

Chapter 71 - 80

His body was surprisingly soft and warm to the touch. My eyes fluttered close as I savored the ticklish sensation ignited by the burning warmth of his skin pressed to my own. For the first time I became aware of the thin layer of the silk nightgown I wore, the thought sent my cheeks blushing into a reddish shade. Not that he would even notice what I'm wearing, it's dark, I assured myself. He carried me inside the house with surprising ease as though I weigh no more than a feather. We reached the foyer without creating as much sound. He could lightly move like a cat for a man having a large, muscular build.

"For god's sake, hold my neck if you don't want us tumbling down the staircase." He hissed. My thoughts drifted away as if the wind had blown them. I bit my lower lips and did what he ordered. He need not be annoyed, I know this ordeal was all my fault but he shouldn't be too obvious. The feeling of my palms wrapped around his neck heightened the sense of intimacy swirling in the air. I don't know if he feels it too. He must be insensitive, numb, or made of stone if he couldn't feel it.

When I leaned my head to his broad shoulders I became too aware of the crazed sound of my heartbeat. It was so loud that I wonder if he couldn't hear it too, he must be deaf or something not to notice the sound. He carried me up to the stairs with incredible ease. He must be used to this activity, I thought rather grimly. Imagining him carrying another woman in his arms was more than enough to make me shudder. It wasn't my business to find out anyway, it's just that I got too curious.

He'd been there in my room earlier that day, he knew exactly where he's going. After reaching the top of the staircase he turned to the left corner of the hall where my bedroom was located. The door to my room was slightly ajar, he used the door to slightly push it open. He quickly slipped inside before anyone could wake up and witness our uncompromising situation. Once

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inside, he used his feet to close the door frame, I heard the clicking sound as he moved to the bed with me still in his arms.

He lowered me to the bed very gently, careful not to create a sound that would disturb Faith Vienne's peaceful slumber. When he knelt on the floor to check the damage on my ankles, I took the opportunity to watch him closely. He was even more attractive up close. The last time we've been this close was a while ago in this very room but it was dark that time and I didn't have the opportunity to observe his features intently. But it was different now, the chandelier was enough to illuminate his face. The golden glow from the chandelier made his face appear like a perfectly chiseled statue of a god.

Despite my best efforts to read his expression his face gave no clue. I was now left guessing what must he be feeling deep within. Probably he was irritated or even annoyed by having to carry me to my bedroom at this ungodly hour. He knelt on the floor and lifted my feet off the floor. His touch was soft and sweet and I nearly close my eyes as his fingers crawled to my sprained ankle. "Ouch!" Pain spread on the injured area when he touched the wrong spot.

"Sorry." He mumbled, he sounded apologetic. A crease appeared on his forehead as he continues to slowly massage the area. I bit my lower lip to prevent myself from making any sound.

"I wonder what you're doing in the poolside at this ungodly hour. I just want to make sure you haven't developed an obsessive nature—shall we say spying a man who happens to be stripping naked."

"Like duh! I'm not spying on you. Over my dead body." It was my response. I nearly kick him with for that remark. Warmth crept on my cheeks, I suddenly want to bury my face under the covers.

"Really Madam?" He sounded amused. When he lifted his gaze to mine, a playful glint lingered on his exquisite blue eyes. "Explain yourself."

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"I saw you walking past the window. I thought you're a thief." I replied, too late to realize I was walking into a treacherous cliff.

"And you decided to investigate?" Gone was the amusement I saw a while ago. His tone was now laced with a chilling menace that caught me off guard.

"Let's say I did exactly just that," I told him the truth and regretted doing so when his tone blazed with controlled fury. "You slow-witted fool. Sorry for the word Madam. You could have done harm to yourself if you indeed encounter a real thief tonight. What you did isn't praiseworthy Madam. Confronting a thief alone is not what a sane woman would do."

He sounded like a father worrying over his careless daughter. Except he was not my father, he was just a stranger. But if I would be honest with myself, I never felt he was a stranger. Surprisingly speaking, I felt as I'd known him all my life.

"Ouch! That hurts!" I whimpered when he touched another sensitive spot. I don't know if he's doing it on purpose just to spite me. After hearing him mumbled an apology, I realize he didn't mean it. His face showed how sincere he was after he look up.

"It's only a minor injury, nothing to worry about. Your ankles would feel better tomorrow." He freed my ankle and got to his feet. It was so nice to feel the warmth of his fingers holding my ankles, but now that he let it go I couldn't help but feel a little bit of remorse. If only he could linger longer, it felt so good having him near.

Soft cries coming from the crib caught both our attention. 'Faith.' My alerted eyes averted to the crib where my daughter was lying. Forgetting the existence of my injury, I hurriedly moved to the crib only to yelp when the pain came surging down my twisted ankle after I stepped on the floor with force. Tears clouded my vision, and I bit my lower lip to hold myself still.

"Stop moving right there, you'll make the injury worse." He shot me a sideways glance, displeasure darkening his face. Without saying anything he

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turned his back in my direction and gently wrapped my baby into his arms in a gentle way that made my heart swell with tenderness. He was holding Faith Vienne as if she was his own child.

He must be very good when it comes to children because he was able to silence my daughter by just putting her into his arms. What an adorable pair they make. He looked like a devoted father.

My wandering shifted to his back after he moved forward. He was still rocking Faith Vienne into his arms. His unwavering attention was lowered in my daughter unaware that I was intently watching him.

I took a deep intake of breath as my eyes traced the scar on his back. The thought of how he got the wound sent shivers down my spine. I wonder what happened to him, but I'm quite sure whatever it is, it was a nightmare he would never forget. Who would forget a memory that caused him a scar so deep, and long, that even time held no power to erase?

As he returns Faith Vienne to the crib, I caught a soft flicker of tenderness in his eyes. It must be my eyes playing a trick on me but he appeared blissfully happy. He may not say it, but the glow of happiness reeked from his body that I could feel it in his aura.

He nods his head to me. "I wish that tonight's incident would not happen again Madam. I don't want you sneaking outside the house to pursue an intruder. Your father would not be happy if I told him the truth."

I didn't respond since I failed to search for the right intelligent remark. Everything he said was annoyingly true. Silence was the best response I could think of. He moved to the door. My energy dropped to the floor seeing him leave.

"Wait!" Before I could stop myself I said the word already. He stopped on his track. His searching gaze shifted to my face. He waited for me to say it. "How did you get such a long scar?"

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He looked quite surprised but he didn't allow it to show. I was sure he would ignore my insensitive question but he shocked me when he moved a couple of steps forward until his knees were barely touching mine

"I saved a woman from her kidnappers by letting her escape. It was her captor who slashed a four-inch dagger on my back after he discovered that I helped her run away."

"It must be painful."

"Yes, but it's all worth it Madam."

"Do you love her that much to put your life into the line?"

"With all my heart." He responds.

Silence lapsed inside the room. No one said anything for the next three minutes. We just look into each other's eyes, lost in our own burgeoning thoughts. It was him who decided to break the silence first. "I must be off." He said before turning to the door.

"Thank you for helping me to tonight—"

"Carter. Just call me Carter Madam." He said.

"Goodnight Carter," I whispered softly.

Before he walked to the door, I saw the faint shadow of a smile on his lips. "Goodnight Beatrix." For the first time he spoke my name, my heartbeat quickened.

"Goodnight Faith Vienne." He said softly turning to the crib. Moments later he was out the door.

Chapter 72

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"What have you gotten yourself into, Ace?"

I lifted my gaze to my best friend, warily battling whether to feel deliberately annoyed or concerned by the hidden warning on his tone. Lucas Nicholas Alexander, my loyal best friend sat on the bar stool beside me, arms folded across his chest, a can of beer remained untouched at the top of the bar counter in front of him. Irritation irked his aristocratic face while impatiently waiting for my response. I didn't say an immediate reply. Instead, I lifted the half-consumed bottle of beer, brought it to my mouth, and drank its contents up to the last drop.

The silence inside the bar of my friend's large Manor was disconcerting but it was more manageable compared to the series of interrogations I unexpectedly received after I told him my current dilemma. He has the audacity to lecture me like an older brother when he was almost facing the same difficult situation I experienced months before—he too was on the brink of divorce. He discovers his wife's illicit affair with her cousin's fiance. He nearly killed his wife on the night he discovered she was about to run away with another man. In the end, he chose the nonviolent way. He decided to opt for divorce.

"I don't know Lucas. I may be walking straight into the entrance of hell and not know it." I lifted the can to my mouth and surprised myself to find it empty. I sighed with frustration and let it drop to the counter after clenching it with my fist.

"Why don't you just tell Phoenix, I mean Beatrice the truth?" Luca's tone softened but his face remained its usual impassive expression.

The sound of my choked laughter almost surprised me. "Are you kidding? She will hate me once I tell her the truth. Have you forgotten that it's my fault why she nearly got killed? I consider it a miracle that she even survived. I don't want her to remember how monster I am." My fingers brushed my hair, an old habit I couldn't avoid when frustrations hit me.

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"You must be responsible for your actions. Face her wrath then show her how an asshole you had been. Ask for forgiveness" Lucas said nonchalantly, his gaze shifted to the beer bottle seated on top of the bar counter and wondered why it was even there in the first place. He didn't drink beer but it was what he picked up in the refrigerator. It seems I wasn't the only one too occupied today.

It took me a vast amount of self-control not to bang my head on the shiny bar counter. Lucas was asking me to do the impossible. Telling Beatrix the truth was like jumping on the rooftop of a skyscraper. It's easier said than done. If I told Beatrix the truth now, she will hate me forever. The worst is she will take Faith Vienne away from me.

"Before I tell her the truth I want to find who tried to kill her."

"But you have the suspect already. It was Angela and Vince who possessed the greatest motive."

"Yes they are the main suspect and without a doubt, I knew that they are guilty as hell. But I need pressing evidence to make them pay for their crimes."

"And how would you do that, Ace?"

"I have my ways, Lucas," I said the words firmly and full of determination. I will never allow the culprits to evade the punishment they deserve. If I have to sacrifice my life to make them pay... I will.

My gaze shifted straight ahead, seeing nothing in particular, my thoughts swirling around me in chaotic disorder. And in the midst of my reverie, her seraphic face appeared pushing all my worries away. For a moment I found myself staring into an ethereal beauty with enchanting phoenix eyes, a cute upturned nose, and thin shapely lips. I found myself smiling at the memory of her cute, blushing cheeks. My sweet beautiful Phoenix.

The only reason why I allowed to become Alexander Crawford's gardener was to have my great masterpiece back. It's insanely important to me that I agreed

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to enter a job I know was below my line of work. It never occurred to me that the fates were playing a game with me not until after I discovered a shocking discovery in the form of Beatrix Crawford.

God knows how dumbfounded I was after seeing her descend the stairs in a jaw-dropping gown that shook the room with her charm. What made the situation more astonishing was seeing her alive after I thought she was indeed dead. The fact that she was the daughter of Alexander Crawford made the situation more awkward especially after realizing I'm her father's lowly gardener.

Things became even more complicated after I discovered she had a daughter—our beautiful daughter—Faith Vienne. Despite her missing memories, I knew deep in her heart she never forgot our first child the way I never forgot Vien.

My plan from the very beginning was plain simple but it was shattered by a few unexpected twists. Instead of wanting to have the painting alone, I ended up wanting her... and so did our daughter. The painting could burn to hell for all I care. All I wanted to do now was keep my family safe. It's okay if Phoenix or Beatrix will never remember me. It's okay if Faith?Vienne will never know I am her father. As long as they are happy and in good condition, I will be content with my life. It would be enough for me to watch them over a distance.

"Shall I drive you back to the Crawford Mansion?" Lucas offered. My burgeoning thoughts were cut short and I nodded thankful for the favor he offered me. I abandoned my seat in a snap, a surging excitement burned inside me, I wanted to return to the mansion as fast as possible.

I snatched the empty bottle from the bar counter and threw it in the trash can. Lucas moved to return the unconsumed beer to the refrigerator. "You can always come here if you want." He said after closing the refrigerator. "You're always welcome."

I didn't reply. Instead, I waited for him to pick his car keys on the counter so we could leave. I'm eager to come home. We walk down the long staircase in

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silence. Lucas must have felt that I was not in the mood for another lengthy conversation.

At the foot of the stairs, a tall woman waits. She was a stunning woman in her mid-twenties with a body to die for. The wild curls of her flaming red hair frame her small face. Her plump lips were stretched into an ethereal smile that brightened her whole face. She has fine and high cheekbones that complemented her perfectly chiseled nose. Her eyes were too large for her face, one would perceive as innocent except that the word 'innocent' would be the last thing to describe Alexandria Alexander— Lucas's wife.

I'd seen her a couple of times before but there's something wrong about her today. She seems to be a different woman—a totally different woman. She's a known celebrity and model. She never once allows anyone to see her face bare of makeup but now her face doesn't even have a slight trace of foundation nor lipstick. But it didn't make her less attractive. Instead, it made her appear youthful and vibrant.

She was wearing a brown loose long-sleeve that made me cringe. On her bottom she wore a black long skirts that nearly reached her ankles, my deceased grandma will never wear that ugly skirt even if someone put a shotgun on her head.

This woman.... I couldn't believe that she's Lucas Nicholas Alexander's wife.

"Lucas? Are you coming for lunch?" Her voice was soft and sweet as rose's petals and I nearly fell from the last steps of the stairs noticing how she sounded like a nun, not only she sounded like a nun but she definitely looks like one.

"No." It was Lucas's response. He didn't bother to throw her a glance. What a pity.

"Oh, it's okay. I'm planning to cook for you but I guess I will just cancel my plans. Take care Nic." Alexandria said and drifted to the kitchen, cheerfully humming a song as if she didn't just receive a rejection from her husband.

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"What happened to your wife?" It was the first thing I blurted out after we're settled inside his shiny BMW. I still can't recover from the shock. That's not Alexandria.

"She'd been like that after the car accident a month ago." He responds shrugging his shoulders.

"She seems different. I thought she couldn't cook?" I respond with eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

"She developed a sudden interest in cooking after the accident. Not only that she's planning to apply for a job."

"She's going back to her old career?"

"No," Lucas replied plainly, his face contorted with displeasure. "She applied for a housekeeping job in a hotel."

"What!?"

The engine roared to life. Moments later the car was peacefully rolling on the highway.

"Are you sure that she's Alexandria? Did she have amnesia or something?"

"Unfortunately yes," Lucas replied, he didn't bother to conceal the irritation on his voice anymore. "For god's sake were are not talking about my wife Ace, it's you're your wife we're talking about."

"It's ex-wife Lucas." I corrected, looking toward the window and avoiding direct contact.

He snorted. "She's still your wife Ace. The lawyer you hired was a fraud. You and Phoenix are not legally divorced."

Chapter 73

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"Thank you for the ride, Lucas." I found myself hurrying out of the car before my best friend could fire a series of fiery, ardent questions that could burn me alive. I heard nothing from him after I clambered out of the car with quick, hurried movements of a thief then closed the door with more force than required. Before the door closed I caught a glimpse of the irritated scowl crumpling his wholesome features. When the car dashed forward that's when I finally let go a deep sigh of relief. I survived another dreadful encounter with Lucas. 'Thank God.' I mumbled to myself while hastily moving to the iron gates.

Lucas should not be worrying about me. I told myself after the iron gates swung open. The wide, breathtaking lawn of the Crawford's came to my view after I strode inside. I quickened my pace with eager anticipation. Soon I would see my little angel and my secret ex-wife—I mean wife. True the divorce papers had been processed but the documents are fake. The lawyer I hired was a fraud. And that makes Phoenix and I husband and wife under the law of man and the law of the church. I don't know if I should be happy or not but either way I'm still destined for doom after Phoenix or Beatrix regains her memory.

True, I could tell her the truth when it's not yet too late but it would only make things worse. Her life is now at peace, she too was happy, and I couldn't destroy her little paradise. Bringing the past would only open old wounds back to life. The truth will hurt her even more. I rather keep it myself than hurt her again. She doesn't deserve what happened in the past. She should move

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forward as Beatrix Crawford because even before she became Phoenix De Amore, she was already a Crawford Heiress in her mother's womb.

'Time to go back to work Ace Carter.' A part of my brain told me. I took a deep breath and shook all chaotic thoughts away and focused my attention on my daily routine. Alexander Crawford would bury me alive if I forgot to water his precious babies for a single day. If given a chance I prefer to get buried alive rather than fired from my job and lose all the chance to watch over my daughter and wife.

I hastily moved to the garage, pulled an old cabinet open, and took the watering hose inside. After pushing the cabinet close a shiny red sports car caught my attention. It doesn't belong to the Crawford's, I'd been working long enough as the gardener to know if it belongs to them. Surely, they have visitors and whoever it was, he has all the plans to stay longer.

The morning sun stood proudly on the blue horizon promising a beautiful day ahead with no possible chance of rain. The sun's glorious rays kissed my exposed skin and somehow I found myself comforted by its warmth. The wind blows softly, refreshing my senses with the coolness it brings. This is what I call paradise. I wouldn't have known this safe haven if I wasn't courageous enough to let go of my old life. I'm content to indulge in life as simple as this.

I cheerfully hummed a song as I proceeded on watering the plants using the hose I took from the garage. The automatic water sprinkler was under repair so I should stick to watering the plants on my own. Later when I finish this task, I shall proceed on trimming the overgrowing grasses on the lawn.

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When I look upon the wide terrace located on the second floor of the mansion I caught sight of Beatrix. As usual, she looked so ethereal in her plain pink dress that I forgot everything around me exists. She's the only one I could see because she shines the brightest like the sun that illuminates everything that surrounds it. Her luminous hair cascade down her back like an endless waterfall. When she suddenly turned towards me my fingers tightened on the house. Just one look from her was enough to break all my self-control.

I pretend not to see her and continue to water the plants. Despite not looking, I could feel the weight of her gaze on my shoulders. Even if my eyes were closed I will always be aware if she's nearby since her presence has a different effect on my nerves. Only Phoenix could make my heart skip a beat. She's the only girl who could melt all my self-control. She's the only one whose existence makes my whole life worthwhile.

When her gaze moved away from me, I took the opportunity to watch her intently.

From the transparent floor-to-ceiling glass window of the terrace, I could see Faith Vienne beside her on the stroller. What a breathtaking sight to see both my wife and daughter at this early hour. I wish I had my canvas and paintbrush with me so I could paint the beautiful scenery.

"Bloody Hell."

The moment was shattered when 'Strawberry' emerged from behind Beatrix. I call him strawberry because the man's hair somehow reminds me of a dry

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strawberry. He flashes Beatrix one of his dazzling smiles I found so damn irritating. I had this sudden urge to run and fly to the second floor and dragged him to the garden. I never liked the man at first glance and seeing him frequently visit the Crawford Mansion made my dislike transform into the size of a monster. The cheerfulness that made my adrenaline pumping ceased to exist. It was replaced by a stabbing sensation in my chest I call jealousy.

Her jubilant smile brightened the terrace, it surpassed the sun with its brightness. But it has the opposite effect on me knowing it wasn't exclusively mine. I found myself plunged into the deepest darkest corner of a secluded place. Damn. I just found my heart broken this early in the morning.

I walk out of the garden. I couldn't just take the sight.

Two hours later 'strawberry' left. I was tracking the time and that's why I know how long he stayed. I'm the gardener but I'm acting more like a personal bodyguard. Not that I could help it, I'm just guarding what's mine, I mean what once been mine. I need to watch over Phoenix or Beatrix just to make sure no other asshole would dare to break her heart the way I did. Whoever dares to hurt her again I will drag him to the deepest, darkest corner of hell.

I checked the time on my wristwatch. It's almost ten o'clock. Alexander Crawford has summoned me to the library. The time was still early but It's better early than late. I'm not that punctual before. Perhaps I'm just eager to enter the mansion in hopes to have a glimpse of Faith Vienne or Beatrix.

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When I entered the Grand door of the regal mansion I wasn't disappointed with my expectations for it was Faith Vienne sitting on her grandmother's lap who greeted my eyes the moment I entered. My heart melted at the sight of her seraphic face and cute smiling lips.

What an adorable little girl. She looked so much like Vien when she was about her age. My gaze lingered on her until I had to shift my attention to where I'm going. But before she disappeared from my view I smiled at her. Call it a miracle or something faith Vienne actually smiled back. My heart fluttered with happiness.

The room to the Alexander Crawford's office slash library was slightly ajar. I moved forward to push it open but stopped midway when I heard Phoenix's soft voice from inside. I peeked on the slight crevice of the open door and saw her standing in the middle of the room opposite, arms folded beneath her chest, her beautiful countenance scrunched in a frown.

"You will be leaving for Brittania next week, Beatrix. You will bring Faith Vienne with you."

I couldn't believe what I'm hearing. I have to press my ears closer to the door to make sure I heard Alexander right.

"Are you sure you want me to leave Pa? Isn't it too soon? I'm going to miss you."

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"And so I will miss you Beatrix and so my little angel. But I'm doing this for you. You need to leave so when you return you will be ready to take over our chain of hotels."

Shock rendered me frozen. The thought of Phoenix leaving shattered my world at my feet. I just found my wife and yet she will leave too soon. My happiness was short-lived. She would have to go to Britannia soon and I would never have the chance to see her again. Maybe if I could that would be after four or maybe five years. She would become an unreachable star by that time.

I walk away from the door. Life without her would never be bright as sunshine. I would once more plunge into the darkness.

Chapter 74

An hour had passed since I walked out of my father's office and climbed up the stairs to my room but the astounding news didn't allow me to recover quickly. As I quietly sat on my bed, with Faith Vienne lying beside me I contemplated father's words. He seriously meant no harm but I couldn't ignore the pain stinging in my chest thinking that I needed to leave my safe haven—the Crawford Mansion. It occurred to me before that I needed to leave this play but it never once crossed my mind that it would be next week. So soon...

"You shall not worry about Faith Vienne, Beatrix." Alexander Crawford said softly while laying a hand on my left shoulder. Loneliness shone on his eyes as if he didn't want me to leave either but he must do it for my sake. He cleared his throat before he continued, "Stella offered to take good care of your daughter while you stay on her luxurious estate so you could focus on

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your studies." His words nearly drew me into tears. God knows how badly I yearned to go back to school to pursue the career I longed to succeed and yet my only regrets were leaving them behind.

"I wouldn't bear to not see you for the next four years pa... Grandma Clarissa and my eight brothers too... I'm gonna miss you all." I looked away so father would not see the tears clouding my eyes but it was too late, his sharp observant eyes caught the glint of tears. The hand holding my shoulders tightened and in spite of the depressing mood, he managed to give me one of his best smiles, for a moment it was enough to let me forget my worries. He knew what's best and maybe I need to take my share of sacrifice too after all this is for my own good.

"We will visit you twice a month. Once you adjust to your new environment I promise you that you will enjoy Stella's luxurious estate and probably you will arrive at a point where you will not wish to leave the place." The conversation ended with my father embracing me tight and telling me things would be fine and there's nothing I should be afraid of. Of course, I trust him, I pushed all the negative thoughts off my mind and told myself that going to another country to study would be a new, exciting experience.

I turned towards Faith Vienne, she was fast asleep. I leaned closer and kissed the tip of her nose. The sight of her was enough to ease a few of my fears and worries. It feels so good to be a mother. But it feels even best to gave birth to a baby girl. Once in Brittania, we could go to popular tourist spots. We could go to popular places to experience new things and see new sceneries. The thought sent my heart pumping with excitement. Who says I couldn't mix studies with pleasure?

I carefully lifted Faith Vien from the bed and placed her inside the stroller. She stirred but thankfully the movement didn't disturb her sleep. I picked my laptop on top of the night table and very slowly pushed the stroller to the terrace using my right hand while clutching my laptop on the other. The laptop was a gift from my father last week. I didn't want to accept the thing since it was too much but father as stubborn as he insisted I accept the present or he will feel bad. In the end, father won and I wholeheartedly thank him for it.

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I pulled a chair near the glass window. I stopped for a moment to appreciate the breathtaking view overlooking the garden. It was the part of the Mansion where I want to spend most of my time, of course, it's nothing to do with our gardener, I told myself defensively. Speaking of our 'hot' gardener he was nowhere to be seen. I saw him down the garden this morning and watering the plants before Marcus arrived but when my gaze searched the spot where I last saw him he's gone.

He was probably on the lawn and moving some of the father's latest collection of lawn ornaments. At least he wasn't there in the garden to distract me with my research. I pulled the stroller beside my chair before taking my seat. When I was comfortably settled on my seat, I placed the laptop on top of my lap.

My eyes narrowed in concentration while I type 'Harvey University in the search tab.' It was the school I would soon find myself in. At least I know what type of school I'm getting myself in. My mouth dropped into the floor when the image of a gigantic building with a modern structure, with pristine white walls, and elegant roofing that look as if it's made of gold came to view.

'Harvey University is a school exclusive for the royal and the elite class. It's known for its global competitiveness, world-renowned faculty, state-of-the-art resources, and outstanding curriculum. It's the perfect school to pursue your career and to discover your best academic interests.

I have to release the breathing I didn't know I was holding as my gaze survey the images available of the University. It is no ordinary school which simply means the majority of the student came from extremely rich and influential families. For a moment I have to ask myself if I could handle all the pressure. 'I must' It was my automatic response to the question since I knew there's no turning back. Whether I like it or not, I shall finish my education so I could return to Cordova and take over Crawford Chain Of Hotels.

My trembling fingers clicked on the list of courses available, I don't really understand if it's excitement or anticipation which was making me fidgety. I clicked on the list of courses available. Until now I'm not quite sure which course to take.

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Accountant, Agriculture, Economics, Animal Production and Fisheries, Banking and Finance...

I stopped reading. The number of courses available was making my head spin. I haven't read half of the lists—not even one-fourth—but I lost interest. The course I need to choose must help me in managing not just hotels but also restaurants that papa wishes to venture into in the future. I heard him mention once that the ongoing hotel project overlooking the sea would be upgraded by adding restaurants on the first floor.

What should I choose? I took a deep breath and continue reading the list of courses. An hour later, my eyes were droopy and tired from looking too much on the screen, my back ached by my uncomfortable position on the chair, and my neck was achingly stiff. But despite everything, there was a smile on my lips knowing I found the course suitable for me. My hardship was all worth it. I closed the laptop on my lap and allowed my eyes to relax while my hands work to massage my temples.

My gaze landed on Faith Vienne. She was still asleep, she's being cooperative while I was doing my research a while ago. The slight flicker of movement at the corner of my eyes caught my attention. In an instant, my expectant eyes shifted to the garden. Oh, look who's here. I mumbled to myself seeing Carter emerge from nowhere. As usual, he was wearing a white t-shirt. On the bottom, he was wearing ripped jeans. Wow, a gardener wearing only a plain t-shirt and ripped jeans were slaying the look, he still looks sizzling hot in his way. He manages to look proud and regal without even trying. He's the only man I know who could look so cool and elegant even if he shall out a rag on.

Warm sunshine gleamed on his hair like molten honey. He moved to the garden with, quick but sure movements with a shovel in his powerful hands. Without me knowing, my hands tightened around the chair. I never knew that gardening could be this elegant. I suddenly have this notion to change my choice into gardening. Bachelor Of Science In Gardening, I wonder if there's such a course because I might be needing one.

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He took his shirt off. I heard myself took a deep intake of breath. I'm badly in need of a glass of cold water to ease the dryness of my throat. The beads of sweat trickling down his back gleamed against the sun. He looks like the God of Sun, Apollo. My eyes sinfully wandered around the muscular contours of his chest. He could pass a model to me. I still couldn't understand why he chooses the wrong line of work. He must be desperate to find a job.

His head moved in my direction. He caught me in the process of drooling over his body. I was thankful for the distance between us it hid the embarrassing blush on my cheeks.

I realize as I look at him that?I will miss him too after I leave next week.

Chapter 75

"Is there something wrong Beatrix? Call me paranoid or something but I sensed weariness in your tone. Are you really fine?" Elisa sounded suspicious.

I distance the phone away from my ears to avoid her high-pitched voice from piercing my eardrum. Her Intuition never ceases to amaze me. No matter how I kept something from my best friend she would always find it out and she will find a way to squeeze the truth from me. This time, I wonder how she manages to feel it across another country. I'm convinced Elisa has a powerful instinct.

A burst of strangled laughter emerge from my lips, even my laughter sounded strained. I thought wincing from my failed attempt to act super fine. How I must convince her that I'm doing fine when I wasn't even convinced with myself? "I'm doing fine Lis! You needn't worry!" My voice rose into a convincing cheerfulness and I silently?I wished it worked. My friend didn't press the matter and I sighed with relief. I guess I have just won this little battle. If Elisa was here, my acting wouldn't work. Just one look into my eyes and she will know instantly as if she could read my emotions by looking into my eyes that things aren't perfect as it seems.

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A couple of days had passed since my father announced his plans to send me to Britannia so I could attend Harvey University to help me polish my career. I'm quite elated at first but as I think of it for days, the excitement faded. Somehow it was replaced by fearful apprehension and doubt. I have once been bullied because I was born different. My eyes have a differing color. Somehow it was enough to scare me, there's a huge possibility I would become another bullying target by some reach elites who act as if their family could buy everything.

"Harvey University is my dream school, Bea! My classmates were kind! The processors are very good—though some still rattle my nerves—still, they are wonderful!! I enjoyed every single minute I spend here in school. I'm sure you have doubts at first. That's exactly what I felt the first time I came here. But after a few months of adjustments to my new environment, I began to love this place." Lisa exclaimed, breathless. I could imagine her eyes lit with fascination, red lips parted in awe, and pulse jittering with unrestrained excitement as she paced back and forth.

"Thank you, Lis, that helped me a lot. Hopefully, I would have the same beautiful adjustment as yours."

"Why not? You have Faith Vienne with you. I'm sure you will adapt well to Britannia! You will not only enjoy the scene you will also enjoy the men as well!"

"P-pardon me?"

"Don't be ridiculous Bea! Good-looking men flock here in Harvey University! Billionaires, future CEOs, Business men, Artists, Model, Architect, and Engineer! You will all find it here. You will never get bored!"

"You just mentioned all the reasons why I should Lis." I sighed heavily. Elisa just explained how complicated the University.

"With your beauty, I'm sure as hell there wouldn't be any difficulty attracting a hot babe Bea."

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My eyes rolled heavenward. "I've no plan to attract one Lis," I replied grimly after leaving the comforts of the Victorian sofa and paced back and forth in the middle of the empty terrace. Silence hung the room, only the soft sound of my feet pacing back and forth helped ease the disconcerting silence. It was so different without papa and my brothers in the house. I'm used to hearing their voices everywhere, it gives me a sense of comfort and a sense of security. Once I leave the Mansion I would miss their presence every single day. Just the thought was enough to dampen my spirits. I don't know how much more would I react once I'm living alone.

"Forgot your boyfriend or ex-husband, Beatrix, if you have one. You deserve another man." For the second time that minute I roll my eyes heavenward. This is going to be a lengthy conversation. I told myself.

"Don't worry Lis. I already forgot his existence in fact I'm trying my best to recall him." I replied after taking a deep, long breath.

"You really don't get my point, Bea. If a man existed in your life he should have found you already. I assume that if he did exist he didn't want you in his life. Perhaps after discovering that you're pregnant he left you."

My feet froze, I stopped pacing back and forth and sat on the long Victorian sofa. The long sofa was so big that it made me feel emptier. How I wished Faith Vienne was here but she was gone with Clarissa. Probably they are in the garden for a walk.

"I guess he wouldn't do that to me," I argued. There was suddenly a part of me who believes that whoever the man was, isn't capable of abandoning me.

"You're right, Bea. It would be your intuition telling you." Relief flooded when Lis finally agree. "Perhaps he passed away before he could discover your pregnant with his child." She added.

"Dear Lord," I mumbled grimly wondering how did our conversation turn so grimly. "I will call you again Lis, maybe tomorrow? I need to some packing."

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"Sure, Bea. Some other time. Please do stop overthinking. It will only stress you out"

Just like you're stressing me out? I want to add but kept it to myself. "You take care, Lis," I said instead.

"You too Bea. See you soon." She hung up.

I moved to the sofa and took the spot where I sat a while ago. My back leaned on the soft cushion behind me. There's too much for me to do but so little time. I don't know what I should do first. But I still haven't summoned the strength to begin one of them.

Little by little my memories return but I still couldn't understand the short flash backs appearing in my thoughts and sometimes in my dreams. They remained a mystery like a piece of a puzzle that needed to be put together to form a perfect image.

Lisa's words reverberated in my mind. She had a point a while ago when she told me the possibility that my boyfriend or husband—if he even existed—would possibly be dead. How tragic. I thought while closing my eyes. Imagining a mysterious lover buried six feet below the ground. He was probably waiting for me to visit his grave. If he was a ghost, I wonder if he was with me now.

"A penny for your thought." His voice was soft and sexy, almost music to my ears. I wonder if I had only imagined it.

I forced my eyes open. A pair of exquisite blue eyes were intently looking at me. My heart skipped a beat. I still wonder how he has this powerful effect on my nerves. My eyes landed on his teasing lips, it was curved into a sultry smile. My throat gone has gone I straightened my spine and cast a casual glance on his direction.

"How long have you been standing there?" Warmth spread on my cheeks at the notion he'd been watching me without me knowing.

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"Long enough to witness the unusual expression on your face." He replied, moved to the corner of the room and lowered a potted plant on the floor, an additional to Papa's collection of rare plants.

My eyes followed his movements. At the same time wondering how he managed to look so sexy without trying. He always remind me of someone. I was so sure I'd seen him before. Isn't it on a television or a magazine? I forgot. I'm not so good recalling the details.

He was now moving towards my direction. I impatiently waited for him. He stopped when he was just a single step away from the sofa. His eyes never leaving mine as his fingers fumbled behind his back as if searching for something. Before I could ask what he was doing he was already holding a stem of pristine white roses in front of me. My pulse jittered and I found myself taking the flower with trembling fingers.

White roses were my favorite. I couldn't believe he guessed what I like in flowers. "Is it for me?" I asked, eyes wide and hopeful. It was so kind of him to give me a gift.

"No, It's for Faith Vienne." He replied without filters. My hope went down the drain. My shoulders fell. So much for hoping that he picked it for me. "You had plenty. Your suitor gave you a bouquet this morning."

Without another word he walk towards the door. My curios eyes trailed on his back until he opened the door and closed it again. Once more, silence hung inside the terrace but this time it was deeper than before. I made no move to follow him. Why would I?

He was gone but I was still frozen on my seat?wondering why did he sound like a jealous lover.

Chapter 76

"Beatrix, I have some important things to tell you."

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I just finished packing my clothes and Faith Vienne's when my father emerged from the door. The grave expression on his face made me suddenly worried. It was the first time I saw the unusual expression on his handsome countenance.

"Please come in Papa. I just finished packing."

I closed my large suitcase after stuffing the last of my necessities inside and closed it. The door behind me opened and closed. When I turned towards father, he was standing in front of me, hand firmly wrapped on the side of the crib where Faith Vienne lay.

He didn't say anything at first. His gaze glued to his granddaughter who was happily wiggling inside her crib. He appeared to be contemplating. Perhaps he was searching for the right words to say before he told me the news.

"Papa? Is everything all right?"

His gaze averted to mine. It occurred to me that he looked tired. "I'm fine Beatrix." He said, offering me a smile. I knew he was lying. It doesn't require words to find out. His expression speaks the truth itself.

Papa is perhaps worried that Faith Vienne and I will be leaving tomorrow morning. It will be the first time we will leave the Mansion for a very long time. It would take me four long years to permanently stay here after I finished my studies.

"It's about your birth certificate Beatrix. You shall carry the name Phoenix De Amore for a while—it's just temporary until the family lawyer could legally change your name to Beatrix Crawford."

Alarm welled inside me. I jumped out of the bed to level father's gaze at mine. "P-phoenix D-De Amore?"

"Yes, it was your real name." He replied, meeting my bulging eyes. I sensed his effort to hide his emotions.

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"Oh, Papa! I'm so happy that the private investigator finally discovered who I was. Is there something important I need to know?" My eyes widened with expectation as I waited for his response.

"There's not much Beatrix. You work in a business hotel as a hotel attendant. The man who stood as your father figure died a year ago from chronic illness while your mother passed away just this year from the same chronic illness. That's the information the private investigator supplied."

I took a deep, long breath while absorbing the information. He said nothing as he continues to regard me with a calculated look. My eyebrows scrunched in confusion, I sensed father wasn't telling the whole tale.

"How about my husband Papa! Or a boyfriend! I want to know who was my daughter's father." I snapped. Before I realized it, the words were spoken aloud and it was too late for me to retreat.

I wonder if it was only my imagination but his jaw clenched and a shadow crossed his eyes. Before I could read the fleeting emotions it was gone as fast as it arrived.

"You have a husband Beatrix but he filed for divorce months before the accident. He has nothing to do with you anymore."

Grief tore my heart into shreds. The news was so devastating and I don't know how to react. There's nothing more depressing than the thought a man had forsaken me while I was with his child. "Give me his name Papa! I want to talk to him." Desperately, I pleaded. If I need to kneel just to know my ex-husband's name I will do it. I will hunt him down and tell his face he was no man.

He shook his head. "I don't believe it would be necessary for my daughter." He said with finality in his tone. But I made up my mind and I wouldn't allow him to keep the man's name.

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"Please Papa, just one favor. He deserves to know he has a daughter." I respond rather harshly. Gone was the self-control I thought I possessed. I found myself becoming too desperate.

"It's too late to tell him, Beatrix. Your ex-husband died of a car accident." He replied in the gentlest way possible.

Silence lapsed between us. I found myself shaken by the news. Hearing him say Faith Vienne's father was dead had drilled a deep hollow emptiness inside me. Indescribable pain clutched my heart. I found myself slowly drifting back to the bed for support.

"I'm sorry Beatrix." He whispered when I was seated on top of the bed. Pain visibly shone in his eyes. I tore my gaze off him and shifted it down to the floor. "I didn't want to tell you the truth because I'm afraid you would grieve over that 'bastard.' The man left you Beatrix and he married his secretary."

I didn't reply.... I don't even know how to respond to the situation.?My silence seems to be the best reaction.

"I still want to know his name, Papa."

He vigorously shook his head. His face hardened. "No, it's better you know little about him, Beatrix. As your father, I refuse to tell you his name."

"I understand Papa. I won't insist anymore." I said weakly, no longer in the mood to argue. My strength had been drained and an argument is the last thing I wanted now. Father was only trying to protect me. If he gave my ex-husband's name, it would complicate things. It will bring back old and painful memories which should be cast to oblivion. It's better if I leave things this way.

The bed moved when he sat beside me. I lifted my gaze to his face to read his expression but father was trying his best to avoid my eyes as if he wasn't trying to hide something. 'Don't be ridiculous Beatrix. He won't keep anything

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from you because he was your father.' said a logical part of my brain and I believe it.

"Don't stress yourself trying to force yourself to remember your ex-husband. There's a huge reason why you forgot about him."

For the first time, my father didn't reach out to me. He must know that there's nothing he could do to make me feel better. But even in the midst of his silence, I could feel his sympathy.

"There's one more thing Beatrix. You shall keep your identity a secret inside Harvey University until the family lawyer settles the issue."

My brain was still fogged with confusion that I just nodded my head. Papa opened his mouth to speak but closed them again as if changed his mind. I heard him sigh. "I'm taking much of your time Beatrix. Finish packing, we would be waiting for you down the hall."

Without another word, he walks towards the door, reaches for the doorknob, and pulls it open. He was gone for a while now but my gaze remained nailed to the door as if it would give me the answer I was looking for.

I picked Faith Vienne from the crib and wrapped her around my arms. When I did, tears gathered in the corner of my eyes. I swallowed the lump in my throat and continued to look at her.

A pair of exquisite blue eyes continue to stare at me with wonder. I bit my lips to suppress the tears attempting to fall down my cheeks. "She's young to understand the truth but when she grows older I wonder how I would explain everything to my daughter.

Will I ever have the courage to one day tell my daughter that her father died when she was just a baby? I sighed deeply and walked towards the door with my daughter still in my arms.

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I got up from the bed leaving the sheets crumpled by my weight. Instead of walking downstairs, I found myself walking towards the terrace.

When I was comfortably seated on the long Victorian sofa, my eyes shifted to the beautiful view spreading on the horizon.

It was almost six and the radiant sun was losing its brightness but it was still high and vibrant enough to create spectacular evening shadows overlooking from the floor to ceiling glass window of the terrace.

Silence hung around the terrace but somehow I found myself gradually relaxing. Questions I couldn't find an answer continue to swirl around me but it didn't bother me that much the way I did while ago. There's far more pressing matters than my past, I reminded myself contemplating what would become of me in a far more different country. Tomorrow I will be leaving with my daughter and there's no turning back.

Below the garden, a soft flicker of movement caught my attention. When my eyes narrowed in concentration I realized it was Carter sitting on top of the bench. My heartbeat increased. He looked sad, I didn't need to be on his side to identify what he felt, melancholy seemed to surround him tonight. There was something about tonight, it seems his spirits were down.

There was something about Carter which I couldn't explain. He was an enigma, a puzzle to be solved. Everytime he looks at me there's only one person who comes to my mind, it was my daughter.

Chapter 77

The black car peacefully rolled under the hot morning sky in the middle of the highway. Soon enough we would reach our destination—the airport— which is only one hour drive away from the Crawford Mansion. I sunk deeper into the front seat, clinging to the available warmth I could take to console myself from

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my unknown fate. The thought of leaving was enough to rattle my nerves and I fidgeted on my seat, anxiety and fear eating me inside. Until now, I couldn't believe I'm leaving Cordova. God knows how long it would be before I could successfully return, perhaps it would take me a year or two to come back here.

I cuddled Faith Vienne closer to my chest and forced my attention to linger on the passing green sceneries outside the window. It would help me?divert my attention?from cowering at the last minute and drive back home. Don't want to disappoint my father, my grandmother, and my eight brothers. I was thankful I did a good job convincing them not to drive me to the airport since it would make me feel worse inside. As a result it was Carter who acted as my driver to take me to my destination. Looking at him now, it seems I made the wrong decision.

Seated on the driver's seat was the demigod who tended Clarissa's well-loved garden with care. As usual, he wore his regular uniform, a plain white t-shirt that made him look quite regal and a pair of ripped jeans I couldn't get tired of looking at especially when he looked like a fashion model within it. He has a somber expression on his handsome face. It made me wonder if someone died. His thick eyebrows seem to merge in a straight line while he drives in concentration.

His?tensed strong jaw was clenched tightly and he was gripping the steering wheel firmly enough to hinder the flow of blood from his fingers. His strange reaction gave me the impression of a man who just fought and lost a war. The

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moment he entered the car, he uttered not a single word which suddenly made me wonder if he was obliged to drive me to the airport against his will. But if he was opposed to the idea, he did not say it out loud and I am in no position to ask him the question.

I shrugged my shoulders and tore my attention from his distracting handsome features. Despite the darkness that envelops his face he managed to appear so appealing to me. It was not his physical appearance which made me drawn to him, there's something deeper and stronger than physical attraction. Love perhaps? I shuddered at the thought and quickly vanished the thought out of my mind. Love is an overstatement but I could consider it a close description.

Soon I would leave this country. Whatever?strange tender I feel towards him, it would vanish in time from his absence. But even after I told myself I would forget him still I wasn't entirely convinced I would. What I felt towards him was no fleeting fancy. It was clear that no man alive has ever made me feel so high and no amount of drug will.

The hours seem shorter than usual. So much to wish time would slow down. We arrived on the airport earlier than expected. The car pulled into a stop and he climbed out of the car to open the door for me. Slowly, I climbed out with Faith Vienne still in my arms. Carter opened passenger's seat and lifted the stroller out. "Thank you." I whispered and lowered my daughter down the stroller.

I was stretching my numbed arms when he pulled a large suitcase out. It contains my clothes and Faith Vienne's too. Papa insist that I would bring few

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clothes with me so it wouldn't be difficult for me to travel. He said that I could expand my wardrobe once I'm settled in Brittania. I couldn't agree more with the idea especially that I have a child with me. Faith Vienne's safety is my priority. Aside from the large suitcase, I also carried a small backpack with me which contains milk and baby necessities.

We are entering the airport to catch my flight when I heard the announcement on the speak: "Attention passengers on Royal Air flight 232 to Brittania."

That was my flight! I mumbled with a jolt of surprise, my gaze shifted to the large flight monitor while Carter followed behind me carrying my backpack behind his left shoulder and pulling my large suitcase on his vacant hand. My eyebrow scrunched in confusion when I saw that my flight was rescheduled.

"This is an announcement for passengers on flight 232 to Brittania. The flight has been delayed due to mechanical issues. . Our new departure time is 3:00 pm. Please be patient. Thank you."

My flight would be delayed for another four hours. I accidentally caught Carter's eye. For a fleeting moment, emotion flickered on his eyes, I wonder if it was relief I saw. but before I could fathom what it was it vanished so fast that I wonder if it even existed.

"There's a mall nearby, only walking distance away from here, I suggest we go for a walk before waiting could bore us to death." It was the first time Carter spoke. He was intently looking at me and I became self-conscious. I wondered if there's some dirt on my face.

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My eyes wander on the crowded airport, and consider that it was a brilliant idea. I have more time to spend with him. The thought nearly made me smile. I sure I would never feel bored with him as my company.

"My suitcase—shall we bring it?" My eyes shifted to the suitcase on his right hand. It would be a burden to stroll inside the mall with such a heavy baggage.

"I shall leave your large suitcase on the baggage counter Madam." He offered and I must admit it was a wise idea. I watch him walk to the counter. Heads turned as he made his way, majority of the onlookers were women throwing him curious and admiring glance. He seems not to notice the looks he was stealing. I smiled to myself while watching the scene with amusement. Carter could wear anything, even a rag, but still could manage to appear dashing.

The soft breeze ruffled his hair as we stepped outside. We walked in silence, as we do so, the crowd seem to disappear and there was only the two of us. I could continue to look at him and not feel tired all.

"I'll help you Madam." He said, and before I could object, he gently pulled the stroller to do the the task. His large hands accidentally touched mine and I flinched in response as the simple gesture burned my skin. How odd, the simple touch was enough to sent shivers down my spine. Realizing that I was still holding my breath, I let it go before I?could die of suffocation.

We entered the mall. Music from the speaker filled the air. People seem to rush all around us while we move in incredibly slow speed but he didn't seem

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to mind. Tenderness welled inside me watching him push the stroller in front. Who would have notice that he wasn't the father of the child inside the stroller. He appeared blissfully happy as if was enjoying the moment the way I did.

I allow my illusion to take over. For a short time, I would pretend he was my husband and the father of my child. But then I didn't need to pretend at all since I actually feel inside me that were a real family.

We pass some clothing boutiques, hair salons, jewelry shops, food stalls, and various stores selling their best products but we barely seem to notice any products on display. We are wrapped in our own thoughts and intently observing one another. Everything seem so right that for a moment I forgot that something was missing in my life. For the first time, I am perfectly content the way I'd never been before.

When we found ourselves overcome with hunger, we found ourselves entering a pizza parlor. Carter ordered Hawaiian pizza and two pineapple juice while I waited for him on our table. Shortly he returned with our orders in hand. We share the food in silence, no one attempted to speak, both of us are content with the situation. When Faith Vienne cried, he mived quickly to pick her inside the stroller and settled her into his arms. She stopped crying and contentedly stared at him with her wide innocent eyes. He continue to eat while holding her. Carter was only helping me, I reminded myself whike crushing any assumptions.

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We strolled on the mall once more and waited until it was time to return to the airport. When it was time to leave my tears almost fell but I bit my lips to conceal them.

"Goodbye Beatrix. Take care." He said for the first time calling me on my first name.

The memory of his smile was the only thing I have in mind as I walk away. I know that it would take me a long time to recover from my feelings for him. I must definitely admit it—I realize I was inlove with Carter, our gardener.

Chapter 78

I yearned to take her in my arms, keep her there for the rest of my life, and never let her go away. Instead, what's happening is the complete opposite. I watch her walk away with Faith Vienne in her arms. I have no choice but to just follow her with my gaze until she's out of my vision. She took half of me, there's no one could make me whole again except her. In haste to walk away from the sight that pains me, I nearly bumped on someone, the woman mumbled an apology and I simply nod my head before turning towards the exit with quick long strides.

Phoenix's sweet natural scent lingered inside the car as if she was still there. It was pure torture knowing she's never going to come back, if she could, perhaps it would take another two to four years before she could. It was a long tortuous wait and by the time I could finally see her she would probably take her newfound lover with her. God knows if by that time my employer would promote me as Butler but it still makes me someone unworthy of her.

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As the car traverse the highway, I couldn't stop thinking about what transpired between the two of us. God knows that the last four hours was the happiest moments I've experienced in all my existence. Words wouldn't be enough to describe them. The short stolen moments with her and our daughter made me realize how I wasted so much chances in my life. If I didn't mess up with our marriage she would still be mine and I don't need to keep the truth from her. But it was too late for my regrets now, nothing will change. I'm just a man who almost had everything—wasted it all—now I have nothing.

Crawford Mansion seems eerily quiet after I arrived. I could sense melancholy wherever I look. Even the garden that used to radiate with good vibes looked somber and I felt triple worse. The only person who made my stay bearable inside Alexander Crawford's property was gone. I would not see her sitting on the window anymore. I wouldn't see her strolling in the garden. I wouldn't see her inside the house. Gone was the source of my happiness. I wonder if I would be happy again now that she's gone.

It was the privacy of my cottage where I found myself dealing with the nagging emptiness. The piecing silence seem to slice me into pieces. I lifted the pillow and fumbled with the picture concealed behind the covers. I Phoenix's face in the picture and it made me smile, though my smile lacked luster and barely reached my eyes, it was genuine. The picture was taken on our the day of her wedding. It reminds me of the time when were both so inlove and plans a bright future ahead of us.

She was smiling in the picture, the kind of smile that could melt the iciest heart with its warmth. Her beautiful phoenix eyes were filled with so much emotion as she looked at me. How I missed those eyes looking so tenderly at me as if I was the only guy on earth. But the memories remains only in the photograph, I could always look back but I could never go back.

I let go a deep sigh before placing the picture back into the pillows with care as if it's a valuable gem that shouldn't be scratched. The picture was the only thing I have of her, it was the single picture I have of her which I was able to salvage before I left the Greyson Mansion. Well, I nearly forgot, aside from the picture I treasured, I also have our wedding ring with me. One day if I have the

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courage to do so, I will put back that ring to her fingers where it belongs. She was still my wife and she have all the right to wear the ring. I want to thank the lawyer who tricked me with fake divorce papers, he saved my marriage. He deserve a reward, if our path crosses again I will remember to give him bonus.

I have too much of sentiments, I warned myself. In response, I moved out of the cottage and decided to spending the next hours tending Alexander's garden. In that way it will help lessen the lonely heaviness on my chest. Out of habit, my gaze averted to the floor to ceiling glass window of the terrace, I was half expecting to see her there—seated on the long Victorian sofa and when I didn't see her shadow my already ruined mood plummeted down the ocean floor.

It was nearly four in the afternoon, the hot sunshine was still pouring from the sky while I shoveled the garden bed. Sweat flowed down my temples and back until my shirt was soaking wet. If I will just focus on my job probably it will helped me ease her off my mind. I didn't realize time slip so fast, when I finished the task, it the sun was setting from the horizon, darkness and light play tug of war in which the darkness prevails in this battle.

Life was miserable without Phoenix in it. I thought inwardly walking towards the nearest wooden bench with the shovel still in my hand. Life was indeed full of surprises, we never know what what will hits you before it's too late. You never know you love someone until you let her go. You never know the true value of a person until you go seperate ways. That's exactly what happened to me and until now I'm still paying the price. I know that even I live am extremely long life I shall not be able to oay my debts in full after all the sins I made. Perhaps I will only find the true meaning of peace until Phoenix learns to forgive me.

I have long since gave up my faith. I forget God's existence when my merciless mother abandoned me at a very young age. My life didn't improve when father took me to his home. In fact, it made my life worst. My step mother is the incarnation of devil himself, there's not a part of my body where the whip didn't burned my skin. But now, I'm willing to take a huge risk and believe the God, if he existed. I'm pleading that he would give me one last

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chance to be with my wife and daughter again.... I don't believe in miracle but now my only option is to believe in its existence.

"Greyson."

When I lifted my gaze, it was Alexander Crawford I saw. I nearly fell from the wooden bench, startled from his unexpected arrival. I didn't hear his footsteps. Perhaps I was too absorb with my thoughts or he made sure that I will not hear him approach. It wasn't so dark that his expression was still visible. His face was surprisingly calm. It made me wonder the Crawford patriarch wanted to tell me.

I rose from the bench and eyed him warily without covering the irritation on my face. "Good evening Sir." I said respectfully. He was still my employer and my secret wife's father.

"let's dive straight to the point Greyson. It would be better if you start packing. I have no use of here." Alexander Crawford spoke, without filters. The expression on his face remained menacingly calm.

I know that I would have to live the Crawford Mansion but it didn't occur to me that it's today. So much for my hopes to stay here longer and wait until Phoenix's returns. I sighed heavily. I was so damn confuse from the quick turn of events that I was left with no choice but to accept my fate. Maybe this is where my journey ends.

"What about my painting, Sir? It's important to me."

"Forget about the painting Greyson. I won't give it to you easily."

Alexander Crawford began to move away. When he was gone, I wasted no time and packed few of my clothes which Lucas Nicholas—my bestfriend was kind enough to give me. I changed into a grey tshirt and put my denim jacket on. I fumbled with my grey rubber shoes under the bed and put it on, unfortunately Lucas gave it to me too. I feel like a charity case. As if I have a choice.

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When I was finish, I slung the backpack behind my back. I'm fed up with this. I'm leaving. I have no further reason to stay anyway. To hell with the painting, I shall make another.

It seems Alexander Crawford was waiting for me. When I close the door to the cottage, he stood in the doorway.

"What's it you want?" I asked in a frosty tone that could have frozen the depths of underworld.

Alexander Crawford shrugged his shoulder before he reply. "I'm here to give your plane ticket and allowance. Congratulations you've been promoted as bodyguard, Greyson."

Chapter 79

a prisoner free

and discover the prisoner

was you.

Alexander Crawford wants nothing but revenge from the man who caused his only daughter nothing but anguish. He started to carefully plot his well-organized revenge to ruin his daughter's ex-husband so he would realize how he wronged an innocent soul. The first step is to present his daughter as the heiress of Crawford Chain of Companies and when Greyson sees his ex-wife he would receive the greatest shock of his life. Just as Alexander planned things went as smoothly as ironed clothes. The night of the party he

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saw how Greyson's jaw dropped to the floor upon the first time he laid an eye on Beatrix, he had a dumbfounded look on his face as if a sharp bolt of lightning struck him. Alexander couldn't stop grinning that night as he watched Greyson suffer in the dark corner of the room as he continued to watch his ex-wife as he slowly realized what he'd lost. Without his knowing it was just the beginning of his suffering

The painting was a bait to lure Greyson into his territory and he willingly jumped right into a treacherous trap despite the large caution sign. The day he set foot inside the Crawford Mansion, he signed his death warrant without him knowing. Alexander enjoyed watching the pained expression on Greyson's face each time he secretly watched Beatrix and Faith Vienne over a distance. He watched the indescribable pain etched on the younger man's somber face knowing he was overcome with grief by the realization all he could do was watch the two women he loved most from where he stood.

Alexander was satisfied that Greyson was painfully suffering from the remorse of losing both a wife and a daughter. And he celebrates his victory almost every night with a bottle of expensive vintage wine. He knew Greyson deserved much much worse than mental and emotional suffering and once more he found himself plotting for another form of revenge—this time he made sure it would snap Greyson's sanity—and that's sending Beatrix and Faith Vienne to Britannia where he would never see his family ever again.

He was almost successful...almost. But it seems the fates have a different plan. When he was only one step away from his ultimate revenge he realize

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while he was fulfilling his carefully organized revenge Beatrix secretly shares the same miserable fate as Greyson. True he wants to hurt her ex-husband but he didn't want his daughter to suffer. It painfully occurred to him that she was still in love with him and there's nothing he could do to alter her feelings. Her memory faded, but her love for Greyson didn't change a bit.

The situation only worsened when Alexander discovered that Greyson's lawyer was a fraud and he was still legally married to his daughter. The serendipitous news shattered his cautiously laden plan to bits. All hopes to avenge his daughter faded like a mass of smoke after being blown by the wind. For the first time, Alexander realized that vengeance would only inflict further damage to two battered hearts.

The door to the library opened. His burgeoning thoughts were cut short from the sound of the door closing followed by soft footsteps inside the terrace. It was ten in the evening, the view outside the glass window was shrouded with darkness. Few stars scattered in the sky, it could be counted with his fingers. It would rain soon, he thought eyeing pitch-black darkness on the horizon that seems to mirror his mood.

The silence hanging inside the terrace was heavy—as heavy as how he felt now that Beatrix was away. The footsteps behind him stopped in front of the white Victorian sofa. Without looking back, he knew exactly who was now sitting on the seat behind him.

"Do you think I made the right decision Mama?"

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He turned in her direction. Clarissa Crawford was gracefully seated on the long, victorian sofa as if it were her throne. Her long dainty hands were clasped on top of her knees as she appeared to be deep in her thought. She heard his question but she made no immediate response as if contemplating the question thrown at her. After a wave of long silence, she raised her head and averted her gaze to his face as if she was reading his thoughts. Few strands of silvery hair fell from her neatly done chignon then slowly cascade to her face. She slowly lifted her hands and tucked the stray hair strands behind her ears before she spoke. "You made the right decision Alex and I'm so proud of you." She whispered without taking her phoenix eyes from his face.

After Alexander saw the flickering emotions in her beautiful eyes he knew he did the right thing. For the first time since morning, he was able to let go a deep sigh filled with relief since he knew when he woke up in the morning he will feel no regrets. As he moved to pour himself another glass of vintage wine on top of the transparent crystal table and occupied the empty seat next to his mother, the last conversation he had with Greyson played on his thoughts.

"I will pay for your tuition fee Greyson in exchange for your service as my daughter's bodyguard. You will stay on the Manor she would be staying so you could perform your duties well."

Alexander didn't know what occurred to him that moment. Not only that he allowed Greyson to stay in the same house as his daughter but he also granted him a big favor—to pursue his passion for art. What an ironic way to punish his greatest enemy, he thought sarcastically as he lifted the glass to

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his lips. The warmth flowed down his throat easing a bit of his stress. He lowered the empty glass back to the glass table while wondering where did his plan for revenge goes. He suddenly realizes that he was helping the man who he should be plotting to destroy.

He was a father too. He knew exactly how heartwrenching it feels to have his daughter taken away from him. He wasn't on good terms with Greyson but for Faith Vienne's sake, Greyson has his deepest sympathy. He too couldn't bear the agony of being parted with his only daughter. Above all, Beatrix was the reason why he changed his mind and decided to abandon all ideas of revenge. He couldn't allow his daughter to grow old miserable. He will give her the liberty to choose for the man she loves without his intervention. Anyway, when Beatrix's memories returns, Greyson has to pay for his mistakes—the price would be high and I doubt if he could even afford it.

"Greyson proves to be changing Alex. He was a nice man who made a lot of regrets in the past. It was his unavoidable circumstances that turn him into a villain."

Alexander groaned, Clarissa was obviously in favor of Greyson. He didn't like it. When he lifted his gaze to her beautiful countenance, he caught the faint trace of a smile forming on her thin lips. "He made a mistake and nothing can change that." He replied eyeing her warily before he refilled his glass to indulge another sip from his wine.

"You're right and wrong at the same time, my son." His mother spoke without even looking at him and straightened the crumple on her night gown. "You're

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right that Greyson made a grave mistake in the past and he couldn't change that but you are definitely wrong for your prejudice, the man still have a future and that future could help alter his past."

When he said nothing, she gave him a victorious smile. Her wisdom silenced him. Clarissa was telling the truth and he couldn't find a thing to say to contradict her words. If he would only be honest, maybe the truth in her words is what encourage him to believe in Greyson. After all the man was a genius artist, and he couldn't allow his exceptional talent to go to waste.

"It's getting late Ma. Go and get some beauty rest."

"Sending me to bed early, my son?" She asked sweetly, a triumphant smile tugging on her lips knowing he was trying to cut her from falling into a lengthy sermon. "Well then, I must be off Alex. Goodnight." She said instead. He couldn't believe his victory as his gaze guided Clarissa's back towards the door after he bid her goodnight.

Silence hung inside the terrace when she was gone. Lightning danced into the sky as the last sign of stars faded into the pitch black horizon. Moments later the rain poured heavily. As he watch the rain falling from the sky he made a promise to himself. From now on he will never come between Greyson and Beatrix. The two had been through a lot. They deserve have one another.

Maybe one day, Beatrix will learn how to forgive Greyson in time, but for sure it would take a long while before she will.

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Chapter 80

Nobody told the fish to swim,

Nobody told the dogs to bark,

They just did. Just like me,

Nobody told me to love you,

But I did.

Two hours later, the plane safely landed at the airport. It was already dark, and Brittania wasn't looking its best. Sharp lightning danced on the pitch-black sky to temporarily tear the darkness, loud resounding thunder shook the earth. Strong wind billowed the trees nearby. The storm raging outside wasn't the warm welcome I was half expecting to receive. It must be an omen or something telling me I made the wrong decision, and coming to Brittania wasn't a great idea. I thought grimly and try to banish the thought as fast as it occurred.

I try to cheer myself up but my efforts were in vain. Well, aware that there's nothing I could do to lift my sunken spirits, not even the gloomy scenery of trees dancing to the storm's harsh rhythm could help ease the sense of foreboding eating me from inside. From the waiting area, I stood, surrounded by my bag and suitcase, my gaze surveyed the crowd for a familiar face.

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There was no sign of Madam Stella in the crowd. I assume she was still on the way. The heavy rain is what was keeping her delayed.

"Wait a little while baby, they would be here soon," I whispered to Faith Vienne's ears and tightened my hold around her. She was peacefully asleep, the journey must have tired her. I too was exhausted. I longed for a soft warm bed to rest my aching legs.

An hour passed by quickly but still, no Madam Stella is coming to fetch us. My feet ached badly from having to endure an hour of waiting while holding my daughter into my arms. I tried to put her down on her stroller a while ago so my arms could rest but Faith Vienne stirred and her eyes fluttered open and before I knew it is she succumbed into one of her unusual tearful fits. I gave up the urge to settled her down the stroller and decided to keep her in my arms and feel her warmth close to my chest. I sighed and assure myself that soon I could rest my aching legs inside the car. What I need to do for the moment is wait further.

The rain showed no sign of slowing down. Instead, the rain seems to pour heavier each minute. I checked my phone several times but there was no message. I wonder if something bad happened on the way.... hopefully not, it's must be the heavy rain delaying Stella's car.

It's becoming colder every minute. The aircon inside the airport was making it worst. I cursed myself inwardly for allowing a simple task to slip off my mind. It never occurred to me to put a jacket on before I left the? Mansion, perhaps it was the weather promising a wonderful day ahead that made me assume a

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thick layer of cloth isn't necessary. And because of that, I have to suffer the unbearable temperature which is now making me shiver.

The soft sensation on the back of my neck cut my wandering thoughts. As if on cue, the drumming sound inside my chest began, it was so loud that I wonder if the passers-by could hear it too. I could feel the weight of a gaze upon my shoulders. My eyes surveyed the crowd to search for the reason for my sudden discomfort but my eyes are either not sharp to spot what I'm looking for or I'm simply imagining things.

I look behind my back to investigate what was making me fidgety, my hawk-eye sharp eyes inspect the crowd but there was no one suspicious and there's nothing I found amiss. Perhaps, it was the cold temperature that was making me uncomfortable at all. Just as I was about to turn away, a man briskly walking in my direction caught my gaze. I was frozen to my tracks enveloped with pure disbelief. I have to blink rapidly to make sure my eyes were not playing a joke on me

Carter? I whispered weakly. My heartbeat was beyond normal now, it almost wants to burst inside my chest from excitement and anticipation. Dear Lord! It was indeed him. With eyes lit with joy, I waited for him to reach my side. The next few minutes seem to take an eternity and when he pulled into a halt closer to me, all the words I want to say erupted into bubbles.

I took a deep intake of breath when his exquisite blue eyes captured mine. The worries and fears that kept me occupied a while ago faded magically as if

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they didn't exist at all. His eyes were looking at me so tenderly that I was confused for a moment if I hadn't imagined it all.

"Beatrix." He whispered softly. I nearly closed my eyes by the magical sound of his voice. How I missed this man. We've been apart for a matter of hours and yet it feels like years. I want to throw my arms around him and tell him how bad I had missed him but before I could shamelessly say the words I bit my lower lip to suppress them.

"I'm sorry I'm late." He said in a formal tone that shattered the spell. Gone was the tenderness I thought I detect from his tone. Even the emotions glowing in his beautiful eyes were gone. His face became a mask of paper blank expression. "Alexander decided to keep me with you. Congratulations, I'm promoted as your bodyguard."

"Bodyguard! Are you kidding me?" I exclaimed in disbelief, eyes wide with shock. I nearly stomped my feet on the floor like a child about to erupt into a tantrum.

"No Madam. I'm being serious here." He replied. His face shows no sign of humor.

I shook my head from the incredulity of the situation. What was father thinking for allowing this nonsense to happen? A bodyguard is only a nuisance. I don't find a use for any at this moment.

"Why would I need a bodyguard!?" My eyebrows were scrunched with confusion as I look at him. I did my best to ignore the sting of my shattered

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illusion after I realize he followed me because he's my bodyguard and not the other way around.

"It's for your safety Madam." He answered. He was looking intently at me now, the heat from his gaze was enough to melt the arguments I had prepared. My eyes left his, a sign of my defeat. There's no use arguing, whether I like it or not, he would become a tail who will follow me everywhere.

Carter took his jacket off. He moved closer until they were barely one ruler apart. His body was unnervingly near that I have to catch a sharp intake of breath to steady myself. His sweet natural scent combined with his musky perfume permeated my nostrils. He smells so heavenly that? I could bury my face into his neck without getting tired of inhaling his scent.

When he lifted his arms around my shoulders as if to give me a hug my lips parted in surprise. A blush crept into my cheeks from the intimate gesture. Before I could understand what he intended, he draped his jacket around my shoulders to protect me from the chill and pulled away. Disappointment hit me when it was over.

"You're cold. My jacket will warm you up." He said without tearing his gaze off me. A flicker of worry crossed his eyes.

"T-thank you," I mumbled and looked away. If I continue to look at the depths of his eyes, I fear that I would lose my way. I offered him a thankful smile while savoring the warmth of his jacket around my shoulders.

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Carter was right, I needed the jacket. Now that I have his jacket, I no longer feel the cold. In truth, I feel comfort from it.

"Allow me to carry Faith Vienne. You must be tired from having to carry her for hours." He offered. I didn't protest when Carter took my daughter into his arms. I was half expecting her to wake up and succumb to tears but I was surprised when she didn't even protest. Instead, she settled into his arms and sighed contently.

I breathed in relief when I was finally able to stretch my numbed arms. I realize how thankful I am for the helping hand. I still have my arms outstretched forward when my gaze averted to Carter. I was about to ask him how he manages to book a plane ticket on such short notice when I was confronted by a delighted glimmer upon his eyes. I was rendered speechless from the sight of his handsome face overcome with admiration.

I could look at him forever without tiring.

The sound of my phone ringing took my attention. I groaned as I fumbled with the phone from inside the pocket of my pants.

"Excuse me.?" I managed to steal a glance from his face before I pressed the answer button.

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