

## Benefits 881

### Chapter 881: Marriage

Rafe stared at Arabelle as his team fussed around her, their chatter and activity filling the room. She looked stunning, even with exhaustion lingering on her face. Thankfully, he had already taken care of one crucial detail—applying for a marriage license weeks ago when he'd been toying with the idea of making her his wife. That decision had saved the day during the press conference and helped solidify their story. Of course, it had also clearly angered her.

In his defense, he wasn't the one who had announced their supposed wedding to the public. That had been an unexpected curveball from Arabelle herself, which, in his mind, made them even. Neither of them had planned for this chaos, but now they were stuck navigating it together.

Unfortunately, his public relations team had swooped in like a pack of overeager vultures right after Arabelle had stepped in and saved the situation. Fools, he thought grimly. They should have acted before things spiraled out of control in the first place. He made a mental note to have a stern talk with them later. For now, his focus was on salvaging what was left of the moment—and on reassuring Arabelle.

He cleared his throat and stepped forward, his voice cutting through the commotion. "Excuse me, everyone. All the interviews and photoshoots can wait. She's just returned from the hospital, and I think she's had enough for one day."

Though his tone was calm, there was an unmistakable edge of anger in his words. The team froze, suddenly realizing their misstep. After a flurry of murmured congratulations and promises to write glowing articles, they dispersed as quickly as they had appeared, leaving the room blessedly quiet.

As the last of them filed out, Arabelle turned to face him. The polite smile she'd been wearing for the team evaporated, replaced by a look that did not look promising.

"I can't believe you had a marriage license ready," she said, her voice tight. "From weeks ago. As in... the night we... How could you? Did you plan this all along?"

Rafe shook his head quickly, stepping closer and gently catching her hand before she could jab an accusatory finger at him. He held both her hands in his, his grip firm but careful. "First," he began, his voice low and earnest, "I need to thank you. You saved me out there. I didn't expect things to get so out

of control so quickly. If you hadn't stepped in when you did, I might already be facing council demands to step down."

He paused, searching her eyes for any sign of softening. "Second," he continued, "about the marriage license. Yes, I did prepare for this possibility. But before you get any more upset, it was only taken as a precaution so if things actually did turn out the way they did, no one could ever claim that we married because you were expecting or had been trapped.

"Third, I need to thank you for saving me again."

Arabelle's expression remained unreadable as she stared at him, her sharp eyes taking in his sincere expression. Finally, she exhaled a long, tired sigh and sat down on the edge of the couch. "I'm not the one you need to thank," she said, her voice softer now but still firm. "It's Cai."

Rafe blinked, surprised by her response. He raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "Cai?" he repeated, leaning forward slightly. "I'm pretty sure Cai didn't announce his marriage to me in front of a packed press conference."

That earned him a small giggle, and her lips curved into a faint smile. She shook her head, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "No, of course not," she replied. "But after you left, our dear friend paid me a visit."

Her smile faded as she leaned back, her fingers tracing idle patterns on the fabric of the couch. "He seemed... concerned," she admitted. "Convinced, actually, that someone had done this on purpose. That it wasn't just some coincidence and that the flames were being fanned purposely."

He thought someone was trying to harm you—trying to force you to step down. And if you were to step down, his plans for the hospital would be jeopardized. That would be a headache for him, so naturally, he started looking for a way to save the day."

She paused and glanced at him with a wry smile. "And it seems I was the chosen one to help you."

Rafe leaned back, processing her words. "I see," he said quietly. And he truly did.

When he had first approached Cai, it had been for practical reasons. Cai's background and undeniable talent in neurosurgery had been the initial draw. But over time, Rafe had come to understand there was far more to the man than just skill. The Frosts weren't just successful—they were strategic, calculating in ways that bordered on devious.

They wielded power like a delicate tool, not just to predict outcomes in volatile political climates but to subtly shape and influence those outcomes to their benefit. It was a skill that few could master, and the Frosts had perfected it.

The most remarkable part, though, was how they managed to avoid accumulating countless enemies despite their reach. They kept their influence carefully controlled, wielding it like a whisper instead of a shout. Their actions were precise, deliberate, and always measured. It was actually inspiring and scary. But it spoke volumes without making a sound.

He sighed and shook his head, "It seems I owe Cai more than I thought. But still, you agreed to marry me. So, thank you for that. Do you have any plans on how to proceed with this?"

Arabelle sighed, "I am sorry but we will not be getting married. I... I think we should hold an engagement and then plan for the wedding but cancel it in a couple of months due to 'differences'.

Rafe stilled. Had he misheard. She had not agreed to marry him. But only set up a ruse... He sighed. This was not done. He did not plan to have an engagement charade. "No."

Chapter 882: No?

"I am sorry but we will not be getting married. I... I think we should hold an engagement and then plan for the wedding but cancel it in a couple of months due to 'differences'.

Rafe stilled. Had he misheard? She had not agreed to marry him. But only set up a ruse... He sighed. This was not done. He did not plan to have an engagement charade. "No."

Her gaze snapped to his, confusion flickering across her features. "What do you mean, no?"

"I don't want an engagement charade, Arabelle," he said firmly.

Arabelle sighed, the weight of his refusal pressing down on her. "You don't understand," she said, shaking her head. "There are things in my past—things that could ruin you if they came to light."

Rafe's brows furrowed. He searched her face for clues, his mind racing even though she had hinted at this earlier as well. "What did you do?" he asked, "Was it something immoral?"

Her lips parted slightly, her caution evident. "Immoral and not illegal?" she ventured carefully.

Rafe's expression softened, though his gaze remained serious. "People in our position have always done something illegal, whether we admit it or not," he said. "What matters is whether it was immoral or not. And do you blame yourself for it? Was it the circumstances?"

Arabelle looked away, her throat tightening. "That's not the point, Rafe," she said quietly. "The point is—"

"The point," he cut in, his voice unwavering, "is that I fell for you the first time I saw you, Arabelle. So, you can say anything you want, but now that we're publicly engaged, I don't intend to let you go. I want you to give me a chance to make you happy."

He leaned forward slightly, his words brimming with determination. "And if there's anything in your past that bothers you, I will deal with it personally. You don't have to face it alone. Or worry about me not accepting it."

Arabelle froze, his declaration rendering her speechless. She studied his face, searching for any trace of doubt or hesitation, but found none. He was serious—dead serious. Her heart twisted, caught between the temptation to believe him and the bitter lessons of her past.

"Fine," she said at last, her voice clipped. "You want to take the risk? So be it."

Rafe's shoulders relaxed slightly, but her next words made him pause.

"Let's go ahead with this wedding," she continued, her tone businesslike. "Feel free to set a date since you've already made most of the arrangements. But there's a few conditions—prepare a prenuptial

agreement with the primary clause being that when we separate in the future, I will retain full custody of the child while you will have visitation rights. That is non negotiable. And, you need to keep the wedding low-key. No grand displays."

With that, Arabelle turned on her heel and walked out of the room, her expression unreadable. She may have not realized it but Rafe had caught onto her words. She believed that they would divorce eventually. She'd used the words 'when' and not 'if'.

As she moved through the corridor, her thoughts churned relentlessly. Someone else had once promised the same thing—that her past didn't matter, that he wouldn't care. But those promises had shattered as soon as the truth came out. It had blown up in his face and, more painfully, in hers.

This time, she vowed, she would be ready. If Rafe wanted to take the risk, let him. But she wouldn't let herself be blindsided.

If they did end up marrying, the prenuptial agreement would be her safety net. It would help her avoid a messy child custody case when the inevitable fallout occurred. And if the truth came out before the wedding, she would simply walk away, as she'd planned. She would take her child and offer Rafe the same arrangements she'd proposed before.

Not once did Arabelle allow herself to consider a third option—that after learning the truth, Rafe might still choose to stay with her. To her, such a scenario was impossible, a fantasy too far-fetched to entertain.

She had learned the hard way that trust was a luxury she couldn't afford.

She returned to her apartment and sighed as she looked around. Things really did have a way of changing suddenly. It reminded her of how Autumn and Gabe had gotten married. Out of the blue and so suddenly.

She sank into the couch, letting out a quiet sigh as she closed her eyes. For a moment, she hoped to lose herself in her thoughts, to drift away from the whirlwind of emotions. But just as the silence began to settle, her phone buzzed to life, its ringtone cutting through the stillness.

A small smile tugged at her lips as she reached for it. She answered the call, but before she could even say hello, a high-pitched squeal erupted from the other end.

"We're going to be sisters! Can you believe it? From being sisters-in-law to the Frosts to this! Arabelle, this is so cool!"

Arabelle winced slightly, pulling the phone away from her ear to escape the enthusiastic volume. Despite the ringing in her ears which might make her deaf, her smile widened.

Dora was nothing if not vocal about her thoughts, and it seemed she wholeheartedly approved of the turn of events.

"I don't think you should be happy about that. If I become a princess too, then you won't be able to flex anymore."

"Ha! We'll flex together then." Dora answered before continuing, "I wanted to come see you but all the press are not gathered around everyone related to Rafe, wanting to know if anyone knew about his dating and what they can tell about you. So, you need to be careful and need to keep a low profile. I'll send someone over to rescue you tomorrow morning. I have questions... and you, my dear sister, have answers. Be prepared. I am going to be asking you all sorts of questions!"

#### Chapter 883: A Mess

Victor Ignis frowned as he stared at the headlines splashed across the screen of his phone. His fingers itched to hurl the device at the nearest wall. The scandal he had orchestrated—meticulously planned down to the last detail—had crumbled into dust before his eyes. How had this happened? He had ensured every element of the situation was controlled. He had confirmed the woman Rafe had escorted to the hospital had been planning an abortion. But now? She had turned the narrative on its head, publicly announcing her marriage to him instead.

And her name—the detail gnawed at him like a persistent thorn. She was a Frost? How had he overlooked such a critical fact? He had dismissed her as just another woman Rafe had carelessly entangled himself with after being drugged. Yet, here she was, not only evading his trap but standing as part of one of the most influential families he knew. His elaborate scandal had not just failed; it had backfired spectacularly.

Victor clenched his jaw as the tension built within him. His mind raced with thoughts of damage control, but first, he needed answers. Turning his sharp gaze to the man standing stiffly in front of him, he demanded, "What did you find out about her now?"

The man—one of Victor's trusted operatives, now looking anything but competent—shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny. He had been tasked with uncovering everything there was to know about Arabelle Frost before the events unfolded. Clearly, he had failed.

"Young master," the man began hesitantly, "she's a volunteer with several NGOs."

Victor raised an eyebrow, the knot in his chest tightening. "Go on," he said, his voice sharp enough to cut through the man's fumbling hesitation.

"She... she's a human rights activist," the man continued hurriedly. "Her work focuses primarily on curbing human trafficking and spreading awareness about its dangers. She's particularly active in regions where these crimes are rampant. She's... well-respected in those circles."

Victor's frown deepened. "And her connection to the Frost family?"

The man swallowed nervously. "She's Gabe Frost's sister-in-law. She took his name when she was a teenager. She was an orphan and raised by him so she eventually took his name. There's nothing on her that stands out, sir. No criminal records, not even a parking ticket. She's spotless."

Victor's grip on the phone tightened as he processed the information. A Frost, a paragon of virtue, and a champion of human rights. His carefully constructed scheme had been no match for someone with such an impeccable reputation. This wasn't some ordinary woman who could be bullied or discredited; this was a fortress he had inadvertently laid siege to without knowing its strength.

"A Frost," he muttered under his breath. "And not just any Frost, but one who's practically untouchable." This time he did hurl his phone to the wall.

Victor's mind churned. Arabelle Frost was not the pawn he had imagined; she was a queen on the chessboard, one whose moves he hadn't anticipated. This revelation demanded a recalibration of his

strategy. He could no longer afford to underestimate Rafe. First it was Kael hooking into a powerful family and now Rafe.

"And her personal life?" Victor asked after a long silence. "Any vulnerabilities?"

The operative shook his head. "None that we could find, sir. She's remarkably private, despite her public work. If there are weaknesses, they're well-hidden. But..."

Victor's eyes narrowed at the operative's hesitance. The man's earlier incompetence had irritated him, but this sudden shift piqued his curiosity. There was something unsaid, and Victor would not tolerate being kept in the dark.

"Speak," Victor demanded, his voice low and dangerous. "What aren't you telling me?"

The operative swallowed, his hands fumbling as he placed a slim file on the desk before Victor. "There is... something, sir. While Arabelle Frost herself is spotless, the same cannot be said about her past. Specifically, her biological parent."

Victor's gaze sharpened. He reached for the file, his movements precise and deliberate, though his mounting frustration made his fingers twitch. "Her birth family?" he repeated, flipping open the file.

The operative nodded. "Yes, young master. It was nearly impossible to gather any information about this. What we do know is limited but given time, we can find that too. And it might turn out to be helpful. However, if you want to continue the scandal, this information should be helpful."

Victor shook his head. No. This was not for a scandal...

Victor shook his head, a dark smirk tugging his lips. "No," he murmured, his tone almost amused. "These changes everything. I'm not ending this now—far from it. In fact, I'm looking forward to this marriage."

The operative blinked, clearly caught off guard by the shift in Victor's demeanor. "Young master?"

Victor leaned back in his chair, tapping a finger against the file. "You see, I underestimated Arabelle Frost once, and I won't make that mistake again. This marriage to Rafe? It's perfect. Let them celebrate, let Rafe think he has won this. But you," he said, his voice hardening as he fixed his gaze on the operative, "will continue digging. Find everything there is to know about these two men. Every skeleton, every rumor, every whisper. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," the operative stammered.

Victor's smirk deepened as he stood and crossed the room, the shattered remains of his phone crunching under his polished shoes. "Once the wedding is over and Rafe is basking in their triumph, that's when we strike. Not to just ruin them—no, that would be too easy—but to make them fall harder than they ever thought possible. When they're at their highest, we'll ensure they're brought to their knees."

He turned back to the operative, his eyes gleaming with a dangerous light. "You have your orders. Leave no stone unturned. And remember—this isn't just about Arabelle. It's about everyone around her. If they're connected to her, I want to know their weaknesses. and past."

The operative nodded quickly, gathering the file before leaving the room. Victor stared at the door for a moment, his mind already calculating the next steps. The game had changed, but the board was still his to control.

Victor allowed himself a rare chuckle, low and sinister. "Enjoy your moment of victory, Rafe," he muttered to himself. "It won't last long."

#### Chapter 884: Seriously?

"I think it's the fate of us sisters to get married in a civil affairs bureau," Arabelle murmured as she signed the marriage papers, her tone carrying a mix of resignation and humor.

Rafe grinned, watching her with amusement before leaning in to add his signature with a flourish. "Well, you were the one who insisted on keeping it simple. If you want, I can still organize a grand celebration," he teased, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

Arabelle shook her head firmly. "No, thank you. This is better—straightforward and fuss-free. Besides, now that we're officially married, we can finally go home and rest."

Rafe chuckled, shaking his head. "Not so fast. We still need to go to the other venue for the bridal photo session. After that, the publicity team will want a few shots to go with the official announcement. It's part of the package, remember?"

Arabelle rolled her eyes dramatically. "Seriously? Haven't I posed for enough pictures already? We've been 'engaged' for barely a month, and I swear I've taken more photos during this time than I have in my entire life!"

"Not my fault everyone thinks you're photogenic," Rafe countered with a grin.

"Photogenic?" Arabelle groaned, throwing her hands in the air. "I'm traumatized, Rafe. Every morning, I wake up with this irrational fear that someone's caught me in some embarrassing moment—like scratching my nose or yawning. Imagine the headlines!"

Rafe laughed as they walked towards the next room, his steps light with amusement. "You really should've brought this up earlier. For what it's worth, the local media follows strict guidelines. They can't release any pictures of you without clearance from the royal office. So, even if someone does manage to snap something unflattering, it's never going to see the light of day."

Arabelle's eyes widened in surprise. "Wait, really? Why didn't you tell me this before? That changes everything!" She smirked, a mischievous glint lighting up her face. "Just you watch—every time I spot a paparazzo now, I'm going to scratch my nose or make the weirdest face possible. Let's see them try to work with that! And you better instruct your office to not give them clearance to publish the pictures."

Rafe burst out laughing, shaking his head. "You're unbelievable, Arabelle. But honestly, I think even your 'weird faces' would probably end up looking charming. The paparazzi would probably label them as 'quirky' and 'adorable and beg my staff for permission'"

She rolled her eyes again, but a small smile tugged at her lips. "If that happens, I'm blaming you."

Rafe gave her a playful shrug. "And you married me anyway. That's on you, my dear wife."

With that, they stepped into the next room, as Arabelle stared at him, "What is it with this dear wife thing?"

"Hey! I am newly married. I need practice to remember I have a wife."

Arabelle shook her head. If anyone needed a reminder about this new circumstance, it was probably her. After all, she still had trouble believing that she had not just agreed to be his wife but also gone ahead and done the deed without having anyone over from the family. She'd probably getting an earful about this from everyone, especially Autumn. But that was another story.

She glanced at Rafe from the corner of her eyes. It was odd, this easy camaraderie. Even though they were 'engaged' and now married, the total number of interactions she'd had with him was limited to the photoshoots and official events. The entire month had been spent in 'queen' training and understanding of the local politics. Thankfully, she'd had experience of that because of Dora who had insisted on taking her along for these classes when they were children.

But now that they had signed on the dotted line, she felt... odd. Had she actually taken such a big step without telling Rafe anything?

Inside the small room, Arabelle turned to stand beside Rafe, her heart beating a little faster as the photographer adjusted his camera. The soft hum of conversation buzzed around them, and the staff moved about, preparing for the impromptu photo session.

"Stand a little closer, Your Highness," the photographer directed, and Rafe did not need any prompting. Immediately, he placed his arm around her and pulled her close.

Arabelle glanced at him. This picture was supposed to be the official photograph for the marriage certificate. Why were they posing so much?

However, as the photographer requested them to pose and look at each other, she knew what this was. A chance for the photographer to release the first shorts of their marriage.

The photographer clicked a few quick shots, his enthusiasm apparent. "Perfect! Just a few more. Can you both lean your heads closer and smile?"

Rafe turned toward her, his expression playful. "You heard the man, dear wife," he whispered, his tone teasing.

Arabelle suppressed a groan but managed a soft smile as she met his gaze.

As the final clicks echoed in the room, the photographer lowered his camera, beaming. "Wonderful! Absolutely wonderful! A historic moment captured perfectly."

The small group of onlookers, staff, and assistants burst into applause, their excitement filling the room. One of them, an older woman with a warm smile, clasped her hands together. "To think we'd be here to witness the royal couple's marriage! Such an honor!"

Another voice chimed in, brimming with excitement. "Your Highnesses, could we perhaps see a kiss for the camera? It would make the announcement even more special!"

Arabelle's eyes widened in alarm, and she instinctively looked at Rafe, silently pleading for him to deflect the request. But to her dismay Rafe turned to her with a wicked grin.

Before she could protest, Rafe stepped closer and cupped her cheek gently, leaning in. And then he leaned in and whispered in her ear, "I've been wanting this chance forever. I should probably award this person." Arabelle let out a surprised gasp. Oookay.. They had indeed not kissed after that night but this was...

Even while she was trying to assimilate this, his lips brushed against hers in a soft, quick kiss that sent a jolt of surprise through her. The room erupted into cheers and clapping, the enthusiasm overwhelming.

Arabelle blinked, trying to process what had just happened. Her cheeks flushed as she saw Rafe pull back, his expression calm but with a hint of smug satisfaction.

"Perfect," he said casually, turning to the photographer. "You got what you needed?"

The photographer nodded, his grin wide. "Absolutely, Your Highness. That was perfect."

Rafe reached for Arabelle's hand, guiding her toward the door as the crowd continued to cheer. She followed, still slightly dazed. Why was she dazed? She could not help but ask herself. She should have expected this! Rafe had warned her repeatedly that their chemistry was still too explosive.

As they stepped outside into the fresh air, Rafe helped her into the car as he said in a light tone. "After you, dear wife," he said, his tone light.

Arabelle rolled her eyes and climbed into the car. As he slid in beside her and the door closed, she finally found her voice. "You didn't have to do that."

Rafe leaned back in his seat, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "It was for the cameras, remember? Publicity, announcements, and all that."

Arabelle narrowed her eyes at him, though a small smile tugged at her lips despite herself. "You opportunist. You're enjoying this way too much."

"Maybe," Rafe admitted with a shrug, his grin widening. "But you have to admit, it was fun."

She harrumphed but then rolled her eyes and turned to say something when he leaned in close and cupped her face. She blinked. Gone was the grin and playfulness in his eyes as he leaned in close and whispered, "I am pleased to marry you, Arabelle Frost. No... Arabelle Ignis. Thank you for saying yes."

Arabelle stilled. This... was too much like a confession. She could not handle all this. So, she leaned back to break the tension and raised a shoulder, "If someone can be blamed for this, it was your swimmers..."

Rafe looked at her for a moment and she wondered if she'd ended up offending him but then, thankfully, he leaned back and laughed, "Well, then, I guess, I must thank my swimmers."

Arabelle gave him a small smile then and turned to look out where one of the employees was rushing out, with an envelope in his hand.

As the employee approached, slightly out of breath but with a wide smile, he knocked on the door, "Your Highness, this is the official certificate and a few preliminary photographs from today's session. We thought you might like to have them."

Rafe accepted the envelope with a gracious nod. "Thank you."

The employee retreated with a respectful bow, and Rafe turned to Arabelle, holding out the envelope. His expression softened as he offered it to her. "Here you go, dear wife. Our first official document as a married couple."

Arabelle gave him a skeptical look but took the envelope anyway, her fingers brushing against his as she did. "You really enjoy saying that, don't you?"

"Immensely," he admitted with a smirk, leaning back in his seat to watch her.

#### Chapter 885: Surprise

Arabelle rolled her eyes and opened the envelope, pulling out the contents carefully. On top was the marriage certificate. She stared at it for a moment, the weight of what she had just done sinking in a little deeper. She was married and pregnant. And now, she felt lightheaded and ready to faint. She'd jumped too deep into this well.

Beneath the certificate were a few printed photos from their earlier session. She flipped through them absently until one caught her eye. It was candid—unposed and unexpected. She was laughing as she stared up at Rafe with her head turned. She looked... almost like a woman in love. And beside her, Rafe was looking at her, his expression unguarded and filled with a warmth that made her heart skip a beat. It reminded her of the many pictures of Autumn and Gabe that she had grown up surrounded with.

She stared at the picture for a moment, her thumb brushing over the glossy surface. The world around her seemed to fade, leaving only that captured moment. Could they really turn out to be like Gabe and Autumn. She doubted that but a bit of hope made her feel warm.

"Found something interesting?" Rafe's voice broke through her thoughts as he turned to look at her.

Arabelle blinked, quickly tucking the photo back into the envelope as if it were something shameful. "Just... surprised they managed to get decent shots of us," she said,

"It is good that you think the pictures are decent. A memory of our first day as husband and wife should at least be 'DECENT,' my dear wife," Rafe replied smoothly, his grin returning.

Arabelle's lips quirked into a small smile despite herself. "You're impossible."

"And you're stuck with me now," he replied smoothly, his grin returning.

She shook her head, turning her attention back to the window, but her thoughts lingered on that photo—the way he had looked at her, the way it made her feel. For a moment, the world outside blurred, and she allowed herself to wonder if this marriage, unexpected and unconventional as it was, might turn out to be something more than she had anticipated. But then, as quickly as the thought came, she buried it. She was being foolish. The day the truth was revealed, Rafe would push away from her faster than if she had poison ivy wrapped around her.

"So, we're going for more photographs now?"

Rafe sighed and shook his head as his driver soon reached a hotel. And then he didn't need to answer because standing right there were people she had not expected to see.

She turned her head sharply to glare at Rafe who quickly shook his head, "I swear on all my ancestors and future generations. This is not my doing. You can blame Dora and Cai."

Even though one might think that she was unhappy with the arrival of the visitors, the truth was that she was overwhelmed and happy. Happy to have them here on this day when her life would change forever... officially.

The car had barely stopped when she quickly ran over and threw herself into the arms of the man who was more of her father than a brother-in-law. "Gabe."

Gabe caught her in a tight hug as he patted her head and then sighed. Just that was enough to make her feel like crying and Arabelle was about to do just that when Autumn poked them, "Hey! You sister stealer, husband! Let go and let me hug my sister too."

Arabelle chuckled at that and mimicking Autumn poked Gabe's other shoulder, "You are a sister stealer. You stole my Autumn from me first."

"Hey! Thats pot calling the kettle black. It is clear that you two stole me from my brothers." Gabe grinned and the three of them laughed at the old joke.

The laughter quickly turned into a few tears and Arabelle hurriedly leaned into Gabe's shoulder, letting his shirt soak her tears. After a few moments, Gabe broke the silence with a playful huff. "Alright, enough of this crying. I'm not exactly a large tissue, you know," he said, his voice light, though his eyes were a little misty.

Rafe cleared his throat awkwardly, stepping forward at last. This wasn't the reunion he had envisioned between Gabe Frost and Arabelle. He had always thought Arabelle would maintain a more stoic demeanor, yet here she was, running toward someone with the open vulnerability of a child seeking comfort.

In the next breath, Rafe wondered if the smile he had seen on Gabe's face was real or merely his imagination, for now, the man was staring at him as though Rafe were the scum of the earth. Slowly, Rafe extended his hand, keeping his expression neutral. "Welcome to Petrovia, Mr. Frost. It's an honor to have you here."

Gabe's gaze lingered on Rafe's hand for a moment, and Rafe braced himself for the possibility that he would refuse the handshake. But after a pause, Gabe clasped his hand firmly, nodding with a hint of respect. "Thank you, Prince Rafael. It's good to see you... even under these circumstances."

The two men exchanged a brief glance, an unspoken understanding passing between them. In that moment, Rafe knew that more than a cordial handshake had just taken place. He had been warned by Gabe, and soon, he would face an inquisition. He just hoped he was prepared for it.

Thankfully, Autumn seemed to sense the tension and stepped forward quickly, wrapping her arms around Rafe. "Welcome to the family, Rafe. I hope you can survive this. Also, in the future, no handshakes. We are all quite casual here."

Rafe returned the hug cautiously, allowing himself a small smile. "Noted," he said softly, relieved for the distraction. "No handshakes."

Finally, the four of them walked into the large hotel where Arabelle was in for another surprise. Shemight have managed to keep their 'marriage' small, but no one was going to stop the Frost from coming out to support her.

#### Chapter 886: Scandal

"Is this the kind of queen we want for our future? Even if we have shifted our focus away from solely considering royal bloodlines for the position of queen, she is nothing more than a commoner. In fact, she is worst than a commoner. She belongs to a family with a criminal record." Victor stood before the three ministers and forcefully threw the documents onto the table in front of them.

The two ministers remained silent, their expressions unreadable as they dare not say anything without thought, while the third carefully examined the file. After a moment of scrutiny, he frowned and shook his head. "Even if this was her past, it is evident that she has never been influenced by that man who was her father. Arabelle Frost has always been in the custody of Autumn Frost and has consistently received nothing but glowing accolades from everyone who knows her as well as International organisations. She is well-respected within the social circles and has been warmly welcomed into high society as a member of the Frost family. I doubt this is of much importance."

Victor snorted and shook his head, a bitter smile playing on his lips. "Really? And do these people truly understand that all this 'good' she is doing is an attempt to atone for her father's sins? If it really doesn't have much importance, why is this information hidden from the public? Have they looked into her father's record? He spent his youth serving with distinction in public service, only to turn into something far worse than anyone could have anticipated."

The other two ministers nodded in agreement. Yes, they had no reservations about Prince Rafael marrying Arabelle Frost. After all, they had long since recognized that the Fosters were advantageous allies. Their wealth and influence were undeniable assets, and the Frost family had proven themselves to be invaluable in furthering any kingdom's interests. But this changed things. A frost by bloodline was different from a Frost in name only. In fact, as far as they could see, Arabelle Frost was not even officially adopted into the Frost family. She'd simply taken on their name.

The third minister adjusted his glasses with a skeptical expression. "You say this information was hidden by the Fosters. How do we know that you aren't the one manipulating this narrative? It's not uncommon for rivals to dig up dirt—true or fabricated—to undermine alliances. Are you certain this is genuine?"

Victor's smile tightened as he turned to face the minister. He'd expected this but really, this man did have too much distrust in him. "Minister, I wouldn't bring this to your attention if I wasn't absolutely certain. The documents were verified. The truth is undeniable, no matter how inconvenient it may be. Would you rather wait until this comes to light in a way that shames us all for not acting sooner?"

The second minister finally broke his silence, his voice cautious. "But what about the timing? If we act hastily, we risk damaging Prince Rafael's reputation. A scandal like this would reflect poorly on him as much as on her. Perhaps we should bring this to his attention directly and let him decide how to proceed. After all, he is the one who stands to lose the most."

Victor's voice lowered at this as he stared at the minister "I understand why you would want to do this quietly. We must proceed with caution. The Frosts are formidable enemies. But Prince Rafe is a man in love. Look at how hastily he married her. Also, she is pregnant with his child. Can we trust him to make the best decision? Even though there is also a strong possibility that Prince Rafael is unaware of her true past, we cannot trust him to handle it."

"Finding this truth has been a true pain, the files were buried so deep by the Frosts. If we confront her too soon, she might craft a convincing or even a story that shows her as the victim to cover her tracks and with the Frosts backing her, things might not turn in our favour. We need to gather information discreetly, ensuring no one suspects a thing until we've unearthed the whole truth and exposed it in front of everyone. Not even Prince Rafe/"

The two ministers exchanged glances, the weight of Victor's words sinking in. They knew he was right. If Arabelle's deception went unchallenged, it could destabilize not only Prince Rafael's future but also the political landscape they had carefully constructed. With a silent nod, they agreed with Victor. It was a nod of acknowledgement.

If and when this matter was brought up in public, they would support Victor. Seeing that two of his colleagues had already agreed, the third also nodded his head, despite his doubts and the three left together.

Victor watched them go, a smug smile spreading across his face. His plan was working flawlessly. Soon, he would get rid of Arabelle Frost from Rafe's life. But in this, he would use Rafe to end the relationship. Thus, Rafe would soon become the laughingstock of all the people of the country and end up making an enemy of the Frosts for hurting Arabelle.

Soon, his aide appeared beside him, "What do you wish to do next, sir?"

Victor smiled, "I heard most of the Frost clan is here. We should give them a proper and lively welcome. Tomorrow is the press conference scheduled for the announcement of the marriage of the Royal head.. Send out the handouts about her teenage antics to the media and they should know to ask provocative questions. Make sure to let Rafe look like a fool for not knowing these things about his wife."

"But, sir. What about the things that the ministers have just left with? Should we not release that as well?"

"Yes. But that will happen in the second part of the day. At the meeting with the council of ministers. And then, later let the news about the ministers protesting this marriage strongly emerge amongst the common people. We need to discredit Rafe bit by bit."

"As of now, Arabelle Frost seems untouchable. We need everyone to see her as nothing more than a deceitful woman trying to climb her way into the royal family. The people should be shown that just because someone has money and connections, they are not much good if one has no class. Her Frost name also won't be enough to save her from the storm we're brewing."

#### Chapter 887: An Attack

"Are you sure we shouldn't walk out of here together?" Arabelle asked, her eyes meeting Rafe's.

Rafe shook his head slowly. "Walk out when I invite you. I want to introduce you properly as the next queen to my people."

He gave her hand a reassuring pat, but then his expression darkened slightly. Her hands were colder than ice. "Are you really that nervous? What's bothering you?"

Arabelle's lips pressed into a thin line as she shook her head. She couldn't bring herself to tell him about the uneasy feeling that had settled in her chest. She didn't understand it, but something felt terribly off.

She shook her head again and smiled up at him, "Just go and do it. I'll come when needed."

Rafe wanted to question her about what was bothering her but he nodded, unsure if he should pressure her. But then, he took a deep sigh and walked onto the podium.

The room grew quiet as he made his way to the podium. Even his footsteps echoed in the large hall.

But before he could speak, a voice called out from the crowd.

"

He stopped at the podium, his presence commanding as always, and took a breath to begin. But before he could utter a single word, a voice rang out from the crowd, cutting through the quiet like a knife.

"Prince Rafe, what do you say about your fiancée, Arabelle Frost's teen pregnancy?"

The words hung in the air for a split second, and then chaos erupted. Reporters, as if waiting for the dam to break, began shouting questions in rapid succession, their voices overlapping in a cacophony of accusations and demands.

"Your Highness, what's your response to the rumors about Arabelle's teen pregnancy and her alleged decision to terminate it?"

"Did you know about her past before proposing? If not, does this change anything?"

"Are you comfortable associating with someone who has such a controversial history? Is she still in contact with her ex?"

"How do you think this affects your image as the future king? Will it tarnish the monarchy?"

"Would you have chosen to marry her if you'd known the truth from the start?"

Rafe stood frozen, his jaw tightening as he struggled to process the onslaught. He glanced briefly at Markus, his aide, who was already weaving through the crowd with purposeful strides. Within moments, Markus reached him and handed over a sleek tablet.

The screen illuminated with text, headlines, and photos—evidence of a scandal that Rafe hadn't anticipated. As he scrolled through, his expression darkened.

On the back side of the stage, Arabelle stiffened. She had not expected this. She felt her knees weaken and leaned against the wall. Her earlier unease now felt justified, but she hadn't imagined it would unfold like this. She closed her eyes, her breathing shallow as the words from the reporters reverberated in her mind.

This news was what she had feared. And worst still was the way it had broken out. The noise from the hall was deafening, a relentless barrage of questions and accusations aimed at her. Her vision blurred as a wave of dizziness hit her, and she blinked rapidly to clear it.

Should she go out there? Should she explain myself? The thoughts echoed in her mind, but her body refused to move, to cooperate.

Summoning what little courage she had left, Arabelle leaned forward and peered around the corner of the curtain. The hall was a storm of chaos, cameras flashing and reporters pressing closer to the stage, shouting over each other to be heard.

And there, at the center of it all, stood Rafe.

His expression was thunderous, his eyes scanning the crowd. He seemed to have sensed her gaze because he turned his head at that moment. His jaw was clenched, his grip on the tablet so tight she thought he might break it.

Arabelle's breath hitched as their eyes met, his anger and disappointment palpable even from a distance. Her heart sank. She had expected this, she tried to remind herself. She had known that she would face this but this was to soon...

unable to hold it any longer, she stepped back, retreating behind the curtain. Her legs felt like lead as she turned away, her mind screaming at her to leave, to get as far from this disaster as possible.

The muffled roar of the crowd followed her as she moved down the corridor, her head spinning. She didn't know where she was going—she just needed to escape. To breathe.

Then, cutting through the noise in her ear like a blade, she heard Rafe's voice for a moment.

"I am ashamed..."

The words echoed in her ears, sharp and unforgiving. She stopped in her tracks, her body rigid. Her chest tightened as if the air had been sucked from her lungs.

Ashamed. Did he mean her? Was he ashamed of her? Or was it this situation, this scandal, this nightmare that she had knowingly pushed him into?

The word rang over and over in her mind, each repetition sinking deeper and deeper into her heart. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them back, refusing to cry. Not here. Not now. First, she needed to get to a safe place. And then she would cry her heart out.

But her mind remained a blank. She couldn't even think of where to go from here. Thankfully, before she could do anything foolish like walk out, someone caught her hand, "Come this way."

She looked up at Kael and breathed a sigh of relief. "Kael? I need to leave..."

He shot her a look and shook his head, "It won't take long for the press to come looking for you. We have limited time."

As he said this, he took her out of a side door towards the waiting car and then she escaped from there. In the distance, she could see the reporters already gathering at the back gates, probably to stop his way and she felt guilty all over again.

Chapter 888: Triumph

Victor leaned back in his large chair, his fingers drumming idly on the armrest as he stared at the screen. There stood Rafe, still and silent, his head bowed in defeat while the press shouted questions at him with relentless fervor.

What did he say this time? That he was ashamed? Victor sighed, his lips curving into a faint smirk. It was predictable—typical, even. When had Rafael ever taken responsibility for anything? All his life, his misdeeds had been neatly swept under the rug, conveniently pinned on Kael, while he pranced about as the pristine white prince.

If only the man had shown a shred of guts—just once—and stood up for his wife. That, Victor mused, might have earned him a flicker of genuine respect. But no, there he was, keeping up the same old act, shielding his carefully polished image by throwing his wife under the bus.

Tsk, tsk. No problem. Let him keep up the charade. It wouldn't matter in the end. Victor's smile deepened as he leaned forward slightly. The throne was as good as his. With a shake of his head, he turned off the screen and closed his eyes, waiting for the next part to unfold.

Unknown to everyone else, another figure stood frozen as he stared at the news. Gabe's eyes darkened, his jaw tightening as he replayed the words he had just heard. Arabelle had been pregnant. Pregnant. How had he not known? The realization struck him like a thunderbolt, unraveling years of his pride at being the closest to Arabelle.

He thought back to the time when she was younger. There had been a time when she had been infinitely heart broken and tensed due to her first ever break up. She'd insisted that she wanted to leave for a vacation to get over that boy. And he had not insisted that she share her feelings with him.. So he'd let her, Cai and Dora plan a trip...

But now, the pieces didn't fit. So that was it. Her sudden shift back then, her brittle smiles, her quiet moments of withdrawal—it hadn't been about her breakup with that boyfriend at all. Gabe's hands curled into fists, his protective instincts flaring like a wildfire. That boy. He'd been ready to blame her heartbreak on him and teach him a lesson, but now he realized there had been something far deeper, far more painful, at play. And someone needed to answer for it.

His eyes narrowed, and his lips pressed into a thin line. That boy, was going to pay. Gabe was already forming the command in his mind, prepared to instruct his assistant to dig into the past and find that sorry excuse for a man. But before he could voice his intent, Rafe's voice broke through the noise again, pulling him sharply back to the present.

"I am ashamed..."

Gabe stiffened, his breath catching as the words registered. His stomach churned with a white-hot anger. Ashamed of Arabelle? The thought ignited a firestorm within him. Rage rolled off him in waves, his mind racing ahead. Rafe had glanced sideways, just for a second, but it was enough. Gabe's sharp eyes caught the movement. Arabelle was likely standing there, within earshot of the accusations, enduring every damning word.

His heart clenched, fury overtaking reason. How dare he! Was this the man who had promised him just yeaterday that he would always care for Arabelle.

He curbed the urge to march forward right away and punch the man but protecting her came first. Teaching Rafe and that old boyfriend their lessons could wait. Gabe's fists unclenched slightly as his focus sharpened. His little girl needed him now more than ever, and no one—no one—was going to tarnish her name, not while he was breathing.

Before he could storm off, however, Rafe's voice rang out again, louder this time, his tone cutting through the crowd's clamor.

"Today, I am ashamed to call you all my people."

Gabe froze mid-step, his mind grinding to a halt.

The press quieted slightly, their incessant shouting fading into murmurs as Rafe finally lifted his head. His expression, though strained, carried an unusual intensity that had everyone turn silent.

"I am ashamed to call you all my people," Rafe repeated, his voice ringing with conviction now. "Petrovia has always prided itself on being a nation that welcomes people with open arms. A country that stands for dignity, respect, and compassion. And yet, today..." He paused, his gaze sweeping over the crowd like a piercing blade. "Today, I see none of that."

The silence grew louder, reporters glancing at one another, uncertain. "You invaded someone's privacy," Rafe continued, "Not just mine, but that of someone I love deeply. You didn't just report the facts—you pried, you speculated, you twisted the findings and presented them cruelly and unforgivably. And in doing so, you've shown utter disregard for the very values we claim to uphold."

"I have dedicated my life to serving this nation, believing in its people, its principles. And yet, today, you've attacked someone I care about—deeply care about—with a level of venom and malice that I never thought I'd witness from Petrovians. From my own people."

He cast a look around the room then and this time, everyone could feel the chill emanating from him. They were people who feared nothing and thought of nothing when questioning someone's privacy. All under the guise of demanding answers for the public. But standing here, under his gaze, suddenly, everyone seemed to realize that they'd made a grave error.

And then, Rafe continued, "Arabelle's past is hers to share, not mine and not anyone else's. My feelings for her are not shaped by what others believe they know of her. I stand by her, as I have promised to. I won't stay idle and let this continue."

"I will not tolerate any further rumors about the past of my wife, the future queen of Petrovia. If anyone has an issue with her, they have an issue with me. If there are those among you who cannot accept her, who believe this baseless vilification should continue, then I invite you—no, I challenge you—to take your grievances to the council."

His gaze burned through the crowd, daring anyone to speak up. No one did. The press members shifted uneasily, cameras clicking hesitantly, as if unsure whether to continue documenting the scene.

"Yes," Rafe continued, his tone sharp enough to cut steel, "if anyone feels I am unfit to rule because I refuse to let the woman I love be dragged through the mud, then request the council to strip me of my title. Ask them to make me step down. I will gladly walk away before I let our country's throne be used as a platform for cruelty."

Chapter 889: Gone

"Where is she?"

The moment Rafe returned behind the stage, his heart pounded in his chest as he frantically searched for Arabelle. He had only caught a fleeting glimpse of her when she peered over the curtain, but even that brief sight was enough to tell him how deeply affected she was. No wonder she had repeatedly warned him that he would not be happy marrying her, that their union would be short-lived.

And the attack must have proven her right. Yet now, she was nowhere to be found. Turning to his PR head, who still stood there in stunned silence, Rafe asked sharply, "Where is she?"

"Who?" the man asked, his confusion evident. Rafe's tone sharpened further. "Where is my wife? She was here just a minute ago."

"That woman ran away." A man from the side spoke up, his words slicing through the air like a dagger. Rafe whipped his head around to face him. How dare he refer to Arabelle with such a demeaning term? Without hesitation, Rafe marched toward the man and seized his collar. "Who do you think you are referring to? Have you forgotten—'that' woman is my wife?"

Before the confrontation could escalate further, Markus came sprinting toward them, his expression urgent. "Your Highness. Her Highness is safe. She is with your brother."

Hearing her addressed properly seemed to momentarily calm Rafe, and with a sharp glare at the man still struggling beneath his grasp, Rafe released his hold and nodded in response. Without another word, he turned to leave. However, just as he had taken a few steps forward, Markus swiftly stepped into his path, blocking his way. His urgency was clear as he quickly guided Rafe toward a private room.

"Sir, you need to see this as well," Markus said, his voice low and tense. "Things are going to keep getting messier, it seems."

"Markus. I need to get to her. She needs me," Rafe said urgently, his voice tight with desperation. But Markus shook his head solemnly and responded, "You're right, sir. She does need you. But right now, more than ever, she needs you to be here. No one but you can stand by her and defend her in front of everyone. If you disappear from the public eye now, things will only spiral further out of control. More people will come forward to attack her, and the damage could become irreparable."

Rafe clenched his jaw, struggling to contain his frustration. He knew Markus was right, but the thought of Arabelle being alone right now tore at his heart. Before he could argue further, Markus pressed a tablet into his hands.

"You need to attend the urgent council meeting that has been arranged," Markus said firmly. "Victor is behind all of this."

Rafe pushed a hand through his disheveled hair, his frustration evident as he scanned the details on the screen. His eyes flicked over the pages, the gravity of the situation sinking in with each word. With a

heavy sigh, he lowered the tablet, his shoulders slumping in defeat. There was no escape from this—no matter how much he longed to be with Arabelle, his duty to protect her demanded his presence elsewhere.

"Make arrangements to get there. Give me a minute. I am sure I saw Gabe Frost in the crowd outside. Let me talk to him for a moment."

He had barely uttered the words when the door to the private room swung open, and Gabe stepped in, his tall frame filling the doorway as he directly blocked Rafe's path. The intensity in his expression was undeniable—anger radiated from him, his jaw clenched tightly as if ready to explode. "Who is behind all this? You can tell me now, or I will find out my way."

Rafe grimaced, acknowledging the storm brewing. It was clear Gabriel Frost was prepared to go on a rampage at a moment's notice. "It's someone coveting the throne," Rafe admitted slowly, almost apologetically, "My cousin—Victor."

Gabe gave a slow nod, but his focus quickly shifted as his attention was captured by the information on the tablet. He snatched it from Rafe's hands and began reading through the reports and updates with sharp, calculating eyes. "And this? Is this going to be in the news next?" he asked, his tone demanding.

Rafe let out a heavy sigh and gave a resigned nod. "Yes. This is the agenda of where I'm heading now."

"I'll kill him." With that declaration, Gabe was already on the move to make true on his words. And he would. He had protected his family from everything not so that any tom, dick and harry could come out to attack them.

But Rafe's voice stopped him. "Mr. Frost."

Gabe paused mid-step, his scowl deepening as he turned back to face Rafe. "What?"

Rafe inhaled slowly, his expression serious. "I know you're capable of protecting and avenging Arabelle. But I'd like to handle this myself."

Gabe's eyes narrowed as he processed Rafe's request. It didn't take a genius to understand what Rafe wanted. He wanted to be the one to stand by Arabelle, to shield her from harm and take responsibility for her well-being—always. Gabe's initial instinct was to refuse, to remind Rafe how this was his fault for putting her in this position in the first place. But then he paused.

Rafael Ignis had been just as blindsided by the news as he had been, yet here he stood—defending Arabelle with calm resolve in front of the entire media and his own people. Rafael had earned the right to handle this. At least for now.

Gabe gave a sharp nod as he sent the man a considering nod. "Alright. I'll give you a chance. Handle this well, or I'll step in."

Rafe exhaled the breath he had been holding and offered a slight, grateful smile. "Thank you. May I also request that you go to Arabelle now? I don't want her to be alone."

Gabe's expression softened slightly. "Of course. I'll take care of her."

Chapter 890: That...

By the time Kael pulled up in front of her apartment, Arabelle had managed to steady herself, her emotions no longer threatening to spiral out of control. She was grateful for one small mercy: that she hadn't yet moved in with His Highness, Prince Rafael Ignis. If she had, where would she have gone tonight to nurse her wounds? The thought brought a small, bitter comfort. At least she still had her own space—a sanctuary to retreat to when everything else felt like it was crumbling.

Murmuring a quiet word of thanks, she stepped out of the car without giving Kael a chance to speak. She wasn't ready for words, not from him, not from anyone. Her mind was too crowded, swirling with thoughts and emotions she hadn't fully sorted through. Tonight had been a night of revelations—painful ones that left her questioning herself.

The most significant realization? She had fallen for Rafael Ignis, and deeply so. Over the past month, despite her best efforts to stay on guard, she had let herself become enchanted by him. And that was entirely on her. She should have known better, should have seen the danger coming.

In hindsight, it wasn't entirely surprising. She had admired him long before they'd spent any real time together, following his work from the moment Dora began dating Kael. She'd built up an image of him in her mind—one based on his reputation, his achievements and the changes he had fought hard for. And

later, during their limited but meaningful interactions, she'd come to see him as more than just the prince everyone revered. Rafael Ignis was genuine, layered, flawed in ways that made him seem real, even approachable.

He reminded her of Gabe in some ways—someone who had made mistakes, paid for them, and emerged stronger, carrying the scars but also the wisdom. How could she not fall for someone like that?

But the walk from the car to her apartment brought a different revelation, one that struck her with just as much force as her heartbreak: anger. Beneath the ache in her chest, she felt the sharp sting of indignation, simmering just below the surface. Yes, she had made mistakes. She should have told him the entirety of her past—she'd had countless opportunities to do so. When he spoke of his own past, about the damage he'd caused Kael and the others, it had been a perfect opening to share her own story. And yet, she hadn't.

Why? Because she'd been ashamed, or so she thought at the time. She had been afraid of how he would see her, of how the past might change the way he looked at her. But now, after hearing his words—that he was ashamed of her—everything had shifted.

She wasn't ashamed of her past. Afraid to face it, perhaps, and even more afraid of sharing it with someone she cared about. But shame? No, that wasn't it. Her decisions, flawed as they might have been, were hers alone. She had made them, lived with them, and moved forward, scars and all.

The anger flared brighter as she replayed his words in her mind, each one a sharp jab at her pride. How dare he? She had kept her past hidden, not out of deceit, but out of fear. Fear of rejection, of judgment, of losing what they had. But never once had she felt less than because of her choices.

Inside the house, Arabelle slammed the door shut behind her, the sound echoing through the empty space. She kicked at the edge of the couch, the sharp pain in her toes doing little to dull the ache in her chest. Ashamed of her? The words reverberated in her mind, each repetition a fresh wound. If Rafael Ignis truly felt that way, then he deserved more than a kick.

Tears streaked her cheeks, but they didn't slow her movements. She moved through the house with a sharp, purposeful determination, her hands trembling as she grabbed at objects—a coat, a bag, a set of keys she wasn't sure she'd need. She couldn't stay. Not here, not now. If she stayed, she might end up doing or saying something she'd regret, and that wasn't a risk she was willing to take. No, she needed space. Distance. Time to think, time to breathe.

The word—ashamed—cut through her resolve again, sharper than the rest. It wasn't the first time she had heard it, and perhaps that was what made it sting so much. Someone else had hurled that same dagger at her. He had said it with a sneer, his tone dripping with judgment: he was ashamed of her because she was the daughter of a monster. Someone who preyed on the weak.

She'd been shaken but despite that she had hoped that he would see past something like that. The result had been that not just her heart but her entire world had been shaken. It had made her fearful of love and trusting anyone.

Even now, the memory stirred a faint bitterness, because of everything he had taken from her. But despite everything, she had come to understand one thing. He was the one who was a weak fool. But Rafe... He was different. He was no weak fool.

Rafe wasn't some faceless critic or distant observer whose opinions she could not care less about. He was someone she admired, someone she had come to trust. And in her heart, despite all her fears and hesitations, she had allowed herself to care for him—deeply.

Finally, she was ready to walk out of the apartment. She was going to return now. She would go back, hide, lick her wounds and then return stronger. If Rafe could not respect her then she would not be with him. They would definitely work out some arrangement. She looked down at the ring that he had slipped on her finger and sighed as her fingers clenched. She did not want to take it off... Shaking her head at her own stupidity, she moved to take the ring off when there was a knock on the door. She stilled.