

Husband With Benefits

chapter 101-110

chapter 101

As Demetri made his way towards the small gathering of his brothers and his grandfather, Elijah Frost quickly excused himself without glancing at his wayward grandson and went on to chat animatedly with the many fawning guests.

Seb and Gabe exchanged glances as they observed their brother approaching. With a grimace, Seb muttered a quick wish of luck to Gabe before making a swift escape. Picking up two glasses of whisky from a passing waiter, Gabe handed one to Demetri before the two of them moved to a small anteroom at the back.

The low buzz from the celebration outside could be heard in the silent room as the two brothers stared at each other. While Demetri looked at his brother as he leaned against the wall casually, Gabe had nothing to say as well, looking away.

"Congratulations," Demetri uttered the words that were right for the occasion but somehow sounded more like a question than a wish.

Gabe forced a smile and looked at his drink, unable to look at his brother as he muttered, "Thanks."

Demetri arched an eyebrow at this, " You sound thrilled."

Gabe hesitated, his eyes betraying a complexity of emotions. "It's complicated, Demon. I mean, I like Arabelle, you know that. But this whole situation is just... overwhelming."

Demetri nodded with understanding as he took a sip of his own drink, " Then why did you offer yourself as a replacement groom?"

Gabe winced at the blunt question. Taking out his phone, he showed the message that he had received from their grandfather's assistant. *"Arabelle's future is now in your hands. The engagement is about to be announced as for the groom... no one knows."*

"I had no idea that grandfather would pull such a move and announce an engagement for Arabelle. And that foolish girl was about to walk towards you. I can't imagine the mess it would have created."

"But it wasn't your mess to clean up." Demetri pointed out.

Gabe looked conflicted, "I know, Demon. It's just that... When I stepped forward, I thought that Arabelle would refuse and even laugh off the engagement. But instead she... I suddenly have hope. I want to use this chance to turn this engagement will turn real soon. I like Arabelle, I've never hidden this, and being with her would make me happy. But it's hard to accept that she's in love... with you. I know that you do not reciprocate her feelings... but seeing her like this hurts me."

Demetri sighed, "Well, you can't control her feelings, and you can't force her to choose. It's her decision. But you owe it to yourself to be truthful. All this can blow up in your face and hurt you."

After a moment of silence, Gabe nodded, "You're right, Demon. But it's a risk I have to accept. Are you going to tell me not to."

"No. I have no right. I can only advice that you do not let this matter linger too long."

Gabe agreed ruefully, before giving him a smile, "I'm just glad that you are supporting me in this. Demon, I've decided. This is the last time I am going to pursue this. If, after this, I am still unable to make her fall for me, then I will give up. Whether this engagement goes ahead or not, I've decided it's up to Arabelle now. I can't let my own desires cloud my judgement anymore."

Demetri narrowed his eyes and looked at Gabe carefully before patting him on the back, "Just remember that whatever happens, we are together. And in the future, do not put her feelings above yours. You are both important."

Gabe nodded gratefully before leaving. However, as the younger man left, Demetri's eyes hardened. He had done everything he could to keep Arabelle out of the family and yet, she had found a way in. This time, he accepted that he could not protect Gabe anymore. He could only hope that Gabe would be able to survive this.

Quickly, he dialed a number, "Keep an eye on Gabe. Let his security double up and he is to be shadowed every moment. Also, I need you to pull out a few juvenile records from Country B...The records are sealed. Be careful to not alert the authorities."

Downing the rest of his drink, he stepped out of the small room, ready to leave the celebration, done for the night.

However, as he stepped outside, looking for Nora as he did, he did not expect that he would fail to find her. His eyes quickly scanned the surroundings and he noticed that his grandfather was also missing...This time, his eyes narrowed to pinpoints. He'd already overlooked Elijah Frost's meeting with Nora at The Cafe, knowing that she could handle it. But the old man needed to be shown that he could no longer control him...

Quickly he changed his path and marched towards the old man's office. But he'd barely reached the door, when the butler stepped in his way, "Master Demetri, I must insist that

you do not enter the office. Your grandfather is in an important meeting, and no interruptions are allowed."

Demetri's eyes narrowed, and he shot back, "Where's Nora? Why has he brought her here? Bring her to me right now."

The butler's gaze remained unyielding. "I assure you, Master Demetri, Mrs. Frost is safe. Your grandfather will inform you when the time is right."

Just when he would have pushed the man aside, the butler lowered his voice and uttered, "Young master. There is no need to escalate matters... yet."

As the situation threatened to escalate, the office door creaked open, and Nora emerged. Her expression was strained, and she glanced at Demetri with a mix of disappointment and frustration.

Demetri's jaw tightened, and as he would have questioned her, she subtly shook her head. As he reluctantly backed away, he cast a lingering glance into the office. His grandfather wore a satisfied smile, a sight that fueled Demetri's suspicion even further.

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By the time Gabe approached her, Nora had already danced with the three other Frost brothers, marvelling at their dance skills as well as their wit. From teasing Ian to being swung around the dancefloor by the skillful Seb to chatting easily with Lucien, Nora decided that the Frost Brothers were a force to be reckoned with.

As she was finally passed onto Gabe, she could not help but raise her sparkling eyes to him, "Ah... the man of the hour! Congratulations."

Gabe searched her eyes slowly. He did not know Nora William well enough but he needed to understand her stance on this, "Are you okay with this? You do know that Arabelle loves Demon..."

Nora smiled up at him and cocked her head, "What if I wasn't? What would you do? Would you break off the engagement?"

Gabriel was shocked at the counter-question and his steps faltered. He'd not expected that. And he realized... he had no answer to that as well. But he pondered it quickly as he said, "I don't know. I guess, the maximum I can do is try to keep her away from you. But no, I would not have broken off the engagement."

Nora nodded, seemingly satisfied with her response. However, curiosity lingered in his eyes. "Fair enough," he said. "But I'm curious, why do you like Arabelle? What draws you to her?"

Gabe paused thoughtfully before he thought back to the memory that had long lingered in his heart, "It was about the time we were fifteen and at a party. It was a common classmate of ours who had organized a party since his parents were not home. So, you can imagine. Leave a bunch of teenagers with the doors of your booze unlocked and they can wreak havoc. Something like this was happening at the time as well when I arrived."

One of our classmates had drunk too much and she fell into the lake. Everyone seemed to freeze out of horror as she tried struggled to come out. The lake was known to be a home to alligators, and everyone had only gone down to goof around. But Arabelle reacted quickly. She jumped into the pool without hesitation to save the girl. She risked her own life to save her. And somehow that bravery and courage stayed with me. I would have pursued her since then but her parents moved away a few months later, while all of us were carted off to boarding schools. By the time I returned, she was already head over heels for Demetri and their engagement seemed to be cast in stone."

As they continued to dance, the conversation was interrupted by another man who cut in. Gabe excused himself, leaving Nora standing alone on the dance floor. shrugging her shoulders, Nora quickly walked towards the bar, ready for a glass of water. She was parched!

However, she'd barely taken a few steps when a man in a well-tailored suit stepped into her path, "Miss Nora, if you would be so kind, Mr. Elijah Frost requests your presence in his study."

Nora was intrigued. After their previous meeting, she had not expected that the old man would have anything else to say to her.

The atmosphere was indeed very tense when Nora entered the study. The butler closed the door behind her with a gentle thud and Nora could not help but imagine if she had somehow entered the guillotines.

The old man, seated at the far end of the imposing antique table, regarded her with a disdainful look that did not escape her notice. She sat down cautiously, feeling the weight of his animosity.

Nora looked around the room with interest before primly folding her hands in her lap and waiting for him to speak whatever was on his mind. The old man, however, maintained his gaze on her, his eyes piercing through the silence until she could not endure it anymore, "Is there something on my face?"

A dry chuckle escaped his lips. "No, nothing on your face. I'm just marveling at the audacity you have to think you belong here."

Nora's eyebrows furrowed, and she retorted, "And why wouldn't I belong here? I was invited by your precious grandson."

The old man leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "Invited, yes. But acceptance is a different matter altogether. You might have fooled my grandson with that pretty face of yours, but you won't fool me."

Nora could only shake her head, "Are you going to offer some more money or have you come up with some new threats."

The old man smiled craftily as he gestured towards a picture on the table, his fingers resting on it possessively, "You think you've ensnared my grandson, don't you? You believe your beauty gives you control. Well, take a good look and see what he's really after."

For the first time, Nora felt uneasy and asked, "What are you talking about?"

He pushed the picture forward, taunting her to inspect the frozen moment captured in the photograph. Nora looked at the picture that was face down on the table but made no move to pick it up, "Mr. Frost. I do not understand something. You have no right to interfere in our relationship. If Demetri has feelings for me, it's none of your business and as a loving grandfather you should be happy for him. Why then are you trying to harm this relationship?"

The old man laughed, a cold, bitter sound. "Feelings? Don't be naïve. Look at the picture and you can see the truth."

Unable to avoid it anymore, Nora picked it up and turned it over while her eyes widened in surprise at the image. She looked at the image closely, trying to come up with an explanation but all she felt was that the world seemed to have come to a stop. How could this be...

The old man's voice dripped with hostility and smugness as he continued, "You believe he's in love with you? Look closer. This is the love of his life..."

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Chapter 102: Widower

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Chapter 102: Widower

"This is not good for her, Uncle Elijah. This might ruin everything that Arabelle has achieved in the past." A worried voice spoke into the phone.

Elijah Frost sighed and rubbed his forehead. " Do you think I do not understand that? But I have tried everything to make Demetri comply. The only thing left to do is to put him at gunpoint and force him to marry her. And even then I am doubtful he would have been willing."

There was silence on the other end of the phone while the woman came to terms with this statement. Eventually, she exhaled sharply and commented, " Can he not let go of the past? She has already paid for her sins."

"You and I both know what kind of a person Demetri is, Serena. I already warned you about it when you broached the topic, that it would be difficult to handle Demetri. If it had been any other boys, I could still have given you assurance, but Demetri is too intransigent."

"Uncle Eli, maybe I can talk to him? He has always treated me like an elder aunt and maybe he would be willing to listen to me..."

Elijah sighed and shook his head, " It is too late now Serena. Demetri has already registered his marriage."

Serena Winthrop inhaled sharply as she heard this and questioned, " What are you talking about? Who did he marry and when? There is no news among the people here? Who is she?"

Elijah Frost sighed once again as he explained his grandson's cunning play. "On the surface, he kept refusing every time I broached the topic but did not do anything to arouse suspicion that he would not marry her. I wanted to settle everything carefully so that Demetri would not hold it against Arabelle, but I did not expect that he would be a step ahead and have already registered a marriage. Of course, there is no talk. He has been guarding the secret. The girl he has married is also a nobody! And she is almost a minor! I don't even know what he was thinking!"

Serena Winthrop frowned as she heard this. It seems they had underestimated Demetri and his averseness to Arabelle if he was willing to go to such lengths.

Just then, Elijah Frost continued, "But don't worry. I have already started taking measures to get rid of that woman. She has been pretending that she married Demetri for money but the girl is in love with him. She will definitely give him up after the blow I have dealt her tonight when she discovers the real reason Demetri has married her."

Serena remained quiet. She was already planning to reach back and help settle things.

"Uncle Eli, I've been trying to get in touch with Arabelle, she won't be in her rational mind at the moment...I'm worried about her. What if she does something irrational."

"She is with Gabe at the moment. I have also spoken to her. He will take care of her. She has already been patient this long, a little longer and then she can marry Demetri."

This time Serena was not so sure. Knowing her daughter, Arabelle would never be able to accept the fact that she had to pretend to be engaged to Gabe while waiting for Demetri. There were things about Arabelle that Uncle Elijah was unaware of. If her daughter was quiet for now, then this meant something was brewing in her mind. "Uncle Eli, why did you announce her marriage to Gabe? Even if Demetri had been parading his wife there at the party, there was no reason for Arabelle to be implicated..."

"To avoid making her a laughingstock! There were already rumours about her possible engagement into the Frost family. Everyone had assumed that it would be Demetri she would be engaged to! At a time like this, with Demetri parading his young wife, even though no one would have said anything to our face, there would have been snide remarks about Arabelle!"

"But why Gabe? It could have been Ian or Seb. You know Gabe is..." Serena tapered off, wondering how she was to say this without offending the old man."

"I know exactly what Gabe is Serena! And it is because of his special identity, I know how to make him back away when the time comes! Also, Serena, whether it is Ian, Seb or Gabe, they are not foolish. They know that their older brother does not like Arabelle. Ian or Seb would never have accepted the match. It is only Gabe who is blindly in love with Arabelle that he is willing to risk everything!"

"Uncle Eli, I know you mean well. But I am still worried... I am going to try and come back as soon as possible, I hope until then, we are able to resolve the matter. I only want my Arabelle to be happy and free of the shadow of her past. And if her happiness is Demetri then she will have him. You might not be able to force Demetri at gunpoint, but I can."

Elijah sighed at that. He knew the girl well enough to understand that Serena was not speaking empty words. He wanted to protest, remind her that there was a difference in right and wrong, but he already understood it was useless. If only his friend had been here to guide his daughter, Elijah would not have to close his eyes and pretend to be blind to all the wrongs that Serena committed in the name of searching for happiness.

She spoke about Arabelle but hadn't that girl inherited her mother's insanity? He only wished Demetri would understand that they were indebted to the Winthrops and that the only way to repay that blood debt was for him to accept Arabelle.

"Maybe Arabelle will fall for Gabe... there is also the matter of Demetri. We will need to be patient, Serena. It would take time for Demetri to divorce the girl..."

"Uncle Eli, if my Arabelle does fall for Gabe, I will overlook everything. But if she doesn't then Gabe will step out of the picture. As for Demetri... he does not need to get a divorce. He'll be a widower by then..."

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The old man's voice dripped with hostility and smugness as he continued, "You believe he's in love with you? Look closer. This is the love of his life..."

Nora's jaw tightened as she saw the picture in front of her and she looked at the old man even as her eyes turned red, feeling the sting of the old man's words.

"I don't understand why you're showing me this. What's your game?" Nora spoke slowly.

The old man leaned back, a sinister grin playing on his lips. "Game? Oh, my dear, no game. I just want you to see the truth. My grandson is infatuated with your appearance, nothing more. You're a passing fancy, and I won't let you delude yourself into thinking otherwise."

Nora looked down at the picture again, feeling as if many of her previous questions had been finally answered. However, she still found the reality difficult to accept. The couple in the picture looked much in love.

From the looks of it, Demetri must have been in her early twenties when this picture was taken. Even though his facial structure was the same and he looked as handsome as he was now, the expressions were vastly different.

The boy in the picture had his arms around a woman as they sat in what seemed to be a staircase. They were sitting cheek to cheek as they grinned at the camera. Demetri Frost would still dress casually at home however, Nora had never seen him with that smile and mussed-up hair. It made her heart ache as she wondered what had happened to this man for him to turn out as he had today. His smooth face would have looked good with a few laugh lines.

However, the answer to that question was right in front of her as well. The girl in the picture looked to be around her age. But that wasn't what shocked her. The shocker was that the girl was her! Demetri Frost's previous girlfriend looked exactly like his current wife! They could have passed off for the same person! If this had been a sci-fi drama, one would think that Nora had been frozen for a few years so that she had not aged while Demetri had.

Needing time to assimilate things and understand her own feelings at this description, Nora stood up decisively. However, she reminded herself that whatever she felt, she could not let the old man spoil their plans. Instead of giving him the pleasure of seeing how affected she was by this, she gave the man a cold smile and thanked him politely, "Thank you for bringing this to my notice. Now I know what obstacles I face. You have helped me greatly, Mr. Frost."

As she walked out of the large room, her eyes met Demetri's who stood waiting outside the door. Not wanting him to see the conflict in her eyes, she gave him a quick look before walking away.

The drive back to the house was quite different from when they returned. While, going the two people had been at ease and yet as they returned, each was lost in his own thought.

Demetri wished to know what it was that his grandfather had told Nora this time, while Nora was trying to think of a way to compose her thoughts.

As an outsider, she understood Elijah Frost's intentions. He's already tried to threaten and bribe her to leave Demetri but had failed. So his next logical conclusion was that she must be in love with Demetri. To discourage her and attack her self-confidence, he had purposely brought out the picture and showed it to her. It was to let her know that even if Demetri treated her well, it wasn't because she was the love of his life but because she looked like her. Exactly like her.

She had always recognized that Demetri had a past and had probably been hurt as well. No one would otherwise go to such lengths to remain single. So, seeing a picture would not have affected her. But it did.

How could there be someone who looked totally like her? They even had the same hair colour and style. She thought back to the warning that she had received from Demetri when he had said that his grandfather would go to great lengths to break them apart and was suspicious. Could it be that the picture was photoshopped.

However, as soon as the thought came, she disregarded it. The matter of the picture could be cleared by simply showing it to Demetri so of course Elijah Frost did not need to use such underhanded methods.

She thought back to Grandpa William's words. She'd questioned Grandpa William repeatedly about his assurance that Demetri would marry her before the man had even arrived at the office. And then later, when he had really agreed, she had continuously wondered about his reasons. But Grandpa William had simply assured her that Demetri was also in need of a wife as much as she needed a husband.

But now, the truth was clear. Grandpa William must have been aware of the resemblance. It was what gave him the confidence to ask Demetri to marry her. He had been aware that Demetri would take one look at her face and all his protective instincts would come to the surface.

Gathering her courage, she sent a look to Demetri whose hands were clenched on the wheel, even as he said nothing. Did it not hurt him to look at her every day and think back to his painful past. How was he able to treat her well when she would be a reminder of everything he had lost.

Clenching and unclenching her fingers, she finally gathered the courage to question him, "Demetri, can you tell me something about yourself? Something about your past?"

Demetri sent a sharp look her way but quickly turned back his eyes to the road, "Why the sudden interest in my past? Did my grandfather had something to say about it?"

"Mm... I know I don't have a right to ask you and I promise that I am not trying to interfere or intrude but I just came across something disturbing..."

"I see." Without a word, Demetri pulled up his cell phone and passed it to Nora.

It was the same picture that she had seen in the old man's office, and she could not help but look at him in confusion, "The old man showed this picture to you?"

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Nora looked down at the phone in her hand and then back at Demetri.

"Uh... yes." Nora looked down at the picture again and cleared her throat awkwardly before finding her words, "I... didn't know..."

Demetri threw another look at her and she could almost hear him speak, "Of course, you wouldn't..."

Since he had given her the look and she had assumed what it meant, Nora looked down at her fingers and asked him directly, the question that had been bothering her, "Did you agree to marry me because I look like her?"

This time there was a pause and Nora could only wait in anticipation. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Demetri gave a single word, "Yes."

She wasn't sure how to process the information; it felt like the ground beneath her had shifted.

"Yes?" she echoed, her voice barely more than a whisper. The word hung in the air, heavy with implications. Nora tried to meet Demetri's eyes, but he seemed to be avoiding her gaze, staring off into the distance.

In a small voice, she questioned him, "Do you still love her?"

This time the answer came quicker, "No."

"Are you sure?", she asked quietly.

"Yes, Nora. I am very sure. I'm not in love with her." Demetri spoke quickly.

However, this time she had trouble believing him and countered, "It doesn't look like it if you are still carrying around her picture in your phone. Also, it quite puzzles me why would you choose someone who looks exactly like your ex to get into a fake marriage. I mean, did you feel this was a second chance?"

"It wasn't deliberate. I needed a wife and William Doughby presented you. I thought it would be easier to convince my grandfather once he looked at you. And I do not believe in second chances."

"I see," Nora whispered softly. However, it was clear that she did not. She had no idea why she felt uncomfortable at the thought of bearing the same face as his ex. She knew of course that this man rarely lied but she had a feeling that he was hiding something if not outright lying.

Demetri sighed with impatience and spoke, "Nora, an archer's ability doesn't change with the circumstances, but it is the circumstances that change. When an archer is playing for fun, they won't be under pressure but if they were playing for a win, then different factors would come in. Telling you about her in advance would have done more harm than good. It doesn't matter how good an actor you are. Some things depend on the audience."

Nora was quiet as she heard this, understanding his reason for not making her aware of this. And she also accepted that what he said was true. Elijah Frost was a powerful man. It would have been easy for him to suspect her reaction. In fact, the only reason

he had not tried to expose them until now could possibly be that he was shocked because of her looks.

"Do you think of her when you... when we..."

A loud screech broke through the air and Nora was thrown forward against the seat belt as Demetri quickly stepped on the brake.

He stared at her sharply for a moment before calling her name, "Nora."

"Hmm?"

"Nora, look at me."

This time, she did not answer, continuing to look down at her hands which were clenched in her lap.

He did not urge her to look at him again. Instead, Demetri caught her chin between his fingers tilted her face upwards and facing him.

Her moist eyes met his and she looked up at him. Moistening her dry lips, Nora tried to speak up, but her words were caught in her throat. "I..."

He, however, did not give her a chance to speak as he let go of his own seat belt and leaned over, catching her lips with his. He pushed her back into the seat as he kissed at first. His insistent mouth parted her shaking lips as her hand came to his shoulder clinging to him.

Unable to stop herself, she kissed him back, as every question she had was pushed to the back of her mind. However, an insistent question continued to haunt her, Did he sleep with her because she looked like that girl...

She had no illusions of some grand love. But she did not want to be used as a substitute. Lost in her thoughts, she withdrew from the kiss absently. As if to punish her for her distraction and get back into the kiss, Demetri slightly pinched her chin and deepened the kiss.

It was a long while later that he finally broke the kiss. Nora looked up at him with hazy eyes while he continued to lean over her seat as he whispered her name, "Nora..."

She blinked at him with wide eyes, and he held her gaze as he spoke slowly, "Nora. Nora."

"Hmm?"

"I know exactly whom I am kissing and who I am sleeping with. There is no doubt in my mind that you are not her. The person I want to kiss in this moment is you. The one whose clothes I want to tear in this car and possess is Nora William. My present wife. To me, you are you and she was she. You cannot be her."

"Oh..." Nora could only stare at him as her body and mind reacted to his words slowly absorbing her words.

As the car started to move again, Demetri threw her a glance and spoke softly once more, "Do you find it difficult to believe still?"

Nora shook her head at his question, his words echoing in her head like a drum beat. Once again, she was lost in thought as she tried to sift her feelings. Should she be happy that he did not think of someone else when he was with her? After all, it was a matter of her self respect...

But why then did her heart hurt when she heard him say that she could never be the woman that he had once loved?

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Arabelle's heels clicked with a pronounced rhythm on the marble floor, her unspoken anger clear in it. Gabe, on the other hand, walked calmly beside her, showing no sign of agitation or anger.

The hotel room door swung open, revealing a room adorned with rose petals, champagne on ice, and a card that read, "Congratulations on your engagement!" Arabelle's anger, suppressed during the ceremony, now bubbled to the surface.

"This is ridiculous!" she spat, her voice sharp. She swept her hand across the table, sending champagne flutes and petals flying. The crash echoed in the room. However, it was not enough to satisfy her. Another glass flew past his face, crashing against the wall with a loud sound.

Grabbing the ice bucket from the table, she hurled it towards the floor, letting out a guttural scream. Gabe, maintaining his calm demeanor, watched as the room transformed into a battlefield of broken fragments.

"Arabelle, please," Gabe urged, attempting to approach her cautiously. She spun around, her eyes ablaze with a fiery intensity that made him doubt if she could even hear him.

"Don't 'please' me, Gabe! None of this makes any sense!" She reached for a vase of flowers, sending it crashing to the floor. Petals scattered like a surreal, fleeting storm.

Gabe winced at the destruction but held back from intervening. Arabelle needed an outlet for her pent-up emotions, and the inanimate objects in the room bore the brunt of her turmoil.

She stormed towards the bed, tearing at the pristine white sheets. The fabric gave way under the force of her frustration, and she flung a pillow across the room.

He attempted to call out to her once again but she simply screamed and sent a small lamp flying his way. Thankfully Gabe stepped aside in time so that the lamp only nicked his face before falling with another loud crash.

Gabe felt the slight sting of the cut but his entire being was focused on calming Arabelle. This small hurt did not matter when she had been dealt two strong blows in a single evening.

First, she had to endure seeing Demetri with another woman throughout the evening. And then her engagement was announced to him without her consent. It was a wonder she had not stormed out of the celebration when Grandfather pulled that trick.

Finally, the storm seemed to have calmed down and Gabe took a chance, carefully stepping over the fragments to stand close to her. He sighed and choosing his words carefully spoke, "Arabelle, I know this is overwhelming, but breaking things won't change our situation. We need to figure out how to handle this together."

Arabelle, her chest heaving with exertion, shot him an incredulous look. "Handle this together? Why would I need to handle it with you who is actually responsible for ruining everything? I would have rather stood on that stage and been humiliated than become engaged to you!"

Another wave of anger surged through her, and she swiped a stack of papers off the table.

Gabe, sensing the futility of trying to stop her, retreated a few steps. "I get it, Arabelle. It's unfair to you that you have to pretend an engagement... to me. However, please think well, did you really want to be humiliated like that? You are a prideful woman. Could you have been able to accept the people making fun of you or looking down on you?"

"Ha! You are trying to tell me that you saved me from ruin? Do you want me to be thankful to you? That will happen when hell freezes over! Because I will never be grateful to you, do you understand?"

"I am not asking you to be grateful. I understand that you do not want to marry me. We can break off the engagement."

"Of course, we are going to break up the engagement! As if I would want to be with you! In fact, announce it now that the engagement stands cancelled."

"That would be sheer stupidity. If we announce this now, it would only instigate people more to speak ill of you. Let's pretend for a while, pacify everyone, and when the time is right, we'll end this engagement. You can simply dump me in front of the entire world."

"Fine." A bitter smile played on her lips as she agreed to his proposal and sank onto the bed, physically and mentally exhausted.

As she lay there with her eyes closed, Gabriel tucked her into the bed and slowly cleared up the mess himself, careful not to disturb her. And finally, when all the debris had been cleared, the man stepped out of the room, ready to treat the small cuts and scratches on his face and his hands.

However, he felt no pain as he thought that he had finally accomplished the mission. She had agreed to his proposal. Unknown to him, Arabelle Winthrop's mind was brewing something so sinister that he could not have imagined.

As Arabelle lay staring up at the ceiling, her hands clenched into fists, her mind only had one loop ongoing in her mind. Demetri had chosen that woman. She needed to get rid of that woman. She needed to get rid of her like the one she had gotten rid of the other woman. No, she needed to be more careful about how she went about this.

Already her mind had given her the answer. She was going to use this engagement with Gabe to handle Nora Williams. Tomorrow, the woman will know what it means to take something that belonged to Arabelle. But it won't be easy on her. She was going to be slowly tortured. She will make sure that the woman ends up in a mental asylum and remembers what she is being punished for... and then when Demetri falls to his knees and apologizes to her, she would help Nora have a peaceful end...

And then she would teach Gabe a lesson. He really did have the audacity to think that he could be with her. How dare he try to link his dirty name with hers?

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Sara Anderson was walking with her head down as she made her way towards the library from her dormitory. The usually beautiful girl looked haggard and even

introverted, unlike the Sara of the past who loved to flaunt her beauty and craved attention. Distracted with thoughts of her studies, she failed to notice the woman who had come to stop in front of her.

She tightened the coat around her body, to ward off the chill of the wind and rubbed her hands together before she almost walked into the woman blocking her way.

Apologizing, she tried to sidestep the person, only for the person to block her path. Frowning, she looked up at the person, only to step back as she finally realized who it was.

Her hands tightened around the strap of her bag and she gave her mother a strained smile, "Mom! How are you here? What are you doing here on this cold day."

Lara smiled down at her favorite daughter and leaned forward, kissing her daughter's cheek as she said, "Hey sweetheart. You've been putting off coming to see me since you moved in here. You are only a freshman and already so busy! So I thought, I'll come see you."

Sara forced a polite smile, though her eyes revealed a mixture of discomfort and anxiety. "Yeah, Mom, I've been swamped with exams and assignments. You know how it is," she replied, trying to keep her tone light.

Lara's smile didn't waver as she continued to scrutinize her daughter. "I also hope you haven't been distracted with other matters lately..."

Lara's gaze lingered on Sara for a moment.

"Good girl," she finally said, her smile widening. "I was thinking we could spend some time together this weekend. You know, catch up. It's been too long."

Sara's heart sank at the prospect of spending an entire weekend under her mother's watchful eye. She hesitated before responding, "I have a big test coming up next week, Mom. I really need to focus on my studies. Maybe next time?"

"You can spare a day for your mother, Sara. I want to talk to you about why you have been talking to the Police for Nora's matter. So, be at home this weekend."

"Mom! I am not talking about Nora. I am fighting for a good person who apparently committed suicide. I have seen for myself how good Max was. I can understand that he was dependent on his medicines for maintaining his sanity but he did not deserve to be used as a tool against Nora."

"And how are you sure that this person was used as a tool? And who do you think the police is going to suspect when they realize that I am someone who is angry at her?" Lara hissed. "Are you trying to go against me and implicate me?"

"You can't keep doing this, Mom!" she shouted, her voice trembling with a mix of anger and desperation as she felt Lara's fingers sinking into her skin, her fingernails biting at her. This is what she had subjected to Nora as well and now that she was going against Lara Anderson, she knew that this would be a common occurrence for as well. But she would not be forbearing like Nora and suffer for years!

Pushing aside her mother she snapped back, "What are you scared of? Did you really use Max and abused him to get back at Nora? Is that why you are worried?"

Of course Sara had expected that. As a child, she had always followed Nora around which had incurred her mother's wrath. Slowly she had come to understand that to avoid her mother's scolding, she just had to behave badly with Nora and cause her to hurt. At a young age, when all mothers tried to inculcate kindness and morals in their children, Lara Anderson had taught her to hurt Nora and manipulate her.

She had never understood her mother's hatred for her sister but only after her marriage to Antonio had she realized that her mother did not just hate her. Lara Anderson treated Nora as a mortal enemy.

After coming to the university, away from her mother's influence, she had slowly realized that Nora was not a bad person. There was too much in their past for her to think that they could be sisters or even friends. But she knew one thing. She would rather be a stranger to Nora than be her enemy. And the only way to do that was to maintain a suitable distance from her mother.

But her mother had somehow found a way to contact someone in her dormitory. She was very sure that her mother was somehow involved in the incident with Max. What she did not understand was how.

Lara's expression was cold and unforgiving, her eyes narrow slits of anger. "You think you can just walk away from me, Sara?" she hissed. "I brought you into this world, and I can make your life a living hell if you cross me. You don't want to help me, then so be it. I have doted on you for years so I will even overlook this. But if you step into my path and try to protect Nora, then don't blame me for treating you like the enemy! And before you try to stand on high ground, let me remind you of something, I pay for your tuitions. Unlike your new best friend Nora, you do not have a trust fund to stand on. Which means that I only have to pull back my sponsorship and you'll come back crawling, begging for my mercy."

Sara's eyes flashed with a mix of defiance and pain. "I won't, Mom."

Lara gave a small smile to her daughter before patting her cheek lovingly, "Oh you will sweetheart. But don't worry. Your mother can be a little lenient with you. After all you have always been a good girl. This time, I won't hold your little rebellion against you. But next time...be good."

As Sara stood there, Lara quickly turned back to her car and drove away. Sara breathed a sigh of relief as she watched her mother leave and quickly turned away to move to the library when her eyes met Nora's.

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Sara's eyes met Nora's indifferent ones and her heart clenched. She had no idea how long Nora had witnessed the confrontation, but seeing her now was like a slap to the face. As children, if Nora had even seen her being hurt, she would have charged forward to save her or avenge her.

Sara gave a trembling smile to Nora and turned away quickly. As she did, she felt regret wash over her. The confrontation had left her shaken. She had treated Nora so poorly in the past, driven by her mother's influence and the desire to avoid her wrath. Now, faced with the consequences of her actions, she couldn't help but feel remorseful.

Her shoulders sagged, and she walked blindly towards the library, lost in memories of her childhood.

She remembered how close she and Nora had once been, how her sister had always been there to comfort her when she was sad or scared. She had driven Nora away, and she knew that she could not turn back the past.

Suddenly, her vision blurred, and she felt lightheaded. She stopped as darkness spread in front of her eyes, and she felt herself losing consciousness.

Just as she thought she might fall, an arm reached out and steadied her, making herself lean against body. Startled, she looked up to find Nora by her side.

Nora's concern was evident in her eyes as she held onto Sara's arm. "Are you okay?" she asked, her voice filled with genuine worry.

Sara managed a weak nod, her voice shaky. "Yeah, I think so. Just... a lot on my mind."

Nora nodded and stepped away, though she kept a gentle grip on Sara's elbow, "It's cold out here. Let me buy you some coffee."

Sara hesitated for a moment but then nodded in agreement. Quietly they made their way to the university's canteen and found a corner to sit. Nora ordered two coffees and soon the sisters were sitting next to each other as they sipped their coffee in awkward silence, the tension between them palpable.

Sara was acutely aware of the awkwardness of the situation. She knew she needed to make amends for her past behavior, but finding the right words was challenging. Finally, she cleared her throat and spoke softly, "Nora, I... I need to apologize."

Nora raised an eyebrow, her expression guarded. "Apologize? For what?"

Sara took a deep breath, her gaze fixed on her coffee cup. "For everything, really. I was terrible to you, and I let Mom's influence drive a wedge between us. I know I have already explained everything and my reasons for it. But the reasons just do not make my actions valid. But, I'm so sorry for hurting you, Nora. I regret it more than you can imagine."

Nora stared at Sara for a moment, her face unreadable, before she sighed, "Sara, what do you expect from me?"

Sara looked up at the question in confusion, unsure what Nora meant.

Seeing her perplexed look, Nora closed her eyes for a moment before saying indifferently, "If you are expecting forgiveness, then I have none to give. Since you regret it so much, you can learn to live with it and carry the burden. I have moved on. I know you think that I helped you just now because I am concerned about you. But this help was only to return the favour you did to me for warning me about the stalker. We are even now. Next time, we will not be acknowledging each other at all."

Sara's heart sank at Nora's response. She had hoped for forgiveness, but she understood that she might not deserve it. "I understand, Nora. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am."

Nora nodded and stood up, her tone final. "Thank you for your honesty, Sara. I hope you find the peace you're looking for. Goodbye."

As Nora walked away, tears slipped from her eyes and she wiped at them hurriedly. She had done the right thing. She was not foolish enough to think that Sara had changed. The girl was a master manipulator, and she had no idea what game she was playing just now. But Nora knew she wanted to part in it. To Nora, she had no family in this world anymore.

As she walked down the path, her mind in turmoil, she looked down as her phone started to ring. Raising her eyebrows, she answered the call and whispered quickly, "Hello?"

The man who could not speak proper sentences questioned her with a word, "Where?"

"I've just left the university canteen and am at the south gate. I'll be going home now."

"I am waiting at the Southern gate."

A sudden shout pierced the air, yanking Nora's attention away from her phone. She turned to find Sara sprinting toward her, a look of urgency etched on her face. Perplexed, Nora's brows furrowed, but before she could utter a word, Sara shouted, "Nora, look behind you! Run!"

Confused and alarmed, Nora swivelled around to face the source of the urgency. Her eyes widened in terror as a massive, ferocious-looking dog, resembling a Tibetan Mastiff, charged toward her with unrestrained intensity. Its fur bristled, and sharp teeth were bared, as it looked ready to attack her, its menacing growls echoing in the air.

Instinct paralyzed her momentarily, but then a surge of determination coursed through her veins. Aware that running might trigger the dog's hunting instincts, Nora scanned her surroundings for a makeshift weapon.

Spotting a sturdy branch nearby, she snatched it up, desperation replacing fear in her eyes. The makeshift weapon trembled in her hands as she raised it, ready to ward off the approaching threat.

But just as Nora prepared to defend herself, Sara sprang into action. Without a second thought, Sara intercepted, positioning herself between Nora and the ferocious dog. The scene froze in a tense tableau — Sara, defiant and protective, facing the charging canine which looked ready to tear holes into her as she tried to push Nora away, urging her to run.

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The air hung heavy with tension as the large dog lunged forward, teeth bared, ready to strike at Sara and Nora. Time seemed to slow, the impending danger casting a shadow over the two women frozen in fear.

Just as the dog was about to reach them, a sudden shot pierced the silence. The echo of the gunshot reverberated through the air, and the massive canine crumpled to the ground with a thud. Stunned and paralyzed, it lay there, momentarily incapacitated while Sara and Nora clung to each other, their eyes tightly closed.

Time came to a standstill as Nora slowly opened her eyes, and looked around in confusion.

She stumbled as she looked down at the dog, still almost glaring at them but continuing to lay there unable to move. Bewildered, she looked around and saw Demetri standing further away, a stun gun in his hand, his chest heaving with exertion. The onlookers,

who had gathered to witness the alarming spectacle, gasped collectively as they looked at the tragedy that had just been averted.

Many had closed their eyes in fear, almost expecting to see a bloody carnage when they next opened their eyes.

Nora and Sara, still trembling from the close encounter, looked up. Demetri approached them cautiously, his eyes scanning for any signs of residual threat. His voice, when he finally spoke, carried a mix of concern and relief. "Are you both okay?"

Nora's breath caught in her throat as she nodded, still processing the adrenaline-fueled encounter. Sara, recovering from the shock, managed a shaky smile and whispered her thanks.

As the two girls let go of each other, many people from the crowd approached them, applauding them for caring for each other so much that they would rather die together than abandon the other.

Nora could feel herself shaking and she quickly ran away from the scene, while Sara was helped away to a bench by the few students. Everyone gave a wide berth to the dog who lay there, still growling, fearing that the effects of the stun would soon disappear.

Under everyone's watchful eyes, a team of security guards soon appeared, clearing the area for everyone. Demetri, distracted by Nora's quiet retreat, quickly ordered his usually invisible team, "Secure the dog safely and take it for immediate testing. I want a thorough sweep of the area. We need to know if it was provoked or if there's some underlying reason for its aggression." Swiftly, a few guards got to work while the others waited for their orders.

Check surveillance footage and identify anyone who might have been involved in releasing that dog. I need answers. Coordinate with campus security. We can't have any more surprises and warn them that if they cannot maintain a better security then they will lose the support of Frost Group."

With the immediate threat dealt with, Demetri quickly moved in the direction that Nora had taken, worried about her. She was in shock and there was a possibility that whoever had instigated the dog might still be on campus.

He found her standing at a distance, leaning against his car, trembling as the echoes of fear reverberated through her. Wordlessly, he approached her, gently taking her into his arms. She trembled as she clung to him, the residual shock still reverberating through her.

Slowly and carefully, he guided her into the passenger seat, driving back home. A heavy silence filled the car as he drove quickly while Nora continued to hug herself with her arms around her, trying to possibly reassure herself that she was safe...for now.

Once home, Demetri wasted no time. When she failed to move from the car, he walked around it and simply carried her out. Her cold skin made him worry. Once inside, he settled her on the couch, before walking into the bathroom quickly, drawing a warm bath.

The water cascaded into the tub, its soothing sound filling the room. With both of them still fully clothed, Demetri picked her up and sank into the warm water slowly, letting the warmth of the water cocoon them in comfort.

As Demetri settled her in the water, Nora's gaze remained distant, her eyes clouded with residual fear and confusion. She clutched at the edges of her clothes, her fingers shaking, seeking some form of stability in the midst of the turmoil that had unfolded.

Demetri, observing her closely, spoke gently, "Nora, you're safe now."

Even though she was present with him and heard his words, it took her a long while to react. She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply in an attempt to ground herself.

Demetri rubbed soothing circles on her back and tried to soothe her, the best way he could without words, since he had no idea what to say. However, the silent comfort had an opposite effect.

The controlled facade she had maintained began to crumble, and silent tears mingled with the warm water around her. Her shoulders shook with the weight of emotions she had suppressed.

"Why...why is this happening?" Nora's voice wavered; the vulnerability laid bare, "What did I do to deserve all this?"

Nora's tears continued to flow, as she whispered aggrievedly, "I learned to fight people. I learned to fight myself to do what was good for me. But now she was to be wary of every animal as well. Today a dog had been used, tomorrow something else might be used. And then she may not be so lucky to have Demetri Frost close by with a stun gun."

Raising her tear-soaked wet lashes, she looked up at Demetri, the man who was always there for her and felt her calm heart shake. He was always by her side, protecting her... As she looked at him with gratitude in her eyes, he gently kissed her forehead and assured her that everything would be fine and the perpetrator would be caught.

Nora looked at him with utmost trust in her eyes and nodded, burrowing closer to him and closing her eyes in a moment of fragile peace.

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In the dimly lit bedroom, Demetri and Nora lay entwined in each other's arms. Their wet clothing lay scattered on the floor, a testament to their lovemaking. But now that the passion had faded, the events of the evening still lingered in their minds.

Even though Nora's mind had settled down, she could not help but continue to go back to the scene where she imagined what would happen if the dog had succeeded in attacking them. Her and Sara would have been torn to pieces.

As she shivered once again, a light smack on her a** startled her and she looked wide eyed at the man who had just done that. "Wh... What?" She stuttered to Demetri who still had his eyes closed.

"Mrs. Wife, if you are not too tired to think about the incident, then I have not done well, hmm? Would you care for round two?" As she said this, his fingers gently squeezed her bottom making her blush.

However, looking at his serious expression, no one would know that he was talking like a pervert. Propping up on her elbow, she mock glared at him. Just because he had suggested round two, did not mean that she had to agree. At least not verbally.

"Then are you also not thinking about it? Your expression was also grave."

His fingers played a staccato beat along her spine, Demetri nodded and answered her, "I am indeed thinking of something important. But it is not the incident."

Nora looked at his face curiously, as she waited for his explanation.

"The weather has turned chill so I was wondering how long our clothes will need to dry. And who is going to mop that floor... They are two very important questions..."

After a beat of stunned silence, Nora burst into a mix of laughter and amazement, unable to contain her surprise at the intensity with which the two things had been presented.

Giggling, she pretended to think the answers seriously and said, "Umm, the clothes will dry in a day or two and since you are so worried, I'll mop that floor..."

Demetri nodded, seemingly satisfied that he would not have to do such a menial task while Nora simply shook her head with speechlessness.

"Well, you do that but there is another more important thing that I am worried about..."

Expecting another such mundane task, she looked at him with expectant wide eyes, "What are you thinking about now?"

The next minute, however, she regretted asking the question as she found her hands held above her head and him over her as he answered, "I am wondering how fast I can make you come... and how much before you are exhausted..."

By the time, Demetri was done finding answers to his questions, Nora was so exhausted that she couldn't keep her eyes open and eventually fell into deep slumber in Demetri's arms.

Unknown to her, as her body slumped in sleep, Demetri's eyes flashed with danger. Slowly, he slipped out of bed, tucking her tightly in before walking out of the room.

The moment he was out of the room, he dialed a number, looking for answers, "Update."

A clear voice immediately started the report on the other end, "Sir, we have already checked the surveillance and found a culprit. But the real mastermind behind this has escaped. It was a young student who did it. It seems she was in need of money."

"According to her account, she found a note in her hostel this morning, promising a substantial sum of money if she complied with certain instructions. The note outlined a seemingly simple task: to walk a dog around the university until the canine attempted to escape. In return, she received an advance of about two thousand dollars. Believing it to be a straightforward dog-walking job, she accepted the offer and followed the instructions."

"Initially, the dog appeared calm throughout the walk. However, without warning, it suddenly became aggressive and attacked. Despite her attempts to intervene and control the situation, she couldn't prevent the dog's aggression. In a state of panic, she fled from the scene and has since been hiding in her room."

"We have already sent the note and money for fingerprints, but it seems improbable to get any leads there. Whoever they were had been very careful. The dog's owner has also recently passed away so the dog was unstable."

"Send someone to collect Nora's clothing and take that to the lab." Demetri ordered. Even though the clothing was already wet, he hoped they would be able to pick up what had agitated the dog into attacking Nora. From there on they would need to find out who had come into contact with her for them to have done something like this.

"Any other updates?" Demetri questioned.

"Yes sir, we have the report that you'd asked for about Miss Arabelle. Also, Miss Lara Anderson was on campus today. Even though she did not contact Ma'am, since she has tried to harm her in the past, she might have found a way to do it again. And we have an interesting lead in Max's case. Sir, his roommate is an influencer and even though he usually used a background during his broadcasts, there is a chance that we may find out who was a regular visitor at their room. We are already working on clearing the backgrounds."

"Keep an eye on Lara Anderson and Arabelle."

As Demetri disconnected the call, a furrow formed on his forehead, and he sank onto the couch, staring at his plants. There was something they were missing in this piece of puzzle.

The stakes were high, and the missing element, like a phantom, taunted him from the shadows, urging him to unravel the truth. Whoever this person was, seemed to be an expert in borrowing other people's hands to hit his targets. Nora had been lucky previously but would she continue to be lucky? He was not willing to risk this.

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Amidst the enchanting glow of city lights, Arabelle and Gabe strolled hand in hand down a quaint cobblestone street, the vibrant sunset casting warm hues on their faces. The air was filled with the gentle murmur of laughter and the occasional clinking of glasses from nearby cafes. Arabelle's new engagement ring sparkled under the streetlights, catching the attention of anyone who happened to glance their way.

Gabe, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit, couldn't help but gaze at Arabelle with a smile that betrayed the fact that this "pretend" engagement held a bit more significance for him.

Arabelle on the other hand remained stone-faced as she ignored the hustle and bustle around her. She had been forced to pretend for this evening and she was not happy about it nor was she going to pretend to be enchanted with him.

She tried to subtly take her hand out of his grasp but he refused to let it go. She glared at him but he only smiled, "Our purpose here is to let people know we are engaged. If you take my hand from mine then they might think that we are already fighting."

Arabelle stopped trying to take her hand back and looked into his eyes. The immense love for her that shone in his eyes made her feel...guilty. Something that she had never

expected from herself. She reminded herself that she did not need the guilt. She needed to find a way to use Gabe to break off Demetri and that woman and make Demetri see that the only person deserving to stand by him was her.

But there was one thing she needed to talk to Gabe about. Maybe after knowing that, he would not give her that 'besotted' look so that when she finally broke up with him, she would not feel guilty. There was only one way to make him forget his love for her...For the first time she gathered her courage and spoke softly of the past, "Gabe, I know that you like me. Both of us have already tried to clarify that. I've always treated you like a friend and hoped that someday you would get over the feelings."

"And I have always told you that we cannot change the heart. Why don't you try letting go of Demetri?" Gabe pointed out, ready to rehash the old discussion.

This time, however, Arabelle shook her head, "Let's not discuss Demetri at this moment. You need to understand that there are things that you do not know about me. Things that will make you question your feelings about me. You think I am some kind person who is out in the world doing good. But I am not that girl. And I think it is time you know the real me."

Gabe paused at that and looked deeply into her eyes. He wanted to tease her and refute her, telling her that he was willing to remedy that and take all the time in the world to get to know her. But something about her look stopped him. Whatever it was she wanted to tell him, it was something probably important.

So, he could only look at her seriously and assure her, "I doubt anything can make me question my feelings for you. But if this is important to you, go ahead and test me, Arabelle. Tell me what it is this worry I see in your eyes."

Arabelle bit her lip, her guilt getting bigger, before she sighed and nodded, "Fine. It is better that you hear everything from me rather than from someone else. This way, I'd be able to look at your reaction myself. Come with me."

Gabe followed Arabelle with trepidation in his eyes, as a feeling of foreboding went through him. His instincts seemed to be screaming at him to avoid this topic. That whatever Arabelle wanted to tell him would somehow change everything. But even as his gut churned, he followed her resolutely. He'd vowed to himself that he would always stand by her and he wasn't about to break it just because of a premonition.

At the hotel room, Arabelle guided him to a small couch, urging him to sit while she moved to stand, with her back to him.

"Gabe, before I tell you everything, can you promise me something?"

Gabe nodded without hesitation. He wholeheartedly believed that whatever Arabelle had to say would not affect him.

"Don't give your promises so easily, Gabe. It would be impossible for you to take them back."

"Arabelle, I know you are trying to scare me but trust me it is not working. I am only getting more worried for you."

Arabelle smiled and slowly cupped his cheek, leaned down and gently kissed his cheek. "Thank you for everything, Gabe. Then promise me that you will never hate me. Even after you know everything you won't hate me... and Gabe, if you do think that you are going to hate me, then don't show it to me. I won't be able to live with that..."

"I promise that I will never hate you, Arabelle."

Arabelle nodded and stepped away from him again. He watched as she walked into her bedroom and wondered what it was that she was going to reveal that she even felt he would hate her. His love for her was such that she could stab him and he wouldn't hate her and think that it was the best day of his life.

Soon, Arabelle returned with a stack of files that made him frown. Did this have anything to do with her mother's business? Did she need a favour? But he had not heard any rumours about the Winthropes...

She placed the files in front of him and without looking at him, turned to go back to her bedroom." You can leave if after reading the files, you feel uncomfortable. If you think that you can continue to be my friend after reading them... then lets have dinner together."

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As Gabe sat alone in the room, the air seemed to carry the echo of her departure. He glanced at the files she left behind, a tangible reminder of the trust she had placed in him. His heart, however, lingered on the unspoken moments that passed between them. The weight of her unexpressed emotions hung in the air, leaving Gabe torn between the urgency of the files and the desire to comfort her.

His fingers traced absent-minded patterns on the couch, unwilling to see the things that has caused Arabelle so much pain. But then his inner voice spoke up, "Unless you know what her enemy is, how are you to protect her."

With a newfound determination, he picked up the topmost file and started to read it. However, the first page itself was enough to tilt his world upside down...The heading read...**Juvenile Incident Report...**

It was a police report attached with copies of court proceedings and certificates as well as medical analysis. However, what seemed to be jumping at him was the **Juvenile information** that held her name and the Victim information which held a name he was sure he had heard somewhere but could not place... Jenny Kavanaugh.

According to the incidence report, a teenaged Arabelle had been bullying another young girl called Jenny Kavanaugh. This had taken such a serious turn that the girl had lost the will to live and committed suicide. She had, however, tried to punish her with her death by naming Arabelle responsible for everything and even gathering evidence.

Gabe frowned, trying to remember something like this happening in their school. But it had also been around that time that they had been thrown into the boarding school while Arabelle's parents had moved away. Now, he also understood the reason for their sudden shift.

He turned the page with trembling hands as he ached for her. How would she had been able to go through such accusations and carry the burden of someone's death? Yes, Arabelle could be rude and arrogant but as far as he knew she had never been mean... Hopefully, the case had been dismissed by the judges.

However, he was in for another shock as he read the incident report. Arabelle had not just confessed to attacking the girl but also something much more horrifying. She'd pleaded guilty and confessed to being mentally unstable.

From there on, she had been subjected to repeated psychological analysis and monitoring. Once a few independent psychologists had confirmed that she was indeed unstable and not capable of understanding the consequence of her heinous actions.

Since she was a juvenile offender who was willing to accept her guilt and take her just punishment, she had been ordered to enter a mental institution where she would be subjected to constant monitoring.

Next up, he saw the pictures of the deceased girl and his heart thundered. How could this be? This was the girl that Arabelle had saved during the party all those years ago. That girl had accused Arabelle of hurting her? Even with everything written in black and white, he was sure that there had been some mistake. He refused to believe a single word of the confession that Arabelle had given to the police. It must have been taken into coercion.

He wanted to rush inside and question her, but he forced himself to continue to sit. There were still a few pages to go through and understand the situation.

He read through the transcriptions of many hours of counselling sessions that she had gone through and the doctor's comments. At the end of the year, even though the doctor agreed that Arabelle suffered from mental ability lapses, she had indeed not been responsible for the death of the girl. The confession that she had given to the court had been under legal advice as well as fright. Due to the final analysis, she was released from the mental institution and her juvenile record was sealed.

However, the instant seemed to have left a deep mark on her and she still needed constant therapy to sometimes go through the day.

With a heavy heart, Gabe closed all the files. He knew he needed to sort out his own tumultuous feelings before he went inside to talk to her. If she felt that he did not believe in her, then she might feel even more vulnerable in the future.

After a few minutes, he finally walked into her room, ready to console her. The cautious look and the tentative smile she sent his way, hurt him more than anything else.

Unable to stop himself, he quickly gathered her in his arms and tried to reassure her, "First thing I want you to know is that my feelings for you remain unchanged. Secondly, I remember that I'm here for you, no matter what. Your past doesn't define you, and it certainly doesn't change anything for me."

Her stiff shoulders relaxed, and he could feel her shuddering as she cried, "I didn't want anyone to find out," she confessed, her voice trembling.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of. Mental health struggles are a part of life for so many people, and it doesn't make you any less amazing or deserving of love and support. If anything, it makes you even stronger in my eyes for overcoming it. As for what happened with Jenny, maybe she was also suffering. What happened was a tragedy but you need not carry the guilt for it."

Her lips quivered as she tried to speak. "Thank you, Gabe. You have no idea how much your words mean to me. I was so scared that you would hate me for all this..."

He wiped away her tears with his thumb and smiled softly. "You're not alone in this, and you never will be. I'm here to support you, to listen, and to love you for who you are, past and all. I could never hate you."

As Arabelle clung to him softly with gratitude, he failed to see the expression on her face...

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Chapter 112: Erasmi

[1,032 words]

Chapter 112: Erasmi

Demetri entered the dimly-lit room, the antiseptic scent hitting him as he closed the door gently behind him. The rhythmic hum of medical equipment filled the space, creating a dissonant symphony of life and its fragility. Slowly, he made his way to the bed that lay in the middle of the room and looked down at the person there, lying motionless on the bed, a stark contrast to the lively memories Demetri held in his heart.

"So, you made it again, this time." Demetri whispered softly, to the still figure on the bed, reaching out to hold their bony hand. The warmth of the contact was a feeble reassurance in the face of the years-long silence that enveloped this room.

As Demetri pulled up the chair, he continued to talk, " See, I don't know why you refuse to give up here and create havoc in hell but if you are really fighting for everything, then do it well! You've been lying here for years now. Aren't you bored looking at the roof day and night?"

The accident had taken so much away, yet the flicker of light in the person's eyes only made Demetri unable to give up. It was a cruel irony that he who was known for not talking much would sit beside his beloved and talk for hours on end, having a one-sided conversation each time he visited.

"So, after your latest brush with the Grim Reaper, are you up for some latest news about the outside world or not? Hmm? I have a few that might hopefully sound interesting but really, if you do not give me a reaction this time, I will sit and read Shakespeare here the next time and bore you to tears."

"Let's see where should I start... Let's see, Ian is up to mischief as always. He has recently decided that he wants to try his hand at adventure sports. Since the guy is busy running errands, he's taking it up on the weekend. Well, he's been hiding it but he tried skydiving without training last week. Needless to say, he ended up tangled in a tree like a cat stuck in a high branch. He was pretty relieved that he had not shared his plans with anyone and no one would make fun of him when the firefighters rescued him. Don't worry, I made sure that his most flattering picture made its way onto that chat group of theirs. Gabe and Seb have been merciless on him."

"Lucien, our little Lucy has also experienced his first heartbreak. The girl he believed himself in love with is already married... But do not worry too much about him. I think he will be alright."

Demetri's fingers traced patterns on the bedsheet, a nervous energy born out of the years of this one-sided conversation as the smile on his face faded when the person on the bed gave no reaction. But he continued, "Seb has been working hard these days and stopped his partying ways. I would have thought it was a good thing but I think he is hiding something. I've tried to probe subtly but he's been stubborn. Guess, I'll have to give him space and only hope that he doesn't jump off the deep end"

Demetri paused before talking about the next person. "Gabe... He's the one I am worried about. He is too much like me. Blind loyalty and faith. I want to tell him everything about Arabelle but it seems to be of no use. He won't care. Arabelle is dangerous in a way that he cannot even think of. He is going to fall badly and there is nothing I can do to prevent it. I can only stand still and watch. I wish he wasn't like this... He knows I disapprove which is why he has been keeping his distance from me."

He inhaled slowly, continuing to look at the person on the bed as he continued, "Erasmi...I need you here with me. If you were here, then maybe we could save Gabe..."

He rose from the chair, pacing the room as if movement could dispel the hopelessness that clung to the air. "I've tried everything to make you talk to me! Can you please break this silence? I need you back, dam* it. I play your favourite music, show you pictures, and read books. But nothing. It's like I'm losing you a little more every day, and it's tearing me apart. Do you not want to get up and see everyone again? How have they grown up and become exceptional humans?"

He fell silent, the room swallowing his words. The machines beeped, a reminder that life continued even when a part of it seemed frozen in time. Demetri reached out once more, brushing a strand of hair from Erasmi's forehead, a touch both gentle and desperate.

"So you still refuse to acknowledge me, huh? Do you still blame me for the accident? But if you do then why don't you try to come out and fight with me? Did I scare you so bad that you would rather hide here away from the world? Hmm? Is that what you think is a suitable punishment for me?"

"But Erasmi, do you know something? I am only pitiful here in this room with you. To the outside world, I am a Demon. Everyone still calls me that. Doesn't it gall you that you are the one who coined this term for me? But I haven't told you about myself much, have I, over the years? I was hoping you would ask me yourself. Now, I'll tell you something. Erasmi, I am now a married man."

"Hmm. See I married someone without you. Now what are you going to do about it? Are you angry? The girl I married is very beautiful. Much more so than... let me show you..."

Demetri casually scrolled through his phone and pulled up one of the many pictures that Nora had clicked of them. This particular one was just after their first kiss on the kitchen island and they were almost wrapped around each other.

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"My favorite girl is finally here to meet me. Nora, my child, how are you doing?" Grandpa William exclaimed, and Nora quickly hugged him, smiling widely. "Hey! Don't tease me! I know I'm only your second choice. Grandma is the top pick."

William Doughby gave a deep loud laugh and said, "I do not lie, girl. You are my favorite girl in your generation of course."

Nora shook her head as she sat opposite the old man and smiled, "You always have an answer for everything."

"Hey! The gift of the gab is what keeps me in business kid. Now what are you going to eat?"

"This place is famous for its spaghetti, so I'll try that." Nora answered quickly.

Grandpa William nodded approvingly and quickly placed the order before looking keenly at Nora...

Nora fidgeted under his gaze before quickly muttering, "Grandpa, don't give me that interrogating look, alright. I know why you've summoned me here."

"Well, you should know! I thought we agreed that you would come to me with any problems. And yet, here we are, with me having no knowledge of what you've been through."

"Grandpa, I did not mean to hide anything from you. But everything happened so suddenly. First there was the stalker, then mother's attack and then the stalker again. After that, I was prepping to be presented as Demetri's wife. And then I'd barely gotten over these other things when the dog attack happened. It almost feels like the Lord of Death has been taking a keen interest in me. I almost lost my life not once or twice but thrice in three months."

"And not once did you come to me." Grandpa William spoke softly, his eyes shining with disappointment.

"Grandpa, I knew you would be worried. Even now I can see that reflected in your eyes. But, Grandpa, you can stop worrying a bit. It's been a challenging time, but I'm okay. It's

a lot to take in, but I'm navigating through it. I was not alone in this. Demetri has been a great support in everything."

The old man's eyes sharpened as he heard Nora's words and a look of discomfort passed over his face which was missed by Nora as the waiter placed the steaming bowls of spaghetti in front of them.

"Demetri helped you?"

The vibrant red sauce clung to the pasta and Nora quickly dug into her bowl, savoring the comforting taste, almost missing the question. However, William Doughby was not someone who did not know how to make people talk without them realizing.

Through the lunch, he carefully fished out the details about how Demon had helped Nora handle the police, and the stalker and even carried on the subsequent investigations.

"He has also been investigating the dog attack. Previously, I never realized that Demetri would use his own means to investigate. It seemed like too much trouble. However, this time when he started investigating the attack, I decided to beg him to involve me as well so that I could learn these things. But whoever the perpetrator is, they are very sharp."

"They had the dog tested and he was not drugged. Demetri had someone test my clothes also in case there was something on them that agitated the dog but they were also normal with no other suspicious traces. The dog has been kept under observation before he is put down. But the dog seems calm always. So, his people are all testing about various things that might have caused the dog to attack me. But I am not too worried. I am sure he will find the person who wants me dead."

Grandpa William smiled and passed her the dessert menu to choose from as he said, "You really do admire Demon Frost, hmm?"

Nora looked up in surprise at the observation and shrugged her shoulders, "What's not to admire? He is a good man- kind, strong and protective. And he is good in..."

"And what?" Grandpa asked with a raised brow.

She answered with a mischievous grin, "And he is good in Math! He is a genius in fact. My scores have been soaring since he started teaching me!"

To say the old man was surprised with every word that came out of Nora's mouth was an understatement. She knew of his protection, but she had no idea the retribution that Lara had received. There was a reason Demetri was called Demon. He was not kind nor was he a good man. Good men were bound by morals. They had limitations while Demon Frost had none. The only reason he had chosen Demetri was because he had believed that the man would not be much concerned about her.

However, his difference in behaviour made him worry. He couldn't help but warn, "Nora, it doesn't take much for admiration to turn into something more. Be careful. You cannot fall in love with him."

Nora paused in the middle of biting into the pastry and looked up at the old man in astonishment. For a second, there was silence before Nora placed down her spoon and smiled softly, "One cannot immediately unlove what they loved or it was never love to begin with. I may not think of Antonio anymore and may have put him in the past, but I've learned a valuable lesson because of him. The only person I love at this moment is myself. So, I have no intention in falling in love with him."

Grandpa William nodded slowly. He could see that she believed what she told him but from where he sat, things were very different. And he understood that at this point if he tried to tell her to be wary, she might inadvertently move closer to Demetri. So, it was better to change the topic, "Nora, what do you think of going to country A, at Isabella's university? Now that you have secured your inheritance, you can move there and be with your best friend, while also being free of danger. Why don't you consider doing your next year there?"

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"I'll take an Alien Invasion and a Fairy Forest, please."

"Only a Mermaid Delight for me, please." The two female customers nodded and closed their menus with a final click while Nora could only blink.

When she failed to move, the woman gave her a questioning look before hurriedly collecting the menus and making a move to place the orders with the chef. Lena and Maya had once again abandoned her for the day, and now suddenly she had a customer who was ordering such an odd thing.

Before she could reach the chef to discuss how to handle this situation, another customer summoned her. Hesitating, she hurriedly walked to him, hoping that he would place his order quickly. However, her expression took on a comical turn when the man ordered a, "Galactic Elixir."

Giving him a strained smile, Nora looked at the menu in front of the man and sighed. It was their normal regular menu. Were there such bizarre things on the menu that she was not aware of? She'd been working here for months and never heard of them...

She quickly went to the chef and relayed the orders. The chef stared at her as if she had lost her mind. "Nora, cara, you've been working here for a few months. Where in the menu can you find these things? Go on out and tell the customers that they have order something off the menu and not make up things."

Hesitating, Nora walked out of the kitchen and towards the customers ready to apologize when another couple seated on the side summoned her, "We'd like an Enchanted Eclair and a Bizarre Blueberry bagel, please."

Nora sighed. What was with all the customers today? Hesitating, she told the couple politely, "I am sorry. We only serve the dishes on the menu."

The girl looked at her as if she had lost her marbles and pointed out, "Are you new here? Of course, these items are on the menu. Look."

Nora took the menu and widened her eyes as she saw an additional page in the menu and quickly nodded and left the table.

She wondered if Lena and Maya were planning to add a few dishes to the menu and had mistakenly placed the trial menu with the original ones. But now, everyone seemed interested in these bizarre ideas. Maybe she could talk to the people on the three tables and request them to change their order, reasoning that this menu of theirs was not yet active. But that proved to be a fruitless exercise because all three tables insisted that they would have that and nothing else.

"Well, I'll see what I can do," she muttered to herself, clutching the peculiar menu. Perplexed and flustered, she wondered what she was supposed to do with these stubborn customers and this whimsical menu. Something seemed to be fishy... Just then, she saw something in the mirror on the opposite wall and the frown on her face was cleared as an enlightened expression came over..

She approached the chef once again, a determined glint in her eyes and a plan already brewing in her mind.

Meanwhile, three men stood side by side in a small office, waiting to see how Nora would handle the prank.

The tallest one pointed out, "I am telling you, that this is not going to work. I mean, she has married Demon, do you think a small menu mix up would surprise her? Let me tell you, I am going to win this bet and she will handle this easily."

The shorter one nodded his head and folded his arms in front of him, "Lucien is right, Seb. This time you are going to lose the bet. We should have gone with the snake one if we really wanted a reaction. There is still time, we can throw a snake and..."

Seb Frost shook his head as he stared at his sister-in-law's bewildered face. She looked cute trying to understand all those fairy tale orders she was getting with stubborn customers who wouldn't move until they got what they had ordered.

"Both of you are wrong, Ian. She is married to Demon but that doesn't mean she can handle this! I'd like her to try. It will give us an understanding of her. She's walking back towards the chef to pass on the customer's orders again. This chef is hot-headed. Once he walks out, we'll end the prank alright?"

"You prepared this as a test for her instead of a prank?"

"It's just a prank alright! Don't think too much. Also, if we had tried the snake prank, after the previous Dog attack on her, we would be lying in the doghouse next to that Tibetan Mastiff, having ourselves poked and prodded by vets."

Lucien frowned and pointed out, " You would have deserved it. I am against the entire plan of playing a prank on her and then betting on it!"

"Yes. But you've already bet on her so you can't renege. Now shush! Look, she and the chef are having an argument about something. Once the chef throws up his hands and walks away, it will be time for us."

"If a real customer comes in by then?" Lucien pointed out, still worried about what they were doing. Even though they were lucky that the three tables were the only actors that Seb hired, it made him worried somehow.

The argument on the screen seemed to be getting heated and hurriedly, Ian gestured, "Let's go now and save our sister-in-law."

As the three men confidently walked around the block towards the cafe, they could not have imagined the scene they would come to. Instead of worrying about the chef leaving and things like that, Nora had already presented some of the customers with their requested dishes.

Lucien quickly slinked away to his regular table with delighted eyes. He had won the bet. Glancing around, he checked- The Alien Invasion seemed to be a coffee macchiato with a weird-looking head on top. She'd actually convinced the chef to create something like that. He then checked out the Fairy Forest, it was their regular avocado toast but somehow it had been made to look magical by using the colorful berry salad on the side...

As he watched the other man sip his Galactic Elixir which was a normal black coffee. Just then, Nora walked out with a glowing face and presented with a flourish, " From the depths of the enchanted room, we have the Eclair and the bagel..."

Lucien watched in amusement as Nora placed a prettily plated eclair and a really bizarre bagel which 'stood' upright on the plate. Her gaze met his and then turned to his brothers who stood at the door in stupefied shock that their prank had failed miserably.

She'd actually discovered the prank and rolled with it! He watched as she made a beeline towards them and quickly hooked each of her hands around their arms, announcing, "And here are the VIPs of today! The special designers of this menu, Ian and Seb Frost along with our regular Lucy Frost."

Herding them to the table, she quickly stepped back and announced, "Somehow, I was expecting you all today! The chef has prepared for something special. Let me present to you- 'The Velvet Volcano Delight'.

The three brothers watched in amazement as an exquisite dessert, featuring layers of vibrant red velvet cake and a smooth, chocolate lava-like sauce was presented in front of them. The fragrance and the look made them salivate and each of them thanked Nora, forgetting all about the prank and the bet.

Nora quickly winked at the chef who pulled out his phone and quickly started the recording with a happy grin on her face.

All three dug in at the same time, expecting a decadent dessert. However, a peculiar expression covered their face as they paused mid-bite, their eyes furrowed in bewilderment. A moment of silence followed, interrupted by a cautious swallow and a hesitant expression.

And then all three of them dove for the bottle of water, as the spiciness of the hot jalapenos and red chilis assaulted their senses. With tears in their eyes, the three brothers realized that they had underestimated their sister-in-law. Not only had she not fallen for their prank, but she had also turned the tables and subjected them to a prank. A swift vengeance.

Sending a quick wink their way, Nora quickly took her phone from the chef and left the cafe, messaging Maya and Lena on the way that they might want to return if they did not want to be robbed blind.

Nora whistled as she walked down the road, happy that she had not just discovered the prank but also pranked the pranksters! The next moment, she received a notification that she had been added to a WeChat group called the Frost Brothers.

Happy at the acceptance, she felt a little envious. This is what it meant to have siblings. People who could play with you and yet accept you. She thought of Sara's recent change... and wondered maybe she could try and forgive her... They could try to create a new bond without their mother's interference.

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With Nora bidding them adieu the three brothers quickly continued to eat the Volcano in front of them. Even though it had surprised them initially, the taste was not bad. However, even as Seb and Lucien continued to dig into the food, Ian only continued to push around the food on his plate, his eyes lost in contemplation.

Seb stopped devouring the food on his plate and questioned him, "Hey? Is the food so spicy that you have lost a few brain cells?"

Ian shook her head and questioned them instead, "Does Nora not remind you of someone?"

Seb and Lucien frowned at that question wondering who could she remind them of. Just then a fourth chair was pulled out and Gabe slouched into the chair as he answered the question, "Yes. She is just like Demon."

While Seb and Lucien looked up in surprise, Ian and Gabe exchanged an understanding glance.

"Nora is like Demon? Since when did Demons and Angels start feeling the same?" Seb shook his head in wonder.

However, Lucien thought back to his older memories of their brother laughing as he followed him around and quietly spoke, "You mean Nora is like the Demon of the past."

Gabe nodded, "Hmm. Nora is a bit like Demetri of our past. Before Erasmi died. Before Demetri was forced to become Demon."

A melancholy silence followed this statement, with each of the brothers pausing in thought. While Lucien and Seb had little memory of Demetri from childhood, Ian had been closest to Demetri among the younger generation followed by Gabe.

But Erasmi had been Demetri's other half. They'd never needed to even talk to understand each other. They'd all been in the boarding school when they had received the news of Erasmi's accident and subsequent death. None of them had been allowed to come back for the funeral.

And when they had indeed returned, Grandfather had forbidden them from even mentioning Erasmi's name. All traces, and pictures had been taken away and Demetri had already turned into the silent Demon he was today.

It was as they started to work by his side and try to understand him that they started to understand that Demon had walled himself off from the entire world. The accident had cost them not just Erasmi but also Demetri Frost.

Lucien finally broke the silence, "It's a good thing that she is like him then, isn't it? Maybe we will get the old Demetri back..."

"I don't know, Lucy. The problem is that Nora is also a bit like Erasmi..." Ian whispered softly

Meanwhile, in the cosy living room, Demetri lounged on the couch, his eyes fixed on the phone's screen and Nora sat on the floor, leaning against his legs as she pretended to read. She was actually waiting for him to finish seeing the video...

When he had finished watching and still not given her an answer, she nudged his knee with her shoulder and gloated, "See, didn't I tell you that I can hold my own against your dangerous brothers?" Nora was feeling very pleased with herself. Demetri had warned her that his brothers might try to pull a fast one on her and she had almost fallen for the prank! Thankfully, she had seen the reflection of the two customers winking at each other and quickly understood that she was the star of a prank!

Demetri patted Nora's head affectionately, a gesture that spoke more than words ever could and she looked up to see his expression. Even though his stoic face remained the same, she saw the amused glint in his eyes while his lips were suppressed as if resisting a smile.

"You won them over." Demetri smiled softly and closed his eyes... completing the sentence in his mind, "*Erasmi would have definitely used such a trick.*"

He let her continue to chatter as she explained each of their expressions and Demetri let her. Her voice felt pleasant to hear.

Seeing that his eyes were closed, Nora tapered off. As she brought her knees to her chest, she could not help but give a wistful sigh. Her eyes reflected the years of longing. She had craved such a bond with Sara, only to be manipulated and used by her again and again.

And as she looked down at the easy way in which the brothers had accepted her, she felt fear for the first time. She may or may not fall in love with him, but she could easily fall in love with the easy relationship the brothers shared. She had no illusions about being with Demetri forever, but she could already feel the hurt she would go through when she broke all ties with the Frost family in the future. They made her feel like a part of the family, something she had never experienced.

As she thought of this, Grandpa William's suggestion came to mind. Her grades had been too low in the past so she could not have considered a foreign university. But things were different now... if she went away, she would not be too deeply involved...

Or maybe she could... "Husband?" She called out softly.

"Hmm?"

"Should I give Sara another chance?"

This caused Demetri's eyes open. Unaware that the man was now staring at her, she continued, " Maybe Sara has really changed. I know Lara Anderson's influence. It had been difficult for me to let go of her, even though I have only known humiliation and abuse at her hands. How difficult must it have been for Sara to understand how she was hurting me when it earned her Lara's approval..."

"Sara has also proven that she has changed. She warned me about the stalker. She fought Lara for me, and she even tried to save me from the massive dog. Demetri, do you think I may have a sisterly bond with her in the future? The way she held me close to her when the dog attacked me..."

As Nora continued to murmur to herself, she failed to notice that Demetri's lazy gaze had suddenly sharpened...

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"Sara has proven that she has changed..." Nora's words echoed in Demetri's mind, overlapping the words from many years ago, spoken by someone else, "Dimi... I am thinking of letting the past go. She has already proven that she has changed... I think I am going to give her another chance..."

As Erasmi's words echoes in his head, Demetri's hands clenched, he looked down at Nora who was also thinking of making the same mistake that Erasmi had made. At that time, he had given in to Erasmi but he could not... no, he would not let Nora commit the same mistake. He'd almost lost Erasmi, he could not lose Nora.

He interrupted her words curtly, " Nora."

Surprised at the biting tone, Nora stopped talking and turned up her head. Her eyes widened as she caught the anger in his eyes, making her wonder what had happened to him today.

Over the months, Nora had come to understand a bit about his moods and she understood that usually weekends were bad for him. The man never said anything but there was always a certain black aura surrounding him over the weekends. Said aura actually reduced during the week only for it to intensify again later.

She usually made a point to steer clear of him and try to become even more invisible but with the change in their physical relationship and her happiness about her victory today had probably made her forget that... It seemed she had angered Demetri Frost in some way.

When he said nothing, she asked him softly, "What?"

The next moment, she was jerked up by the shoulders and straddling his lap. How the heck did this guy make that manoeuvre with her, she had no idea. Was her body that malleable?

Noticing her distraction, Demetri placed his hands on her bare thighs and pinched slightly. She winced and focused on him. Unexpectedly, all that anger from a few moments seemed to have disappeared as he slowly said, "Nora, the reasons behind actions may echo through the corridors of justification, yet in the resounding chambers of reality, it is the reverberation of results that shapes the enduring silhouette of significance."

Nora frowned in confusion at the words, totally at a loss what Demetri meant. Sighing, he explained himself, "Her reasons may be justifiable for her safety but the result of her actions has harmed you. So, when you take the past into consideration, you cannot change the result even if you can justify her actions. A person who has broken your trust to save themselves in the past, and received your forgiveness, will do that again in the future."

Nora paused, realizing that what he said was true. Hadn't she also believed the same thing before the "Dog incident" had happened? She'd even told Sara that they would be strangers and nothing more. But her yearning had made her forget her own words. Feeling foolish, Nora looked away, as she bit her lip.

Demetri sighed and placed his hand on her cheek, his thumb tugging at her lower lip so that she would not bite it anymore and sighed, "Are you feeling bad? You've just acquired a few brothers, haven't you? They already consider you part of the family, so as long as you don't treat me too shabbily, they will always treat you like a sister. Even when we divorce in the future."

Nora looked into his eyes and nodded slowly, holding onto a few words and discarding the others. Maybe he was right. She'd acquired a few brothers and whether they continued to be the same in the future, she would enjoy their time now. Enjoy being part of a family. Something that had always been important to her.

Nora looked at Demetri who was still rubbing his thumb along her lip and nipped lightly causing the man to look into her eyes. With a small sigh, she questioned him, " How do you do this?"

"Do what?"

"Nothing..." Nora stopped what she wanted to say as she looked into his eyes. Every time she looked into them, it felt as if there was a deep sadness buried inside him. Previously, it had not bothered her because he had only been a stranger and everyone had to carry their burdens.

But recently she would be overcome with the urge to comfort him the way he always comforted her. He always knew what to say and what to do to bring her peace. She wanted to do the same for him but had no idea how to do it.

"What are you thinking?" Demetri asked her as he slowly brought her face closer to his, his intent clear.

However, Nora's mouth seemed to have acquired some courage lately and she blurted out, " Who broke your trust? Who hurt you?"

The air seemed to still between them, the cozy atmosphere disappearing. He closed his eyes and it felt as if a real curtain had fallen between them. Even though neither of them moved from their intimate position, the distance seemed to be enormous between them.

Nora prepared to scramble away from him and apologize when he sighed deeply and pulled her close to him. He buried his face in the crook of her neck and she felt him tremble for a moment. It jostled her. How badly had he been hurt? She placed her hands on his back and gently patted him, letting him know without words she was with him.

For a moment, he hugged her in a crushing embrace, making it almost difficult for her to breathe. And then, slowly, he let go and moved back. His eyes had returned to their normal self as if the entire small moment had been a figment of her imagination. He kissed her slowly and whispered, " It doesn't matter who did what in the past. They won't be able to do it in the future. But thank you, Nora, for being yourself..."

Nora nodded, not understanding why he was thanking her... but she understood one thing, something had once again shifted in their relationship...

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"I still believe poker would have been the best choice," Demetri commented as he downed the small shot in one go.

Nora grinned at Demetri and quickly downed her own shot as she shook her head, "That game is way too overrated. Also, I do not know how to play poker and you are an expert face reader. I would have been left without clothes in a couple of rounds." She slurred her words, while her flushed face and pouty lips made Demetri want to kiss her senseless.

They'd already polished off a bottle and were well onto the next bottle, all from playing a silly game of numbers called Apples.

Nora squinted her eyes trying to discern which of the three Demetris in front of her was the real one and finally spoke to the one on the left, "Fine fine. We'll change the rules. The game continues the same way. We have to say Apple for every multiple of seven instead of the number and whoever misses has to do a seggy dare..."

Demetri raised an eyebrow and turned her face towards him as he said, "Sexy dare? Are you sure, kitten? You can't even look straight; how will you do a dare?"

"Ha! Maybe you will make a mistake again and then I'll make you sssstttriipp."

Demetri smiled and started the game, "1"

"2" Nora goofily grinned back at him and the game continued...

As the two of them continued the game quickly with him stating "apple" first, Demetri could also feel the alcohol rushing to his head. It had been a long time since he had felt so... free. How they had gotten into this gaming competition, he had no idea but the highest they had been able to count upto before making a mistake had been 343 and that too when both had been sober. Even though he had a head for numbers, he kept getting distracted by her glassy eyes and the way she sat cross-legged on the bed, her silky calves inviting him...

He played absently, but already his mind was on what he kind of a dare he would give her... Unfortunately, he was thinking from the wrong head and thus answered, 224 when she said 223...

Nora threw her hands up in the air and swayed from side to side as she shouted, "I am having a good day today. I win..."

Demetri leaned back on the bed, and gave a half smile as he watched her moves with interest, "So you want me to do a sexy dare? Hmm?"

Nora grinned happily and said, "Yes. I want you to wear something..." Quickly she stood up from the bed, before swaying dangerously and almost falling but she caught herself

in time and carefully moved again, letting the moving world come to a standstill before she took another step.

Demetri continued to watch her with lidded eyes, as he commented, "I thought I would have to remove some clothing not wearing it. Your definition of sexy weird, Mrs Frost."

"Ha!" Nora took another step and threw the lampshade behind Demetri a mysterious glance as she said, "Well, that would be sexy too. But that is next. First, you must wear..."

Nora muttered something about having hidden that thing in her room as she foraged through her cupboard and finally found what she was looking for. Holding the thing up like a trophy, she grinned and said, "Found it!"

Demetri looked at the thing in her hand and shook his head in disbelief, "How can you even think that I would put on something like this? You even have it in your cupboard."

Nora grinned and jumped onto the bed, moving close to Demetri as she said, "It's for a play at the university. I just thought that it would look good on you. Let me put it on..."

Demetri watched in horror as Nora brought the hairband close to him, the vivid red horns almost mocking him. He caught her wrist to stop her just as she would have poked him in the eye.

Thinking that he had refused to wear the hairband, Nora pouted and blinked her glassy eyes at him, "You are being a spoilsport..."

Demetri grimaced and carefully placed the hairband on his head as he muttered, "How is this sexy?"

Quickly she grabbed her phone and hugged his neck, "Click a picture." Demetri rolled his eyes and warned her not to dare share the photo with anyone as he grabbed the phone from her and clicked it with steady hands.

But the girl he was supposedly complaining to stared at him with such a pleased smile that he could only steal a kiss from her as punishment.

Her quiet moan quickly brought him to attention, and he whispered things in her ear that made her head spin, throwing the thoughts of winning out of her head.

Soon, Nora found herself flat on the bed with almost three Demetris hovering over her, the red horns on his head glinting almost menacingly.

Her breath caught in her throat as he devilishly kissed his way down her face and neck as he slowly made his way to the valley between her breasts.

His sucked her through the tshirt, making her breath catch as she moaned his name. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, and the hardness against her stomach made her yearn to rub herself against him like a cat, which she did.

Demetri sucked in a breath as he felt her arousal. He trapped her hips by throwing a leg over her to stop her from being the death of him but as he looked into her eyes, he came to a realization that he would never be able to say no to his girl...

"Do you know, you are going to the death of me, hmm? All these years, I have protected myself and now, you've wiggled your way inside. What am I going to do with you kitten?"

Nora smiled and tried to move against him as she answered him, "Keep me then."

Mini theatre:

Seb: Dam* it! I think someone spiked my morning coffee!

Ian: Uh huh, mine too.

Lucien: I'm scared to look outside, what if pigs are flying next?

Gabe: Even our wildest imaginations could not have dreamed up the picture we are staring at... We've got a great sister-in-law... she actually made Demon wear that... whatever that thing is... and then posted it on her moments!

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"I think you need to start investigating along these lines, detective." Demetri instructed the man by her side. Demetri could not help but frown as he wondered what it was they were missing. They'd already guessed that Lara Anderson was behind the attacks that had happened on Nora but still could not find the missing link that would connect her to the crimes. He needed those links to finish off what that woman had started.

Just as the detective was about to say something, Demetri's phone started to ring. Frowning, he looked at the screen, ready to decline the call when he glanced at the name. Waving for the detective to leave, he answered the call hurriedly. "Doctor?"

Doctor Mills gulped when he heard the voice on the other side as beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. He'd been thinking for a while on how to answer the phone but no amount of practice could protect him from the storm that was going to come their way.

"Something's happened. Please, come to the medical centre right away," he stammered, his voice betraying panic.

Silence filled the phone line for a moment, broken only by Demetri's sharp intake of breath. His heart raced, and a lump formed in his throat. "What happened?" he demanded, the panic in his voice mirroring the doctors' urgency. He'd already prepared for the worst, he reminded himself, however, the doctor would have directly told him that...if Erasmi had... left the world...

The air hung heavy with anxiety and yet the doctor said nothing. Worrying that his fears had come true, "I'm on my way," he declared, the gravity of the situation cutting through any other thoughts as he raced out of the building.

Behind the wheel, Demetri's hands gripped the steering wheel with intensity, his mind racing with worry. He weaved through traffic, glancing at the clock, every second ticking louder in his mind as he wondered what could have happened.

On the one hand, he prayed that Erasmi had really passed on to the other life and ended the suffering. On the other, he knew that if Erasmi was really no longer in this world then he would definitely know by instinct. They were two halves of a whole, how could he not know?

Demetri screeched into the medical centre's parking lot, the abrupt halt jolting him forward. Ignoring the still-running engine, he flung the car door open, the metal clanging against the frame. With long strides, he sprinted towards the entrance, his heart pounding in sync with each step. Panic etched across his face, he disregarded the automatic doors, pushing them open with urgency.

Spotting the doctor in a nearby consultation room, he stormed in, his eyes locked onto the man. "Dr. Mills!" he barked, his voice strained with a mix of fear and frustration.

The doctor, visibly startled, turned towards Demetri. He had not expected the man to reach so soon. It usually took at least a couple of hours to reach the medical centre from the city during the evening rush hour...

"Mr. Frost, I—" he began, attempting to explain as Demetri cut in sharply.

"No explanations, just tell me what happened to Erasmi!" Demetri's tone brooked no delay.

"We're addressing it urgently, and Erasmi is stable now. I assure you, we're doing everything we can to rectify the situation. In fact, Mr Frost, the outcome jolted us and the circumstances under which it happened were also unworthy, but I think what happened might prove beneficial to Erasmi in the long run."

Demetri's jaw tightened, but he nodded, absorbing the information. "I need detailed answers, and I need them now," he demanded, the tension in the room palpable. Even though the doctor hinted that the events might be good for Erasmi, Demetri paid it no mind. Unless the doctor had something solid to show him, he was not going to back down.

Dr. Mills hesitated for a moment, collecting his thoughts before beginning to explain the unusual circumstances surrounding Erasmi's reaction. "Mr. Frost, what transpired was highly unexpected and, frankly, unprofessional. Two nurses, unfortunately, engaged in a conversation within Erasmi's room. They were gossiping, talking about personal matters, and, inappropriately, discussing your marital status."

Demetri's eyes narrowed in disbelief, a mixture of anger and concern etched across his face. "My marital status? What does that have to do with Erasmi's condition?" he demanded, his voice edged with frustration and a sense of foreboding.

The doctor sighed, acknowledging the absurdity of the situation. "One of the nurses, in her misguided enthusiasm, found a picture of your new wife on the internet. She believed showing it to Erasmi might elicit a positive reaction, thinking it could be a source of joy for the patient and harmless way to engage."

Demetri's jaw clenched as he tried to process the absurdity of the situation. "Are you saying that Erasmi actually saw the picture?"

Dr. Mills nodded solemnly. "Yes, I'm afraid so. The nurse's misguided attempt at providing a form of stimulation for Erasmi backfired. The reaction was unexpected, leading to a spike in blood pressure and heightened brain activity. It was an unfortunate turn of events, and I apologize for the lapse in professionalism."

Anger flickered in Demetri's eyes, but beneath it, a profound concern for Erasmi prevailed.

"How could this happen? This is a medical facility, not a gossip hub. What were those nurses thinking?" he growled, wanting to strangle them.

The doctor sighed deeply, acknowledging the gravity of the situation. "Mr. Frost, I share your concern and disappointment. This incident was a breach of our standard protocols, and I assure you, both nurses are facing disciplinary actions. We are conducting a thorough review of our procedures to prevent such incidents in the future."

Demetri paced the room, his mind racing with a mix of emotions. "What about Erasmi?"

Dr. Mills nodded, attempting to offer reassurance. "Yes, thankfully, Erasmi is stable now. We've implemented corrective measures and closely monitored the condition. The team is working diligently to ensure the patient's recovery remains on track. Despite the unfortunate circumstances, we are hopeful that the increased brain activity might have positive implications for his overall condition in the long run."

As Demetri left the room to see Erasmi, the doctor couldn't shake the weight of the error that had occurred under his watch and worried about what would have happened if things had not been handled properly.

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Demetri entered Erasmi's room, relief washing over him to find Erasmi had been placed in a wheelchair. As he moved, he suddenly had a feeling that Erasmi had indeed reacted with a flicker of his eyes. "Erasmi?" he called out, the anticipation in his voice echoing in the sterile room hoping that the slight movement was not his own illusion. However, there was no response. The hope that had briefly ignited began to wane, replaced by a deep sadness.

"Until when are you going to punish me? hmm?"

Demetri pulled a chair closer, his gaze fixed on Erasmi's still form. "Erasmi?" he called again, a mixture of hope and uncertainty in his voice. The room remained silent, save for the hum of medical equipment.

The man who had been attending to Erasmi knocked and entered at this time, his expression reflecting the weight of the situation. "Mr. Frost, I've been monitoring Erasmi's condition closely.

There's a pattern we've observed—the patient's blood pressure spiked dangerously twice in the last three months. The last time, he had been on a video call with you and he had heard a woman's voice. And then this time again when he saw the lady's picture. It's as if there's a deep emotional response to the person related to you. If I am not wrong, the patient had reacted to your wife's voice in the past."

Demetri's eyes narrowed, a knot forming in his stomach. "What are you saying?"

The man hesitated before continuing, "It seems there might be a connection between these emotional stimuli and Erasmi's physical response. Perhaps there's a yearning, a desire to engage with these familiar stimuli, even if the patient's current state inhibits a visible response."

Demetri's mind raced as he absorbed the information. "Are you suggesting that Erasmi wants to see my wife?" he questioned, a mix of confusion and realization in his voice. And something more. He could not arrange for Nora to meet Erasmi. It would destroy Erasmi...

The man nodded solemnly. "It's a hypothesis, but there's a possibility that these stimuli hold significant emotional weight to Erasmi. It's worth exploring, Mr. Frost. It might be a key to understanding and potentially improving the condition."

Demetri's eyes flickered with a blend of emotions—hope, skepticism, and a tinge of guilt. "She cannot come here. Erasmi's existence cannot be revealed to anyone. Can we proceed in some other way? Maybe play her voice, or show more pictures?"

The man nodded thoughtfully, "We can try different stimuli and monitor the reactions. It's a delicate process, but it might provide insights into the emotional and cognitive responses. It's crucial to tread carefully, considering the medical history."

Demetri took a deep breath, the weight of responsibility settling on his shoulders. "Let's do it. If there's a chance that connecting with familiar stimuli could help Erasmi, I won't hesitate."

As the medical team prepared to test this hypothesis, Demetri couldn't shake the internal struggle. He questioned the morality of using Nora's voice and image, knowing that the long-term repercussions could be dangerous.

With every medical instrument in place and the medical team on standby, Demetri called Nora. He did not have her voice recordings but he could speak to her directly.

The ringing of the phone echoed along with the medical beeps and Demetri sighed deeply. The past and the present were all mixing up and he felt nauseous about it.

The call was answered with a cheery, voice calling out, "Mr. Husband! You called me instead of messaging? Where did the sun set today?"

Demetri said nothing as her voice echoed in the room. His entire being was focused on Erasmi who had no reaction.

When he said nothing, Nora continued, "Did you dial by mistake? Do you need something?"

Demetri closed his eyes as there was no reaction from Erasmi, feeling a hint of sadness and relief.

"I won't be coming home tonight."

"Ahh. So that is why you called me? Alright then, thanks for letting me know. Toodles...."

Demetri nodded and was about to disconnect the phone when suddenly the machines started beeping, the monitor indicating that the patient's blood pressure was on a rise.

This time the doctors were prepared and quickly started to administer the medicine to stabilize Erasmi.

Erasmi's eyes, for a brief moment, locked onto Demetri's with a mixture of accusation, anger, and an unidentifiable emotion. His fingers flinched, a subtle sign of life breaking through the stillness. Demetri leaned in, a surge of anticipation coursing through him as he waited for more signs of recognition. However, in the next moment, Erasmi's eyes closed, and he lapsed back into unconsciousness.

Demetri, a mix of excitement and impatience, turned to the attending doctor. "Did you see that? He reacted! Can we continue the experiment?"

The doctor, while acknowledging the progress, held a cautious tone. "We need to proceed with caution, Mr. Frost. Rapid stimulation could have adverse effects. Erasmi's response is promising, but we must allow his system to adjust gradually. Rushing could lead to increased stress, affecting his overall well-being."

"How long until we can try again? I need him to come back, to be aware."

The doctor considered, "Give it a day or two. We'll closely monitor his vitals and reassess. It's a delicate process, and we must ensure his safety above all."

Demetri nodded and turned to look at Erasmi who was now sleeping peacefully on the bed. "Welcome back, Erasmi. Welcome back. I knew you would someday return to me. After all, how can you abandon your twin like that? Come back, my brother. You've rested enough. Come back fast. It's been too long."

However, As Demetri spent the night by his brother's bedside, he could not help but worry about what the future would hold. If Erasmi had reacted like that to Nora's photograph, how would he then react to when she met him? And how would Nora react when she finally discovered his deception? His reason for helping her was not that she looked like his ex-girlfriend but because she looked exactly like his twin's dead girlfriend...

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Demetri drove through the deserted streets at three in the morning, the world bathed in the eerie glow of streetlights. The silence outside mirrored the weariness within him. His hands gripped the steering wheel, even as his mind wandered dangerously.

As he entered the silent home, his eyes automatically scanned the corner where he usually found Nora. But of course, she must be asleep as the place was dark. His shoulders slumping, he trudged towards his own room, intent on not going to Nora tonight. It was an unspoken rule between them. If they'd been together then they would sleep in Nora's bed, if not, they would simply sleep in their own respective beds.

However, his feet seemed to have a mind of their own. Lost in his own thoughts, he found himself standing over her bed, looking down at her peaceful sleeping form. It made him feel detestable. Everything had been so clear when he had found Nora. Why did he have to change the rules to his own game?

Looking at her peaceful face, Demetri betrayed all thoughts of returning to his own room and sighed over his own lack of control. Discarding his clothing, he slid into the bed with her. But even as he felt her warmth draw him close, it was not enough to simply share the bed. His hand glided along her waist, resting to a stop on her soft stomach. Gently, he pulled her into his embrace, fitting their bodies together like the pieces of a puzzle.

Nora stirred in her sleep, disturbed by the movement and tried to wake up. Opening her blurry eyes, she looked up into Demetri's clear ones and snuggled even closer to him as she said softly, "Demetri? Weren't you not coming tonight?"

Demetri nodded and kissed her forehead, "Yes. But I am here now. Sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

With a lazy 'ummm' Nora went back to sleep, tucking her head under his chin. Demetri's hand slid under her shirt, drawing lazy circles on her stomach as he sighed deeply, letting her closeness comfort him. Only he knew the truth of what a mess he had made. He couldn't help but wonder if he was destined to make such a mess for his brother.

As he continued to be lost, his fingers moving unconsciously over her, Nora opened her eyes. How was she supposed to sleep when the man was teasing her? As she glanced at him with sleepy eyes, wondering if he wanted to do something more than sleep, when she realized that he was lost far in thought.

Puzzled, she turned toward him, concern furrowing her brow at his odd behaviour over the past few days.

"Demetri?" she whispered, the hushed tones of the night surrounding them. Demetri's fingers clenched for a moment before he sighed and reassured her, "Everything is fine. Just sleep."

Nora wanted to say that everything did not feel fine for him but stopped herself. She had no right to pry into his personal matters. However, worry etched her face and she felt frustration rise inside her. Why was it that he was able to protect her and help her while she feared to even question him?

As her mind started to wander, leaving the land of sleep behind, she felt Demetri press a soft kiss to the back of her head, his breath softly brushing against her ear, "Stop thinking. Your thoughts are too loud. I just had a bad day and nothing else."

His embrace tightened around her and Nora could only let herself relax until finally the two of them left behind the world of the awake, sleeping peacefully in each others' arms.

The next morning, Nora woke up with a jolt. The space beside her was empty and she wondered if she had hallucinated the incident from last night. However, the peaceful sleep that she'd had was a sign that it was true. Nora stretched lazily and turned her head to look at the time, sighing when she realized that she still had a while to get ready and go. And hopefully, there would be time to discuss her new plan.

After thinking things through, she had decided that she would no longer wait for the next attack to come. So, naturally, she needed to do something to bring out the person who was intent on killing her. And the only way she could do that was to lure them outside.

As expected, Demetri was out having his coffee when Nora stepped out of her room. Wrinkling her nose at his choice of drinking that poison every morning, she grabbed her own pop-tarts and quickly sat opposite him.

"I am going to lay a trap," she announced abruptly.

He stared at her over the rim of the coffee mug, before questioning, "I wasn't aware there was a mouse in our house. Do you need cheese?"

"I am not talking about a mouse. I am talking about the person who is intent on harming me. See, both times, the plans were well thought out and executed. Because that person was aware of what I was doing and how I would react. Each time the plan would have been successful but for one variable-you."

"If I had not reached you in time that day or if you had not suddenly come to my university, unexpectedly, then I would have been dead or at least gravely injured wanting to die. But now the surprise element is lost. You've put security around me and the person behind all this knows your identity so going further they will be even more careful. However, if I give them an unexpected opening, they might want to rush in unprepared and launch an attack, thus making some mistake... So, I am thinking... a few students are planning to go out for the upcoming long weekend and they've invited me..."

Before she could continue, Demetri placed his mug on the table with a loud sound and interrupted her, "No. Absolutely not."

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"No absolutely not." Demetri growled.

Nora stopped talking, her spoon hanging mid-air as she stared at his sudden and totally unexpected outburst.

"What?"

"You are not going to use yourself as bait to get the perpetrator caught. I won't let you put yourself in danger."

Nora placed down her spoon gently and spoke, "Uhh... Demetri, I don't know if you know this but I am already in danger..."

"Yes, and my people are already looking for the culprits. So we do not have to take unnecessary risks. There is no need for you to go out and endanger yourself more...And that is final."

Nora looked down at her spoon and then at Demetri. This is what she had feared would happen. When they had entered the contract marriage, they had both been on equal ground. But due to the attacks on her, Demetri had taken over the charge of protecting her. And this had tilted the balance.

From her interaction with the Frosty Fours (the name that she had given to the other Frost brothers) she'd come to understand that he had a habit of becoming autocratic when it came to protecting someone.

Already, she was beholden to him, his actions to help her felt like a burden at times. Their marriage was not supposed to create more problems for him but it did. And that made her feel terrible. When their marriage ended, she wanted to leave without feeling indebted to him.

What she did not understand was why her mother was intent on killing her now. According to Grandpa William, if something happened to her before her twenty-first birthday then all the trust funds would go to different charities.

The only way for her mother to get her hands on the trust was to either break apart their marriage or prove that it was a sham. But she could think of no one else wanting to harm her. Antonio would not be bothered with her while Sara had already started to change for the better. And she had no other enemies as far as she was aware.

So, the only way to stop living in fear and pain was to finally put her mother behind bars once and for all.

Sighing, she refuted Demetri's words and spoke quietly but firmly, "I am going to the vacation house with the others, Demetri."

Demetri stared her down, his aura oppressive as he stared at her. Nora wanted to shiver at the way the temperature suddenly seemed to drop. However, she knew that she could not back down. She would never be able to stand up for herself if she gave in this time...But maybe she could explain...

So she did... hurriedly..." Demetri, look, we all know who is behind this. We just do not have evidence. If Lara learns that I am not in the city and am away from your protection, she will not be able to resist the opportunity. I've already spoken to the Police detective about this and he has agreed to send someone with me for my protection and to help catch the culprit."

Demetri's face showed no emotion other than disapproval even after she had finished her explanation. Nora looked down at her breakfast, wondering what else she could say to make him go back to his normal less cold self. She felt as if she had committed a misdemeanour and been instructed to receive her punishment from the principal.

Demetri's jaw clenched as Nora finished explaining, his eyes narrowing slightly. The silence that followed hung heavily in the air, broken only by the distant sounds of the city. Nora could practically feel the tension radiating from him.

"Absolutely not, Nora," Demetri finally spoke, his voice low and controlled. "I won't allow it. You're safer here with me."

Nora looked up at him, frustration building within her. "Demetri, I appreciate everything you're doing, but I can't just sit here and wait. I need to do something, too. I can't let fear control my life."

His response, this time, was a deep, almost guttural growl. He turned away from her, pacing a few steps toward the window, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"I won't allow it," he repeated, his voice colder than ever. It made her shiver, and she felt the fear in her bones.

Her reaction was not missed by Demetri as he turned away, moving towards the door, his body language rigid.

Nora's frustration flared into a spark of anger. "You won't allow it? Demetri, this isn't about permission."

He turned to face her once more, and there was a silent battle of wills in that gaze. Nora could almost feel the palpable force of his stubbornness.

"Stay here, Nora. That's an order," he stated, his voice firm and authoritative.

Nora bristled at that and snapped back, "I am not one of your subordinates! I am doing this Demetri. I cannot and will not rely on you forever!"

He didn't respond with words. Instead, he walked out of the house, closing the door behind him with a bang.

Nora sat there shocked at how things had spun out of control so quickly and could not help but wonder if this was their first fight...

The air in the room felt charged, and she couldn't shake the uncertainty that lingered. The conflict between her feelings and Demetri's need to protect had set the stage for a battle that neither of them had anticipated.

Unexpectedly, Nora could feel the tears in her eyes, as she watched the closed door. Why would Demetri do this? Did he not see that taking this step would be beneficial to him as well? He would not be forced to spend so much time and effort on protecting her. She did not want to be a burden to him.

Outside the house, Demetri's anger was palpable. He had no idea what Nora was thinking but he did not like the idea of her putting herself in danger. But what made him even more angry was his first reaction to her insisting on doing this. He had almost caught her in his arms and declared that he could not lose her.

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"Well, of course, he is angry. Imagine if I were to tell you that I want to perform ballet dance on a tight rope between two skyscrapers!"

Nora giggled amid the seriousness of the visual Isabella painted, and shook her head, "That is not the same, Isabella! You do not even know ballet!"

Isabella laughed at that but soon answered seriously, "And you do not know about all these games, Nora! You cannot get to me. In fact, even though as your best friend, I

should be hating on him for making you worry and cry, I think I understand him. Whether it is wanting to dance on a tightrope or the plan you are proposing, it involves putting yourself in danger. That man has been protecting you, doing his best to keep you safe and instead, you want to put yourself in danger."

Nora leaned against the wall as she stared at the people passing by, sighing again, " I know that, Bella. And I understand. But he cannot put me in a fortress twenty-four-seven and protect me. Someday, the perpetrator will find a way to break into the defence. I cannot wait for that day!"

"I know baby. But just because you are worried that someone will shoot you, its not okay to go and stand in front of the gun."

Silence reigned as Nora absorbed the words. After Demetri left, Nora had been drowning in conflict of guilt and her own stubbornness. On the one hand, she wanted to go ahead with the plan and get done with all the waiting. On the other, she felt like an ungrateful wretch for fighting with the man over this.

Finally, she'd convinced herself that she was right and even told herself that Demetri was probably angry because he thought that she did not trust him. Finally, having convinced herself, she called Isabella so that the girl would concur with her thinking. This way, when Demetri returned, she would again try to talk to him calmly. She would assure him that she trusted that he could protect her and find the culprit but just that she did not wish to just wait passively. She wanted to actively participate in getting rid of that person.

But instead, her all-time supporter had decided to play devil's advocate today and was siding with Demetri!

As the silence continued, Isabelle sighed and explained, " Baby, you are not wrong in wanting to get rid of the threat. I cannot imagine how you are feeling at this time, the danger always hovering behind you. I am totally on your team. But, that husband of yours, though he may be opposing you, he is also in your team. We don't want you to risk yourself. We're just worried about you."

"Your plan is good, but it is indeed too hasty. The trip is in two days and you are going in blind. I know you are doing good with self-defense and the police will be there but there is always a what if..."

"I don't want him to keep protecting me, Bella. I want to be independent." Nora spoke slowly.

Isabella sighed through the phone, " Then be independent, baby but not at the expense of your safety."

"But I've trusted him all this while, haven't I? Can he not trust me? I know my mother. Once she knows that I am going on this trip, she will not let go of the opportunity. This is the best time to discover who is helping her and how."

"Don't convince me, babe. Convince that husband of yours. He is the one who walked out mid-fight."

Nora nodded, energized. Yes. She would talk to Demetri again! He had not even let her explain the entire plan and walked out! Maybe if she could show him that she would be taking precautions and how she would be meticulous, minimizing the danger, maybe he would trust her and not object her to taking this risk!

Even though she had told him that she did not need his permission, she knew in her heart that she did hope that he would agree. So, she would make this last-ditch effort to maybe convince him.

"You are right! I'll go right now and talk to him! He has to listen to me before he goes around banging doors childishly! Thanks Bella! I'll talk to you later! You sleep now!" With that, Nora disconnected the phone and marched towards the campus gate, ready to head straight to Demetri's office so as not to waste time. It was almost lunch hour anyway..."

On the other side of the phone, Isabella glanced at the clock and then sighed. Nora baby had indeed grown up. There was a time when she was always telling her to fight that woman and not be suppressed by her. But she had always been scared. A few months with Demon Frost had actually made her friend strong enough to do something like this.

Nora might not know this but having Demon Frost back you up was akin to having an entire army backing you up. But the question why was the army behind her? What did it gain from this?

Isabella sighed. She would need to hurry back and meet Demon Frost soon so that she could read the man's intentions.

Nora had just left the university when she received a message from Demetri, "At home."

That caused her to raise her brows. Did the man already know that she was going to his office? Was that why he had asked her to come home? Changing directions, she turned her bicycle and took the way home, thinking about what she could say to convince him.

She could not have expected that the moment, she entered the door, she would be met with Demetri's hard gaze while he waited for her.

And she most certainly did not expect that he would order, "Take off your clothes."

When she froze in place the man actually narrowed his eyes and spoke sharply, "Take them off."

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