, his breath uneven, eyes still locked on Dora's face. A flicker of confusion crossed his expression when he noticed her stillness.

"Why... why aren't you hugging me back?" he asked, his voice strained, almost vulnerable. "Are you angry with me? For not protecting you? For not coming sooner?"

Dora shook her head, looking down instead of meeting his eyes, and he followed her gaze.

Then he noticed it—her wrists bound tightly to the bed rails. Kael cursed under his breath, shaking his head at his own stupidity.

"I'm such an idiot," he muttered as he fumbled to untie her restraints. His fingers moved swiftly, and in seconds, her hands were free. He gently rubbed her wrists which had been roughly bandaged and felt anger burn inside him.

"Better?" he asked softly.

This time, Dora lifted her eyes to meet his, giving him a faint, grateful smile. She reached up and wrapped her arms around him, almost throwing herself at him as she whispered, "I knew, you would definitely come!"

Kael exhaled, his tension easing as he held her close, her warmth reminding him that she was safe, that she was here.

But just as they found this fleeting moment of peace, a loud voice cut through the air, full of disbelief and fury.

"How... how did you find me so quickly?" the kidnapper, now restrained by the officers, shouted in frustration. His voice cracked with desperation, no longer smug or amused.

Kael's eyes narrowed as he turned his head toward the man, his princely demeanor hardening into something colder. His arms remained protectively around Dora but before she could say more, Dora gave a saccharine sweet smile to the man and whispered, "Ahh... you made a small mistake. You gave me your phone to call Kael. My fingers kind of slipped and I might have messaged our location to him as well..."

The kidnapper's face contorted with rage as Dora's words sank in. His eyes widened in fury, and he screamed, his voice raw.

"I should've let you die!" he howled, thrashing against the officers' grip. "You don't understand! This is how you repay your kindness! I saved you when you were supposed to—"

His words were cut short as the officers yanked him toward the door, his wild eyes still fixed on Dora. "You'll regret this!"

Kael tightened his hold on Dora, his jaw clenched in fury as he heard the plans of letting her die, but before he could react and attack, the kidnapper was dragged out of the room, his curses and threats echoing down the hallway until the sound finally faded into silence.

Kael exhaled slowly, the adrenaline still pulsing through his veins. He turned back to Dora, gently brushing her cheek. "Let's get out of here," he said, his voice firm but soft. "We need to get you somewhere safe."

Dora, however, shook her head, her expression serious. "Wait, Kael. We can't leave yet."

He paused, frowning in confusion. "Why not? You've been through enough, Dora. We need to get you out of this place."

"No. No. There's something else. That man... he's not the one in charge or the master mind. In fact he did save me from dying... The master mind is someone else."

Kael frowned, "I guessed that there was one more person involved. It must be that woman you kidnapped. Don't worry, my people will find her identity from him."

"But there is no need for it! Just check his phone. He just finished speaking to his partner. He was blackmailing her to extort more money and warned her to hurry up. If we can find her number or just wait for her to contact him, then we can catch her red handed. But, if we leave now, they'll slip away."

Kael's expression tightened as he processed Dora's words. His gaze flickered toward the door where the kidnapper had been dragged away, his mind racing with the implications of what she'd said.

"Dora," he said softly but firmly, his fingers still gently brushing her cheek. "I understand what you're saying, but you've been through enough. Let me handle the rest of this. You need to trust me."

Dora hesitated, but looking at him nodded. "Fine. You can catch her... but you have to promise me something."

"What?"

"Don't harm her."

Kael frowned. Did she mean for him to go lenient on the kidnapper?

Dora sensed his confusion and shook her head, "I will be the one to punish her, Kael. Can you do that? Step back and let me handle her?"

Kael looked into her eyes again and realized what she meant. He wanted to refuse. Tell her that she shouldn't do that. But instead, he could only nod.. She had the right to her revenge and he wouldn't take that from her,

Chapter 784: An Escape Plan

While Dora and Kael lay in waiting for the arrival of Dora's kidnapper in the small clinic, a soft knock echoed in the dimly lit corridor leading to Prince Rafe's office on the other coast of Petrovia. The door opened after a Prince Rafe allowed the person to enter, and a woman, her eyes downcast, was ushered inside by the Prince's assistant.

Pausing at the threshold, she cast a glance at the man sitting behind the desk and stepped forward, her fingers clutching a set of papers tightly to her chest.

Prince Rafe, seated behind his ornate desk, stood up at her entrance. It was a matter of his regard for her that instead of waiting for her to bow as was expected due to his rank, he chose to go to her. His eyes softened the moment they landed on her. He strode toward her, a subtle air of authority in every step, until he stood just before her. Without hesitation, he leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on the crown of her head, his lips lingering.

"Emma," he murmured, his voice low and soothing. "How are you? And how is your father doing?"

Emma lifted her gaze briefly, her eyes meeting his for a fleeting moment before quickly darting away again, her nerves evident in the tense set of her shoulders and the movement of her eyes. "Father and I are both fine," she replied softly, her voice almost a whisper. She extended the papers she held toward him. "These are the documents you asked me to sign."

Rafe's gaze shifted to the papers, and his lips curled into a faint smile when he saw her signature already scrawled neatly at the bottom of the page. He accepted them, though instead of immediately reading or completing the agreement with his own signature, his focus remained on Emma. With a swift yet tender motion, he slipped an arm around her waist, drawing her closer to him until she stood pressed against the polished edge of his desk.

A single stray lock of her dark hair had fallen forward, and with deliberate care, he tucked it behind her ear, his fingers lingering at the curve of her neck. His eyes, intense and searching, held hers as he spoke again, his tone filled with quiet assurance.

"You've made a very wise decision, Emma," Rafe said, his voice thick with admiration. "Once you're crowned as the crown princess, no one will be able to touch you. Anyone who dares to dig into your past or tries to use it against you will find themselves powerless. I will make sure of that." His thumb gently brushed her jawline, a promise lingering in the air between them. "I'll protect my crown princess. Always."

Emma swallowed, her hands trembling slightly as they rested against his chest. Though her face remained impassive, there was a flicker of something that briefly crossed her expression. Rafe frowned at that passing emotion but then concentrated instead on holding her close to him.

Finally, she was coming to him of her own free will. At least he wouldn't have to feel like an ogre for forcing himself on her.

Emma remained still in his arms, as he continued to hug her. After a pause, she glanced up at him again, her eyes lingering on his face for longer this time before she quickly turned away. Her voice was quiet but firm when she finally spoke. "Rafe... why aren't you signing them yet? We agreed on this contract marriage, and everything's in order. Why delay?"

A slow, teasing smile spread across Rafe's face as he studied her. "Ah, Emma. Are you that eager to be wed? I didn't realize you were in such a hurry." His tone was light, but there was an unmistakable playfulness behind it. She could see how pleased he was and she smiled softly, looking into his eyes.

"How is this a hurry? We are going to be together after a long time. I know I was foolish in the past but I want to correct those mistakes, Rafe. Emma's cheeks flushed a soft pink, and she dropped her gaze to the floor, fidgeting with her fingers. "I'm happy, Rafe. Happy to be your wife."

Without waiting for a response, Emma leaned up, pressing her lips against his. The kiss was soft, tentative at first, but it deepened as Rafe responded, cupping her face gently as his lips moved against hers. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver down her spine. When he finally broke the kiss, Rafe pulled back just enough to look at her carefully, his expression more serious now.

"Be very, very careful, Emma," he warned, his voice dropping to a low rumble. "If you make me believe you're happy about this marriage... I won't let you back out in the future. There will be no second chances. No turning away."

Emma smiled, shaking her head softly. "Who said anything about backing out? In fact, I think we should get married right away. Why wait for all the fuss and hype? We can deal with that later. Let's make it official now."

Rafe's grin widened at her boldness, a spark of amusement lighting his eyes. He leaned in and stole another quick kiss, his lips brushing hers for the briefest moment before stepping back. "You want a flash marriage, do you? Fine. Then we'll have one."

He glanced down at the papers of their contract marriage on the table, flipping through them quickly. "Let me get these documents straightened out and registered, and then..." He raised an eyebrow, a mischievous glint in his gaze. "We'll be married right away."

Emma laughed and leaned into him, kissing his chin, "Then I'll be waiting for you, my prince."

As Rafe continued to look down at the papers, signing them hurriedly, he failed to notice the malicious intent on Emma's face. Blinded by love for the woman he had fooled a few years ago, it did not even strike him that her change of heart might have something to do with her desire for revenge against him and Kael

Chapter 785: Bad To Worse

"I don't think that woman is going to show up, whoever she is," Dora muttered, her gaze fixed on the horizon outside the window. They'd been waiting for hours, the tension in the room thickening with

each passing minute. "She might have already left Petrovia... so that is why she is not worried about all this."

Kael didn't respond immediately, his own thoughts racing as he checked his watch again, growing more impatient with every tick of the second hand. He knew of course this was a possibility but what Dora did not know that none of the airplanes flying out of Petrovia since yesterday were going to their destinations. Every passenger on the airplane was being interrogated using lie stimulators and what not to find the kidnapper.

So, there was another possibility... that the woman was indeed fearless and was still in Petrovia.

Just then, his phone buzzed sharply, slicing through the stillness. Quickly, he answered, "Yes?"

"Sir, we've gathered some intel on the other kidnapper", the voice of his security personnel on the other end spoke quickly, "It seems she hired this man we've been questioning, but according to him, he's never actually seen her face. She was always masked during their encounters. Even when he helped her push the cart in which she kidnapped Princess Isidora, she was wearing a lot of makeup that hid her real features."

Kael's expression remained stony. "Anything else?"

"Yes, something odd," the voice hesitated briefly before continuing. "He once asked her why she was so certain she wouldn't face any consequences for her actions. Her response was... peculiar. He said she muttered something about royalty being untouchable by law. But here's the thing—there are no royal Petrovanian women currently active in any public or governmental role. The only women connected to Petrovia's royal line would be your mother and... well, it couldn't possibly be her, sir."

Kael's grip tightened around the phone as his mind raced. His mother? Involved in something like this? Impossible. "Keep digging. Find out if there's any other connection," he muttered before disconnecting the call.

"Royalty?" There was no royalty that was above the law but of course if it was someone directly, some things could be twisted around...But then who was this woman?

His phone buzzed again, this time with a message. Glancing at it, Kael froze. The message was from Rafe, brief but shocking enough to knock the air out of his lungs.

"Will you and Dora be witnesses to my marriage with Emma? We're on the way now. Get there. We'll be waiting."

Kael blinked, the words on the screen flashing as he tried to absorb them. Marriage? Now? With Emma...

Hurriedly, he dialed Rafe's number but the man simply declined the call, giving him a busy ringtone. Before he could redial his number, Rafe messaged again, "I haven't told her that I am inviting you as the witness. So, don't call. Just get here soon. Proposing a flash marriage was Emma's surprise to me so this is going to be my surprise to my crown princess... Get here now!"

The words "flash marriage" and "crown princess" struck Kael like a blow, sending a surge of disbelief through him. His grip on the phone tightened as an impossible thought clawed its way to the surface. It was ridiculous. It had to be. He shook his head, trying to dismiss the idea, but the doubt refused to let go. Emma? The kidnapper?

But it was possible. After all, she had 'accidentally' killed a woman in the past. And if that had not been an accident, then the possibility of Emma being behind the kidnapping of Dora multiplied a hundredfold.

He moved abruptly, pacing the length of the room, trying to make sense of it all. If Emma was the mastermind behind the kidnapping, then she had played Rafe—and everyone else—for fools. And now, with this sudden marriage, she was preparing to solidify her position, making herself nearly immune to any consequences. Because once she was the crown princess, he would not dare to create trouble, threatening to put the entire stability of Petrovia into jeopardy. With Master as her father, she definitely knew this first hand...

He cursed. He had to stop this marriage.

Kael shoved his phone into his pocket, the weight of realization settling hard on his shoulders. He turned to Dora, urgency sharpening his expression.

"We need to move. Now," he said, striding toward the door with quick, determined steps.

Dora blinked in confusion, snapping out of her thoughts. "What? Why? What's going on?"

Kael paused at the doorway, glancing back at her. His jaw clenched, but there wasn't time to explain the storm that was brewing in his mind. "I think I've figured it out. I know who the kidnapper is—or at least, I have a very strong suspicion."

Dora's eyes widened. "Who? How?"

Kael shook his head, cutting her off before she could ask more. "I'll explain everything in the car, but if we don't stop this marriage, everything will fall apart."

Dora hurriedly stood up, as she started to follow him. Thankfully, they had practiced moving again while waiting for the news on the kidnapper or she would not have been able to catch up for sure. "Wait—what? Kael, you're not making sense! What do you mean stop the marriage? Whose marriage are we trying to stop?"

"Just trust me," Kael interrupted, his voice firm. "We'll talk on the way, but we need to go now. This is bigger than we thought. It might be Emma."

Dora stopped in her tracks for a moment, her brow furrowing in disbelief. "Emma? You think Emma is behind the kidnapping?"

When she hesitated for another second, he finally gave her a hard look.

"Dora, please. We need to stop this before everything goes to hell. Let's make a move."

"But we do not have any evidence..." Dora said as they got into the car hurriedly, but Kael just shook his head, "We will have to play this blindly then. We do not have the time to look for evidence."

Chapter 786: Stopping a Wedding

"What's the holdup?" Emma asked, her voice tinged with impatience as she glanced around the civil affairs bureau. The room felt stifling, not because of its size, but because of the weight of what they were about to do—or at least, what they were supposed to be doing. They had been waiting far longer than she'd expected. First, the staff had been utterly speechless, gawking at the fact that their prince—their Prince Rafe—was marrying quietly, without the grand fanfare everyone no doubt expected. They'd seemed so dumbfounded that they couldn't even manage a proper response.

And then came the complication: apparently, the local civil affairs bureau did not have the proper jurisdiction to marry royalty. That revelation had made Emma's stomach drop. Marrying a prince wasn't as simple as walking in, signing a paper, and walking out—there were legalities, traditions, protocols. Rafe had kept his cool, though, quickly arranging for the necessary signatures of priests and high-ranking officers. Yet here they still were, sitting around, waiting.

Emma glanced at Rafe, who seemed unusually calm. If anything, it was his hesitance that concerned her now. Why was he stalling? She could not afford this! Hadn't he been eager to marry her? So much so that he'd thrown the contract papers for marriage at her the moment he knew that she was alive? Was he hesitating now because she'd proposed to marry him immediately?

"Rafe," she sighed, tugging gently at his sleeve. "If it's not convenient for them, we can just come back another day. This was all so impulsive, anyway." She bit her lip, pretending to second-guess the very idea that had brought them here in the first place. "Honestly, I'm starting to get cold feet. Maybe we should take some time... I don't know, a year or two of dating, and then we can plan the perfect wedding." She forced a soft smile, hoping her casual suggestion sounded convincing.

Rafe, however, wasn't buying it. His dark eyes softened, but his grip on her hand tightened ever so slightly.

Slowly, he intertwined their fingers, his thumb tracing gentle circles across her knuckles.

"We're not waiting a year or two, Emma," he said firmly, his deep voice soothing but unyielding. He brought her hand up to his lips, pressing a kiss to her fingers, his gaze never leaving hers. "This is happening today. We just need a few more minutes. The witnesses are on their way."

His words were final, leaving no room for negotiation. Before she could respond, Rafe let go of her hand and stood up, brushing imaginary dust off his jacket. "I'll go check on the timing, see how long they'll be," he added, casting her a reassuring smile before walking toward the front desk.

Emma nodded, watching his retreating form, but her mind was racing. Of course, they weren't waiting. How could they? She couldn't afford to wait any longer. It was now or never. And Rafe, thankfully, had taken the bait she'd thrown so skillfully. Her mention of cold feet had been nothing more than a test, and he had passed—no hesitation, no second-guessing. He was all in, and that was exactly what she needed to guarantee her safety.

Once outside, Rafe quickly messaged Kael, asking him how far away they were, his fingers moving rapidly over the screen. He sighed in frustration when no reply came through. Damn it! Why was it taking them so long? Maybe he really should just go ahead and finish the formalities with the employees here as their witnesses. The thought gnawed at him as he took another glance at his phone, hoping for a change, but the screen remained blank. He sighed again, running a hand through his hair, deciding he would give them another ten minutes. Any later, he thought with irritation, and they could sign their own heads instead of my marriage papers.

He sighed again, but this time, a small smile tugged at the corners of his lips. Despite the delays, despite the frustration, there was a sense of satisfaction growing within him. He was finally making right the last wrong he had committed. He had hurt Emma deeply, making her fall in love with him and then forcing her to live away from her family, in fear.

Of course, he didn't love her, but he would never let her know or feel that. He had chosen this path for her sake, and though his heart wasn't fully in it yet, he was determined to make it right. He would always care for her—the girl who had fallen so deeply for him. She deserved that much from him, and in time, he was certain he would fall for her as well. Or so he hoped. For now, duty, honor, and responsibility would guide his steps.

He glanced at his phone again, the minutes ticking away in his mind. Oops. Five minutes had already passed.. And soon, the next five minutes were up as well. He sighed and gestured to the officer who had been waiting on the side, "Arrange for the witnesses and begin the ceremony."

"YourHighness? Aren't you waiting for your brother?" the officer asked slowly.

"I think he is a bit busy. So, I think we should start. Its not right to have everyone wait and work overtime because of us."

"It's not a problem, Your Highness. It is our honour to actually be a part of your wedding."

Rafe smiled then," Really? Then would you do me the honour of becoming a witness for my marriage."

The officer hurriedly bowed, "Your highness, I barely can afford this lever of honor! I'll go and look for a few higher- ups quickly." As the officer hurried out of sight, Rafe could only sigh, second guessing this decision. What if Emma was right to have cold feet?

Soon, the two people stood in front of the clerk in the office, ready to say their vows and put their signatures against each other, forever. Emma bent down and signed the papers with a flourish before handing the pen over to Rafe...

Chapter 787: Wedded

Rafe stared down at the signature line, a strange chill crawling up his spine, like a cold whisper brushing against his soul—as if someone had just walked over his grave. With the pen poised in hand, he leaned forward to sign, ignoring the feeling, when suddenly, the room erupted with a loud, jarring noise. The sound of a door slamming forcefully against the wall echoed around him, breaking the silence. Startled, he turned around sharply, only to see Kael striding inside with hurried, determined steps, followed closely by Dora, her face etched with concern.

Rafe let out a slow, amused grin at the dramatic entrance, shaking his head as he called out, "Slow down! You're too late—it's already done. We're wedded..."

In his happiness, Rafe failed to notice the subtle shift in his bride's demeanor. Her once vibrant complexion had drained of color, her skin growing pale as an unsettling calm settled over her. Without drawing attention to herself, she began to inch slowly behind him, her movements deliberate yet casual, as if trying to escape notice. Her fingers deftly caught hold of the wedding certificate, clutching it tightly. It was official now—they were married.

No one could undo it, no matter what happened. At least, not unless they wanted to cause a major scandal. And of course if Rafe discovered the truth now—that she was the one behind Dora's kidnapping, she would still be secure in her position as his wife. But that was nearly impossible... or so she hoped since she had been extremely careful.

"What are you doing here, Kael?" She asked in a shocked voice.

It was Rafe who answered her, almost making her head spin that this time she'd escaped by an inch. " It was I who invited them. To be witness on our wedding. But of course, they are too late now. It was supposed to be a surprise for you."

Rafe watched as Kael's expression shifted from worry to something more dangerous, making Rafe frown. Without warning, Kael took a step forward, his posture rigid and threatening, eyes blazing with accusation. "What do you think you're doing, Emma? I am going to make you pay!" he said, the words dripping with disdain.

Rafe instinctively moved to block Kael's advance, placing himself protectively in front of Emma. "What do you mean by this behavior, Kael?" he asked, "What's going on? Have you lost your mind? I invited you here for our wedding and you are threatening my bride?"

I am not threatening her uselessly! She has been playing us! Emma has been lying to all of us from the very beginning. She claimed that the past was just an accident, but it was no accident. She committed murder, Rafe! She is also the one behind Dora's kidnapping. And now she's here, marrying you so that no one can touch her. She thinks that by becoming your wife, she can evade arrest for what she's done!"

""What are you talking about? It was you who believed that it was an accident. That she hadn't meant to. And isn't Dora's kidnapper already under arrest?"

This time, before Kael could continue, Emma spoke up, " Kael! Dora was kidnapped? When? How?" She turned to Dora then, " Are you alright?" But before Dora could reply, she immediately turned her attention back to Kael, " And what do you mean that I was the one who kidnapped her? I did no such thing."

"Your act really is up, Emma. We've already matched your finger prints. You see, you'd been pretty careful about cleaning your traces from everything. But you made a tiny mistake... You left the camera in the docks. And on that camera, we happened to discover a miniscule finger print... that just matches you according to the Petrovinian data base.. So, just confess now and answer me! Why are you doing all this?"

This time, Rafe too turned to Emma, shocked at the turn of events, " Emma? Whatever he is saying? Is that really true? Were you behind Dora's kidnapping?"

For a moment, Emma thought about denying the charges and continuing to argue. It was impossible that she'd left a print on the camera! She'd definitely wiped it off! But even if she had... she could deny and claim that Kael was trying to implicate her for his own vengeance.

But then, the certificate in her hand, gave her a rush of power and she raised her chin, "Yes. I did it. So what?"

Rafe was shocked at this and watched as Emma continued, "What? Prince Rafael? You look too shocked. What happened? Are you really finding it so hard to believe? Well, what did you expect? The two of you would play with my feelings and I would simply forgive you? Of course I was not going to rest easy without extracting my revenge! And now, now I have the ultimate revenge! I have now successfully wedded into the Royal Family of the Ignis, the rulers of Petrovia. Going forward, I will be your doting wife in public and make your life a living hell in private. This is going to be such a perfect revenge..."

She started to walk away but Rafe quickly caught her shoulders tightly, questioning her, "You... you actually did all that? Including committing murder? Wasn't it a mistake? If you didn't want to forgive me, it was up to you. But why resort to this? Why harm anyone else?"

She simply shrugged off his questions, turning away from him with an air of indifference. "Behave yourself, Prince Rafe. Take off your hands from my shoulders. This isn't how you should treat your wife. If word gets out that Prince Rafe is a man who commits domestic violence, it won't be good for your precious reputation."

As she began to walk away smugly, Rafe clenched his jaw, "Wait!" he called out, his voice sharper than intended. "Just check the certificate again."

Emma hesitated, frowning as she glanced down at the document in her hand. She scanned it, and a flicker of confusion crossed her face. "What do you mean?"

He gestured at the blank space where his signature should be. "Look closely. I haven't signed yet."

Her brow furrowed as she noticed the dot of ink where Rafe had only barely touched the pen to the paper and her world tilted.

Chapter 788: White Moonlight (1)

Cai and Rafe clinked their glasses together, the sound sharp in the relative quiet of the room. Both men nursed their drinks, the warmth of the whiskey settling between them as they sat in silence for a while.

After they'd drained their first round, Cai finally broke the quiet, turning to Rafe with a raised eyebrow. "So," he began, leaning back in his seat, "are we wallowing in sadness over your breakup today, or are we cheering because you dodged a disaster at the last minute?"

Rafe shot Cai a sardonic look, his lips curling in a brief smirk before he shrugged. "Can't you just be a regular guy and not talk about your feelings?" he muttered. "Real men don't need to dissect every little thing."

Cai leaned back, a smug grin spreading across his face. "Well, it's too bad for you that you've befriended a Frost," he said, swirling his glass. "We Frost men don't just talk about our feelings. We work them out, too, if need be. But hey, if you're too chicken to handle that, feel free to sit there quietly and feel all... suppressed." He glanced over at Rafe, raising his eyebrows mockingly. "You know, see what it's like to live in a pressure cooker with no way to let off steam."

Rafe rolled his eyes, letting out a long sigh. "Wow, Cai," he muttered dryly, "what an amazing metaphor. Truly inspirational. And for that matter, I never did befriend you. How did we turn into friends from business partners?"

Cai just shrugged and poured another round, the whiskey sloshing smoothly into their glasses. "You were too lonely and in need of a brother. So, you gravitated towards me. I am the Universal Big brother." Rafe glanced at him then and sighed before turning his attention back to his drink.

They sat in silence for a few moments, the weight of unspoken thoughts filling the space between them. Cai didn't push—he didn't need to. He knew human behaviour well enough. Rafe would talk when he was ready to and not a minute sooner.

Finally, Rafe let out a deeper, more resigned sigh. He stared into his glass for a second before saying quietly, "I think she was my white moonlight."

Cai looked at him, the teasing grin fading slightly as he heard the heaviness in Rafe's voice. "White moonlight, huh?"

Rafe nodded slowly. "You know... that one person who's always in the back of your mind. The one that no matter how much time passes, no matter how hard you try to forget, they stay there. Even when it's over, you can't shake the feeling that... that maybe it wasn't supposed to end."

"I know what white moonlight means, Rafe. But was she really the one who got away? Or was she always on your mind because of your guilt towards her?"

"Now that I know what she is like and what I just dodged, I think it might be more of guilt. I'd always known that I didn't love her but everytime I looked back to the foolish things I had done in the past, and that she had been the one to suffer consequences, I kind of convinced myself that maybe I was in love with her and that is why...foolish."

"So, we are probably celebrating you dodging a bullet today. That is actually much better. I wouldn't know how to console you. I mean... I was worried what I would do if you started crying..."

Rafe smirked and raised an eyebrow at Cai. "Frost men don't know how to handle tears, huh? Figures."

Cai gave him a mock-serious look. "I know exactly how to handle female tears," he shot back, leaning forward as if to explain a well-established fact. "You just hug the girl, let her cry on your shoulder, and tell her everything's going to be okay. Works like a charm."

Rafe's smirk deepened. "And if it's me crying?"

Cai leaned back again, shaking his head. "No way, man. If you want to cry, you better start looking for another shoulder. There's no chance I'm hugging you."

Rafe chuckled, setting his glass down and gesturing toward Cai. "I don't know, Cai. Your shoulders look pretty sturdy. Come on, let me see if they can handle my manly tears."

Cai rolled his eyes, leaning away as if Rafe might actually try it. "Buzz off," he muttered, but there was a laugh in his voice. "I'm not built for that level of emotional damage."

Rafe laughed, shaking his head in amusement. "You're all heart, Frost. All heart."

They both took a sip from their glasses, the mood lightening again followed by silence. Finally, Rafe could not help but turn his head to stare at Cai curiously...

Cai caught Rafe's curious stare from the corner of his eye and let out a dramatic sigh. "Why are you staring at me like that?" he asked, raising an eyebrow and flashing a sarcastic grin. "If you're thinking about hugging me again, I swear I'll throw you out of this room."

Rafe chuckled but didn't look away. He swirled the remaining whiskey in his glass before speaking. "No, I'm just wondering... How are you so sorted? We're practically the same age, but you have this... emotional calm about everything. Like you've got it all figured out."

Cai leaned back in his chair, smirking. "Oh, I definitely don't have it all figured out, but thanks for the vote of confidence."

"No, seriously," Rafe insisted. "You never seem to get shaken up about anything. It's like life throws something at you, and you just... handle it. I bet you've never known heartbreak, right? Maybe that's why everything seems easy for you. You've never had to crawl through the mess that is falling apart over someone."

Cai let out a low laugh, shaking his head. "You think I've never known heartbreak? Oh, Rafe, if only that were true. But here's the thing." He paused, swirling the whiskey in his glass. "Heartbreak, life, whatever—it all happens. But you don't let it destroy you. You learn from it. You take the hit, feel it, then you move on."

Chapter 789: White Moonlight (2)

Cai shrugged. "Just like that." He took a slow sip from his glass before continuing, "Look, it's not about never getting hurt or pretending like nothing bothers you. It's about not letting it define you. You get your heart broken, sure. You stumble, you screw up, but at the end of the day, you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep going."

Rafe stared at him for a moment, then scoffed. "That sounds like the biggest load of self-help crap I've ever heard. Which self help book did you steal it from? Are you too shy to talk about your heartbreak? Hmm? Now who is the chicken? Tell me, do you have a white moonlight?"

This time, it was Cai's turn to remain silent before he sighed, "Why do you think I am specializing in research related to the brain?"

Rafe frowned, "Isn't that because of your father? I read the investigative reports. And it's no hidden secret that he was in the hospital, assumed to be in a vegetative state because all his CTs always showed no movement, when in fact his brain was trying to heal itself. And if your Uncle had not held onto not letting his brother die, he would have been gone before he could heal..."

Cai nodded at that, "That is indeed a part of it. My father lost seeing me in my growing years because of that. And it did have an impact on me and my life. But there was something else..."

"We were teenagers... I fell in love with a girl. It was a first crush, I was a late bloomer in that department, but I was infatuated. I approached her and we quickly became close friends. She was amazing and we continued to grow closer for almost a year...until she was diagnosed with an inoperable tumor."

Rafe could sense the heaviness in Cai's voice now, the gravity of his words tugging at the air between them. He felt the urge to crack another joke, to lighten the mood before it got too dark, but something in the way Cai spoke made him hesitate. It was clear this story was going somewhere, and Rafe wasn't sure he was ready to hear it. But he stayed quiet, letting Cai continue, knowing his friend needed to get this out.

Cai's eyes were distant, the casual demeanor he'd worn earlier all but gone. "Things progressed too quickly," he said softly, staring at his glass but seeing something far away. "One moment, we were two dumb kids, dreaming about a future we thought we had all the time in the world to live, and the next, she was lying in a hospital bed, fighting for her life."

Rafe swallowed, already feeling the ache of the story in his own chest, but he didn't interrupt. He knew better.

"My dad was there for me through all of it," Cai continued, his voice tightening slightly. "He tried to help me understand what was happening, but how do you explain to a fifteen-year-old kid that someone he cares about is dying? He did his best but that didn't make it any easier. He told me that sometimes the hardest part of life is accepting the things we can't change, but I didn't want to accept it. I was there, every day, holding her hand, watching her get weaker. They tried everything to shrink the tumor... but it didn't matter. Nothing worked. Every treatment session was seeing her soul leave little by little. Finally,

in her last days, my father even tried to stop me from going, but I didn't want her to think that I had abandoned her, so I went."

Cai looked up then, meeting Rafe's gaze, his expression calm despite the deep sadness and pain he had heard in his voice. "I never went to her funeral, you know. I couldn't bear to. But I promised her... That I would do my best so that no other little girl would be lost like her. That's why I do what I do. Researching the brain, the most complex organ in the body... it became my mission. So that no one else has to go through what I did. So that no one loses their first love, or their father, or anyone they care about to something like this."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The room felt still, the only sound the faint clink of ice in their glasses as each of them continued to think of their past...

Rafe stared down at his glass, running a thumb along the rim, before speaking, his voice quieter than before. "As sad as that is, Cai... I think I'm envious of you."

Cai looked at him, confused. "Envious?"

Rafe nodded, his gaze still fixed on his glass. "Yeah. You felt something, deeply. You had something that mattered so much that it shaped your life, your entire purpose. I can't help but wonder what it's like... to care about someone that intensely, to have that connection."

Cai frowned slightly, his tone serious now. "Rafe, trust me, you don't want to go through that kind of loss. It's not something to envy."

"No," Rafe said, shaking his head slowly, "not the loss. I'm not talking about that. I mean the part before it—the feeling, the connection, the depth. I've been with people, sure. But... I don't know if I've ever had anything like what you had with her. Something that stays with you, even after everything's over. Something that does not separate you from people with a 'crown'. For me, it seems there has always been a wall between me and the rest of the world."

Maybe you haven't found your person yet... but that doesn't mean you won't."

Rafe snorted lightly, a touch of bitterness in his voice. "Alright, now you sound like a professional therapist... Keep your bedside manner to yourself."

Cai smiled, "All right then, let's have one last toast. To our 'white moonlights'—for the lessons they taught us, and for the future we're still figuring out."

Rafe laughed softly, lifting his glass to clink against Cai's. "To the white moonlights," he echoed, a hint of something wistful in his tone. "May they haunt us just a little less."

Chapter 790: Cai's Obsession

Cai glanced up from his computer screen and exhaled a deep breath, his fingers tapping restlessly on the desk as he waited for the results of the post-surgery analysis. Unexpectedly, he felt a tightness in his chest—nerves that he hadn't expected to creep up on him. Despite performing countless surgeries over the years, there was always a sliver of anxiety that lingered until he saw the final results. But this time was different. This surgery had been groundbreaking, and he could only hope the outcome was as successful as they had anticipated.

He sighed. He didn't know why, but this little girl reminded him of... he shook his head. The chat with Rafe had brought back memories that he had long buried in the past. So that, here in the middle of this important analysis, he was still being distracted and thinking of her...

Or maybe it was the hangover.

Though, truth be told, Cai couldn't remember drinking that much last night—at least not enough to feel this unsettled. But after everything that had happened that morning, he wasn't entirely sure anymore. His thoughts drifted back to those early hours...

He'd woken up groggy in his hotel room, still half-asleep, only to find the housekeeper moving about, tidying up. At first, he hadn't paid much attention—his brain was still foggy from sleep. But then something about her had made him stop, the way her hair fell over her face, the way she moved... For a moment, she had looked like her.

By the time he fully snapped out of it, the housekeeper had realized her mistake—wrong room—and hurriedly apologized before slipping out, leaving him with the uncomfortable sensation that his mind was playing tricks on him. He shook it off, but even now, hours later, the ghost of the memory lingered at the edges of his thoughts, refusing to leave him in peace.

Back in the present, his attention snapped back to the screen as the long-awaited report finally finished uploading. His heart pounded in anticipation as he clicked it open and scanned the results. His eyes moved quickly over the text, taking in the key findings. And then, he saw it.

"Yes!" he shouted, his fist punching the air in triumph.

The report confirmed it—Mina was showing significant improvement. Her body had responded to the surgery better than they could have hoped, with no adverse side effects. The initial prognosis had been cautious, but this... This was the best possible outcome. Relief and excitement surged through him, his grin spreading wider as he absorbed the news, before pinching himself to make sure that he was not dreaming or even still hung over.

However, even the little pain that he felt could not affect his good mood.

It wasn't just a step forward—it was a leap. Now, all that was left was to monitor her progress closely over the next few months and see how well her body continued to adjust. With this positive sign, they could start planning the next phase, maybe even push the boundaries further.

He leaned back in his chair, the tension easing out of his shoulders for the first time in days. It wasn't over yet, but this was a victory. He took out his phone, ready to call Dora and let her know, but then paused.

She was probably with Kael right now. No point in calling her now...For the first time in a while, he felt at a loss. He had no one to share his good news with... Of course he could call his parents or uncles but it just wasn't the same as sharing something with Dora... his best friend.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, feeling a sudden pang of loneliness. Gosh! Rafe Ignis was the one who had broken up but instead he was the one who was feeling all melancholy.

But he really did need to start dating. Probably.

Cai shook his head, groaning as he banged his palm against his forehead. One success and suddenly he was feeling all lonely, thinking about wanting to get back into the dating world. Get a grip, man, he

thought, scolding himself. Decisively, he pulled out his phone and shot off a quick message to his best friend, Dora, about the success of the surgery.

Barely a moment passed before his screen lit up with an incoming video call. He couldn't help but grin as he answered, her face filling the screen with excitement.

"What type of imbecile gives such amazing news in a text?!" she exclaimed. "Come on, Cai! Share the reports too! This is awesome news! We need to celebrate as soon as possible!"

Before Cai could even reply, he suddenly flinched, turning his head away from the screen with a wince. "Whoa, whoa—seriously? Are you trying to traumatize me?"

The camera had shifted, giving him an unexpected view of Kael's bare chest as he moved in the background. Cai groaned in exaggerated horror. "I do not need to see naked male abs, alright? Kael, get out of the camera frame! If this was any lower, I'd have to bleach my eyes!"

He turned back to his phone, rolling his eyes dramatically, though he couldn't help but laugh as Dora rolled her eyes at him. "Did you enjoy the view? You'll have to pay tax for that, you know? It is for my personal viewing only?"

Ignoring her, he instead called out to Kael, "You hear that? Your girlfriend is selling you out, Kael Ignis."

"Good enough! We can only sell what we own. So, trying to sell me means that she has claimed ownership. I am quite happy."

Cai shook his head at Kael's answer while whispering under his breath about being whipped.... but Dora simply grinned and nodded, "True true! He is totally whipped...."

"Gosh! I am not even talking to you! Dora Frost! You are forbidden to make any video calls to me until you get out of the whole honeymoon phase!"

"Hey! Are you trying to curse us? We are never coming out of the honeymoon phase."