THORNS 141

Chapter 141 - Drunken Escapades

5:00pm.

The sky was a palette of violet and deep orange.

Long shadows stretched across the quiet graveyard, reaching for the trio standing before a simple, dignified headstone.

Peter.

Kurt's hand was a warm, steady anchor for Hope. The girl stood remarkably still, her small maid's uniform slightly dusty at the hem. Her eyes were fixed on the stone, and her expression was one of heavy sadness.

"Are you ready to leave, Hope?" Kurt asked softly.

Hope took a shaky breath, nodding as she clutched the hem of her apron.

"Yes. I told him about my new family. And about me being a maid. And... and that I'm being a good girl. That's everything's going to be okay." She looked up at Kurt, her eyes shimmering but her chin held high. "We can go now."

They turned back toward the gravel path. As the iron gates of the cemetery creaked behind them, Kurt looked down at her.

"Listen, Hope. If you ever feel like the walls of the mansion are getting too close, or if you just want to talk to him, don't ever be afraid to ask me. I'll bring you here. Day or night, okay?"

"The offer extends to me as well." Yuna added. "Or any of the senior staff. You are not a prisoner, Hope. You are a member of this household."

Hope wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and offered a small, watery smile. "Okay. I will."

By the time they reached the carriage, the last sliver of the sun had dipped below the horizon. The interior of the coach was dim and cool. Kurt watched Hope as they began to ride along the road.

The adrenaline of the city and the emotional weight of the graveyard were finally taking their toll. Hope's head began to wobble, her eyelids drooping. She would jerk upright, blinking rapidly and knocking against Yuna's arm, only to start drifting again seconds later.

Kurt exchanged a knowing look with Yuna. "I think that's enough for one day," he whispered to the driver through the partition. "Take us home."

...

An hour passed in comfortable silence. When the carriage finally pulled into the smooth stone driveway of the mansion, Hope was fast asleep against Yuna's shoulder. Yuna shifted, gently waking the girl as the door was opened.

"I will take her to her new room," Yuna said to Kurt as they stepped onto the porch. "She needs a bath and a bed."

Kurt crouched down, reaching out to pat Hope's head. "Considering everything you went through today, I'd say you did pretty good."

Hope leaned into his hand, her voice thick with sleep. "It's nothing... I'm a cool maid, remember? Cool maids don't cry much."

"The coolest. Make sure you eat something before you crash, alright?"

Yuna nodded. "I will oversee her meal personally."

Hope looked at Yuna, then back at Kurt, her arms twitching as if she wanted to reach out. She looked at Yuna's stern face and hesitated. Yuna let out a sharp click of her tongue, though her eyes were soft.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Yuna muttered. "Fine. But this is the last time. Maids must maintain professional boundaries."

Hope didn't need a second confirmation. She lunged forward, nearly knocking Kurt over as she wrapped her arms around his neck in a fierce hug. "Goodnight, Kurt," she whispered. "And thank you for today."

"Anytime." Kurt squeezed her back. "Goodnight, Hope."

He watched them disappear down the path toward the maids' dorms before turning to enter the main house.

The moment he stepped through the doors, he realised the atmosphere was... different.

A servant hurried past toward the kitchen, balancing a tray piled high with empty wine bottles. Another servant came jogging out of the pantry clutching a fresh bottle of expensive vintage and a bowl of seasoned snacks.

"Whoa, easy there," Kurt caught the man by the shoulder when he nearly tripped. "What's the occasion? Is Diana home?"

"Oh! Master Rossana, thank you and welcome home! Yes, Ms. Valentine is home. She is at the pool area with Head Maid Wendy, her secretary, Ms. Mia, and... well, Madam Valentine is here as well."

"Madam Valentine? As in..."

"Ms. Valentine's mother, yes."

"Really? Talk about unexpected... Here, let me take that," Kurt said, reaching for the tray. "Since I'm heading that way anyway."

"O-Oh! Here you go then." The servant handed the tray over to him.

As Kurt made his way through the house, the sound of feminine laughter grew louder as he approached the glass doors leading to the pool. He stepped out into the night air, which was warmed by the mana-heated water of the pool.

As he walked through the open glass panel door, he saw the group.

Mia was slouched in a chair, looking significantly more relaxed than her usual lively self.

Wendy sat nearby, her posture straight as she sipped from a glass.

Diana was also slouched on the lounge chair next to Mia as she waved around a wine bottle while laughing.

Finally, opposite all three of them was the woman he heard about. Madam Valentine. Even from where he’s standing, her posture was regal and her platinum hair shimmered like moonlight.

Isabel and Sadie were standing a few paces back, acting as attendants but clearly enjoying the spectacle.

Kurt caught Sadie’s eye. He pressed a finger to his lips, gesturing for them to stay quiet. He moved silently, stepping up to the low table and setting down the snacks and the wine with the practiced grace of a servant.

"Your snacks and beverages, ladies."

"Finally," Mia said, slightly slurred and cheerful. "Thank you, sweetie, just put it–"

She stopped, her eyes widening as she looked up.

Diana didn’t even need to look. The moment he stepped into her personal space, her head whipped around. "ROSIE!"

She jumped– no, launched herself at him. Kurt barely had time to set the bottle down before he was a face-full of her. Diana wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck, peppering his face with hungry, wine-sweetened kisses.

"You’re back! You took too long! I missed you!" she chirped between kisses.

"D-Diana! Hey! People are watching!"

"Let them watch! I’m the principal of Future Academy! I make the rules! Hahaha!" She squeezed him tighter as she rubbed her cheek against his.

"Yeah! *Hik* Y-You’re the principal! Ahahaha!" Mia let out a drunken cheer as she hoisted her glass.

Wendy simply poured herself another drink with a stoic expression, though her eyes twinkled. Sadie let out a sharp, appreciative whistle, while Isabel covered her glowing face with her hands, peeking through her fingers.

And then there was Madam Valentine. She watched the display with a calculating smile, her crimson eyes scanning Kurt from head to toe.

"Diana, stop for a second," Kurt panted, gently peeling her back. "What’s the celebration? What did I miss? Or is this a lady’s night out?"

Diana beamed with sparkling eyes. "Mia! Tell him!"

Mia held up her left hand, wiggling her ring finger. A modest but beautiful diamond caught the light. "My Dommy finally did it! We’re engaged!"

"Huh?! Really?! That’s awesome, Mia. Congratulations. Dominik is a lucky guy."

"He really is!" Mia giggled, leaning back. She pointed a wobbly finger at Kurt. "So, when are you going to make an honest woman out of Diana, hmm~?

"Now, now, let’s not jump the gun," a melodic voice interrupted.

Kurt finally turned his full attention to Madam Valentine. Up close, the resemblance was staggering.

"You must be the "Rosie" I’ve heard so much about," she said, leaning back.

"Hey! Only I get to call him Rosie because he is MY Rosie!"

"Haha, yes yes. I’m sorry my baby. I’ll call him Kurt."

"Hmph!"

"I am," Kurt said, giving a polite bow. "And I have to say, Madam Valentine, you are incredibly beautiful. I can see exactly where Diana gets her looks."

"Oh my, he’s a charmer. Is this why my daughter is acting like a smitten schoolgirl? Thank you, Kurt. A rare compliment from a man of your... unique aura."

Diana immediately grabbed Kurt’s cheeks and turned his face back to her. Her lip was pouted. "Rosie! What are you saying about my mother? You’re supposed to be looking at me!"

"I am looking at you. I’m just saying it makes sense now. You– no, your mother takes after the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. You, Ana."

"Shouldn’t it be the other way around?" the Madam noted dryly, sipping her wine.

Diana completely ignored her mother. Kurt’s words had caused her heart to visibly melt. Her eyes turned glazed and adoring. "Oh, Rosie~!"

Without warning, she lunged for another kiss, but her momentum caught him off guard. Kurt stumbled back when his heel caught on the lip of the pool.

SPLASH!

The water exploded upward as they both went under. Mia shrieked with laughter, clutching her stomach. Wendy didn’t move an inch, except for hiding her glass to avoid a stray droplet.

Kurt surfaced a moment later, treading water. He was holding Diana in a bridal carry, her soaked dress clinging to her curves like a second skin.

Diana, meanwhile, was laughing hysterically as her arms were locked around his neck, completely unbothered by the fact that they were both completely drenched.

"Sadie! Isabel! A little help getting her out?"

"Nnnno! Stay back!" Diana commanded, pointing a wet finger at the maids while clinging on him. "I don’t want to be separated from Rosie!"

Kurt sighed, though he couldn’t stop smiling. "Diana, I love the enthusiasm, but how am I supposed to get us out of the pool like this? I can’t climb the ladder with my hands full."

"Hehehe~ I don’t know. Figure it out, Prince Charming."

’Oh my Lord... Well, here goes nothing.’

Kurt took a deep breath. He focused, drawing mana into his legs and core. The water around him began to hum. With a sudden, explosive burst of strengthening magic, he kicked off the bottom of the pool.

He launched out of the water like a whale, soaring through the air before landing safely on the stone tiles, still holding Diana perfectly.

"Ha! I'm glad that worked. Hooray for magic."

Mia, Wendy, and the Madam all clapped in genuine admiration.

"See~ I knew you had it~ *Mwah* Achoo!"

"And now look at you," Kurt shot a judgmental look. "You're freezing."

Diana let out a soft, needy moan, nuzzling into his neck. "Take us to the room, Rosie... dry me off. Please~?"

Kurt looked toward the Madam, feeling a bit awkward about ditching her without having some sort of conversation. The Madam, however, simply waved a hand dismissively.

"It's ok. You may go," she said, her eyes glinting with amusement. "She won't give us a moment's peace with the way she is now anyway."

"I'm sorry about this, Madam," Kurt said. He then turned to Mia before leaving. "Goodnight, Mia. Congrats again!"

Mia waved her glass, spilling half of it on her own shoe.

Kurt signaled for Sadie and Isabel to follow with some towels. He turned and carried the shivering, clinging Diana back into the warmth of the mansion.

Chapter 142 - For Diana's Sake

Inside the master room, the sounds of rustling fabric and soft murmurs filled the air. Isabel had just finished the arduous task of drying Diana's hair and was now navigating the ever-so delicate challenge of maneuvering her into warm silk pajamas.

Across the room, Sadie had just pulled the towel away from Kurt's head, having finished drying his own damp locks.

Kurt ran a hand through his hair, feeling the warmth of the fireplace nearby. "Thanks, Sadie. Although I could have handled that myself."

"Nah. Remember what Wendy told you, bossman. Don't fret over the small things. It's our job to look after you, so just relax and leave the details to us."

Letting out a small chuckle, he then stood up and reached into his wardrobe to grab a fresh set of sleeping clothes. "Fair enough. I'm going to step into the bathroom to change really quick."

"Where do you think you're going?!" Diana's voice rang out, loud and slurred. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, swaying slightly as Isabel struggled to button her top.

"Just changing, Diana. It'll only take a second."

"Change here!" she demanded, pointing a finger at the floor.

"If I change here," Kurt said slowly, as if explaining to a child, "then Sadie and Isabel are going to see me naked. Are you sure you want that?"

The realisation hit her like a bucket of ice water. Her eyes went wide, and she immediately turned into a protective lioness. She whipped her head toward the two maids.

"Out! Both of you! Out right now!"

Isabel fumbled with the buttons with a flushed face. "But Ms. Valentine, I'm not finished! Your top isn't buttoned fully and you're still in your... well, your undergarments."

"I don't care! I can do it! Go!" Diana shooed them with her hands, nearly falling off the bed in the process.

Isabel looked at Sadie, who shrugged with an amused expression. They both bowed. Before Isabel crossed the threshold, she turned back to Kurt, her face turning a deep shade of crimson.

"Please... Master Rossana, make sure she gets dressed properly. She's... she's a handful tonight." She gave him a lingering, shy look before closing the door behind them.

Now alone, Diana patted the bed with a goofy grin. "Okay. No maids. Change now."

'I feel like there's something seriously wrong here.'

"You should finish up too, Ana. You'll catch a cold if you haven't already."

"I will~, I will~," she giggled.

Kurt turned his back to her and began to pull off his damp shirt and pants. However, the skin on the back of his neck began to prickle. He sensed eyes on him. Not just any eyes, but a predatory, focused gaze. He glanced over his shoulder and nearly choked.

Diana was lying on her side; her hair draped over her shoulder and face. She was watching him with wide, hungry eyes, her top still open, holding her breast with one hand while the other was tucked firmly into the waistband of her panties.

"Ana! What are you doing?!" Kurt dropped his shirt and lunged across the bed to grab both of her hands, pulling them away.

She let out a flustered, tinkling laugh, her face flushed with wine and heat. "I couldn't help it! Rosie, you're way too sexy when you're changing~ My body just... reacted!"

"And you are way too drunk," Kurt groaned as he felt his own face heating up. He let go of her hands and grabbed her pajama top, beginning to work the buttons with clumsy, hurried fingers. "We are getting you dressed before you do something we both won't be able to walk away from."

"Hehehe~ Ah~ Haah~ Where are you touching me, Rosie~?"

Diana didn’t make it easy. Every time his knuckles brushed against her skin, she let out a soft, intentional moan, leaning her weight into him. Kurt kept his face as stony as a statue, focusing entirely on the tiny silk buttons.

"You’re blushing, Master Rosie~ I can see it~"

"S-Shut up and stand up. I need to put your pants on."

She stood up, but instead of cooperating, she draped her arms around his neck and hooked one leg around his waist, pinning him close. Kurt took a deep, shaky breath, fighting a losing battle against the temptation radiating off her.

"Stop it, Ana," he whispered.

She didn’t listen. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, her lips and tongue trailing hot across his skin as she began to suck and kiss his pulse point.

"Mmm... put my pants on, I’m getting cold. So cold..."

"You sure you aren’t feeling hot instead?"

He waited for a witty retort, but none came. He felt her weight grow slack against him, her breathing evening out into a deep, rhythmic tempo. He pulled back slightly and saw that her eyes were closed as her head rested peacefully on his shoulder.

She had passed out mid-seduction.

Kurt let out a long, weary sigh of relief. Or disappointment?

He carefully finished dressing her, tucked her under the heavy down comforter, and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. After changing into his own clothes, he slipped out of the room, moving quietly down the grand staircase.

As he reached the foyer, the front doors creaked open. Dominik was stepping out, looking exhausted but wearing a faint smile. He was carrying a snoring, incoherent Mia in his arms.

"Dom?" Kurt called out.

"Hm? Oh hey, man. Long day?"

Kurt walked down the final few steps. "Tell me about it. Hey, why didn't you tell me you were engaged? I had to find out from a drunken Mia and a very excited Diana."

"Honestly? It happened right before we left for the island. I needed something to keep me focused, you know? A reason to make sure I came back in one piece. Also, it was about time anyway. I was going to tell you once the dust settled from the mission and all the kids were accounted for, but it looks like my fiancé couldn't keep a secret."

"Huh? No wonder you showed up at the pier looking like you'd been attacked by a swarm of lipstick-wearing bees."

Mia stirred in Dominik's arms, let out a soft moan, and patted his chest. "Dommy... take me home. Too much wine..."

"We're going, we're going," Dominik cooed at her with a tenderness that Kurt hadn't seen before. He looked back at Kurt.

"By the way, the mission is officially completed. You can swing by the station if you want the full breakdown. Also, you might be getting a visit from a royal guard but don't worry you're not in trouble. It's the opposite. The king will most likely be rewarding you."

"Thanks for the heads-up."

"No prob. Later, brother."

"Later, Dom. Congrats on the engagement."

After the doors closed behind them, Kurt wandered back toward the backyard. Madam Valentine was still there, reclining on a lounge chair. She was scribbling something in a red covered book.

"Madam Valentine?"

She looked up, her eyes slightly glazed from the evening's festivities. She closed the book, slid it between her humongous breasts, and patted the seat next to her. "Ah, Prince Charming returns. Sit. Sit down, Kurt."

'What the hell did I just see?'

Kurt took a seat on the adjacent chair and got comfortable. "I don't see Wendy anywhere."

"Oh her? I believe she retired for the night, haha. She really knows how to hold her liquor, that one." She laughed melodically.

"You know... My baby, Diana... when we were drinking, she wouldn't stop talking about you. "'Rosie this', 'Rosie that'." She leaned in with a playful glint in her eyes. "I'm Julianne Valentine. Buuut, you can just call me Mom~"

"Ha..haha. Isn't it a bit early for that, Julianne?"

"Oh? Why is that? You are planning on marrying her, aren't you?"

"Of course," Kurt said without a moment's hesitation.

"Mmm~ A straight shooter. I like it. So, when?"

Kurt paused, looking out over the water. "After I save the world."

Julianne stared at him with wide eyes for a second. Then, she burst into a fit of boisterous laughter, clutching her stomach. "Ahahaha! Handsome, strong, ambitious, and funny too! You really are a catch!"

She laughed so hard she began to tilt, losing her balance on the edge of the lounge chair.

"Oh–!"

"Careful!"

Before she could tumble onto the stone, Kurt moved with a blur of speed. He caught her mid-fall, sweeping her up into a perfect princess carry.

Julianne’s laughter died down as she found herself tucked against his chest. A faint, genuine blush crept onto her cheeks. "My... Thank you, Kurt."

"No problem," he replied, his expression turning serious as he looked down at her. "But please, be careful. I wouldn’t want to lose you."

’For Diana’s sake.’

Julianne’s eyes went wide, and the blush deepened until it reached the tips of her ears. Unable to meet his gaze, she looked away. "...Is that so?"

"Something wrong?" Kurt asked, tilting his head to get a proper look at her. She immediately snapped her head the other direction.

"That’s... that’s enough for tonight!" her voice pitched higher than usual. "Please put me down, I’m going to rest in the guest room."

As he set her feet on the ground, she took one step and wobbled dangerously. Kurt didn’t even wait for her to fall this time; he scooped her back up into his arms.

"I’ll take you there. You’re too tipsy."

Julianne covered her face with her hands, peeking through her fingers like a shy girl. "I can go myself! I must be so heavy! This is embarrassing!"

Kurt smiled gently at her. "I don’t want to see you get hurt," ’For Diana’s sake.’ "Let me take you. You’re not heavy at all. You’re safe in my arms, see?" He held her more securely to his chest.

Julianne stopped resisting as her fingers closed shut. She then let out a meek, "Okay."

He carried her through the silent halls to the primary guest room, opening the door and gently setting her onto the soft mattress. He knelt down and carefully slid her heels off her feet, setting them neatly by the bed.

"Is there anything else you need? Should I call a maid?"

"No," she whispered, looking up at him from the pillows. "I’m fine. I can handle the rest."

"Alright. Sleep well, Julianne."

He turned to leave, but as his hand touched the doorknob, her voice stopped him. "Kurt?"

He looked back.

"I’m glad," she said, her voice sincere and sober for a moment. "I’m glad someone like you is with my daughter. Please... look after her."

"I will. And don’t worry – I’ll look after you too."

’For Diana’s sake.’

He closed the door softly, leaving Julianne staring at the dark wood. Her heart pounded against her ribs and a stunned, bewildered expression caught her face.

"Huh?"