

Benefits 341

Chapter 341: A Rival?

Ian took a deep breath, reminding himself to dial down the intensity. He needed not to scare away whoever was at the door with a murderous expression. The relentless ringing of the doorbell suggested growing impatience on the visitor's part, as if he had decided to keep his finger glued to the bell. Frowning, Ian strode towards the door impatiently.

The man, who had just raised his hand to knock, now stood frozen, his gaze fixed on Ian. Ian met the man's curious stare with an unwavering one of his own. He noted a momentary flicker of surprise on the visitor's face, as if encountering Ian was not part of the expected scenario. The man's eyes darted from Ian to the door number, and then back to Ian.

Squinting slightly, the man's expression shifted, a subtle glare forming as his eyes bore into Ian's. Without preamble, he questioned, "Is this Isabella's house?"

Ian arched an eyebrow at the abruptness of the question. There was something about the man's demeanor that set off alarm bells in Ian's mind. The thinly veiled hostility in the man's gaze didn't escape Ian's notice, and it was clear that this encounter might not be a casual visit.

"Yes, it is," Ian replied, maintaining a guarded composure. "And you are?"

Ian's question made the man's lips tighten into a thin line. Ignoring him now, the man actually dared to step inside, as if he owned the place. With a simple move, Ian blocked his path, positioning himself squarely in the middle of the doorway, effectively preventing the man's advance.

The man's face twisted in irritation, his thinly veiled politeness replaced by undisguised rudeness.

"Out of my way," he demanded, his tone carrying a haughty edge.

Ian simply shrugged, his expression impassive at the man's attempt to intimidate him, "I don't recall inviting you in. State your business."

The man's eyes narrowed with a mix of frustration and anger. Ignoring Ian's question, he made another attempt to bypass him, brushing against Ian's shoulder in a blatant show of disrespect. Ian's jaw clenched, but he maintained his composure.

"Isabella Ruffalo! Isi! Isi!!" the man called out, raising his voice as if summoning her would magically grant him access to go inside or that she would apparate here.

Ian's patience wore thin. "You can't just barge in. Wait here if you must. Isabella will be back shortly."

The man scoffed, a condescending smirk playing on his lips. "I don't take orders from you. Move aside."

Ian's gaze remained steady, and with a calm yet assertive tone, he stated, "You're not getting in without Isabella's say-so."

Undeterred, the man scowled and tried once again to force his way in, before stepping away with a scowl.

"Fine. I'll wait here!"

Isabella's voice cut through the tension, echoing from inside the house, "Who is it?"

The man's scowl deepened as Isabella appeared behind Ian. Her eyes widened in surprise, and then a subtle frown crept onto her face as she recognized him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her tone a mix of irritation and dismay.

The man scoffed and rolled his eyes, speaking snidely, "What? You didn't expect to get caught?"

Without giving him a response, Isabella turned to Ian and told him, "Thanks for coming over even though you didn't have to."

Ian, curious about the connection between the man outside and Isabella, was about to inquire when Isabella subtly shook her head, a signal for him to stay quiet.

The interaction did not miss the man's notice and he scoffed before he brushed past Ian, hitting his shoulder in passing, and headed straight into the house. Without waiting for an invitation, he made his way towards a room, presumably the one Isabella had just emerged from.

Ian watched as Isabella let the other pass even though she did not seem too happy about it.

"I appreciate your help, Ian, but I've got it from here. Thanks again," Isabella said, her words carrying an air of finality.

Before Ian could protest or inquire further, Isabella closed the door with a swift, deliberate motion, leaving him standing alone on the doorstep. The heavy thud of the closing door echoed through the quiet space, leaving Ian bemused and slightly baffled in the sudden silence.

Ian stared at the closed door with and raised an eyebrow. Why did he suddenly feel like he'd been used and thrown out.

He looked down at himself and wondered what he should do next. His suit jacket was inside, along with his keys and phone.

As Ian contemplated his predicament, a sudden realization hit him like a comedic punchline. He was stranded without his essentials. Just as he pondered his next move, the door swung open, and Isabella stood there holding his suit jacket, keys, and phone.

"Here," she said curtly, handing him the items. Her gaze was cool, giving away nothing of the drama that had unfolded inside.

Ian took the belongings, his expression a mix of confusion and gratitude. "Thanks, I guess. Any chance of an explanation?"

Isabella's eyes narrowed, and she spoke with an air of finality, "This is none of your business. Goodbye, Ian."

Before he could utter a word of thanks or protest, the door closed again, this time more deliberately. Ian blinked, his bemusement growing. "Well, that was...unexpected," he muttered to himself.

Shaking his head, he shrugged and walked away. He'd already offered to help and if she didn't take it, he couldn't really force her to accept anything. He'd already done his duty so his guilt was gone.

However, a twinge of an unfamiliar emotion tugged at him, something he couldn't quite put a label on. His footsteps felt heavier, as if he was unsure of wanting to leave and was not too comfortable about the unspoken tension left at Isabella's doorstep. With a deep breath and a shake of his head, he decisively returned to his car, locking the feelings he did not understand.

Of course, Ian could not have understood the feeling or recognized it as he'd never been acquainted with jealousy in the past...

Chapter 342: Gabe's Meeting

The heavy oak door creaked open slowly, revealing a dimly lit foyer adorned with antique furniture. Gabe Frost hesitated, his heart pounding, as he stepped into the small mansion he had tracked Arabelle to. He had not expected that she would be here, so close to them.

For a moment, his consciousness warned him that this could be a trap, but as always, he knew he was willing to step into any trap for Arabelle. He needed to see her truth for himself. Only then would his heart believe what his brain was telling him.

His cautious steps echoed through the entrance hall and his eyes darted around, searching for any sign of Arabelle but was met only with blank gazes of the guards standing on both sides.

As he moved deeper into the mansion, a door opened, revealing a figure in the shadows. Gabe's breath caught as he saw the woman who came out and his lips lifted in a smile, "Mrs. Winthrop."

The woman stood tall, her gaze cold and filled with hatred. The air grew colder as their eyes locked in a silent standoff as she finally spoke, "Gabe Frost. Why are you here?"

Gabe answered with a question of his own, "Where is she?"

"Who she?", the lady asked with an air of confusion.

"Arabelle." Gabe growled the name, irritated that the woman dared to pretend with him.

But she was determined to continue her act and teared up, "Have you lost your mind, Gabe? My Arabelle is dead? Didn't you bring the news to me last year about her?"

Gabe clenched his hands, "If you think I will be impressed with your acting, then it is useless. Where is she?"

The woman's lips curved into a sardonic smile as she dropped the pretense. "What makes you think I have any idea where my daughter is?"

Gabe's jaw tightened, his suspicion growing. "I traced her here. Don't play games with me. Where is she?"

The woman's hostile gaze met his, and for a moment, the room crackled with tension. The guards maintained their watchful stance, ready for any sign of trouble.

"Games?", she scoffed. "You think you can just barge in here and demand answers?"

Gabe's response was a glare that mirrored her hostility. The room seemed to shrink with the intensity of their confrontation. The woman finally broke eye contact, her cold demeanor wavering for just a moment.

"Fine," she said with a dismissive wave. "Let's talk first. But you'll find the truth isn't always what you expect."

Her sudden change in demeanour caught her off guard as he tried to judge what she could be upto.

She motioned towards an ornate sitting area, inviting him to take a seat. Reluctantly, he obliged, keeping a vigilant eye on the woman who had just moments ago portrayed hostility.

Seated across from each other, a palpable tension filled the room. Mrs. Winthrop, with a composed facade, began, "Gabe, I've seen the changes in Arabelle since she's been with you. I hate how you took her away, but she seems happier now, and that's something I didn't think was possible after everything that happened."

Gabe's eyes narrowed, distrust etched on his face. "Why the sudden change of heart? I find it hard to believe you'd offer your blessings so easily."

Mrs. Winthrop sighed, her gaze flickering between sincerity and something more elusive. "I'm a realist, Gabe. I may despise the circumstances, but I also see the positive impact you've had on her. My daughter was spiraling into a dark place, and you pulled her back. I can't ignore that. I've seen the love she has for you. It is far different than the feelings that she had for Demetri."

Gabe leaned backward his voice low and filled with suspicion. He might be a fool in love, but he was not someone who could be fooled so easily. "What's the catch, Mrs. Winthrop? You are not someone who hands out blessings without a motive. So, let's not talk in loops. Get to the point."

A cryptic smile played on her lips as she leaned back, crossing her legs elegantly. "Business, Gabe. Everything is a negotiation. A deal, if you will. I propose a truce of sorts. I'll give you my blessings, and in return, you ensure Arabelle remains content."

"She had been content before you took her away from there." Gabe pointed out.

"Ahh, yes. But I meant for the long term. Her contentment is precarious and dependent on many factors. As a mother, how can I rest assured if a single step can ruin everything that can keep my daughter happy?"

Gabe's jaw clenched as he studied her, the unease growing within him. "What do you want?"

Mrs. Winthrop's eyes glinted with a cunning resolve. "Arabelle is my daughter, and as much as I may dislike you, I care about her well-being. I'm a businesswoman, and I understand the value of compromise. This benefits both of us and Arabelle."

With irritation, Gabe leaned forward and stood up, "If you are going to continue talking in circles, I'll be going now. I'll find Arabelle sooner or later."

"Tsk tsk. Sit down, Gabe. No need to show me your impatience."

"Then tell me your endgame?"

"My endgame? It is the end of course. The end of the source of my daughter's unhappiness. The threat that hangs over her every minute that she is with you."

Gabe's mind raced, contemplating the cryptic words, his intuition warning him. The room seemed to close in around them, the mansion's walls echoing with the whispers of secrets yet unveiled as Mrs Winthrop spoke slowly, "Get rid of Demetri and Nora. Then you can live with Arabelle happily ever after."

Gabe's eyes blazed with fury, his face contorted with disbelief and anger. "Get rid of them?" he spat out, his voice low and seething. "You've got nerve suggesting something like that. I won't harm my brother for your twisted version of a happy ending!"

The heavy oak door slammed shut behind him as he stormed out, leaving Mrs. Winthrop alone in the dimly lit room. She watched his exit with a sinister smirk, murmuring to herself, "We'll see, Gabe Frost. Desperation can drive people to do the unimaginable."

Chapter 343: Apology

Ian stood at the door, wearing an expression that mirrored a guilty defendant facing a stern judge - an apt comparison, given the circumstances. Just as he was about to press the doorbell once more, he hesitated as the door swung open, revealing Gabe's fatigued and worn-out countenance.

Their eyes locked in a silent exchange, both brothers maintaining an unspoken standoff. Gabe arched an eyebrow in inquiry, prompting Ian to lift the bottle in his hand. "I come bearing an apology."

A subtle flicker of sadness faded from Gabe's face as he quipped, "Macallan?" A wry smile played on his lips. "That's quite an expensive apology."

Ian nervously chuckled, a sheepish grin surfacing. "Well, I figured a standard apology wouldn't cut it this time."

Gabe's expression softened, and he stepped aside, gesturing for Ian to enter. With a hint of vulnerability, he spoke, "You were not wrong, Ian. I know that."

Ian shrugged nonchalantly and walked inside. "Hmm. I know that too. But you are older, so I have to be the one to apologize." His tone was light, a mix of jest and sincerity.

Gabe chuckled at Ian's remark, appreciating the attempt at levity. As Ian settled into the living room, Gabe joined him and Ian continued, "I overreacted and for that I'm sorry."

Placing two crystal glasses in front of Ian, Gabe sat opposite his brother, and sighed, "But I'm grateful for what you did. I think I needed that reminder, with everything that took place. I've taken all of you for granted for too long."

Ian smiled, "I'll take that white limited-edition Ferrari you got last year as my apology."

Gabe's eyebrows shot up in mock surprise, and a chuckle escaped his lips. "A white Ferrari, huh? Setting the bar high, aren't we? Opportunist bastar*. You have it."

A look of shared understanding passed between them as a peaceful silence reigned, the two of them sipping their whiskey silently. Gabe stared at the amber liquid in his glass and another sigh escaped him as he cast a melancholy look at Ian.

"You think I should go apologize to Demetri and Nora as well?"

Ian snickered, "You'll go bankrupt..."

Gabe laughed at that and hummed in agreement. Of course, he needed to apologize but he just did not have it in him at this point of time. There were feelings and things to be resolved before he would be able to face Demetri.

"So? Did you succeed?" Ian asked Gabe after the latter remained quite for some time.

"Succeed?"

"You went looking for Arabelle right? Any luck?"

Gabe paused. Dare he tell Ian that while he'd not met Arabelle, he'd seen her mother. And the offer that she'd proposed or even the news she'd just sent. He knew he should, but he dare not. If Ian knew these things, he would not sit around and wait for him to keep things under control but take action into his own hands. And that might...

Ian clicked his fingers in front of Gabe when he failed to answer, "What are you thinking?"

Gabe was startled out of his thoughts, and he quickly shook his head, "Its nothing. It was a dead end."

Ian stared at Gabe who avoided his gaze and looked into his drink as if it held the answers of every question in the world and sighed, " Gabe? You're going to start lying now?"

Gabe shook his head, " You're too astute, flappy. I hated that as a kid as well."

Ian smiled at the childhood nickname but continued to wait for Gabe to open up. 'Flappy' was short for unflappable and it'd been so long since he'd been called that, it felt nice to think back to their childhood.

Finally, Gabe gave in and sighed, " Arabelle was not there. Her mother on the other hand..."

Ian raised an eyebrow at that. Mrs Winthrop? She'd been a pain for a while now. The lady was their grandfather's Goddaughter for all intents and purposes, but she'd never even come to pay her respects to the old man after he passed away and used him only to meet her own demands.

"What did the old woman have to say?"

"She implied that Arabelle was pining for me and that if I needed to get to her then..."

"What did she want?"

"It doesn't matter, Ian. What she wanted. I came away from there before she could propose anything."

Ian nodded and Gabe silently looked away. He was lying again. He knew exactly what the lady wanted but he was unwilling to even speak of it. Gabe wondered why he did not tell the truth to Ian. That she wanted him to help her get rid of Demon. But somehow he felt ashamed of this. Never had he ever considered that he would end up in this situation.

He heard Ian murmur absently that she would not let go things so easily since she had Arabelle, but he had no strength left to talk or discuss these things. He understood the truth. Since Lady Winthrop had contacted him, she would not let go easily. She'd already messaged him with an invitation for a meeting and like the fool he was, he'd already been considering it.

"Ian? Do you think there is a possibility that... Arabelle is..."

Ian looked up at that, the hopefulness in Gabe's voice alarming him. Cautiously, he stared at his brother, "Gabe... you think that Arabelle has not been affected by her mother again?"

"I don't know Gabe. According to the doctors, the biggest reason for her switching personalities was the tumor pressing on the nerve in her brain and her mother's influence. The tumor is gone and she'd been stable all this time so... I was hoping..."

Ian stood up and walked to Gabe, keeping his cynical thoughts to himself, "Only time will tell Gabe. We can only hope for the best..."

Gabe's shoulders slumped, a heavy sigh escaping him. "I just wanted her to be free from all of this, Ian. I wanted her to have a chance at a relatively normal life."

Chapter 344: A Negotiation

Elena Winthrop savored the delicate notes of her wine, a subtle smile playing on her lips as she patiently awaited Gabe's inevitable response. It would not be surprising to her that Gabe would knowingly step into the intricately laid trap she had set. Just then, her phone beeped and her smile widened as she looked at her phone with the reply that he'd just sent.

Elena's assistant observed her expression with a mix of curiosity and awe, unable to contain the question that lingered in the air. "Has he agreed, madam? And how did you know he would agree?"

Elena's smile widened, a glint of satisfaction in her eyes. "It's all thanks to Elijah Frost, my dear. My godfather was a man driven by sentiment, instilling in his progeny an unwavering commitment to family. Love and loyalty were paramount in his teachings. Gabe Frost has cherished my Arabelle for over a decade, and his loyalty to her is unwavering. Even if he harbors suspicions about her or questions my motives, his loyalty will lead him here like a devoted dog, wagging his tail."

"But how will you convince him?"

"I won't have to. Arabelle will do it. Call her caretaker here."

A little while later, the assistant returned with Arabelle's caretaker, an older woman who limped in with a hesitant expression, "You asked for me, Madam?"

"How is Arabelle doing now?" Elena asked, her face a perfect combination of motherly concern and more.

The lady hesitated before answering, "She is calm most of the time. And always calling for Gabe Frost. And when her other personality returns, she is mostly violent and not able to understand much."

"And her physical state?"

This time the woman gave an even more hesitant reply, "It's..."

The door swung open, and Gabe entered the small, dimly lit private room, his gaze fixed and determined. Without missing a beat, he cut through, "Let's get to the point, Mrs Winthrop."

Elena, seated with a glass of wine in hand, arched an elegant eyebrow, her smile undeterred. "Gabe, my dear, manners first. A simple greeting to your mother-in-law wouldn't hurt," she replied with a subtle insistence.

Gabe's jaw tightened, his eyes narrowing in response to her request and what she'd referred to herself as. He stood his ground, a silent standoff unfolding between them.

The tension between them escalated, a palpable standoff unfolding in the confined space.

Breaking the silence with a calculated calmness, Elena invited him, "Have a seat, Gabe."

Without uttering a word, Gabe complied, choosing a chair on the opposite side of the room, purposefully maintaining a distance that did not go unnoticed by Elena. She couldn't help but chuckle mirthlessly at the unspoken standoff.

Once settled, Elena shifted the conversation, "Have you given any thought to my proposition from our last encounter?"

Gabe, his jaw still subtly clenched, met her gaze firmly, "I've made it abundantly clear—I won't jeopardize my family, not even for Arabelle. The sole reason I find myself in this room is your promise of information regarding her."

Elena leaned back, her eyes assessing Gabe's unwavering stance, "I am a businesswoman, Gabe. Information comes at a cost, and I'm not inclined to offer anything, even details about my daughter, without receiving something in return."

Gabe said nothing at that as well.

Elena clucked her tongue in a display of mild disapproval. "You really are quite unwilling, Gabe. If I didn't know you so well, I might have thought you were unconcerned about my Arabelle's condition. She's remarkably stable these days, you know. She frequently mentions you, holds you in her thoughts, and it seems she has managed to erase any trace of your brother and his wife from her memory."

Despite her ridiculous attempts to provoke a reaction, Gabe stoically maintained his silence. Unfazed, she continued to smile languidly, her gaze unwavering as she reached for her phone and placed it purposefully on the table. Without missing a beat, her assistant stepped forward, picked up the phone, and carried it across the room to Gabe.

As Gabe's gaze shifted to the screen, a flood of memories surged through him. The display showcased Arabelle seated by a sunlit window, a serene smile gracing her features as she ate her food.

Elena leaned forward and continued, "You see her. She's always talking about going for strolls with you and how you used to sit with her on the porch, reading to her."

Gabe stared at the screen and the girl laughing and talking, a lump in his throat. She was his Achilles' heel. Why? Why had she not reverted to her old self. He'd loved her like that but at least it would have been easier to take action against her if she'd been hell bent on harming Demon and Nora.

"Gabe, it is clear from your eyes how much you love her. I am also not unaware of the sacrifices you've made for her in all this time. Ask yourself, are you not willing to make a final sacrifice?"

Just as Elena said this, Arabelle's sweet voice sounded from the phone, "When can I go back to my Gabe aunty? I miss him a lot."

Gabe's emotions wrestled within him, torn between the desire to reconnect with those cherished moments and the realization that the past was irretrievable. The screen flickered, capturing Arabelle in a moment of quiet reflection, her eyes mirroring the wistfulness that echoed in Gabe's own heart.

Closing his eyes, Gabe sighed deeply, "What do you want?"

"It's not much, Gabe. And remember before you say anything, remember that whatever you do, you will do it for Arabelle and your little child that she is carrying."

Gabe's eyes widened in shock, his features frozen in disbelief. The revelation hit him like a sudden storm, leaving him momentarily speechless. The room seemed to close in as the weight of the unseen future pressed upon him. Arabelle was pregnant?

Elena showed a smile of triumph as she watched his expression. She now had him exactly where she wanted, under her control. "A small sacrifice for the sake of your unborn child and the woman you've always cherished. Your loyalty is commendable, Gabe. It is now time to prove it."

Chapter 345: Missing

"Gabe's gone missing," Lucien declared with a weighty tone as he entered the conference room, the atmosphere instantly shifting to one of concern as his brothers turned their attention to him. Ian's furrowed brow reflected his worry as he inquired, "What do you mean missing? I was with him just the day before yesterday."

"But nobody's seen him since then, Ian. I've meticulously scoured his usual haunts and explored other places where he might have ventured in search of Arabelle. He's simply vanished," Lucien elaborated, a subtle undercurrent of worry coloring his voice.

Ian exchanged a knowing glance with the others, their shared concern palpable in the air. He cautiously suggested, "Perhaps he stumbled upon a clue regarding Arabelle?"

A heavy sigh escaped Demon, and he pressed further, "You know something, Ian?"

"Elena Winthrop made contact. Gabe seemed a bit distracted that day."

"This is not good, Demon. Gabe is not in a state to handle Elena's and Arabelle's games," Seb replied slowly, the gravity of the situation sinking in.

"And we can't afford to stretch our security team any thinner. It's already an uphill challenge. What does she want? Her only enmity with us was because of Arabelle? And she has Arabelle now. So what are the Winthrops' upto? Have you tried tracing his whereabouts from his phone, Lucy?"

"Yes, and it's no use. His phone is at his house. Wherever he went, he deliberately left behind all electronics. I've also meticulously reviewed the surveillance footage. He purposely avoided them and even disabled a few key cameras so that we wouldn't know his whereabouts."

Ian's grew even more worried as he heard this. By disabling the cameras, he'd made sure to let them know that he was going underground deliberately. The question was why. What was it that the woman had proposed?

Finally Demon spoke, " I think its not enmity with us but something else."

As the others looked at him with worry, Demetri explained, " Elena has been thrown out of the Winthrop family. All these years, Arabelle was the only was she'd been able to stick to them and suppress them. However, with Arabelle gone, instead of supporting Elena, Winthrop threw her out and moved in his mistress.

"And news has it that mistress might be pregnant with the man's baby. So...."

"So, she somehow found Arabelle and wants to get a hold back with the Winthrop's?" Seb asked incredulously. This was sounding more like a television drama.

"You think she would just be happy getting her position back? She's no weakling And if Winthrop had an affair, there is no way she wouldn't know. This means she had back up plan in place to throw him once she was done. However he moved first and now she intends to punish him."

"But where does that bring Gabe into the equation?" Seb asked with confusion.

'Not Gabe. But his position as a director here."

"She wants to use Frost Industries?" Seb asked incredulously.

"Seems like it." Demetri said thoughtfully, his eyes seemingly looking into the future. "It appears so. Gabe's position as a director makes him a valuable asset for her plan. If she can gain control or influence within our company, it becomes a strategic move in her game against Winthrop."

"Madam, the Frosts have discovered that Gabe Frost is missing."

Elena smiled at the news and shook her head. It was a good thing she'd expected them to find him and made her own preparations. Everything was going according to her plan. A few more months and she will have succeeded in her plan. And the Frosts wouldn't know what hit them.

All these years, she'd had only one desire. To ruin the Frosts. She'd loved that man all her life and he'd rejected her for another woman and had a happy family with Demetri, Erasmi and Seb. And then to add salt over her wounds even his younger brother had rejected a marriage with her leaving her to marry that disgusting man where she had suffered for all this while.

Hadn't she been willing to forgive and forget everything with Uncle Elijah? The only thing she'd asked in return was to give Demetri to her Arabelle. But that too had never happened. Like her, her daughter had been handed a consolation prize. Atleast in Arabelle's case, the consolation prize called Gabe Frost would be of some use. And now, Elijah Frost was dead. So who would save the Frosts now?

Her parents had been the ones who had supported Uncle Elijah in the foundation of Frost Industries. And he'd repaid them with hurting their family repeatedly. Uncle Elijah. It was now time for his family to repay the debt they owed her.

She sat back in her luxurious chair, a triumphant gleam in her eyes as she contemplated the next steps of her carefully crafted plan. She spoke to her loyal assistant, "Ensure that our insider at Frost Industries keeps feeding us information. We need to stay one step ahead of the Frosts at all times. And keep an eye on Gabe. He should not do something unexpected."

As her assistant left to execute the orders, Elena reminisced about the moments that had fueled her hatred. Poor Gabe Frost. He thought that she intended to use him to punish her ex husband. He'd even agreed to be a willing tool to help punish the man.

What will happen when he realizes that the Winthrops' were never her target but it was him and the Frosts. A few more months and Arabelle would give birth to a frost heir. That was all she needed. Once

she had the Frost blood, she would let go of Arabelle and Gabe.. They'd be able to stay together and rest in peace...

With a sinister smile, she picked up her phone and counted down the days to the great Frost wedding... Demetri and Nora Frost. Lets see if you have the wedding celebration first or a funeral in the next few months.

Chapter 346: A Plan

Gabe waited patiently on the bench, his heart fluttering with anticipation. His heart was a mess. From all the clues that he'd discovered while looking for Arabelle, he'd assumed that Arabelle had been lost to him forever and he would have to opt for the Plan B and...

He shuddered from the thought of it even as a part of him wondered if he was making a mistake. He reminded himself that he was muddled whenever it came to Arabelle and need to tread carefully. He'd already left behind everything that could be used to connect with his brothers as a show of good faith towards Arabelle. That was all he could do for now. Remain suspicious and alert.

A month had passed since Arabelle had been taken away by Elena, and every passing day had felt like an eternity. He missed the sound of her laughter, the warmth of her presence, and the way she would playfully argue with him. He just hoped that Arabelle was still like that. He would give Elena everything she asked for if that was the case. And Arabelle was pregnant... She was going to be a mother? It was unbelievable.

"Of course it is unbelievable... a voice in his head tried to say but he ignored it as he turned to see Arabelle.

He spotted her approaching from a distance. Arabelle was practically running, her eyes fixed on him. He stood up, a wide smile breaking across his face as he opened his arms to welcome her. The moment she reached him, she threw herself into his embrace, clinging to him like a lifeline.

"Gabe!" Her voice was a mixture of joy and relief, muffled against his chest. "I missed you so much! Why did you not come to see me and take me back to our house. I kept begging mother to bring me to you but she said you were busy."

Gabe tightened his grip around her, savoring the familiar scent of her. "I missed you too, sweetheart. It feels like you've been gone forever. I'm sorry, I couldn't come to your sooner."

Arabelle pulled back slightly, her eyes searching his face as if to reassure herself that he was real. "I thought I'd never see you again." as tears fell down her pretty face, showing her vulnerability.

Gabe cupped her face in his hands, looking deep into her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere, Arabelle. I promise to be with you always.."

Arabelle smiled, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I love you, Gabe. Don't leave me like this ever again. If you have to go to work, take me with you. I won't cause you any troubles, I promise. I will always sit on side and play games on my phone till you tell me to go back with you."

"I love you too, Arabelle." Gabe pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, his heart swelling with affection. "I said I won't be leaving you again, hmm? Don't worry about it."

Arabelle nodded and grinned as she tugged at his hand. "There are so many things that I have to tell you, Gabe! You'll be amazed. I went to the doctors' recently and he's told me to rest as much as possible. And do you know she told me that there is a child growing in our stomach. Yours and mine. Isn't that wonderful news?"

"Hmm. Its wonderful." Gabe watched their intertwined hands, his thumb going up to caress her wrist, and walked alongside Arabelle continuing, "Arabelle? Are you sure that you are pregnant with a baby?"

Arabelle giggled and lay her head against his shoulders, "Its what the doctor told me. If its not a baby then do you think I'm pregnant with a watermelon, Gabe."

Gabe smiled at her joke before stopping and turning to her. Slowly, he leaned down and kissed her forehead again, "Thank you, Arabelle. You've made me the happiest man alive. If I were to die after this, I would have no regrets."

"Don't say that Gabe! You're not allowed to talk about your death ever again! You understand?"

Gabe nodded and once again walked side by side with Arabelle saying nothing as Arabelle chattered about everything she had done when he was away.

Finally, when they sat down again, Gabe took a moment to ask her cautiously, "Arabelle? Can you tell me what happened when I left? How did you end up with your mother?"

Arabelle nodded and cocked her head, as if thinking back to that day, "My mother sent someone for me. That person came and said that you asked my mother to take me away for a few days because you were going to be busy and did not want me to get bored at home. So, I went with that person and then mother brought me here. Next time, I am not going anywhere with her though! Do you know how much she has troubled me, pestering me with questions about you and everything else."

Gabe's eyes narrowed at the mention of someone claiming he had sent for Arabelle. There were clear records that no one had entered the place at the time and Arabelle had left on her own. There was also the matter of the stolen phone. Something did not add up. How did Elena know where to find Arabelle if it wasn't Arabelle herself who had told her.

As he was lost in thoughts, he felt Arabelle sneak into his lap as she said coyly, "Gabe, I missed you so much. Take me away from here. I don't want to go back to that dull room anymore. I want to be with you. Can you take me away to our home? We can take mother back with us if she wants to spend more time with me or the grandbaby. What do you think? Can we do that?"

He gently brushed a strand of hair away from Arabelle's face, meeting her hopeful gaze. "Arabelle, I want nothing more than to take you back home. But we need to be wait for sometime and then we will go back to our peaceful world, alright?"

Chapter 347: A Double Agent

Ian pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, his frustration releasing in a fluent stream of curses. Out of the countless employees who could have been leaking information to Elena Winthorp, it just had to be his assistant.

The revelation left Ian seething with a mixture of anger and disbelief. He slammed his hand on the desk, causing a few scattered papers to flutter to the floor. Why? She'd been with them for almost five years now? She held a clean record and her regular investigation reports had come out clean as a whistle. Then why did she suddenly leak information to Elena? And how did he miss the signs?

Standing, the first thing he did was check his office for any listening devices or spyware. He had his office scanned often but it was usually done with his assistant in the know. Thus, giving her a chance to hide the things. Now, he'd have to do it himself.

Thankfully, there was nothing in the room, or he'd have made sure the woman never dared to hear anything again! As he finished checking under the desk, he slumped back in his chair with a thump, grumbling, "Of all the lousy luck! My own assistant turning out to be a double agent. And now I have to pretend to know nothing and let her do her 'job'. How am I going to get any other work done if I cannot trust her?"

With a curt face, he walked out of the office, only to stare at the face of his betrayer. His jaw clenched. He wanted to question this woman how she dared to look him in the eye after cheating him. Their company was one of the most employee-oriented companies around, offering all sorts of support programs for troubled employees. Why then, did he have to deal with all this.

"Leave it here. I'm going out for lunch. No one is allowed in my office while I'm gone," Ian retorted, his voice sharp with frustration.

"Of course, sir. Where are you going for lunch?" she inquired, her tone sugary sweet.

"I didn't realize I was answerable to you, Miss North," Ian bit out, his patience wearing thin.

The woman actually had the gall to look startled even as she apologized quickly, "I'm sorry, Sir. I just meant if you needed me to make any reservations."

Ian breathed in deeply. He could not let her know that he was onto her, "No need. Miss North. I'm going out for some personal business. Forgive me for being rude."

With that, Ian walked out of his own office, seething inwardly.

Ian stared at the coffee in his mug and sighed for the nth time. He still had trouble wrapping his head around this new problem. Miss North had been the one to pass Gabe's information to Elena. Now, even as they would be using her only to pass on information to Elena and predict her next moves, he would have to function without an assistant for the foreseeable future. Maybe he could beg Demetri to lend him Nina for a few days. She could continue to work from outside of Demetri's office.

Just then, Seb arrived and placed a file in front of him, "You can relax a bit. Miss North is clean in other areas. It seems Elena found something from her university days to use as blackmail."

Ian looked at the file with a furrowed brow before tossing it aside in frustration.

Ian: "This is almost inconsequential. She betrayed us for this?"

Seb: "It might not mean much to us, Ian, but if these details were to surface in the wrong way, they could..."

"I know, Seb! I'm just frustrated with the whole situation. Now, I have to find a new assistant and let a perfectly well-trained one go," Ian grumbled, his annoyance palpable.

Seb leaned against the desk, his tone sympathetic, "It's a tough spot, but we'll navigate through it. We can conduct interviews for a replacement quietly. And, who knows, the next assistant might even be an upgrade."

Of course, both of them knew that this was easier said than done, cause any type of new person would need training as well as shifting of personnel which would definitely alert Miss North and the others.

Snatching Ian's half-eaten sandwich, Seb rose from his chair, a triumphant grin playing on his face. "Thank the heavens it wasn't my assistant. I'd go nuts. The guy practically does half my job. Although, I should probably check with him about any 'wild' videos from his university days floating around. Ciao, Ian."

Ian shot a disgruntled glare at Seb's departing figure, his brow furrowing. "Showoff!" he muttered, and as he surveyed his now-empty plate, he tacked on another title, "Food thief."

Ian sighed in resignation and ordered another sandwich. There was no way he was going to make himself suffer more by starving through the afternoon. As the waiter left with his order, his gaze froze on a familiar face across the café. A jolt of recognition coursed through him. Isabella? Here?

The last time he'd seen her when he'd been unceremoniously pushed out of her house. Across her, with his back to him, sat a man with whom, she was having a heated argument from the looks of it.

Ian couldn't hear the specifics of their conversation, but the intensity of their exchange was palpable from Isabella's actions and expression.

He was almost halfway out of the chair before he stopped himself. He shouldn't intervene in someone else's personal matters.

Ian hesitated, wondering if he should probably leave, as he watched the intensity of the argument unfold. As the man rose from his chair, attempting to intimidate Isabella, a surge of protective instinct surged through Ian. The desire to stay out of personal matters clashed with a deeper sense of something... more.

Without overthinking, Ian stood up and briskly approached their table.

Isabella looked surprised, the man momentarily taken aback by Ian's unexpected arrival but before either of them could say anything, the man banged his hand on the table again, startling her.

Chapter 348: Ian's Anger

As Ian approached the table, he could feel the tension in the air. Isabella's eyes met his, a mix of embarrassment and desperation in her gaze and he had the overwhelming urge to take her away immediately. The man in front of her, however, remained unaware of his presence as he continued to rant, "You need to get your head out of the clouds, Isabella! This is not how life works."

Isabella winced at the voice and tried to shush the man, however he continued, impervious to the danger behind him continued, as voice rising with each word. "Are you really going to spend the rest of your life trying to please different men and sleep with them. Just because your parents are not looking into your who*ing ways, does not mean I will look the other way! Don't forget, I am going to inherit the family business. And Once I do, I will cut off your allowance! Then you can earn money in the way you know best! By sleeping with men!"

Ian's temper flared, a white-hot anger simmering beneath the surface as he looked at Isabella's face which was almost in tears. He had seen enough. Without a second thought, he reached out, grabbing the man by the collar and yanking him off his feet and raising him away from the ground.

The suddenness of Ian's intervention sent shockwaves through the café, while the man screamed loudly and tried to get away from Ian and onto the floor. But for all of Ian's lean build, he was able to easily hold the man as he continued to scream.

Isabella was shocked at Ian's sudden move and quickly stood up trying to say something but as he turned his head to look at her, she felt a lump in her throat. Never has she been more humiliated in her life. And that too in front of a man she admired and respected.

Even as the man's panicked screaming echoed in the now stunned silent cafe, Ian could hear the derogatory comments echoing in his mind, fueling the intensity of his grip.

Once the man's screaming slowed and he tried to catch his breath, Ian uttered a single word, "Apologize." as he let go of the man who almost slumped to the floor. As the man stood there shakily, Ian spoke again, a silent threat in his words, " Apologize."

The man, finally seemed to realize that Ian was asking him to apologize to Isabella and he raised his chin as he said, " No. I don't think I said anything that would make me want to apologize to this bi*ch."

The next moment, the man found himself flailing in the air again as this time he was caught by the neck instead of the collar and he started to suffocate. Once again, the man tried to struggle but in vain.

Finally, Isabella, seeing that the man was turning almost blue, found her voice and pleaded, " Ian. Let him go. Its okay."

But Ian couldn't let go just yet. The man's insults lingered, and the atmosphere crackled with tension as he growled, "No one should treat you like this."

The onlookers in the café remained frozen, unsure whether to intervene or let the scene unfold.

Isabella looked around and whispered softly, "Ian, please, it's enough. I can handle it."

Ian, finally registering the distress in Isabella's voice, reluctantly loosened his grip, allowing the man to slump back into his chair.

However, even as Isabella wanted to only leave, Ian was not satisfied and threatened the man again, "Apologize now and sincerely or I won't be responsible for what happens next."

The man mumbled a reluctant apology, even though the expression on his face made it clear that he was not happy about it.

Ian opened his mouth to say some more but he caught the tears at the corner of her eyes. With a last threatening look at the man, Ian grabbed Isabella's hand and pulled her out of the cafe, uncaring of the gazes being directed at the man.

At the exit, he handed the waiter a stack of bills and ordered to blacklist that man.

The chilly air outside the café felt like a stark contrast to the heated atmosphere left behind. Ian guided Isabella towards his car, her hand trembling in his. As they reached the car, Ian opened the door for her, offering a small, comforting smile. Isabella, her eyes red from both humiliation and tears, hesitated before getting in.

As he got in, Isabella averted her face, making it clear with her silence that she felt the need to not talk. Respecting her wishes, Ian simply extended his handkerchief to her, before starting the engine and driving away from the place.

Ian, glancing at her occasionally, could sense the mix of emotions within Isabella. The vulnerability she showed at that moment tugged at something deep within him as he tried to look for something comforting to say to her.

Finally, a little while later, Isabella inhaled deeply and clutching his handkerchief in her hands, looked at him with gratitude, "Thank you for today, Ian."

Ian threw a glance at her tear-stained face and gently took her hand in his, "How are you doing?"

His kind words almost seemed to spark more emotion as she almost broke down again but he watched her chin firm as she nodded resolutely. He wanted to say more, to ask her who that man was. She'd not been too happy about his arrival that day and yet, here he was saying vile things to her....

However, he knew that she would feel even worse at this and so could only maintain his silence, hoping that she would open up to him herself. Looking at her, he was almost tempted to turn the car around and paint the man's face with a few bruises!

But, instead of confiding in him, Isabelle chose to retreat as she spoke in a small voice, " Ian. Can you please drop me off here?"

Chapter 349: Need To Talk

"We need to talk." Ian said, only to have the door closed in his face when the other person said, " Hey! We are not in a relationship. Don't you scare me with that line." and slammed the door in his face, leaving him blinking.

Before he could wonder if this was going to be a new and rather peculiar trend of having the door slammed in his face. It was the second time in a week. The door was opened again as he was thinking things and Nora grinned as she stepped aside, " Come on in. I was just teasing you."

Ian chuckled, " And here I was practicing my 'serious talk' face."

As Ian entered, she asked seriously, "So, any news about our missing Frostie Angel?"

Ian grimaced at the nickname as well at the thought of Gabe who'd gone missing, before shaking his head, " Nah! We can only keep an eye out for now."

Nora frowned with worry about Gabe, but refrained from saying anything more. They were all worried as it is. As she led him to the sitting area, she shifted the topic, " Whats up? You wanted to talk?"

"Yes! You and I will talk after. First I need to talk to your husband."

That said, Ian turned to Demetri who'd just come out of the room and had already turned to go back inside on spotting Ian, "Hey! Demon Frost! Don't run away. You are avoiding me. Shame on you."

Demetri turned around at that accusation and was about to retort when suddenly Nora raised her hand and shouted, "Wait! Stop!"

Ian and Demetri both turned in confusion to Nora who was quickly powering on a machine. Seeing her actions, Demetri grimaced and shook his head while Ian was only confused, "What are you doing?"

"You guys are going to argue, right?" Nora questioned. Instead of being worried about their arguing, she seemed to be anticipating it.

Demetri sighed and went to sit on the couch with a shake of his head while Ian was even more confused. He looked from her eager face to Demetri's resigned one. He was definitely missing something and he had no idea.

Helping him out of the confusion, Demetri sighed, "Just tell me, Ian. She is actually preparing popcorn so that she can enjoy the show."

"Hey! Don't say it as if it's a bad thing! A girl has to grab her entertainment when she can get it."

Demon rolled his eyes and nodded, "Of course. Glad I can be of use to keep you entertained."

Ian looked between the two and then the machine which was already making some popping noises and shrugged. They were weird but yeah, he got that. "I'll take some of that popcorn first. I don't do free entertainment."

Nora pouted and agreed while Ian simply got back to the topic with Demetri, "I messaged you that I was coming to see you and you actually left early!"

"I came early to spend some quality time with my wife."

"Ha! Convenient excuse. You see that, Nora? He is using you now to escape things."

Passing a bowl of popcorn to Ian, Nora co-operated with Ian and sent Demetri puppy dog eyes, full of accusation, as she said, "You did that? You came home early to avoid Ian? And here I was thinking, "We could be slow dancing... we could be romancing the night away." It was all a lie? You don't love me enough?"

"Yes! Demetri! How could you break Nora's heart by doing that? You could have met with me and then come home. Then 'You would be slow dancing' with Nora" Ian said in the same tune that Nora had said before sending a wink her way.

Demetri grimaced and shook his head at their antics, "There is nothing to talk, Ian. I am not giving you Nina. No matter what you say. I am swamped with work and Nina is indispensable."

Nora stuffed some popcorn into her mouth and asked, "Why do you need a new assistant? What happened to yours?"

Ian sent a glance at Demon before explaining, "Miss North has been compromised. She's presently working as a double agent for Elena Winthrop."

"Ahh! And you guys want to use her to pass on wrong information to Elena?" Nora nodded in understanding.

"You got it. But I do need an assistant meanwhile, someone I can trust. And if I give this responsibility to someone else within the company, then there will be talk and Miss North will know that she has been compromised. And finding someone from outside, is a whole new set of worms. I need your help Demon! Come on!"

"You can have my help. But not my assistant." Demon said with finality.

"See that Nora. your husband is fighting me for another woman!" Ian pointed it out to Nora who was busy with her popcorn as she stared at the two.

Finally, after finishing her popcorn, Nora chimed in, "Well if he is fighting for you over another woman then Nina is not a bad choice. I like her."

"Ha! How can you do that! Nina is in your team now, isn't she Nora? She is spying on Demon for you. See that Demetri? Your wife doesn't trust you. She's having your secretary spy on you."

Demetri chuckled while Nora simply shook her head at Ian pitifully, " Divide and rule policy does not work on us Ian."

Ian narrowed his eyes and said, " I need a capable assistant, Demetri! Someone I can trust."

"Not Nina. Choose someone else.' Demetri answered firmly.

"Are you sure you can make someone else work for me?" Ian asked.

Demetri narrowed his eyes, realizing that Ian already had someone else in mind and he'd somehow walked into the man's trap.

Nora, watching from the perfect spot, also understood this and almost cheered for Ian! He'd actually out witted her husband. And now she needed to know who this new coveted assistant for which Ian was actually dared to play such a trick...

"Fine. You don't want to give me Nina then I want Isabella Ruffalo."

lines from the song SLOW DANCING by Kim Taehyung

Chapter 350: A New Assistant

"Fine. You don't want to give me Nina then I want Isabella Ruffalo."

Demetri raised his eyebrows while Nora almost choked on her popcorn. Before Demetri could say anything, Nora exclaimed, " Isabella Ruffalo? My Isabella? Pixie eyes? Dimpled smile?"

Ian rolled his eyes at the apt description and nodded, " Yes. Isabella Ruffalo? But I don't think someone else agrees that she's yours."

Nora and Ian both turned their heads in unison to see Demetri staring at Nora with narrowed eyes. Realizing the thin ice she was walking on with the jealous Demon, she quickly raised her hands and added, " I meant, my girlfriend."

"She is your girlfriend? Then what about Demetri?" Ian asked casually, a sly grin playing on his lips, as he leaned back in his chair. And they said divide and rule was difficulty. Ha! He just needed the weak points.

Nora glared at Ian, her eyes promising revenge as she clarified, " Demetri is my husband, while Isabella is my..."

She wanted to say 'girl' friend again but changed her words at the last moment, " She's my second best friend."

Demetri nodded, extremely pleased to be proclaimed as his wife's husband as well as best friend while Ian mouthed, "Nice save" to Nora who made a face at him in reply.

"So, can you arrange for Isabella to work in the Frost industries as my assistant?"

"But why do you want Isabella?" Nora asked seriously. As many thoughts entered her mind, Ian carefully told Nora that he'd heard Isabella mention looking for a job and since she was trustworthy and trained in business administration, she would be able to handle things while they took care of Miss North's problem. And once everything was resolved, it would be up to her if she wanted to go or not.

As Demetri and Nora looked at each other in consideration, Ian thought back to the little tiff he'd had with Isabella before coming here.

"Ian. Can you please drop me off here?"

"Isabella? Can you at least talk to me? Who was that man? And why would you let him talk to you like that?"

"Its none of your business, Ian."

As he'd parked the car to the side, he'd been tempted to keep her locked in the car with him until she gave him a reasonable answer, but he knew his boundaries.

"Isabella? Can we not be considered friends? Nobody should have to hear things like that from anyone. Please, if you are in trouble..."

"What things like that, Ian? Do you not know that everything he said was the truth? Of course, I am more interested in looking for a boyfriend instead of looking for a job. And he was right it is because I don't have to worry about anything, since I have my parents' money to fall back on. And just so you know, we are not friends!"

He'd been about to snap back at her for even thinking like that about herself but the tears in her voice had made him keep his mouth shut, and he'd only been able to watch as she jumped out of the car, and walked down the pathway.

Nora's voice brought him back to the present moment, as Nora surmised, "So, what you are saying is, Demetri should offer a job to Isabella and..."

"And let her work for me. Officially she would be training with you. It will open Demetri and Isabella to all sorts of criticism about nepotism but no one would say anything to Demetri's assistant or to him. Isabella is also trustworthy and qualified and looking for employment at the moment. So, it's killing multiple targets with the same stone."

Nora was already nodding along with Ian's thought process as she said, "You could be right. Let me talk to Isabella about this. That way, she won't feel burdened about getting a job. I'll tell her that it would be help to us."

Ian smiled at his success without alerting Nora, while Demetri cocked his head at his brother, his eyes warning him to not push his luck any further.

Demetri nodded and stood up, taking Nora by the hand as he said, "Since you solved Ian's problem, Ian is going to be making the supper for tonight. Come on, Ian, We'll take the full course meal and don't forget the fish."

Ian narrowed his eyes while Nora looked puzzled as she asked, "Where are we going?"

"Slow dancing and romancing, of course."

Nora stepped out cautiously, looking around for any traces of Ian. Thankfully, the man had disappeared, or she would have to do the walk of shame in her own home. As she looked around, the whiff of delicious food tickled her nose and she quietly stepped outside. Her eyes widened at the display of food.

Ian really had prepared a full course meal. She picked up a tiny piece of the mushroom salad and popped it into her mouth. Amazing! This was Michelin star level good!

Excited about the food, she quickly lit up the candle and marveled at the arrangement. No wonder the hotels under the Frost group were known for their best service. The top man was the best. He'd even placed a bunch of flowers alongwith the best food.

Demetri walked out of the washroom with his wet hair and grinned at Nora's surprised expression, "You're surprised."

"I know you said he cooked well, but this is..."

Shaking her head, Nora looked at Demetri and muttered, " You Frosties are really homely. You nurture plants and flowers, Ian makes nurturing food... What are you doing in the business world?"

Demetri walked to Nora and quickly took her mouth in a kiss, slowly letting her and himself burn with desire before stepping back and whispering, " It's all in the eyes, kitten. Look at it another way, Ian likes to cut up the dead and I like to dig out the mud."

Nora rolled her eyes at that and shook her head, " You cannot scare me with that, Demetri. I know you."

Demetri smiled at that as he picked up a piece of the asparagus and placed it on her lips, " Of course you do, kitten."