

## **Chapter 66 - 70**

Beatrix fled from my thoughts after I saw Alexander in the most unlikely situation. I have no idea whether to be amused, bewildered, or shocked. My eyes went so wide that an apple could nearly fit inside. My mouth parted so wide that I'm afraid my uvula could be seen sticking out. I told myself I lost my mind, perhaps this might be the proof I did. If not then why would I see Alexander Crawford holding a wailing infant into his arms with an expression a mixture of fear, anxiety, and dread. If the situation were not so grave, I swore I already fell into fits of hysterical laughter watching the alarm dancing on his handsome face. He looked far from a man who was feared by his enemies. Gathered around him sharing his demise were eight of his children, some pacing back and forth while others remained by his side with a somber expression mirroring their patriarch's somber mood. Bloody hell! Was I dreaming because as far as I'm concerned this scene wouldn't possibly happen unless I'm into a deep state of slumber. Definitely, a wailing child wrapped around my employer's arm would be the most impossible thing that I could come across in the real world. Soon probably I would find myself awake and laughing at how ridiculous the unlikely scenario is.

"Wah-wah." The sound of the cries intensified. It was so loud that I swear it could be heard up to the next block. This time it pierced my ears and nearly broke my eardrums too. The chance I hold that it's only a dream faded in a snap. It's as if I'd been splashed with ice-cold water and I found myself wide awake. My unblinking eyes remain transfixed on the cherubic baby which was far from angelic now as she plunged the entire Crawford Household into a chaotic disorder. All efforts had been applied to stop the baby's cries but none refused to stop her little tantrums. The baby misses his or her mother. In a time like this, only her scent would calm her down. She was overcome with tears since she couldn't sense that her mother was around.

Does Beatrix have a child?

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Suddenly the thought made my heart hammer inside my chest. My heartbeat was so loud that it reached my ears. I was even wondering why the entire household hadn't heard about it. Could it be.... Could it be possible that the baby was..... I shooed the thought before I jumped to the conclusion. Impossible! It can't be, she wasn't even pregnant the last time I saw her and she didn't inform me about her pregnancy. But then, we divorced and she was furious with me, it was enough reason for her to keep the truth from me. I calculated the days after the last time we made love and everything seemed to fall into detail. There's a possibility that I was the father.

Rhyze, the man I initially thought was her boyfriend was in fact, her younger brother... and so the rest of the men living inside the Crawford Mansion. She wasn't involved in a romantic affair with anyone before I arrived. There's a fifty percent probability that I am the father. A surge of happiness filled my chest, I had to hold myself still for a moment to catch my breath. Without me realizing I suddenly felt the warmth leaking from my eyes. Bloody Hell... A man shouldn't be overcome with tears especially if he was uncertain of the facts. But I don't need any proof to prove that the child was mine, I could feel it.... I have a child with Phoenix!

My sentiments were cut short, pity took over my body as I witnessed how the baby was passed around like a piece of doll in an attempt to try if anyone from them could silence the child. Of course, it failed since the baby couldn't sense her mother's presence. The Crawford Men were a bunch of inexperienced bachelors who haven't once held a baby in their arms, they also simply lacked some skills. I have to clench my fist on my side to stop myself from running forward and snatching the child into my arms. It annoyed me that much to watch how to continue to cry restlessly.

Before I realized what I was doing, I found myself moving forward. Damm my impatience and lack of self-control, it will surely land me in trouble one day. But I don't care about myself anymore, all I could think of was to take the baby into my arms. Listening to her tears was crushing my heart into pieces. I couldn't bear to see her like this without me doing anything. "There you are

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Greyson." It was the greetings I received from Alexander Crawford. For once, he was somehow relieved to see me. What a miracle.

"As you can see Sir, I heard a baby wailing, I came to check if I could be of some assistance."

He didn't seem to think my offer was suspicious. His sleepy, tired gaze landed on mine. Beads of sweat formed on his temples. The shirt he wore was crumpled and it was soaked with his sweat too. "It's beyond your field of work but do you have an idea how to make a baby sleep?" His voice sounded tired."

My gaze surveyed the faces inside the room. It was obvious they are too happy to have me there and save their asses. I swallowed hard as Ethan slowly walked towards me. I caught my breath when he slowly transferred the baby into my arms Everything seems to happen in slow motion

My fingers were trembling as I held her. I nearly began to weep when her exquisite ocean blue eyes captured mine. She was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen.... So soft... so breathtaking... The moment she looked at me, there's no denying that the baby I'm holding into my arms was my daughter.... She was a splitting replica of our first daughter Vien.

The thought made the burden in my chest heavier.

A particular memory flickered inside my thoughts. It was the memory of me holding Vien into my arms after she was born. Phoenix was peacefully asleep that time and I crept inside her room to have a look at our daughter.... Yes, our daughter... The moment I saw Vien smile, I fell in love with her right away despite my belief she was not my daughter. But of course, it had been all a lie that it was my brother who wanted me to believe and he succeeded after he faked the paternity test result. I was a fool to fall on his tricks back then. The affection I have for Vien—I try to keep them—I hated Phoenix that time because I thought she cheated on me. I was a gullible fool believing so. And now it cost me my marriage.

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Regrets... There are so many regrets in my life. But after holding the seraphic creature in my arms I forgot every single one of them. My life had been a huge mistake, and this baby was the only thing that made my life right. It took me a moment to realize that the tranquil silence had fallen back inside the mansion. The baby was no longer wailing at the top of her lungs. Instead, she was now smiling, her ocean blue eyes wide with wonder. She felt a strong bond that a father and daughter could only share.

"Good Lord." Alexander Crawford exclaimed and sank into the long Victorian sofa with relief. For once, he shot me a thankful glance as if a thorn had been pulled out of his chest. He wiped the beads of sweat off his temples using a handkerchief.

Eight pairs of eyes glared at me with amazement. Somehow I found myself pleased at the notion that my daughter preferred his father more compared to his uncles. The thought made my mood soar higher. If it weren't for the somber atmosphere I should have cackle with laughter. No one said a word. They just continue to stare at me with wonder.

The baby in my arms opened her tiny mouth and sighed sleepily in my arms. As I watched her, a sudden overprotectiveness swept over me. I suddenly made a promise to myself to protect her at all cost. Even if it means she will never have to know about me. I rocked the baby into my arms until her eyelids fluttered close. Before I knew it, she was already fast asleep. I sighed with relief. It felt so good while she slept into my arms.

"Where's her room?"

Alexander Crawford led the way. We entered an elegantly decorated room, it must be the largest room found inside the Mansion. The feminine pink interior confirmed that it was Beatrix's room. Beside the Queen size bed, there was a movable crib. I hastily entered as nine men followed inside making the room crowded.

I carefully laid her back to the crib. She stirred... Then she started crying.

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I sighed. It wasn't against my will but it seems I have to stay longer until Beatrix returns....

## **Chapter 67**

'Please, let this be over soon. I want to go home already.' My beaded silver stiletto just landed on the crimson carpeted floor but it was going home which bothers my mind already. The thought of my daughter at home in the hands of my beloved family doesn't ease the gnawing worry inside me. The thought of my eight brothers with father in addition watching over Faith tripled my unease considering that they have zero experience handling a newborn baby. Not that I blame father for putting me in this ordeal but it was him who agreed and I can't break his word of honor so I'm obliged to go.

I should be at home. Curled on the feathery softness of my Queen size bed with an angel lying next to me with my arms protectively around her. Instead, I found myself in the middle of nowhere, with no acquaintances and no friends. Even the man standing beside me—Mr. Marcus Peterson—was a total stranger. If I don't care about propriety, damn it to hell but I'm going home. I cursed mentally, hoping I weaved an excuse to escape this date but I hated lying. I stared heavenward, asking the gods for a little bit of patience.

"Beatrix, are you okay?" Marcus spoke beside me, worry gleaming upon his eyes. Guilt invaded me for nearly forgetting he was with me. He captured my eyes with his gaze. I was trying to lower my eyes on the floor but his eyes held mine captive. Marcus Peterson was without a doubt a handsome man. He could put an actor to shame with his looks and charm. But I wonder why I felt nothing for him. I expect that his good looks could make my heart flutter and my pulse rate jitter in some ways. Unfortunately, his good looks have no profound effect on me. He couldn't make my heart beat like crazy the way our new gardener did. The Gardener's sexy, sultry body was enough to make my mouth water with admiration. Not that I'm fantasizing over him, it's just that I appreciate his six-pocket abs. I'm not made of stone not to appreciate a blessing when I see one.

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"I'm fine Mr. Peterson," I replied, my mouth stretched lazily into something which I hope resembled a bit of a smile. If only I had the power to pull the time, I already did moments ago so I don't have to waste the next hour of my life in ennui. He must be convinced about my response for he did not comment, he just held his arms to mine which I'm obliged to take for the sake of good manners and we moved deeper to the crowd. The crowd lapsed into silence. If it weren't for the musician playing at the dimly lit corner of the room, it would be extremely awkward. Heads turned in our direction like magnets attracted to metals. My Peterson seems not to mind the stir he was creating. He even appeared amused, I'm not sure, must be my imagination.

"Beatrix?" I tore my gaze away from straight ahead and peered through my eyelashes after throwing him a sidelong glance. His stare was soft against my skin and there was some sort of tenderness in it. I wasn't sure if I was reading his expression right but it appears that way to me. He saw my wide inquiring eyes, for a moment he didn't say anything, he just continued to stare at me as if he found me fascinating. I was lost for words too, wondering if I should take his reaction as an insult or a compliment. "You're beautiful." He whispered, oblivious to the hundreds of eyes peering at us.

I groaned inwardly. I believe I look good tonight since it was the third time he told me that. One was after I descended from the stairs of the Crawford Mansion, the second was when we were inside the car while he's driving, and the third was just now. It seems Mr. Peterson was having minor memory lapses. "Thank you, Mr. Peterson," I replied. If I had known he was going to try his charm on me right here in the middle of the room atop the red carpet I should have stayed home and fake an illness and deal with the guilt on my own. It would be more manageable than having him as a company.

"Please call me Marcus." He said, capturing my hands before I could hide them as we pulled into a stop. "Could you possibly do that?" He added with pleading eyes nailed to mine.

"Of course, Marcus," I replied and pulled my fingers out of his hold. Luckily his hold loosened and his hands fell to his side.

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"Thank you," He mumbled, he looked pleased.

Moments later, we are settled into a round table draped into an elegant pink tablecloth. There was a small pink flower vase in the middle patterned with primroses and leaves, it was filled with different varieties of flowers which were arranged into a neat perfection. The whole place screamed of elegance and luxury. Even the small vase atop the tables must have cost a fortune based on its quality. I sighed with relief when my weight sunk into the feathery softness of the chair that resembled a throne. After pulling the chair for me, Marcus turned in the opposite direction and occupied his seat.

The room the party was underway is as large as the Grand Hall of the Crawford Mansion. Golden chandeliers glowed brightly on the high ceiling. Round Tables draped with pink silk scattered around the flawless white floor. Seats that looked like a king and a Queen's regal throne surrounds the tables. On the stage decorated with light pink balloons, a golden royalty throne engraved with precious gemstones stood but it was empty, it seems the occupant had wandered around the hall to search for her King. Behind the chair where a light pink cloth stood as a background 'Ynna @18 was written.

The place looked so inviting but it wasn't enough to make me forget all my worries. I was here at the party but my thoughts wandered far away. I was wondering if Faith was asleep by now, if not, I'm sure she would be throwing a tantrum after failing to sense my presence. It would be difficult to make her stop crying. None of my brothers couldn't handle her tears, even the mighty Alexander Crawford failed to tame his grandchild. Letting myself worry now will make things worse for me. I reminded myself. Before I left the house I made sure that Faith was full and sleepy. I was guaranteed that she would quickly fall asleep since she's tired from all the strolling we had in the garden early that day. Hopefully, my daughter was doing fine. Please Lord, let her be fine. I mumbled with optimism.

"You look nervous Beatrix." It was Marcus again invading my thoughts. For the second time that day, I forgot he was with me. But then, I never felt I have company, remain sad and lonely while my thoughts held me captive. I lifted my gaze and faked a smile, not only it lacked in luster, it barely reached my

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eyes too. If I could, I swear I walked out of the party at this moment if I haven't considered how embarrassing it could be. I'm not enjoying it anymore—I haven't enjoyed it one bit.

'Oh Faith! If mommy could only go home now! I badly miss you. I think I'm going to lose my mind before this party ends.'

"Beatrix?" Marcus repeated.

"I'm fine." I lied once more. By the number of lies, I formed tonight I deserved to be crucified.

"Champagne?" He offered and I nodded, embarrassed to say no. I'll just pretend to drink the champagne or just take a sip or two. I'm breastfeeding Faith and I'm afraid I wasn't allowed to drink wine, not even champagne.

"Are you enjoying the party?"

I wasn't able to respond to the question when I felt someone's hard gaze in mine—it was heavy and disconcerting. I glanced sideways and caught a pair of prying eyes glaring at me as if he'd seen a ghost.

Marcus, seeing the couple approaching our table was quick to leave his seat and meet them halfway. I found myself abandoning my seat too as if it suddenly burned my ass.

The birthday celebrant was approaching our way. But it was not her who captured my attention but the man standing tall beside her with the look of pure disbelief darkening his handsome face. He was tall, with broad athletic shoulders. A grey tuxedo clung to his large build perfectly. But it was not his regal look that captured my attention but a pair of piercing blue eyes that seemed to penetrate my soul.

"Beatrix, I would like you to meet the new CEO of Greyson Enterprise and Heir of Greyson Inheritance—Vince Greyson."

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It was not only his name that sounds familiar. Even his face looks a good deal familiar too.

Why do I feel I hate this man?

## **Chapter 68**

There was something dangerous about the man.... Almost ominous. After looking at his piercing blue eyes I knew that moment he couldn't be trusted. There was something about him that warned me to be cautious, I could compare him to a traitorous predator, ready to rip his innocent prey to pieces behind its back. He was a stranger....But it felt as if I have known him my whole life. A part of me screams to be on guard. Behind those seemingly innocent faces lies a man with the deepest darkest secret which he kept locked into Pandora's box to hide the truth forever, no one has access except himself.

I recovered first, pulled a mask of paper blank expression, and held my chin upward. Father's words flashed in my thoughts, 'You're a Crawford now.... You have nothing to fear, always put in mind that fame, power, and money are all yours. You're no ordinary woman, they should fear you and not the otherwise.' My father was right, I thought as I gave Mr. Vince Greyson the sweetest smile I could muster. "Nice meeting you Sir," I replied, overwhelming satisfaction rushed through me at the sight of his face contorting with shock and disbelief.

For a moment, he lost his composure, his fingers held to the chair seated next to him for support.?Somehow after hearing me speak, his shock tripled as if my voice confirmed his greatest fears. My chin tilted defiantly. I lifted my fingers so I could hold my hands to him for formalities. In the process, I became aware of the champagne glass I'm absentmindedly holding. I took a step forward and tripped, my fault I wasn't cautious. Marcus was quick enough to hold me still but it was too late, he saved me from the fall but Mr. Vince Greysons expensive tuxedo did not.

"F\*ck!" He screamed after snapping out of trance, He was furious, there was a murderous glint upon his blue eyes. To my surprise, I didn't feel a bit scared...

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not even fear. Instead, I could feel a surprising amount of satisfaction for staining his favorite tuxedo that must have cost him a fortune. My only concern is I got the wrong place to pour the champagne, I should have aimed it on his face. At this point, his loud cursing attracted too much unwanted attention. The incident would no doubt spread like wildfire tomorrow.

I opened my clutch bag, fumbled for my handkerchief, and hurriedly wiped the stain on the cloth, "Please do forgive me, Mr. Vince Greyson. This is entirely my fault I tripped on the floor." I mumbled apologetically as I hastily found a way to dry the wet garment. But instead of helping to erase the stain, the champagne spread further. His expression darkened. Without another word he hurriedly left the scene. I swear, I never felt so satisfied until I watched him walk out. He was seriously pissed off but it only soared my mood higher.

I just proved how talented I am.

The girl he was with, briskly followed Vince Greyson, but before she did, she monetarily stopped to throw me a deadly glare. I shrugged my shoulders while watching her follow the man.

"That was a nice act, Darling." It was Marcus. When I lifted my gaze to him his eyes were wide with admiration. It twinkled with playfulness and mirth. He looked supportive, he was perceptive enough to realize that the 'incident' was no accident.

"I don't like the man." All my attempt to summon a lie failed miserably. I decided to tell him the truth. A man as sensitive as Marcus gave me no chance to tell a lie that would appear believable to a man as intelligent as he.

"Me too." He replied without filters when we got back to our seats. He looked pleased. He did not bother to conceal the boyish green spreading on his cheeks.

His response was unexpected. He now got my full attention. It took me a moment to digest his words. "You don't like him?" I lowered my voice in case someone nearby was listening.

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"No." He lifted the champagne glass into his mouth.

"Why?"

"Vince Greyson just arrived here in Cordova just recently... Heard he attended a business meeting. Just from first glance, I knew I didn't like him and I would never arrive at the point I would like him.?He was a cunning man. The birthday celebrant was his girlfriend. Some say he was married to his older brother's ex-girlfriend but no one could prove the truth. Even if he was not what I thought, but still I don't like the man."

I nod my head sympathetically. Marcus sensed the negative vibe I felt towards Vince. At least I wasn't alone, there's someone aside from me who dislikes the man.

Marcus sensed my discomfort. We made no further discussion about Vince Greyson. Instead, Marcus began to discuss interesting topics about business and people in the same business field as he.

It was around nine o'clock when we decided to leave the party. In the car, he continues to discuss his family, his hobbies, and passions and I listen intently like his old-time friend, casually speaking my opinions when needed.

Thirty minutes after, his car pulled into a stop in front of the Crawford Mansion. I yelp with relief when he finally opened the door and clambered out of the car. God knows my daughter never slipped out of my mind the whole evening. I nearly ran inside the house to my room without bidding him goodbye but it was good manners which won in the end.

"Thank you for your time, Beatrix," Marcus said, he did enjoy the party, it was visibly written all over his face which remained aglow with excitement.

"You don't need to thank me. You've been a good company." I replied which was true, it was just that I'm worried about my daughter that I couldn't enjoy the party. Aside from that Vince Greyson arrived to ruin my mood entirely.

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I watched as he waved goodbye for one last time before climbing inside the car. He turned the engine on and made a U-turn before his car made a beeline straight on the gates and vanished into the darkness. He was gone but I was still standing there lost in my burgeoning thoughts.

Remembering my daughter, panic and fear rattled my senses and I ran to the door, it was left open. I hurriedly slipped inside and vaulted the lock before I tiptoed to the staircase. The maids had retired for the night. The main lights are already turned off. The pilot lights are the ones that were left open to illuminate the foyer.

I snatched my silver beaded shoes to minimize the noise, with shoes clutched on both hands, I walked barefoot across the cold, ceramic floor. Climbing up the staircase almost took me an eternity.

It was the eerie silence that welcomed me at the top of the stairs. I assume that father was asleep at this hour, he wasn't allowed to sleep late and he was following his doctor's orders. Grandmama was probably asleep too, above all it was she who should take good care of her health most.

As I tiptoed to my room I made a promise to myself that no more parties anymore. Even if someone would put a shotgun to my head, I will never go to another party again! Well, if Faith comes then I will allow myself to be dragged to a party where I could show my beautiful daughter to everyone.

I reached my room and quietly pulled it open. It was dimly lit, but the flicker of light from the lampshade was enough to illuminate the man lying on the bed with his arm protectively around Faith.

I wasn't prepared for the sight. I have to blink several times to digest the scene. I even tried to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I found myself lost for words. Tears were now clouding my vision, anytime soon it would fell my eyes.

There was a phone placed on the top of the night table, I'm sure it wasn't mine. But it wasn't the phone that captured my attention but the song playing.

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When I think back on these times,

And the dreams we left behind,

I'll be glad cause I was blessed to get,

To have you in my life,

When I look back on these days,

I look and see your face,

You were right there for me.

In my dreams I'll always see you soar above the sky,

In my heart there'll always be a place for you,

For all my life,

Listening to my favorite song 'There You'll Be' play in the background gave me a different kind of feeling. Hearing it play was something but watching our gardener with his arms protectively around my daughter was another.

For the first time while watching the two together, a thought occurred to me, the startling realization hit me like lightning. I was rendered speechless for a moment.

Why does Faith Vien look so much like our 'handsome' gardener?

## **Chapter 69 -**

He stirred on top of the bed. His eyes fluttered open and drifted to the spot where he sensed an intruder intervening in his sweet slumber. Instantly, his gaze landed on mine, thus taking my breath away. I have to wrap my trembling fingers around the doorknob to support my knees that suddenly melted into Jell-O. For a frozen moment, I just stood there unblinkingly

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enchanted by his enticing blue eyes that seemed to penetrate through my soul. He looked so good on the bed as if he belonged there.

The thin fabric of his shirt clung to the hard contours of his chest leaving nothing to the imagination, his rich tousled hair fell to his eyes enticingly like soft molten honey against the light from the lampshade on his right. He was wearing fitted cargo shorts, the tight garment hugged to his powerful thighs and when my gaze moved further it sinfully stopped on his crotch—he was indeed—blessed. Heat flooded my cheeks. Thankfully the shadows concealed the blush. My eyes drifted down to his muscled thigh. He has the sexiest legs I'd ever seen—sexy in a masculine way.

The sight of him on the bed nearly took all the sanity in me, I nearly ran to his side and wrapped my arms around his shoulders to experience the thrill of being crushed against his perfectly chiseled body. Ocean blue eyes peered under extraordinary eyelashes, the look meant nothing for him, and yet it turned my throat into an arid desert and singed my body with fever. Just one look from him and I lost all control. He was the first man who had such a profound effect on my senses. With little to no effort, he could make me giddy like a girl straight from the schoolroom.

I took another deep intake of breath when he carefully eased his arms away from Faith Viene and rose from the bed leaving the sheet crumpled behind his weight. The spacious room constricted as he slowly made his way in my direction. His sweet enchanting scent drifted to my nostrils. I inhaled his achingly familiar scent as I watched him stop when he was just a few inches away from me.

The dreamy look on his eyes was seductively sexy, I want to grab a camera and capture the exhilarating expression. The lampshade near the bed cast golden shadows on his profile, he was like a beautiful painting emerging from an artist's canvas. "It's about time you arrive home, Madam." He said in a hoarse sensual whisper that sent tiny butterflies crawling inside my stomach.

My lips parted to retort but to my surprise, no words escaped my lips escape a sound that sounded like a strangled chicken. The soft cries coming from the bed saved me from the humiliation. I ran to the bed but before I could take

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Faith Vien into my arms, he already did the job. He carefully lifted the tiny angel from the bed, less than a minute, she stopped crying as he skillfully rocked her into his arms. I stood there unblinking, dazed from the scene. Watching him hold Faith Viene into his arms sent my heart aching with tenderness. That moment I wished that he was Faith Vienne's father.

There was something in him that draws me near, the way a moth is drawn to fire. Fire is ablaze with danger for it could burn a moth's delicate wings and yet the temptation ahead was impossibly hard to resist. I rather burn than not feel the heat at all. My thoughts were interrupted by the soft rustle of his slippers on the marble floor. He was moving to the bed. I watched with growing fascination as he gently placed Faith Vienne's tiny body atop the crib and pulled it closer to the bed. He moved confidently as if he knew exactly what he's doing as if he'd done it a hundred times before.

I became aware that he's done with the job when he turned in my direction and stepped closer and closer.... My breathing quickened from anticipation while watching him cross the distance between us without tearing his gaze off my eyes. My heartbeat quickened. My throat went dry. When we were inches apart, he stopped walking. "Goodnight Madam." He said in a soft whisper. Before I could react he was gone. The door softly closed behind me.

'Madam' He just made me feel like an old maid again. I'm not that too old.

My knees finally gave in, and I slumped on the bed on the same exact spot he last occupied, it was still warm, and his natural musky scent lingered in the air as if he was still there. I was surprised to realize I was still holding my silver beaded stiletto into my hands, it softly dropped on the floor. My head ducked over to the crib to watch the rise and fall of my daughter's chest.

Faith Vienne is fine. Our 'handsome' gardener took good care of my daughter well. I was seriously worried a while ago by the thought Faith had fallen on one of her violent tantrums, when she fell into one, none could console her tearful fits, not even her father could. My eight brothers are as hopeless as my father since they never handled a child before.

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I sighed with relief. A thorn had just been pulled out of my chest. Now that I saw how peaceful my angel looked in her sleep I was able to stretch my lips into a genuine smile. I haven't thanked him yet, whatever his name is.

Five minutes later, I already changed into a silk nightgown. The makeup on my face had been flawlessly cleaned with wipes. I now lay in my bed, nestled beneath the covers waiting for the dreamland portal to open.

My eyes remained nailed on the ceiling but it was not the flawless white ceiling I'm intently looking at but the man with exquisite blue eyes and hair the shade of warm honey playing on my thoughts.

I want to know his name. I remember mumbling to myself before plunging into a dream.

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No matter what happens, just run...Don't ever look back." His words came as harsh and fierce, it was not a plea but an order.

I looked up at him, the face of the man kneeling next to me wasn't a blur anymore. Shocked hit me like a sharp bolt of lightning when a pair of haunted blue eyes held my gaze prisoner. Fierce pain stabbed my chest realizing the tears softly streaming down the smoothness of his cheeks, moonlight gleaming on his tear-stricken eyes.

His fingers were bound by a rope, thus, restricting his movement. But despite the obstruction, he managed to capture my hands which were bound in front of me. He fumbled with the rope on my wrists and struggled to unfasten the rope using a piece of broken glass he managed to retrieve on the ground.

He impatiently struggled to brush the shard against the rope, muttering unintelligent curses under his breath, unmindful that his fingers were now bleeding from the exertion. I cast him a pitiful glance, if only I could help him but I could barely move. The rope was tied too hard, it was digging into my flesh.

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"Please, I will never leave you, not like this," I whispered weakly. Tears burst forth from my eyes, slithering down my cheeks until I could taste the saltiness on my parted lips.

"No! Listen to me!" He snapped, his tone laced with impatience, he had to stop cutting the glass to the rope so he could explain better. "You need to escape! Both of us will get killed if you don't, I need to spare you!" He whispered grimly, gritting his teeth in exasperation.

"No, please don't make me do this please!?" My chest ached painfully. Even my shoulders are shaking uncontrollably. "I will never leave you alone!"

From the distance the sound of a long, loud, doleful cry uttered by an animal, a dog, or probably a wolf—I'm not quite sure which—sounded ominous, it sent deep chills down my stiff spine.

I swallowed hard as he struggled to free my wrist, a tedious task which we found impossibly hard to accomplish within short notice. The rope that tied around my fingers painfully dug into my flesh, making my fingers numb and cold.

"Promise me you will not look back okay? Just run, please, find help. Promise, I will be fine." His ocean blue eyes glowed brighter, almost begging. How could? I say no?

Unmistakably terror filled my eyes. Dread spread throughout my body until it crept to my bones. My breath came deep and labored. The thought of escaping alone and leaving him behind scared the hell out of me.

"Please Ace! No!"

"No Phoenix! Run... never look back."

\*\*\*

Dream...It's only a dream... the same repetitive nightmare.

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I woke up with eyes wet with tears, beads of sweat trickling down my temples, chest heaving violently, and heartbeat still hammering from shock.

Before, the dream had been vague.... Ambiguous... But now it appeared vividly clear and exquisitely detailed.

The man I saw in my dream was our gardener, his ocean blue eyes would be difficult to forget especially when it was brimming with tears.

He was the man who sacrificed himself so I could escape and in return, he was beaten and stabbed to death.

True, it was a dream, but my guilt had been irrepressible, it weighed heavily over my chest making it difficult for me to breathe.

I eased myself from the bed and leaned on the headboard, I wrapped my arms around my legs and rested my chin on my knees.

I wasn't sure if it was only a dream or real events from my past. I couldn't find an answer. How could I find the truth when the most crucial part of me has long since been forgotten—my name.

Am I Phoenix?

If yes, then who's Ace?

## **Chapter 70 -**

The grandfather clock chimed indicating midnight had arrived. Stunned by the sound, my palms moved to my chest in alarm while my startled gaze averted to the object within distance. I blamed my jumpy state on sleep deprivation.? I should be sound asleep by now, I told myself as I lean on the headboard,

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gaze blindly staring ahead. But every time I close my eyes, a pair of ocean blue eyes, which remind me of a beautiful lagoon, keep haunting my thoughts.

I gave up all efforts to drift back to sleep half an hour ago. Tired of twisting and turning on top of the bed, I found myself leaning on the headboard. Falling asleep appeared to be impossibly hard to achieve especially not after the nightmare I went through earlier. Careful not to wake up my daughter, I got off the bed quietly. My feet, after landing on the cold marble floor fumbled for the fluffy slippers underneath the bed. After putting it on, I fumbled for the remote control on top of the dresser and turned the chandelier on, not too bright, just enough to illuminate the room.

Faith Vienne was peacefully asleep inside her crib. Such a beautiful creature, I mumbled, my eyes admiring her cute nose. She would be fine. I told myself as I tiptoed to the door leaving it open and briskly moved down the staircase. I opened the door to the kitchen and grabbed a mug from the counter. At this hour, it was obvious I'm the remaining soul awake at this hour. My movements were quick and hurried while minimizing the noise my movement creates. I don't want to wake up the household while I'm making a glass of milk.

I consumed the milk quickly. Hopefully, I could successfully fall back to sleep this time. Just after I placed the mug on top of the sink, a soft flicker of movement from the window caught my attention. Thief!? Fear gripped me inside realizing that an intruder got in the house. No one from inside the house would go out at this hour, not my father, not my eight brothers, and definitely

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not my grandmother. With my heart on my throat, I decided to investigate. My fingers trembled as I unbolted the lock of the kitchen door, pulled it open, and crept outside.

The moon glowed beautifully on the horizon, thousands of stars scattered the pitch-black sky like precious gemstones. I averted my gaze away from the above, it's no time for me to star-gaze, there are more pressing matters I need to investigate. The soft rustle of wind blowing past me sent shivers down my spine. I wrapped my arms beneath my breasts while I pursued the sound of footsteps which was now going towards the pool.

I don't understand why someone would be roaming outside at this hour. It's past midnight! And there's no valid reason I could think of why a household staff would be awake at this hour except—well if he is up to something. The footsteps stopped on the poolside and I stopped moving and concealed my presence beneath a tall potted plant. I forgot the name. Once securely hidden I summoned all the courage I could muster and leaned forward to investigate the identity of the midnight intruder.

An ear-shattering scream nearly escaped my lips after my wide bulging eyes landed on the man standing legs apart on the edge of the pool and stripping his garments. He peeled his clothes off— composed of t-shirt and cargo pants—leaving only his black brief on.? My fingers flew to cover my mouth after realization hit me, the gardener was the man. Heat crept my cheeks. I am brutally embarrassed to catch myself enjoying the view.? My head refused to turn after I tried to look away, as if my neck was stuck in that direction. Even

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after I moved my eyes it refused to look away. The almost naked demi-god standing in front of me got me hypnotized.

How could it be he's still awake in the middle of this hour? Does it mean he can't sleep the way I did? Was he thinking something else? Or probably someone else? The last question sent a stab of pain inside my chest.... I don't like the feeling.... it was a sensation close to jealousy.

The pale light from the moon was enough to illuminate him. I could freely watch each of his movements. He was like a deity descending from the skies, except that I know he was not a spirit. My eyes sinfully gazed at the length of his body, he was so masculine and well defined. My fingers moved to my lips, almost expecting to find a trace of saliva, thankfully I wasn't drooling.

He dived into the pool like a pro. I caught my breath watching the startling gleam of moonlight on his warm honey hair. My throat turned as dry as a desert while watching the enchanting movement of his hands as he swam on the water. I shouldn't be here, hidden behind a plant, and invading his privacy like a crazed, obsessed stalker. But I couldn't find the strength to stop watching. I have taken a dose of an addictive drug, and now I can't seem to stop.

When he finally got tired of swimming back and forth he emerged from the pool. Brush his powerful fingers on his hair. He indeed looks like a demigod at the moment. The drops of water that almost look like liquid gold against the moonlight tickle down his spine. How I? wished I could look at him like this forever.

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He moved to the edge and sat on the second step of the swimming pool. He just sat there, unmoving, staring blindly straight ahead. I want to read his mind and know the thoughts running inside his brain. I was momentarily hypnotized by his god-like appearance that it took me a moment to realize the wetness slithering down his cheeks. At first, I thought it's was plain water but after intently staring at his now red-rimmed eyes and I listened closely, I heard him sniff, I realize it was tears

He was crying, the thought was impossibly hard for me to digest. Somehow watching him in tears had an adverse effect on me. I found myself dealing with a deep sense of loss I couldn't explain. Whatever his pain is—I was secretly sharing it with him.

I thought a? guy like him never knew about the word 'tears' but now, he was crying.

It broke my heart into million pieces. The I pain was indescribably painful as I? stared at his face. There's an urge within me wanting to walk up to him, wrap his face around my palms and kiss the saltiness of his tears. Maybe that simple act of gesture would help ease the burden on his chest. But no matter how strong the urge to wrap my arms around him, I can't. He would discover I was spying on him at this ungodly hour.

He stood from the pool, water dripped down his body. He turned his back to me giving me the liberty to linger my gaze on the hard muscles of his back. The towel was picked on the floor to dry his body. When he was done, he wrapped the towel around his waist.

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For the very first time, I saw something which he allowed no one to see. Not even his closest friends and family had ever had a glimpse. A long slant scar was carved from below his shoulder blades down to his hip bone.

A horrified gasp tear on my throat, I have to cover my mouth to suppress them. I realize I was shaking as my gaze traced the scar that was visibly splayed on his delicate skin. I was sure that the wound had been fatal. The scar was so deeply carved that I knew that it marred his emotions too. Someone with that wound would be impossible to survive. And it's such a miracle that he actually did.

"I know you're there." His tone was soft and yet it was ominous.

I froze from my hiding place. I'd been discovered. Consumed with panic and shock, my crazy self decided to run for safety. But karma had been waiting for me all along. When I turned in the opposite direction to flee my feet stumbled into the uneven pavement, lost my balance, and slumped on the ground wincing from the sudden assault of pain on my ankle.

"Bloody hell." I heard him muttered under his breath and run to my aid.

He knelt beside me. His eyebrows draw together into a scowl. His nearness didn't do me any good. I found myself unnerved by the inch distance between us. I no longer feel the cold, his body was an incredible source of heat.

His fingers carefully moved to my ankles, where the searing pain was coming from. "Sprain." He mumbled. "Can you walk?" He added, his piercing blue eyes devouring mine.

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I shook my head as I adjust to the pain. Tears formed on the corner of my eyes.

Without another word, his arm slithers to my back while the other went on my thigh. My shriek became muffled gasp when he yanked me off the floor and my head landed on his neck.

He really smells good.... So heavenly.

Before I could object, he carried me to the house in bridal style. My heart started to beat erratically inside my rib cage. I was afraid that he could even hear the drumming? sound.

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