

Benefits 331

Chapter 331: A Bomb

"Big Mama. Thank you for the breakfast."

Miss Martha looked at the handsome man in front of her and smiled. This one here was a good boy, despite being an 'influencer'. But he was too thin. And the sadness around his eyes, she just didn't like it. Even though she had seen the pictures he'd shared of when he had just started recovering and he'd built up now, she felt that this boy could use some fattening up. And so, she did not hesitate to add another scoop of butter on the young's man's stack of pancakes.

"You're welcome. Erasmi, you've been here for a few days but you haven't even explored the town. Why don't you go look around at the scenery. Our town is small but we have a lot of pretty places. They used to be crowded and full of picnicking families in the past but these days hardly ever anyone ventures outside, so they are very tranquil. Do you want me to give you a map?"

Erasmi paused and nodded his head, "Thank you, big mama. I don't need a map, but I would like recommendations. Any places around town that a young boy might enjoy?"

"A young boy? Sure there are many! I'll go and write down the directions for you right away!" Big Mama hurriedly bustled away while Erasmi shook his head. The lady did not seem to value any GPS systems. She reminded him so much of that old man Elijah Frost!

After the hearty breakfast and detailed instructions from Big mama about a small lake where they could go fishing and boating, Erasmi finally went to make 'The Call'.

In the small room, he carefully brought out the photo album that Caius' mother had given him and picked up the picture of a six-month-old Caius. And grinned. Time to create some havoc. Grabbing his phone, he clicked the picture of the photo and sent it into the group.

Seb: "Why would you send a baby's picture?"

Ian: "Cute baby. You go on a trip and send baby pictures? I remember asking you to share your escapades! What are you up to Erasmi Frost?"

Erasmi: "Look carefully, fools. Who does the baby look like?"

Before Seb and Ian could even peer closely at the baby, Lucien dropped the bomb, "The baby looks like Demetri and Nora."

Seb: Holy shi*! They had a baby and did not even inform us?

Ian: @Demon! What is wrong with you? When were you going to tell us about this cute little baby monster! I want to pull his cheeks and bite them!

Seb: At least he is smiling and not scowling like Demetri! He might have taken our Frost features, but his personality should not be like Demon!

Erasmi smiled at that. As expected.

Lucien: Where did you find a baby that looks like Demetri AND Nora?

Seb: Erasmi Frost! Is this some AI generated baby?

Ian: Could be? But even so, now we know what the next generation Frost would be like. We have to be prepared for the cuteness overload.

Lucien: I will not talk in baby language, ever! So, please don't bring the baby to me.

Next, Erasmi clicked pictures from, Caius' first birthday to his tenth birthday and shared them simultaneously.

This was followed by silence. Erasmi's smile faded a bit and he knew his brothers must have finally realized. As he stared at the silent chat, his phone started to ring. Demetri. He clenched his hands. Unexpectedly, it was Demon who would make the connection first.

With shaking hands, he tapped the answer icon but was unable to speak. "He's yours and Nellie's? Isn't he?"

Erasmi heard the slight hesitation in Demetri's voice and somehow it stabilized him. His brother was as shocked as him. "Yes."

"She was pregnant when the accident happened?"

"Seems like it." Erasmi answered slowly.

"This changes things, Eras... So many things now make sense but..."

"But also raised as many questions?" Erasmi finished the sentence for Demetri. "It doesn't matter, Demon. I'm not going to look at the past for now. I'm going to use this time to get to know my son."

"Your son. Congratulations Eras! I'm an uncle now." Demetri's voice contained a hint of a smile while he heard Nora scream from behind, "Congratulations Erasmi! I'm an aunt now! Even though I'm too young to be an aunt! I'm an aunt!"

Erasmi smiled at her exuberence before cutting them off, "You are not the aunt and uncle!"

That caused an abrupt silence to fall on the other end and Erasmi announced, "You are the Godmother and Godfather of Caius Demetri Mercer, soon to be Frost."

"His name is Caius Demetri?" Demetri asked slowly.

"Hmm... But he likes Demetri better."

"We want to see him. Where are you? Have you spoken to him yet? And the adoptive family?", Nora asked quickly.

"I've contacted his mother. His adoptive father is out of the picture. Caius knows he is adopted but was told that both his biological parents are dead. His mother will tell him today about me. I've met him, Demon. He is so much like us..."

Suddenly, Demetri exploded, "F*ck! That old man had some nerve, hiding your kid from us! How dare he deprive the child of us! No wonder he did not tell us even when you returned! That old man! Always thinking that he was right? Even if he did not trust us, couldn't he have trusted his own upbringing and let us treat the kid well! Ten years! The child is almost eleven!"

Erasmi was gratified at his twin's reaction. He'd been wanting to rant at the old man since finding the truth but had felt equal parts guilty. After all the man was dead and it didn't do to curse the dead.

After talking with Demetri and then answering the video call with others, Erasmi finally smiled and settled down, feeling lighter and much more at ease. Soon, his son would know about him. Would the little boy who had followed him around this morning, still be the same when he returned? He hoped Caius would accept him...

Chapter 332: Erasmi Frost

Caius Mercer sat in front of his computer's screen and looked at the pictures carefully. He had a father? It was something out of a movie. Hadn't he just been praying last week, hoping that he would have a father who would protect him and his mother like other fathers? He repeated the name slowly in his heart, 'Erasmi Frost.' and carefully typed the words on his keyboard.

According to his mother, this man had been sick since the accident and so everyone had been told he was dead. How could this be? They must be lying to him. Was his mother lying to him? Did she want to send him away? Or maybe the man was a fraud! He had to be.

He'd heard all the gossip in the town about how she was sick and could die anytime. She had to be lying to him so that he would be safe from all these people who had been troubling them. But he wouldn't leave her, ever. She was his only family. And he was her only family.

Soon, a long list of names appeared on the screen and on the second position was Erasmi Frost. It was a list of directors of some large corporation called Frost Industries. There were six names in total and suddenly he felt scared. The first name was Demetri Frost. And his name also had Demetri...

Could it be that man was really his father? Would he take him away from his mother? Then who would look after his mother? No. He had to find a way to get rid of this man. But... he'd also promised to help him with the matter of the school and helping him in protecting his mother. First, he would have to ask this man's intentions. And if that man really thought that he could take him away, he would teach him not to mess with Caius Mercer.

Just as he was thinking what to do, he heard his mother's call, "Caius."

Suddenly, he felt scared. He did not want to meet this man. He'd been fine to talk to in the morning but then he had not known that this man could be the enemy.

Caius descended the stairs, each step heavy with the weight of uncertainty. His mother stood in the living room, a warm smile on her face, but Caius couldn't shake off the unease gnawing at him.

He looked at the man who had almost seemed like a friend today and tried to smile but could not. His mother came to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, "Caius. Your father wants to take you out. Why don't you go with him?"

All of his fears manifested and Caius hurriedly took a step back, "I am not going anywhere with you. I won't leave my mother! Why did you return? You should've remained dead."

Ava was shocked at the outburst and tried to stop Caius who was already racing up the stairs while Erasmi stood shocked. Ava Mercer quickly apologized, "I'm sorry, Mr Frost. I thought I explained things but he seems to have received a shock. I'll go and talk to him."

"Mrs Mercer. Why don't I go and talk to him?" Erasmi asked calmly.

Mrs Mercer hesitated and nodded, stepping aside to let Erasmi pass.

Upstairs, Erasmi paused at the door, knocked and entered when the boy's voice sounded, "Mom! I don't want to go with...It's you. Get out."

"Caius. I thought we agreed to be friends this morning."

Caius raised his chin," That was before I knew that you came to separate me from my mother! You are a liar! You pretended to be my mother's friend and promised me that you would help me. But you came to take me away!"

Erasmi smiled at that," You're mistaken Caius. I wouldn't know what to do with you if I took you away from your mother. I can't do that. All I know about being a dad is dad jokes. And those might not be funny."

That made the boy quiet down. He had not expected that. "You're serious? You expect me to believe you that you are not going to take me away from my mother."

"Hmm. Thats what I said. I have no intention of taking you away from Mrs Mercer.

"Then where were you taking me just now?"

"I planned to take you to the lake down the lake for some sailing and fishing. If you are interested that is."

"You promise to not take me from my mother? Ever?"

"Promise, Caius. But in return, I want you to give me a chance. I'd like to get to know my son more."

Caius bit his lip," I guess I can do that. But..."

"But?"

"But I never had a father so I don't know... what you expect."

Erasmi felt relieved at that and nodded," Well, I've never had a son either so I guess, we can start together?"

Caius nodded at that and extended his hand, "Alright, it's a deal."

Erasmi looked down at the little hand and gently grasped it, "It's a promise."

As the two walked down the stairs hand in hand, Ave Mercer stared at the people and felt a pang in her heart as well as some fear. However, that fear was soon dissipated as Caius let go of the man's hand and skipped to her, "Mom. We are going fishing to the lake. Erasmi is going to teach me to fish."

"That is great, Caius. I hope you have fun. Go." Erasmi watched as the boy skipped to the door, where he was waiting but continued to look back at his mother.

For a moment, Erasmi wondered if he should do what the child wanted him to do or ignore his instincts. "Mrs. Mercer, why don't you join us? I'm sure you could do with some fresh air."

Erasmi watched as the boy's eyes lit up and he quickly caught his mother's hand, looking up at her imploringly and knew that he'd made the right decision.

Chapter 333: An Accident

Nora walked down the path with a smile on her face as she heard Isabella complaining all about her dear brother and shook her head. Isabella and Emerald Ruffalo were never going to see eye to eye, no matter how much Isabella tried to explain things to the man. Emerald Ruffalo was a narrow-minded and judgmental man. Long ago, he'd decided that Isabella was a slut* because one of her friends said so. No matter what she did, he'd refused to look at Bella without that tarnished view point.

It was why Isabella had purposely hugged that label. A challenge to her brother. If he thought that of her, then she would prove him right. Isabella had gone away for further studies, hoping against hope that she would be able to change his viewpoint but here they were. Still at the same place.

As Isabella vowed to kill the man for the nth time, Nora tried to speak again, "You really need to hit him over the head. Even a small tap will probably help his brain settle back in the right place."

Isabella groaned and shook her head, "I wish. Nora, you should see the men he has been trying to set me up with! Some of them are older than my father. I'm telling you, he is going to make me crazy."

"And I'm telling you, let me go talk to him. I will..."

Isabella looked at her and shook her head, "No way. Do you remember the wild accusations he made last time? I'm definitely not..."

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ChatGPT

ChatGPT

Engrossed in their conversation, the two girls failed to notice the faint hum of an approaching vehicle. The sudden, screeching sound of tires echoed through the quiet evening, as a car careened toward Isabella and Nora, one of its sides scraping against the pavement.

Nora and Isabella watched in horror as pedestrians scrambled to evade the oncoming vehicle. Panic surged through them, and instinctively, they tried to assess the best route to escape the impending danger. The chaos unfolded in a surreal haze—the shouts of others, the blaring of horns, and the high-pitched squeal of brakes merging into a disorienting cacophony.

Nora's eyes darted around, desperately searching for an escape route. She could feel the rush of wind as the car drew closer, seemingly out of control. With a quick decision, she pulled Isabella towards the wall, hoping that the car, if it had lost control, would continue straight and pass them by.

As they tried to move, the car's headlights blinded them, and the world blurred into a disconcerting mix of fear and urgency. Nora's heart pounded in her chest, the seconds stretching into an eternity as the car hurtled toward them.

Then, just when it seemed like the car would pass by harmlessly, it abruptly veered towards them. The sudden change in trajectory sent a shock of terror through Nora. She gasped, pulling Isabella even closer to the wall, attempting to minimize the impact as she tried to think of a way to escape being crushed into the wall.

The car's side mirror brushed against Isabella who tried to push Nora away from the car, knocking Nora off balance. The air was filled with the chilling sound of metal against concrete. Isabella stumbled, her back hitting the wall as the car scraped past them. The force of the near collision left them breathless, disoriented, and acutely aware of how narrowly they had escaped a potentially life-altering accident.

As the car finally came to a stop a few yards away, the air hung heavy with the scent of burning rubber. Nora and Isabella, still pressed against the wall, exchanged wide-eyed glances, their hearts racing. Before she could gather herself, a slew of people appeared, quickly surrounding them and the car.

Unconcerned about everything else, Isabella turned to Nora wide eyes and asked in a trembling voice, "Are you alright?"

Nora nodded and stood up slowly, "I think so. What just happened?"

Before either of them had a chance to even sigh, Nora's phone started to ring. Looking at each other, the two girls hugged and almost cried. Dam* it! They'd almost turned into dust, just now.

Just then a man extended his phone to Nora and spoke sharply, "Miss Nora. Mr Frost would like a word."

Confused now about a stranger approaching her, Nora took the phone with shaking hands and answered, "Hello?"

She heard his wild sigh before he asked her, "Are you alright, kitten? You're not hurt?"

Hearing the trembling in his voice, Nora took a shaky breath and tried to reassure him, "Yes. Yes. Demetri this... you.."

"Not now, Nora. Get into the car with this man and he'll bring you to me. I'll explain everything."

Nora nodded her head, even though Demetri could not see her and followed the man slowly. As they reached the car, Nora hesitated for a moment, her gaze lingering on the battered car, the front of which had been pushed into the wall.

The driver's side had not opened and it made her wonder if the person driving the car had even survived the crash.

As the car pulled away from the scene, Nora couldn't shake the images of the battered vehicle and the narrow gap between life and death. And somehow, she had a feeling that this had not been a simple accident of a driver losing control.

Nora leaned back and closed her eyes, trying to steady her breath and prepare herself for what could be. If Demetri had come to know about the accident and his people had come to her within a few seconds, it meant that they'd already been around... protecting her covertly.

It didn't take rocket science to come to a conclusion. Suddenly, Nora opened her eyes and questioned the man driving the car, "Where is Gabe Frost?"

She watched the man hesitate and knew she had an answer. "Nora..." Isabella's hesitant voice sounded and it was enough to let her know that Isabella knew this.

Picking up her phone, she dialled her husband and spoke straightaway, "I want to see Gabe."

Chapter 334: Ian's Guilt

As Nora's car glided to a stop in front of the Frost building, she spotted Demetri standing at the entrance. The car had barely stopped, when Demetri charged forward and quickly pulled her into his arms, hugging her closely. Nora closed her eyes and let herself hug him back, his embrace reminding her that she was still alive and able to be with him. She could feel him trembling and knew that he'd been as scared as her. They'd almost lost each other too many times.

Finally, Demetri stepped back and quickly held her hand, causing her to wince. Noticing her scraped knees and scratches on her palms, Demetri instinctively let go of her hand before asking in concern, "You're hurt. Why didn't you say so?"

He turned to glare at the driver, as if ready to fire him for not reporting her injuries and Nora quickly tugged at his sleeve, offering him a reassuring smile, "These are just a few minor scrapes. I'm fine."

Demetri's look as he stared at Nora suggested that he did not think they were a few minor scrapes and he quickly tried to tug her to his office where he could properly dress her wounds. However, Nora resisted and turned to look at Isabella who still sat in the car, with her head between her knees, trying to breathe deeply.

"Ian is..."

As Demetri was about to explain, Ian passed by them in a gust of wind as he murmured to Nora, "Thank God, the two of you are safe." and walked around the car towards Isabella's side.

Seeing that her friend was now in safe hands, she followed Demetri into the building.

Once inside, she tried to question Demetri but he simple pulled her into another hug, kissing her forehead repeatedly. Once in the office, he silently pushed her onto the sofa and got to the task of wiping her wounds with antiseptic wipes.

Nora felt her throat close as she looked at his silent form as he avoided her gaze. "It could have been a freak accident, you know. Maybe the driver was drunk or lost control of the car..."

His jaw clenched, letting her know that he heard her, but he said nothing, applying the medicine next.

"Maybe it wasn't..."

"It was Arabelle, Nora. I know it. We've been taking so many precautions but she was still able to almost get to you. I feel as if I should lock you in the house and not let you out, until she is handled. I should have done that, even if you'd hated me for locking you up. I should have told you about her instead of"

"Hey! I could never hate you." Nora quickly caught his face between her fingers and caressed his cheek, "Demetri, I know you could never have been able to keep me locked up. Something was bound to happen

even if you'd told me about her so don't beat yourself up. That car came out of nowhere. Even if I'd known about Arabelle, I wouldn't have been any better prepared."

"I know. But what if..."

"No what ifs. They are all invalid, okay? Where's Gabe?"

"On his way."

Nora nodded and quickly stood up, letting Demetri sit on the couch before climbing onto his lap, "Then let's take a moment for ourselves."

Isabella sat in the back seat of the car, her eyes wide and unblinking, still reeling from the near miss of the accident. As Ian opened the car door, he realized that the girl seemed to be in shock. Gently, he moved towards her, taking hold of Isabella's trembling hands. She jerked at the simple touch and almost fell off her seat before she looked up to see Ian with glassy and haunted eyes.

"Bella, are you alright?" he asked, his voice filled with concern.

She managed a nod, but her lips quivered as she tried to form words. "I-I'm fine, just... just a bit shaken," she stammered, her voice barely audible. " I was fine. And we were safe but now, that car..."

Ian's expression softened as he sensed her vulnerability. Without hesitation, he helped her out of the car, his grip on her hands reassuring. However, as Isabella attempted to stand on her own, her knees betrayed her, threatening to buckle beneath her weight. Panic flickered across her face, but before she could hit the ground, Ian swiftly scooped her up in his arms, cradling her against his chest.

"Easy there, Bella," Ian murmured, his voice a comforting whisper. He settled her back into the car, sliding in beside her, making sure to keep holding her hand as he quickly pulled her into a comforting embrace.

All emotions that she'd held back, seemed to come in full force as the floodgates opened up. She buried her face in his chest, her shoulders shaking as silent tears rolled down her cheeks, wetting the fabric of Ian's shirt.

Ian tightened his hold on her, a silent gesture of support. "It's okay, Bella. Let it out," he encouraged, his voice a soothing balm. His fingers traced comforting circles on her back as she clung to him.

As Isabella wept, Ian felt his heart move. It made him realize that if something had happened to this lively girl, he would not have been able to forgive himself for putting her in harm's way. Slowly, he hugged her tighter, hoping that this would not turn into a nightmare for her.

The evening sky hung heavy with the remnants of twilight as Isabella sat in the back seat of the car, her eyes wide and unblinking, still reeling from the near miss of the accident. The distant hum of traffic seemed muffled as she struggled to control her erratic breathing. The sudden jolt had left her trembling, her hands gripping the edge of the seat as if it were the only anchor in a sea of chaos.

Ian, sensing her distress, moved towards her with a worried furrow in his brow. He reached out, gently taking hold of Isabella's trembling hands. "Bella, are you alright?" he asked, his voice filled with concern.

Isabella turned her gaze towards Ian, her eyes glassy and haunted. She managed a nod, but her lips quivered as she tried to form words. "I-I'm fine, just... just a bit shaken," she stammered, her voice barely audible.

Ian's expression softened as he sensed her vulnerability. Without hesitation, he helped her out of the car, his grip on her hands reassuring. However, as Isabella attempted to stand on her own, her knees betrayed her, threatening to buckle beneath her weight. Panic flickered across her face, but before she could hit the ground, Ian swiftly scooped her up in his arms, cradling her in a bridal hold.

"Easy there, Bella," Ian murmured, his voice a comforting whisper. He settled her back into the car, sliding in beside her, never letting go of her hands. The interior of the car cocooned them in a momentary sanctuary from the outside world.

Isabella, now seated beside Ian, felt the warmth of his embrace and the safety of his presence. She buried her face in his chest, her shoulders shaking as the floodgates of held-back emotions burst open. Silent tears rolled down her cheeks, wetting the fabric of Ian's shirt.

Ian tightened his hold on her, a silent gesture of support. "It's okay, Bella. Let it out," he encouraged, his voice a soothing balm. His fingers traced comforting circles on her back as she clung to him, the weight of the harrowing experience finally catching up to her.

As Isabella wept, the car became a haven of solace, shielded from the outside world. The soft hum of the engine and the rhythmic sound of Isabella's uneven breathing filled the space between them. Ian, understanding the need for silence, offered a steady presence, his own emotions hidden behind a facade of strength.

After a while, as Isabella's sobs began to subside, she pulled back slightly from Ian's chest. Tear-streaked eyes met his, and in that unspoken exchange, something seemed to shift between them.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice still carrying the remnants of vulnerability and something more.

Ian nodded, his eyes softening. "Anytime, Bella."

Chapter 335: Gabe's Vow

Gabe rushed out of the house, a far look from his usual meticulous self, his usually composed demeanor shattered by the weight of guilt and uncertainty that clung to him.

For the last few days, he'd been eaten by all kinds of guilt, haunted by doubts that gnawed at the edges of his consciousness. The nagging question persisted: had he made an irreversible mistake?

Despite all the regret and unanswered questions, he'd come to one conclusion. Any time that he had spent with Arabelle, any hope for a peaceful future were now in the past. Their journey together had come to an end. Even if she was still the girl that he'd spent the last year with, and loved all his life, he could not hold her there. And if the last year had been an act on her behalf, then... his eyes hardened ruthlessly.

His love for her had been a driving force in his life, the reason to live but now, it had slowly turned into hatred. Not for herself but for him. For being so foolish and trying to live life by covering his eyes with rose colored glasses.

He loved with everything but he hated with everything as well. As his hands clenched the steering wheel, he vowed to himself that he would put an end to this matter at the soonest.

As he barged into Demetri's office, wracked with guilt over what Nora had suffered due to his own foolishness, he could not help but hesitate. How was he to face her when he was to be blamed that she'd almost died?

Seeing her sitting there with her eyes closed as she lay back on the couch, gave him a pause. His eyes met Demetri's hard gaze and in that he knew that he'd finally crossed the limits to his brother's patience. He gulped as he tried to apologize but the words remained stuck in her throat.

Demetri looked away from him and casually picked up his phone before walking over to Nora. Gently he woke her up and whispered something before coming towards him.

Once again, Gabe tried to speak but Demetri did not even glance at him as he walked out of the door, passing him by.

"Demon..."

"Not now." Demetri spoke softly, " Come to the conference room where you're done here." The sheer coldness in his voice made Gabe's feel extremely uncomfortable even as he nodded at him.

Gabe stood there, a heavy silence lingering in the room as Demetri left, leaving him alone with Nora. She opened her eyes, and for a moment, confusion flickered across her face. As she focused on Gabe, concern replaced the confusion.

Standing up, she quickly raced to him, " Are you alright, Gabe? You look like a zombie."

The soft concern instead of the rightful accusation almost gutted him as he quickly hugged her back, " Thank the heavens, you're alright! If something had happened to you..." He hesitated, struggling to find the right words. "Nora, I... I'm so sorry. For everything. It's all my fault, Nora. Everything that happened. I put you in danger, if it hadn't been for me..."

Nora stepped back and quickly stopped him with a pat on his hand, her voice even softer, as she shook her head. "Gabe, it's not you."

Gabe looked away from the understanding look, "I should have been more careful."

Nora smiled gently, her hand squeezing his arm reassuringly. "We can't change what's already happened. What matters is how we move forward from here."

As she said that, a questioning look entered her eyes, "Will you be alright? Have you thought what you want to do from here?"

Gabe breathed in deeply and answered, "Yes."

Something in his tone must have caught her attention for she looked at him even more concernedly, "Dam* it! What are you planning? I'm pretty sure its foolish. Look, don't rush it okay. Calm down and talk to..."

Gabe, however, cut her off, "Nora? How can you still be concerned about me? I almost got you killed!"

Nora waved away his apology. "Gabe, I already said it's not your fault. I'm more worried about you right now. You seem... broken."

"I'll be fine. Thanks Nora."

Knowing that he was barely hanging by a thread, and Nora's kindness might just end up making him fall apart, he quickly rushed out of the office. At least he knew his brothers would be ready to beat him up for his foolishness.

Unexpectedly, once inside the conference room, Gabe could only stare at Lucien, Seb, Ian and Demetri. While the previous times, they'd been ready to lecture him and even kidnap him, the silence today was a whole new pain.

Gabe sighed and looked at Demon, "I'm sorry man... I never thought..."

Before Demetri could say anything more, Ian burst out, "We know you never thought that Arabelle might try to kill a few people, despite evidence to the contrary. You always thought that she could do no wrong. And now, you almost had two innocent lives killed!"

Gabe sighed and did not defend himself. He knew, of course, Gabe was right. Instead he looked at Ian and promised, "I know. I have no excuse. What I can say is that I will make this right."

Ian scoffed at that, "How? By taking Arabelle again and trying to get her treated? Then you'll cut yourself from us and live your happily ever after with her?"

"That's enough, Ian!" Demetri growled as he stared at him with a penetrating gaze. Even Seb and Lucien were shocked by the outburst.

Before anyone could question Ian about his out of sorts behavior, Gabe spoke softly, "I know there will be no happily ever after. There never was. I've already promised that I'll take care of it."

"The only way to stop her is to bury her six feet under! You won't be able to do that, Gabe. I suggest that you leave here and we'll take care of everything."

"If her death is the only way to assure everyone's safety then that is what will happen. What needs to be done, will be done. And I don't need anyone to do it for me."

As Gabe turned and walked back out of the room, Ian kicked the wall in frustration, "The idio* is going to end up destroying himself!"

Chapter 336: Arabelle's Game

In the dimly lit room, a girl sat cross-legged on her bed, the soft glow of her phone casting a subtle blue hue across her excited face. The thrill of impeding victory rushed through her as the sound of tires screeching echoed through the speakers, before a loud crash could be heard from them. Her face contorted into an expression of frustration at the crash and failure to accomplish the task and she flung her phone across the room in a fit of anger, causing the phone to shatter into pieces.

Unconcerned by the destruction she had just caused, Arabelle reached for another phone from the bedside, determined to resume her gaming experience. She powered it on, swiftly downloading the game once more. Laying back down, she resumed her virtual race, her fingers moving with agility over the screen, navigating virtual cars through the intense competition.

Just as she started to win again, a message popped onto her screen, disrupting her game and almost causing her to crash again. The words flashed before her eyes, "Looking for you, Arrie." A chill ran down her spine as the realization hit her – her phone had been hacked. The excitement of the game quickly morphed into a sense of unease, and her eyes narrowed as she scanned the room, half-expecting someone to materialize from the shadows.

The nickname caused her to narrow her eyes in hatred as she stared at the message again, her mood ruined! Angry, she tossed the compromised phone aside, causing it to crash against the wall once more. The display flickered and went dark, adding another victim to her fit of frustration.

She reached for yet another phone, undeterred by the chaos she had created, and began the process of downloading the game once again. She was bored and needed something to do. And she liked gaming best.

Once again, she focused on gaming but this time, she was a bit shaken. The previous message seemed to be echoing in her head as a voice spoke her name in a loving voice, "Arrie..."

However, as the seconds ticked away, a new message materialized on the screen, its appearance abrupt and unwelcome. "Come back to me, Arrie. Why did you leave me?"

Arabelle's eyes widened in disbelief, her heart pounding against the backdrop of the racing game's soundtrack. Had he found her? Was it really Gabe who was asking her to come back to him. A kind of yearning unfurled within her as memories seemed to awash over her. Him calling out to her in the pool or when she'd gone for the brain tumor removal surgery, the way he'd held her hand, promising that he would be waiting for his Arrie when she returned.

As tears fell from her eyes, Arabelle threw this phone into the wall too and quickly slid under the blanket, covering her face as she hid under it. No. She could not go back to him or else, she would once again forget her love for Demetri. She needed to kill that Nora for standing in her way.

"Kill Gabe too.", a sinister voice echoed in her head. " He played you and used your trust against you. Kill him."

Yes. She would kill Gabe too, she decided. She would kill him and then the weakness in her which was always clambering to go to him and hug him would die as well. She would kill him and hug his corpse! As Arabelle lay shivering under the blanket, she thought of ways to kill him and resolutely pushed away the blanket and grabbed another phone.

Gabe looked at the blank screen and sighed. Just when he was able to locate her physical address, the signal was cut off both times. He looked at the time, wondering if she would come online a third time.

He felt the door behind him open and turned back to see Lucien coming in. Without a word, he turned his eyes back to the screen and sighed. "What are you doing?"

"Tracing Arabelle. She was addicted to racing games. I bugged a few popular ones hoping that she would come online. I think I found her just now but ...

Lucien looked at him sharply, " But?"

"But her signal disappeared before I could track her physical location."

Lucien placed a hand on his shoulder as he sat next to him, " You need help?"

"I know you're an expert, Lucy. But I want to do this on my own."

"But if she knows now, will she come back on?"

Just then, Gabe's laptop beeped, letting him know that someone had reappeared. Quickly, he turned back to the screen, bewildered by the username which appeared on the screen. It was a string of numbers that looked like a phone number...Hurriedly, he sent another message, this time only writing

her name, "Arrie...." and as his fingers flew over the keyboard, his laptop actively started to trace the physical address of the server's location.

Unexpectedly, a reply to Gabe's message appeared on the screen, "Gabe? Is that you?"

Gabe and Lucien both leaned forward at the message. Gabe growled while Lucien swore as he tried to stop Gabe from replying.

Gabe sent him a warning glance, "Arrie. Where are you? Come back to me."

Another message soon appeared on the screen, "Gabe! I don't know where I am. But save me from there people! They keep me locked up in this room all day. Come and take me away, Gabe please. I miss you. Take me with you Gabe."

Silence echoed in the room as Gabe stared at the screen while Lucien stared at Gabe. This was not good. He tried to shake Gabe but the man seemed to be frozen. Just then the signal seemed to finally have been reached and the coordinates of a place appeared on the screen.

Gabe stood up immediately and started to pack away his laptop, while Lucien tried to stop him, "Gabe! This could be a trap. Take a moment and calm down. What are you going to do?"

But Gabe simply shrugged him off and walked out of the room without a backward glance.

Chapter 337: Get A Hold

"You need to get a hold of yourself, Ian." Seb advised softly as he watched Ian pace the office floor restlessly. "Lately, something's off with you. What's going on? You seem... changed."

Ian glanced at Seb and sighed deeply, "Its nothing. I just... I didn't like what happened today."

"Mm.. none of us liked it. But it is just not like you to burst out like that? Aren't you Mr. Unflappable? If anyone other than Demon, has always kept calm in the eye of the storm, its been you. I understand Demon's anger, but you..."

"What? Only Demon is about to be angry about everything that happened? Hasn't Gabe been foolish long enough? He's been thinking about his love and that is all. And we've let him be, but today because of his selfishness, two innocent lives could have been harmed."

As Ian banged on the table, Seb suddenly had an inkling. It seemed he had finally discovered his brother's reason for the burst of anger. Hmm. Isabella was an interesting person...

"Are you worried about Miss Ruffalo? But she escaped unscathed, as well, didn't she?"

"Unscathed? Do you know how panicked she was when she arrived here? I don't even know how Demon could be so calm when he saw Gabe! For this matter, I don't blame just Arabelle but also Gabe!"

Seb stared, "Since when did we do that, Ian? Hate our brother? Especially when he recognizes what he has done and needs us more than ever?"

Ian paused and stared at Seb with dawning realization that he'd been too angry at Gabe. ";I don't hate him. I'm just angry at the mess..."

Seb sighed, " It's alright, Ian. We're all angry at him. But we need to clean up the mess carefully, Ian."

Ian sighed and shook his head, " I'll talk to Gabe."

"Lucy went there, for now. I think you need to take a breather. Let's go to the bar. It'll give you an outlet to take off some steam and forget things. Everyone is safe for now."

Ian shook his head and waved his hand, " You go. I don't feel like it tonight."

Seb shrugged and walked out of Ian's office without looking back. He was going to see a beautiful girl tonight. He was sure of it. With a bittersweet shake of his head, he whistled and walked away. Soon, he was going to lose his wingman as well. His brothers were falling like dominos. Shortly, he was going to be left the only Frost bachelor standing.

A little while after Seb left, Ian decisively stood up and grabbed his keys, walking out of the office.

Isabella let out a weary sigh, her eyes carefully examining the large bruise on her arm. The memory of how it got there eluded her, lost in the shock and chaos of the accident. She realized she had been too overwhelmed to notice the pain at the time.

Dragging herself towards the couch, she sank into its cushions and absentmindedly turned on the television. Sleep seemed like an impossible feat tonight, haunted by the vivid image of the car hurtling towards them. Later, she'd look up things to binge watch and pass the night.

Reflecting on her past perception of the life threatening situations Nora had to face, Isabella thought she had understood what her friend faced in those perilous moments. However, facing the potential end of her own life altered everything. The gravity of the danger hit her differently and she realized that she understood next to nothing...

In a moment of rare vulnerability, she accepted the truth was that she been a little envious in the past when she's heard of Ian's concern for Nora. Though she reminded herself that Nora deserved all the love she could get from Demon and his family, it made her want something like that for herself as well. Sigh. Maybe someday she would have that love as well. Hopefully without all those bruises.

Grimacing at the bruise on her arm, she checked the time. There were still a few more minutes until her favorite K-drama aired. The accident had almost caused her to miss the latest episode.

Perhaps she should tend to the bruise with some medicine in the meantime. However, laziness won over, and she dismissed the idea, deciding to endure the discomfort for a little longer. With a resigned shake of her head, she sighed again. Adjusting herself on the couch for a more comfortable position, Isabella prepared to lose herself in the world of her favorite drama, momentarily escaping the harsh reality of the recent events.

However, she could not have expected that she would not be able to get lazy as someone would soon ring the doorbell as soon as the drama started to air.

Cursing the person, she wondered who would come to her place. No one even knew her address except Nora and there was no way, Demetri would be sending her here.

Irritated, she muttered to herself about unexpected visitors and made her way to the door. As she opened it, her annoyance turned into surprise when she saw Ian Frost standing there.

"What are you doing here?"

"Hey," Ian greeted, a concerned furrow in his brow. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd check on you. After today's incident, I wanted to make sure you're okay."

Isabella's eyes widened at this and she asked in surprise, "How did you know my address?"

Ian scratched the back of his head with a sheepish smile on his face, "I asked Demon after the last time. After all, the wedding is still further away and you and Nora are probably going to get drunk again. So I thought it would be better to be prepared for next time. In case you need someone to take you home again."

Isabella blinked at that, wondering if she should be feeling touched or aggrieved that he would think she was a total slush. However, with her current mood, she was leaning towards being touched.

Chapter 338: Oh Soup!

As Isabella continued to stand there, Ian felt a little uncomfortable. Why did she not say anything? She wasn't even inviting him inside. Should he leave now?

With a frown, he cleared his throat, "I'd like to talk to you about something. May I come in?"

Isabella, realizing that she'd been standing there foolishly staring at the man, quickly blushed and stepped aside, "Yes. I'm sorry. Please come in. Would you like some water?"

"No. Thank you."

Once again, silence reigned as the two people stared at each other before a sudden sound echoed in the room, shaking the two out of their stupor. In unison they turned towards the television where the leads were kissing each other. Her eyes widening at the scene, Isabella quickly raced to the couch and grabbed the remote control, before turning to Ian with a red face, "I was watching dramas."

Ian smiled and somehow her red face, made him want to tease her, "I can see that, Isabella. Seemed like quite an interesting drama too. You shouldn't turn it off on my account. I can always wait for you to finish watching and then talk."

"No!" Isabella almost panicked. The thought of watching a drama with another man was impossible. Hurriedly, she latched onto the second part of his sentence, "You wanted to talk to me?"

Ian nodded and looked away, "Yes. I needed to apologize to you."

"Apologize? For what?"

"For involving you in this mess. I thought we were well prepared for anything that Arabelle might come up with. I only meant to use you as a cover to hide the security. I never thought that you would also be endangered by this. I can't even imagine what would have happened if you had.."

Isabella was stunned as she saw the guilt in the man's eyes. She'd never expected him to be concerned and guilty towards her. "You think too much. It was just a coincidence that Nora and I were together. You do not need to apologize..."

As they exchanged these words, Ian's gaze unintentionally fell on Isabella's arm, where the bruise from the accident was visible. His eyes narrowed, catching the subtle signs of discomfort she tried to conceal.

"What happened to your arm?" Ian asked, "Why didn't you tell the security team earlier that you'd hurt yourself?"

Isabella's eyes widened as Ian quickly took hold of her hand and stared at the large black-blue bruise on her arm.

"I... I didn't realize I'd hurt myself. I did not even know it until this appeared on my arm."

Ian nodded at that and asked, "Where is the ointment?"

"In the kitchen cabinet. I'll go get it..."

Before she could say more, Ian had already walked over in the direction of the kitchen as he said, "It must be when the side mirror hit you and Nora tried to pull you while she you tried to psuh you away. I should have paid attention to that when I saw the clip."

"You saw the clip of the accident?"

"Hmm. There were surveillance cameras around."

"What about the driver..." Isabella asked with some hesitation. She could not help but wonder if the driver had survived. The front of that car had been..."

"The driver survived though he is still in danger. We'll know in a few hours."

Isabella watched as Ian briskly but somehow naturally pulled her to the couch and had her sit. Next, he opened the first aid box and took her hand in his.

Isabella found herself captivated by the focused determination in Ian's eyes as he carefully examined the bruise on her arm. His spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose only added to the intensity of his gaze. She couldn't help but notice the subtle lines of worry etched on his forehead.

"You should have applied the medicine as soon as you saw the bruise." Ian chided gently, his voice carrying a hint of concern.

Isabella bit her lip, momentarily distracted by the proximity of his face. She couldn't deny the undeniable allure of Ian's features. The soft glow of lamplight accentuated the angles of his jaw and the way his dark hair fell slightly over his forehead. His long eyelashes would make a girl jealous.

For a moment, she forgot about the throbbing pain in her arm as she marveled at the unexpected tenderness in his touch.

Ian, fully engrossed in the task at hand, took a small jar of ointment and began applying it to the bruise with gentle strokes. Isabella couldn't help but admire the precision in his movements, the care he took not to cause her any more discomfort.

"Does it hurt?" Ian asked, his eyes flickering up to meet hers.

She shook her head, "Not as much as before. Thank you for doing this."

Ian smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and Isabella found herself momentarily breathless. She hadn't expected such a caring side from a man known for his cold and uncaring demeanor towards those not of his family.

Ian looked up at that moment, and caught her staring at him. She wanted to look away but her body seemed to forget to listen to her.

"What are you looking at?", he asked her seriously.

"You", she blurted out, thoughtlessly. "You're too beautiful."

Something seemed to shift in that moment. However, suddenly, Ian's phone rang, interrupting whatever was about to be said. He glanced at the screen and sighed.

"I need to take this," Ian apologized, placing a gentle hand on Isabella's uninjured arm. "It's about the ongoing investigation. I'll be right back."

As Ian stepped away to answer the call, Isabella couldn't help but reflect on the events of the evening. Somehow, amidst the chaos and concern, she had discovered a new side to Ian – a side that made her appreciate the man behind the composed facade.

And she realised that she might have somehow found someone she could appreciate. "Oh soup! She was gone if she fell for the playboy Frost!"

Chapter 339: Oh Soup (2)

Isabella shook her head to get rid of the notion that she was more than 'physically' attracted to Ian Frost.

She looked at him, standing in the balcony with his back to her and then quickly turned back to look at her hands which were still tingling. As expected that man was as perfect from behind as he was from the front. He was se* on legs so physical attraction was to be expected. She'd have to be a corpse to not be horn* for that man. But being attracted to him more than physically... nah that would be a mess of soup!

She'd definitely hurt more than her arm also in the accident. Did she hit her head against the wall and did not remember? That had to be it. She was having delusions due to concussion. She'd go to the hospital at the earliest and get medication.

Just then, the man responsible for her doubts returned and sat back down next to her, explaining, " We might have a clue about Arabelle's location. Actually two clues. Gabe thinks he might have found Arabelle's online gaming address while one of our investigators located an older caretaker of Arabelle from when she was younger who had retired but recently returned to work."

"That's good then. Once we know about her location, it would be easy to hand her over to the Police, right?"

Ian smiled and nodded along. The girl was quite innocent if she thought that they would give Arabelle over to the police. The Frossts did not give second chances to those who threatened them. In a world of fight or die, they would not be the ones to attack someone but if attacked, they wouldn't give the person another chance to backstab them. And while Gabe had let Arabelle have her way too many times, she'd finally crossed his boundaries.

That brought an end to their conversation and once again, an awkward silence echoed in the room. Isabella fidgeted with her fingers, avoiding direct eye contact with Ian. While he, in turn, glanced around the room, searching for something to break the awkward silence. Ultimately, Ian decided that he'd come here to make sure that she was alright, and he'd done that, so it was time to leave.

"I guess, I'll leave now." Ian said softly, his statement somehow sounding like a question.

However, just as Isabella was about to bid farewell to him, a loud growl emanated from her stomach. Both of them looked at each other, surprise etched on their faces. Isabella blushed, realizing that her empty stomach had chosen this precise moment to announce its hunger.

Ian's lips curled into a faint smile. "Seems like someone's hungry. Have you had anything to eat?"

Isabella laughed nervously, a hint of embarrassment in her voice. "I guess I got too caught up in everything. I haven't eaten since morning."

Ian, still standing, raised an eyebrow playfully. "Well then, we can't have you starving. How about we grab a bite together? My treat."

Isabella shook her head regretfully, "I'm sorry. May I take a rain check? I'll just order delivery for today. I won't be good company tonight. I'm not too dressed as well..."

Wordlessly, she pointed to her extremely old but comfortable clothing and hoped he would understand. Tonight, she just did not have it in her to do anything. She was still astounded at herself that she was not feeling extremely self-conscious in front of Hot Ian to change into decent clothing. She might regret it tomorrow but today...

Ian looked her over once and then again. Well, she might not be formally dressed but that threadbare and old t shirt and shorts did not do her injustice. In fact, he had no idea how he failed to notice those sexy legs of hers tonight. Isabella blushed as Ian casually looked her over from top to toe once and then again. Da*n it! Why did that have to be so attractive on him? Any other man would have looked like a perv checking her out like that and she'd have given him a piece of her mind.

Ian looked around the house and frowned that she would be eating unhealthy food. She'd been in an accident today... "Do you have any fresh groceries at home?"

"Hmmm. But I don't know what. Nora brought them. She's always trying to make me eat healthy..."

Isabella tapered off when Ian once again wandered towards her kitchen. As she watched him open her refrigerator and cupboards like he owned the place, she could not help but frown. This man... wasn't he too comfortable in her home when he'd only visited one time?

'Experience' a voice in her head whispered. Do you think he brings every girl home. He must be used to waking up in different places with different women. So, he is quick to adapt.

While she stood there, thinking, Ian had already filled up a pot of water and placed it on the stove.

"What are you doing?", she asked as she watched him cut up things and throw them into the large pot with ease.

"I'm making you some soup. It's the least I can do after what you've been through today; let me take care of the food. Why don't you relax and watch that drama?"

Isabella nodded but did not do as he said, instead mesmerized by what he was doing. Leaning against the counter, she watched his skilled fingers cut the meat effortlessly and she could only wonder what else those fingers could do... and then immediately blushed at her own naughty thoughts as another question came to her regarding connection the 'length' of a man being directly proportional to his fingers...

Ian, sensing her gaze, met her eyes and smirked. "Like what you see?"

Isabella blushed, looking away. "I didn't expect you to be such a domestic wizard."

"Well, life is full of surprises," he replied while putting around in her kitchen.

As the soup simmered on the stove, Ian set the table, creating a cozy atmosphere. He poured the steaming broth into bowls, adding a touch of finesse even to this simple task.

"There you go," he said, placing a bowl in front of her as he invited her to sit. "Homemade chicken noodle soup. Perfect for a night like this."

Chapter 340: Oh Soup (3)

Much to Isabella's surprise, the dinner turned out to be a silent but peaceful affair. She concentrated on enjoying the delicious soup, only realizing when she ate, how ravenous she had been. There was no music or fancy ambience or even romantic lighting but somehow this felt like a date and Isabella realized that she was too soft for something like this. Through out the dinner, she could not stop peeking at Ian.

Finally, as the last spoonful of the soup was finished, Ian stood up. Somehow she wanted to stop him. She was too reluctant to let the night end. Did he have to leave so soon? However, she then realized that he wasn't leaving but actually clearing the table to wash the dishes.

Isabella, feeling a sudden surge of gratitude, rushed to stop him. "No, no, let me do that. You cooked, the least I can do is clean up," she tried to insist but was gently pushed away by him as he said, "I told you to relax. I'll take care of this and then leave."

Isabella tried to take the bowls from him, "I can do it, Ian. There's no need for you to..."

As they played a little tug of war with the bowls, Isabella suddenly lost her balance and fell against Ian.

Caught off guard by the unexpected stumble, Isabella found herself pressed against Ian's chest, their proximity creating an unspoken tension in the air as her fingers clung to his shirt. For a moment, they simply stood there, frozen. Isabella's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she felt the warmth of Ian's body against hers.

"Easy there," Ian murmured, his arms instinctively wrapping around her for support as he placed the bowls aside. The gentle touch sent a shiver down Isabella's spine, and she couldn't help but look up at him.

"I'm sorry," Isabella stammered, attempting to pull away. However, Ian's grip on her remained steady. She could feel the heat of his fingers against her back, through the t shirt and they almost seemed to scald her. As if realizing he was holding her, his fingers gently squeezed her hip and moved. She expected him to take away his hand, was prepared for the disappointment. Unexpectedly, he did the opposite.

After a moment of hesitation, his fingers slowly traced along the curve of her hip, gently bringing her closer as his face leaned close to hers. He stopped just as hands reached her a** and his mouth was a breath away, and whispered, "I want you so bad."

Isabella stared into his eyes, and knew that all the desire she had for him, she could unleash, "I want you too.."

The next minute, his mouth was on hers as they kissed passionately. She felt his tongue probe against her as one of his hands slid under her shirt while the other groped her a**, having easily slid under the shorts.

He kissed her passionately, taking in and memorizing the taste of her and she met him for each stroke, igniting a desire of her own. She'd never been this turned on in her life. Ian broke the kiss and looked down at her slightly swollen lips, leaning down to gently rub their lips together.

And then as he stared at her, his hand cupped her breast, under the shirt, his thumb accurately finding her peak through the thin cotton of her bra. He held her gaze, as his thumb slowly flicked her and he groaned, "I want another taste."

His hand molded and raised the flesh there, as if it were an offering and as he held her gaze, he bent down slowly and his mouth enclosed over the tightened bud, sucking her through the tshirt.

The touch jolted her. The heat and wetness of his mouth, even through the layers of clothing as his hand continued to tease her, made her dizzy with desire as Isabella felt her knees go weak. But Ian was not satisfied with this. His other hand slid under the edge of her panties, slowly moving towards her hidden centre...Her fingers clung to his shoulders, the only support that she had and she closed her eyes and moaned as his mouth slowly moved onto the other side, to offer the same treatment to her other breast.

"Ian..." his name escaped in a moan. He hummed in answer, the reverberations of that sending more jolts through her, as bells rung in her head. She wanted, needed more.

As she was about to pull him towards her bedroom, Ian unexpectedly stepped back, his hands leaving her body at the same time. She opened her eyes in confusion and was shocked to see that he'd already composed himself, all hints of desire now only visible in his heated vision.

"Don't look at me like that, doll. I'll take you right here and now and to heck with the person at the door." It was then she realized that it was her doorbell ringing. The ringing in her head was not from the desire but her doorbell.

"I'll go and see." Isabella turned to go and open the door but was stopped by him as he growled, "You can't go like this. I'll go and see."

As Isabella looked in confusion, Ian threw a meaningful glance at the front and she followed his gaze, realizing that there were twin wet spots on the front of her tshirt, glistening there. She flushed at that and quickly retreated, "I'll go change."

Ian watched her quick retreat and breathed deeply, trying to control his desire. Dam* it! He'd not come here to seduce her and be seduced like that. He'd totally lost control...If that bell had not rung, she would have been on that kitchen island, spread eagle in another minute with him inside her. And he did not know whether to curse the person who stood outside the door or to thank him.

That image did not help him calm down, and he shook his head as the bell rang again. He was going to hit the person who was outside. That was for sure.