

Benefits 361

Chapter 361: You Dare

As the man struggled to breathe, Eliza Ruffalo stared in horror while Gio Ruffalo quickly rushed towards Ian to push him away from the dangerous man.

Unexpectedly, the man proved to be as immovable while Emerald Ruffalo almost turned blue and his eyes started to bulge with sheer horror. Seeing his son struggle to breathe, Gio screamed threats at Ian. On the other hand, Eliza Ruffalo grasped the situation and she turned to her daughter and implored frantically, "Isabella. For heaven's sake, tell the man to release Emerald.."

Isabella, still recovering from the shock of her parents' arrival, Emerald's lies and then Ian's anger, quickly pleaded with the man, "Ian, please, let it go. My family is just worried, they don't understand."

Within a minute, the man was on the ground, gasping for breath as he clutched his neck and pointed at Ian accusingly. However, Gio Ruffalo seemed to have gained his senses as his son was released and questioned Ian, "Who are you? How dare you try and harm my son? I will call the police."

Ian looked at the short man in front of him and was amused. He looked quite like Isabella. However, it would have been better if the man had done something to protect her as well.

"Harm your son? Tch Tcg. Mr Ruffalo needs to get his eyes tested. I was only teaching him not to spout nonsense."

As the couple went to check on their son, Ian ignored the three people and their commotion in the room and walked to Isabella who was staring at the plain hospital sheet as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world. Deliberately not talking, he reached for the small box he'd prepared and poured the warm bowl of oatmeal for her.

Gently, he reached for her chin and tipped up her face, "Isabella," he said gently, "you need to eat. The doctor advised you to have your meals on time. It's already so late..."

Isabella, still trying to collect herself, gulped nervously. She attempted to speak, but her awkwardness betrayed her as she looked at his gentle eyes with her glittering ones. She was thankful to him, for caring for her and for standing up for her. As she raised her hands to take the bowl, it almost slipped from her

trembling hands, but before any harm could be done, Ian took it from her. He scolded her gently, "Careful, you almost hurt yourself."

As Ian held the warm bowl of oatmeal, he noticed Isabella's hands were still trembling from the earlier tension in the room. Concern etched across his face; he took a moment to ensure the temperature of the oatmeal was just right before gently offering her a bite by placing it next to her slightly parted lips.

The entire scene was observed by Eliza Ruffalo who stood aside and felt a pang in her heart. She watched as her daughter's shoulders eased from the tension under the careful care of the man. It gave her a bittersweet feeling. It had been so long since they'd seen her.

First she'd gone abroad to study, and then instead of welcoming her everytime she came back, they'd chosen to ignore her. All so as to assure Emerald that we did not favour him over her. But, now for the first time, she wondered if they'd made a mistake. If it had been the past, her little Bella would have jumped into her arms and cried like a baby, complaining about the pain.

And instead, when she'd first reached Bella, instead of hugging her, she'd actually felt her recoil as if being near her mother would hurt her.

Just as a semblance of calm settled in the room, Emerald Ruffalo, now recovered, couldn't resist the urge to stir up trouble. He eyed Ian and Isabella with resentment, his voice accusatory, "You think you can just waltz in here and take control, huh? Interfere in family matters? I am her brother and if she makes a mistake, it is my duty to correct her! Do you see this man, mom? Dad? See how dangerous he is and Isabella is not even concerned about my wellbeing and is busy making eyes at him."

Just as Ian was about to throw the man out of the room, Isabella clenched her hands and eyed the three people in front of her, before muttering, "Get out!"

The cold words caught the attention of everyone and as Gio Ruffalo and he straightened to look at his daughter, "Bella! How can you say something like this to your parents? Your brother is hurt and..."

Isabella laughed out loud at that, "Emerald is hurt? Will you look around, daddy? I am the one in the hospital. But the first thing you talk to me about is my brother hurting. Please leave. I did not ask for you to be here." She then turned to her mother, "And you dare to ask me why I did not call you."

"Fine! If you do not want us here, we have no need to be here. Answer me one thing, did you get pregnant again and abort the child?"

Isabella gritted her teeth and raised her chin, " Yes. Yes, I did it again."

"You! You murderer! You were punished by us but instead of learning from your mistake, you continue to make the same mistakes! I do not have a daughter like you! I will disown you and you will never be welcome in the Ruffalo family again. You..."

For the first time in her life, Eliza Ruffalo stepped in front of her husband and scolded him, " That is enough, Gio!"

"But, mother," her son tried to interrupt but she shot him a glare as well, " Get out!"

The father and son duo glared at Eliza Ruffalo while she turned to look at her daughter who'd almost turned white and had closed her eyes against them. And then to the man who stood still. She could see that he was ready to attack her husband again, but only stood there because of Isabella's grip on him.

With no right words for her daughter, Eliza Ruffalo looked at the man and apologized, " I'm sorry. Please take care of her."

Chapter 362: The Past

Long after her family had gone Isabella continued to keep her eyes closed, as if protecting herself against the painful present. She thought back to her happy childhood when Emerald and her had been best of friends. Why then did he change so much as they grew older?

Was it only because of her 'promiscuousness' as he claimed? And her parents, she thought they knew her best. But they too had started to believe his lies. She knew she should have stayed back and fought for her right. She should have defended herself with all her might, knowing how old fashioned and orthodox her father was. She'd never had an abortion. Not then and not now.

Instead, she'd been angry that her parents had questioned her instead of trusting her. She'd been horrified that her parents would believe that their daughter would sleep with anyone and everyone. In her rebellion, she'd made sure that the rumors that had been started about her would get even more wild.

Unbeknown to her, Ian who had gone out to talk to his brothers about Gabe, had already returned to her room and now stood there, watching her silently, as tears rolled down her cheeks. He was tempted to go out and teach those men a lesson, something that would make them remember how to behave with Isabella and with women in general.

Luckily for them, they were Isabella's father and brother, or he'd have shown them some of his knife skills. Slowly, he walked to her side and gently wiped her face. Her eyes snapped open and the vulnerability in them, tugged at something inside him.

Carefully, he wiped her face as he consoled her, " Everything is going to be alright."

His words seemed to make her vulnerability disappear and she gave him a cynical smile, " Do you really think everything is going to be alright? How? Do you believe in magic, Ian? Maybe a fairy godmother will come and change everything to the way it was when I was younger?"

Ian shook his head, " There is no magic in this world, Isi."

Isabella glanced at him at that. He liked to call her Isi while everyone else was used to calling her Bella. She did not know why but she liked it. However, even that warm feeling of liking was like an arrow in her heart and she turned her head away from his warm touch, " Then there is only one way to make everything alright. I guess I must change my ways. I should stop sleeping around and getting rid of my pregnancies."

Ian frowned at the bitterness in her tone. Isabella was always different from his perception of her. And the more he knew her the more different she sounded from her party girl image.

"You don't need to change anything, Isi. They just need to learn to accept you as you are."

Isabella smiled at that, " Like I said, that would be magic."

"Then maybe there will be magic some day?" Ian said, not wanting her to be sad anymore.

Isabella giggled at that, " Ian Frost! You are too amazing. You'd even say something like that with a straight face."

Ian gave her a crooked smile at that and patted her head, " Of course I am amazing. You are only now discovering the truth?"

Her small laughter turned into sobbing and Ian could only gather her in his arms as she cried into his chest, clutching his shirt tightly.

Ian inhaled deeply, gently patting her back, as he tried to console her. He hated how her tears made him feel helpless and he suddenly wanted to go and break something apart.

After a while as Isabella lay her head against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat, she murmured slowly, "You know what is the funniest part? I've only even had one sexual partner in my life."

Ian looked down in surprise at that. Isabella, the girl who was an expert flirt only had a single partner until now. How was that...

But before he could ask, she continued to explain, " My head was always in the clouds, reading romance and imagining myself as the female lead who was being wooed by a prince charming. As a child, I used to have friends who wanted to be doctors, engineers, pilots and what not. Me? I only wanted to be a little homemaker, spending days with preparing things for my prince charming, waiting for him to return home and spend time with me. It made me foolish."

"The first boy who proposed to me, I accepted, not imagining that he'd only want to have sex with me. He was my age at the time. Sixteen. He took me on a date and then directly to a small icky room that he'd booked there."

Ian felt his heart clench, his imagination providing all kinds of things that could have gone wrong. Did Isabella fall for some predator?"

Isabella felt his arms tighten around her protectively and her heart almost melted as she said, " Don't worry, I was never a victim. That night, imagining myself in love with him, I went willingly. But that fool was too inexperienced and I had too many expectations from all those books. Gosh, it was over before it

started and was I thankful for it. I decided that night that since he could not please me, he must not be my soulmate."

"So, I tried to break up with him the next day. To be sure, it did not go well. He spread the rumors that I slept with him and dumped him. Out of solidarity many other boys also said the same thing and soon I gained a reputation. What I did not imagine was that my brother would also believe those rumors and even add more to them."

"When he accused me of being a slu* and sleepign with many boys from my class, instead of asking him for evidence and explaining myself, I decided to go on a rebellion. I flirted with every man in my path and made audacious remarks about them. Hoping against hope that her parents would at least come to me. Like a little girl, I threw tantrums to get my parents attention but instead they chose to ignore me."

Chapter 363: A Fallout

"Whoever did this was too foolish. The work is water-tight, Demetri. There is no way there has been any non-compliance in our work or policies. I've already checked repeatedly," Seb retorted, frustration evident in his voice as he threw the file on the table before slumping into his seat.

"Hmm. I've checked too. They've tried to file complaints repeatedly with the Health Board regarding malpractices in the kitchen, but it has proven useless, and multiple surprise checks have proven that," Ian added, his eyes scanning the documents spread across the table.

"Yes. But this time, the merger and acquisition rumors have come on too quick. I've checked the financials and the market. There has been some movement in the stocks which we are trying to trace, but when things happen in threes... Anyway, the rumors have somewhat stirred up the market and things are going to be..." Before he could continue, Lucien received a notification and he swore, "Check this out." as he connected his phone to the projector.

On the projector, Demetri, Ian, Seb and Lucien watched as the news anchor shared news about their company that even they were unaware of.

The anchor began by highlighting the fact that each of the brothers held a modest ten percent of the company's stocks, revealing how the Frost siblings had strategically distributed their ownership to maintain a firm collective control over the company. With meticulous detail, she went on to outline a brewing crisis within Frost Industries, disclosing a sudden falling out among the brothers. This revelation, she warned, posed a significant threat to the stability of the company, predicting a domino effect as investors, alarmed by the internal discord, might hastily begin shedding their stocks. The

impending turmoil, she insinuated, had the potential to plunge Frost Industries into a state of uncertainty and volatility.

Demetri leaned forward in his seat as he heard this before sending a glance around the table, as if asking who fell out with whom.

This time Seb's curses sounded while his phone started to beep continuously with incoming messages.

"Dam* it! Can't these people at least verify something before making a report? Now I have to handle extra PR as well! My office is getting inundated with calls! Lucy and Ian, why did you have a fall out? What is this about?"

Lucien and Ian glared at Seb for his untimely joke before accusing each other, "Hey! You had a fall out with Ian! I remember the two of you fighting it out last week." Lucien said as he frowned at the two."

"Uh huh! That was not a fall out! It was because I previously 'fell in' with a chick that Ian wanted. Fell into bed that is!" Seb defended himself.

"If its none of you maybe I had a fall out with Erasmi?" Demetri added thoughtfully.

Ian shook his head, "Nah! That is not possible. Erasmi is not even here."

Demetri shrugged, his expression serious yet playful. "That's not a problem. We are twins and know each other well. I don't need him to be present to hold an entire argument with him from start to finish."

Ian, Lucien and Seb stared at their brother's serious face as he made such an outrageous claim before guffawing with laughter, "Demetri! You've actually been influenced by Nora."

"Sih! The Goddess has finally blessed you with a sense of humor. I'm so proud of you big brother." Seb said with fake tears in his eyes.

Just then, there was a knock on the door and Demetri's Secretary walked in with a letter in her hand," Sir, this is a letter from the attorney's office. And the recent news piece..."

Demetri took the sealed envelope from the lawyer and clenched his teeth at the name of the firm. It seems there might be some truth to the reports. One of them had fallen out with them without them even being aware about it."

Throwing the letter on the round table, he turned to the secretary,"Nina, prepare to summon an urgent board meeting."

As the secretary scurried out, Seb leaned forward and picked up the letter that had been sent from their personal lawyer's office. As he read the letter, with Ian and Lucien peering curiously, he could only curse some more as he stared at Demetri in horror," Has Gabe lost his mind?"

Taking the letter from Seb's hand, Ian peered closely at the signature on the bottom of the page and shook his head," He actually went ahead and transferred his power of attorney to Elena Winthrop?"

Silence reigned in the boardroom as each of them contemplated the next move. While they still held the majority of stocks, Gabe's sign on the bottom of the page felt like a betrayal, a stab in the back.

Lucien quietly stared at the letter before asking slowly," Gabe is not in his right mind. There must be some way we can overturn this POA."

"Not unless we can prove him to be of unsound mind." Demetri answered.

"Which will only highlight the news of our fallout and cause losses to the company, scaring investors into dropping the stocks, creating a further mess for them."

Finally, Ian shrugged," Alright, so if he wants to transfer the POA, its fine. We still own the majority together."

"There's only one problem with that, Ian.Gabe had inherited stocks from Grandfather as well which would have made his total share about twenty two percent..." Lucien added slowly.

Contrary to belief, Elijah Frost had not divided his property equally, giving each grandson something different. Gabe, who'd been forced to leave the country for his love, had been awarded stocks so that he would never have to lose money.

But now, Elijah Frost's decision had caused their stocks land into the hands of Elene Winthrop, while creating trouble for them all

Ian shook his head and stood up, muttering, " Gabe. Why is he being fooled by Elena and Arabelle? Did he hit his head against a rock or something when he was young? His intelligence must be falling out of his ears at this rate."

Seb sighed and shared a look with his brothers, " Okay people. Time for an uphill battle to start."

Chapter 364: A Negotiation

"You're quite something, Elena Wintrhope."

Elena looked up from her papers at the cold voice that had just spoken up and raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"You used your own daughter for ransom? So, how does it feel to be a large stockholder of Frost Industries."

Elena Winthrope caressed the file in front of her lovingly before she looked up, " Good. And it will be quite better tomorrow when I throw Demetri out of the chairman's position."

"You sound quite confident. How much stocks did you get?"

Elena smiled, " Enough to create trouble. I might not be able to exceed their own share but if I were to take into account Gabe's share then I have enough to wreak havoc and create troubles. The Frosts are finally going to suffer... And it could not have been possible without you darling. So thank you."

Standing up Elena walked around her desk and gently hugged her daughter, " If you had not come back when you did, I would have been thrown out by your father, destitute and desperate."

Arabelle patted her mother's back even as she had no emotion on her face as she told her, "It was all I could do to help you. Mom, I want to go back now."

Elena stepped back and looked at her daughter with concern, "You don't mean that? You want to go back with that Gabe?"

Arabelle nodded, "Yes mother. I want to go back with him and just live well. The other me sometimes... she is not well and unable to handle herself. I fear that I will end up in a bad state some day because of my other self. I'd rather go with Gabe who will take good care of me."

Elena wanted to protest but Arabelle shook her head, "Tomorrow when you go to the Frost Industries, I will leave here with Gabe. I hope you will be happy in the future and let go of the past. Forget about me as well. I will not return here."

Elena nodded and patted her daughter's head, "Okay. I will do that. But remember if you ever need anything, your mother is there for you. Also, Arabelle, I..."

Arabelle looked at her mother with a sweet look of expectation and the woman could only sigh at her daughter, "You have to be careful, Arabelle. This move might drive a wedge between Gabe and his brothers but it won't be enough to tear them apart. And if Gabe discovers your deception before that..."

"Quiet, mother. There is no deception." Arabelle refuted calmly, "How can I deceive my Gabe?"

"You don't understand Arabelle. According to my source, Ian has already discovered that you may not be pregnant. If he succeeds in contacting Gabe before you leave..."

Arabelle's eyes sharpened at that, "How did he know?"

"I don't know. Apparently, he was in the hospital at the same time as you went for the ultrasound."

"Did he meet up with Gabe then?"

"No. I had them checked. They did not meet each other."

Arabelle nodded. "That's good then. Just make sure Gabe meets no one else until we leave tomorrow."

Gabe observed Arabelle as she stood by the window, her gaze fixed on the outside world. A soft sigh escaped her lips, and he felt a pang of concern. Closing the distance between them, Gabe enveloped Arabelle in a gentle embrace, his chin finding a comfortable spot atop her head. "What's on your mind?" he inquired, his voice tender.

Her response carried a hint of longing, "I want to go home, Gabe."

Reassuringly, Gabe spoke, "We'll be heading back tomorrow, Arabelle."

A sigh of relief escaped her lips. "That makes me so happy, Gabe. From tomorrow, we'll always be together. Promise you won't leave me."

"I want to go home, Gabe."

"We're going tomorrow, Arabelle."

"Hmm. That makes me so happy, Gabe. From tomorrow, we'll be together always. You won't leave me, no?"

"Have I ever?" Gabe asked her as he looked at their reflection in the window glass.

Arabelle smiled, her downturned eyes glittering with malice, unseen by Gabe as she held onto his hands tightly, "Never. You can never leave me."

He turned her around, still in his embrace, " Arabelle, tell me one thing."

"What?"

"Is there anything that you are hiding from me?" Gabe questioned her quietly.

Arabelle stilled. What did he mean? Could it be?

Putting on her most innocent expression, Arabelle looked up into his eyes," What can I hide from you?

"I think you are. I can see the worry in your eyes."

Arabelle gave a silent sigh of relief as she shrugged her shoulders," I'm worried about the future, Gabe. You've handed over your stocks to mother to manage just so that I wouldn't have to worry about her. But what if she causes any problems for you? Will you hate me for it?"

"Silly girl. Your mother can try what she wants. It has nothing to with us. As for creating problems with my brothers, they'll understand once I show them our little baby. You know the Frost thumb of rule, right?"

Arabelle grinned," Yes. Family first. It is a good rule."

"Yes. It is. Now come on, it's time for you to sleep and rest."

"I don't want to rest so early." Arabelle pouted.

Gabe grinned and nuzzled her close," Thats okay. We can do other things."

Arabelle blushed and hit his arm playfully," You really are too much!"

"Hey! I'm not talking about activities. I was thinking of something else. I have a surprise for you, Arabelle."

"Really? What surprise? Show me quickly."

Gabe smiled and shook the phone in his hand, "Uh huh. Go and lie down on the bed and I'll turn on the television."

Hurriedly, Arabelle jumped into the bed while Gabe fiddled with the controls before joining her on the bed.

Soon, a reel of pictures started to play on the screen and Arabelle's eyes lit up as a young Gabe and her posed hand in hand, smiling at the camera followed by another one and then another. Happily, Arabelle snuggled into Gabe as she watched their life together since the beginning.

Chapter 365: Piping Hot

Seb, Ian, Demetri and Lucien stared out of the gates at the many journalists who's staked claim outside their building's multiple entries and then looked at each other. None of them liked to interact with the journalists when they behaved like a swarm of bees.

Seb raised an eyebrow at then, "Any volunteers to be the sacrificial lambs?"

Demetri shrugged his shoulders and stepped back, "I'm not going home tonight."

Ian raised an eyebrow at that, "I handled the last press conference. It's someone else's turn."

Lucien, on the other hand, quipped, "I've got a date with my Evana tonight and can't get stuck here. No can do. I'll take it next time."

"Hey! I've been handling them since the last evening! Its not my turn. Let's sort it like adults, alright?"

As he met the narrowed gazes of his brother and their nod, Seb hurriedly called out, "Rock, paper, scissors," only to look at the three hands that showed Rock while his showed scissors. "Hey! How is that possible?"

"Its fate. Its decided now. You go out and handle them. We'll wait for the meeting to start." Lucien grinned and quickly hurried away while Seb walked out of the office muttering, "How come I always lose out?"

Ian grinned and looked at Demetri, "Do you think he'll ever realize that he always gives away what he is going to make."

Demetri shrugged, "As long as he doesn't realise it, we'll profit from it."

As Seb stepped out of the building, the atmosphere crackled with tension as reporters surrounded him, hungry for answers about the rumored fallout between Gabriel Frost the Frost Industries. As expected, one brave journalist, quickly shouted the question, "Is it true that Gabriel Frost has had a fallout with his brothers and thus decided to drop his stock?"

That seemed to open the floodgates as the questions started coming in, "Why have the Frosts' been silent about this matter until now?"

"Where is Mr Gabe Frost. He disappeared from the limelight about a year ago. Does that also have something to do with this matter?"

Seb looked at them with a twinkle in his eye as he raised his brow, "What? So you guys don't like me now? You're all pining for Gabe?"

That brought out a but of laughter among everyone giving Seb a chance to continue, "I don't know where you're getting your rumored information from, but if there has been a fallout, I have no knowledge of it."

"There is no smoke without fire. We know that there was an argument between Mr Ian Frost and Gabriel Frost a few days ago. And you also have had a physical altercation with him..."

Seb, maintaining his cool demeanor, chuckled at the persistence of the questions. "Ah, the rumor mill has been working overtime, I see. Let me clarify my statement – disagreements are part and parcel of any family or business. It's the spice of life, isn't it? But that does not equal fallout. "

A reporter pressed on, "But what about the physical altercation? We do have pictures of you with a black eye and split lip a few weeks ago."

"There you go now. Accusing me of being a violent wreck. Me and Gabe, we like our wrestling matches. It had nothing to do with hard feelings and more to do with sore muscles. Again, we are brothers with strong personalities and opinions. We disagree many times. There was nothing different this time."

"If as you claim, nothing is underfoot, then why the sudden board meeting with stockholders."

"To stop the rumour mill. Soon, we will be able to make a statement to clarify everything. I simply request you to wait until then. I'll tell you, what, I'll see you all after the board meeting, right here. It's a date. Until then, I request you to clear our exits so as not to obstruct any movement."

Having done his magic, Seb turned to leave, only to be stopped by a gloating voice, "Are you sure you'll be able to come here after the board meeting? You might have to hide your face somewhere, Seb Frost."

Seb turned around, the easy going look in his eyes vanishing, even as he smiled cordially at the woman, "Time will tell, Aunt Elena. How are you doing?"

With a flourish, he leaned down and air kissed the woman, before ordering his hand gallantly, "Let me escort you inside?"

Elena smiled and placed her hand in his, "Of course."

Once inside, the thin veneer of civility seemed to veer off as both walked inside calmly. Elena Winthrop glanced sideways at Seb Grost and could not help but chuckle, "There is a saying, Revenge is a dish best served cold. I must say, it is quite apt. How do you like my dish, Seb? Hmm? Your father and uncle rejected my love. So, I made your brother lose out because of love."

Seb smiled at that, "Hmm. I don't care for cold dishes, Aunt Elena. I like mine piping hot. Me? I can't wait that long? As for Gabe losing out because of love? I don't think so. If my brother is happy, then... I don't care either way." Seb shrugged off the implied threat in Elena's words. As the elevator came to a stop, Seb stepped back, gesturing for Elena to precede him before giving her a friendly reminder, "Of course, Aunt Elena... Ian is our main chef, you know. And he... doesn't care much for cold dishes either."

With that, Seb walked off in the direction of the conference room, leaving Elena standing there.

After standing still for a few minutes as she tried to think of a way that Ian might have found himself a way out, she shook her head. No, they were probably just trying to scare her off."

Soon, other few stockholders had arrived and together they walked into the conference room, some ready to create chaos while others, ready to watch a good show.

Chapter 366: A Setback

Demetri sat at the head of the conference table, flanked by Ian on one side and Lucien on the other as Seb took his place, his piercing gaze locking onto Elena's as she settled into her seat with an air of smug satisfaction.

Elena looked at the three brothers and smirked as she took the seat on the opposite end. Very soon, she would make sure that Demetri would not be able to take that chair again.

With a thin smile at Demetri, venom dripping in every word, she murmured, "I hope you don't mind, Demetri. Business is business. As for Gabe, he needed to be elsewhere so he had to transfer his stocks to me."

A cold smile played on Demetri's lips, his voice steady. "You mean the power of attorney to his stocks, Mrs. Winthrop."

"That's splitting hairs, Demon," she retorted dismissively. "I have the complete power of attorney, to do with them as I want."

The silence that followed was simmering with resentment and anger as Elena leaned back and waited for Demetri to refute.

"So, what is it that you want to do?" Ian, broke the silence as he looked at the stock holders, his question direct. He'd already investigated them and knew that most of them were simply dummy holders for Elena, who'd been planning this for a long time. While the remaining few had their own agendas.

Elena smirked at Ian, "I like how you want to get this over with, so I'll be direct. When you liquidated your stocks previously, you reduced your percentage for each of you, maintaining your majority by combining your ten percent each. But, I now have Gabe's stocks which brings your share to fifty percent instead of sixty seven percent. So, while that might not make e majority, it puts us at an exual footing. Neat, isn't it."

Lucien smiled at that, "Thank you for breaking that down for us, Mrs Winthrop. We would not have been able to calculate that otherwise."

"Are you trying to be smart with me, Lucien? Are you so overconfident that you can handle this?"

"Not over-confident. Just Confident."

"I like how you all maintain this unconcerned front. But it's no use. I've won this time."

"If you say so. Should we get to the point now?" Demetri added.

Elena leaned forward, her eyes glinting with triumph. "Oh, we'll get to the point, Demetri. But before that, let's discuss the terms of your surrender."

Demetri raised an eyebrow, his composure unwavering. "Terms of surrender? I wasn't aware this was a war that we'd lost, Elena."

She chuckled, a sound that sent shivers down the spines of those in the room. "Oh, it is, Demetri. And you're about to realize just how powerless you are."

With a flourish, she produced a document from her briefcase and slid it across the table. "Here are my terms. First and foremost, I want a complete overhaul of the entire management. I'm talking about new faces, new blood, people who understand the future of the industry."

Seb scoffed, unable to contain himself. "You expect us to just hand over the reins of our family business to your puppets?"

Elena's gaze turned icy. "Oh, they won't be puppets, Seb. They'll be competent professionals who understand the modern market dynamics. Unlike your outdated methods and old-fashioned mindset." She continued, "Secondly, I want all of you to resign from your executive director positions. I'll graciously allow you to stay on as figureheads, but the real power will lie with the new management. It's time for a fresh start, a new era under my leadership."

Demetri leaned back in his chair, a glint of amusement in his eyes. "These demands are quite ambitious, Elena. Do you really think we would agree to such terms?"

Elena's smile never wavered. "You don't have much of a choice, Demetri. Either you accept these terms or I will drop fifty percent of the stocks in the market tomorrow and you know what will happen then. I will also make public the information about Gabe, how he abducted my daughter and kept her under imprisonment all this while."

The room fell silent as the weight of her threat hung in the air.

Finally, Demetri leaned forward, a troubled expression on his face as he said, "I see."

"That's it? I suggest you get to drafting your resignation, Demetri. After all, the longer you resist, the more damage I can inflict."

Demetri turned his head to Lucien and nodded once who understood and sighed, "I'm sorry to burst your bubble, Mrs Winthrop but there is a small problem in your calculation."

Elena stilled and narrowed her eyes. They definitely had some trick up their sleeve."

"I've already made certain that my calculations are correct. So you cannot fool me."

"Oh, but I can. You see, there is a problem with Gabe's stocks."

"What do you mean? Are you trying to mislead me? I verified that he is the owner of seventeen percent stocks. I also know that he has not sold his stocks or there would have been a transfer certificate. So..."

"Ah! He is the owner of seventeen percent stocks but he is not authorized to give the power of attorney to all those stocks. You see..."

Slowly, Lucien pulled out a file and passed it to his assistant standing behind him, who then carried it over to Elena. "Now, where was I? Ah yes. The problem with Gabe's stocks is that he mortgaged his share of stocks to the company a year ago, before he left. And according to the papers, the power of attorney to those shares belongs to the chairman of the bank... who happens to be... me."

Elena's eyes widened in shock, disbelief washing over her smug demeanor. She quickly scanned the document Lucien had handed her, her fingers trembling slightly as she read the intricate details.

"This... this can't be true," she stammered, her voice wavering.

Lucien gave a sympathetic but entirely fake smile as he consoled, "So, you have the POA to only seven percent of his shares.. Which makes this ratio back to sixty: forty..."

Chapter 367: A Setback(2)

Elena's face contorted with anger, her eyes blazing as she struggled to process the unexpected turn of events. Gabe had actually double crossed them. She verified the papers that Lucien had given her and then the ones that Gabe had signed for her. This paper really was pre-dated! And Gabe had been well aware of what he was doing, even as he pretended to give in to her demands.

The Frost brothers on the other hand, maintained their calm demeanor, unfazed by her anger.

"You think this changes anything?" Elena spat out. "I can still wreak havoc with the stocks in the market. You might have a small stake in Gabe's shares, but I still have all of that. I might not be able to accomplish anything in the management but I can inflict significant damage."

Demetri leaned back in his chair, a smile playing on his lips. "Ah, but you see, Mrs Winthroe, we are really sorry to disappoint you. Us, outdated people have anticipated your every move. While it's true that dropping the stocks in the market might cause a temporary dip, but we have more than enough personal liquid funds and contacts to buy them back at the market price. Your attempt to manipulate the stock value won't hurt us as much as you would like."

"Tsk Tsk. Aunt Elena. I'm really sorry that we are not as vulnerable as you would believed. We can weather the storm you're trying to create." Seb added with a look so apologetic that one might have actually believed that he was regretful.

Elena shared at the smug faces of the men and then at the people who had come to support her but were now avoiding eye contact with her. She stood up, ready to leave the room, when Ian's voice broke it, "Mrs. Winthroe. I believed the meeting is still ongoing. We have a counteroffer that you might be interested in. Or atleast the others with you might want to see..."

Elena stopped and stared at Ian. And then at those who had vouched to help her. She could already see from their expressions that they'd been cowed by the turn of events and would do anything to escape this situation and not want enmity with these men. Slowly, she sat down, vowing in her heart that she would teach Gabe a lesson for this betrayal. He was going to regret and remember this as the biggest mistake of his life.

Ian nodded with a smile as the woman sat down and continued, "Now, let's talk about a more sensible resolution. You can save yourself from humiliation and further complications. We propose that you directly sell the stocks to us at the current market price. It's a fair offer, considering the circumstances and your intentions."

Elena's anger turned into frustration due to her failure but she was not ready to give up so easily. As long as she had Gabe, she would resort to any means to get what she wanted.

"You think you can dictate terms to me?" she retorted, her eyes narrowing. "I still have leverage, and I won't let go of it so easily. You might have found a loophole but that does not mean I am willing to let go. Holding onto the stocks is no loss to me."

The words angered all of the Frost brothers, the meaning clear to them. They'd given her a clear out and yet, she wanted to hold on so as to try and cause them trouble in the future.

Finally, Demetri spoke in a measured tone, the underlying threat clear in his voice, "Mrs Winthrop, it's in your best interest to consider our offer. Going down this path will only lead to more losses for you. We're giving you a way out without causing irreparable damage to your reputation. Why don't we convene for a break, and we can consider this again?"

Without a word, Elena gathered her papers and walked out of the conference room while the others quickly scurried after her.

Watching the conference room empty so quickly, Seb could only rub his hands and grin at Demetri, "Dam*! Couldn't you have told me all this last evening? I spent the entire night sleepless, wondering if I was going to have to leave my office. I just had it refurbished!"

As Ian and Lucien exchange knowing glances, Demetri raised an eyebrow at Seb, "Are you sure that your sleeplessness was because of worry for the office or other nocturnal activities?"

Seb shut his mouth, while Ian and Lucien chuckled before Ian asked, "Okay. Who wants to eat what for lunch. Let's order it and celebrate our little victory."

Lucien, however, was as worried as always, "We've exposed Gabe's deception. And we have no way of letting him know. What if she does something unreasonable. After all both Arabelle and Elena are vicious and unpredictable."

Ian sighed and shook his head, "Yeah. And so is Gabe. Gosh! I just want this matter to come to an end now. Gabe needs a break. Heck. All of us do."

Demetri sighed as well, "It will be over this time. Gabe has already made his decision. But the consequences of this coming to an end might be what we are not prepared for..."

"Anything would be better than this stalemate¹ position" Seb muttered as he leaned down his head on the table. He'd been on the tneterhooks since last night and now was ready to crash on the table itself. A cat-nap would help him a long way...

Just as he was about to fall asleep, he heard his phone go off and groaned as he pulled it out of his pocket. Who could be calling him on his personal number at this hour?

"Hello?"

"Seb! Its me."

"Gabe. How are you? Where are you? What is go..."

"Seb! Listen to me. Trace this phone number. And get to my location. Nora is in danger."

"Nora?"

As Seb listened in alarm, the phone was disconnected. The sharpness in Seb's tone had already caught Demetri's attention as he quickly brought out his own phone to call Nora.

A "stalemate" refers to a situation in which neither side in a conflict or competition is able to make progress or gain an advantage and is often used in chess or other military operations.

Chapter 368: A Set Up

"Are you getting in, or do you want me to drive off, leaving you here alone?" Arabelle's impatient voice sliced through the tension like a blade, while the only sound that echoed in around them was the hum of the engine.

Gabe stood frozen, disbelief flooding his senses as he stared into the back seat of the car. How had Arabelle managed to reach Nora? The layers of security they'd meticulously set up seemed impenetrable. His mind raced, trying to make sense of the unthinkable breach.

As he looked into her eyes, he felt a shiver down his spine. He could feel the weight of her ultimatum hanging in the air.

His heart pounded in his chest, the gravity of the situation sinking in. "Arabelle, how did you—"

"Questions later," she interrupted, a dangerous edge to her tone. "Now, decide."

Gabe hesitated, his gaze shifting between Arabelle and an unconscious Nora in the backseat.

"Arabelle, just give me a moment to—"

"Moments are a luxury we don't have," she snapped, her impatience palpable. "Get in or stay out, Gabe. The clock is ticking."

Gabe took a deep breath, the weight of the situation settling on his shoulders. With a final glance at Arabelle, he stepped into the car, the door closing with a definitive thud. The engine roared to life, as the car raced out of the estate.

"Arabelle, slow down." Gabe reached for the dashboard to stabilise himself as Arabelle drove out recklessly, casting a worried glance at Nora who was still unconscious.

In reply, Arabelle gripped the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity, her foot pressed firmly on the accelerator. The empty road stretched endlessly, and the only sounds were the tires screeching against the asphalt.

"Ari, please slow down! You're driving too fast!" Gabe pleaded softly, trying to place a calming hand on Arabelle's arm, who quickly swatted at his hand angrily, "Don't touch me. And don't call me by that weaklings name! I am Arabella not some Ari. Arabelle gets everything she wants while Ari! She only craves for you. Disgusting."

Arabelle's gaze remained fixed ahead, her wild eyes reflecting a mixture of fear and desperation. Her breaths came in ragged gasps, and her chest heaved as if trying to outrun the chaos inside her mind.

"Ari pines for you all day as if you are oxygen! It is sickening! She wants to be with you forever and ever. Even now, she is whining in my head, asking me to calm down! How dare she! How dare she give control of me to you?", she accused, her voice rising in hysteria, as she narrowly avoided an oncoming car from the opposite direction.

Gabe's brows furrowed and he tried to think quickly, "Arabelle, no one can control you. Most certainly not me. You know me, don't you? Just slow down and pull over. Let's talk? Can we not do that?"

However, Arabelle's eyes darted around as she drove recklessly, "No. That Ari, she wants to be with you forever. Doesn't she? And you promised her to never her. Don't worry then. I will make it happen! After today, Ari, you and me, we will be together forever."

Gabe had an ominous feeling in his stomach! Damn it! He'd been prepared for a similar outcome. Knew of the struggle that had been ongoing in Arabelle's mind. Her other personality, Ari, had already warned him that Arabelle was going to do something sinister. But how did Arabelle get Nora and why did Ari not know this or warn him of it?

He needed to get Ari to the fore somehow. Only then would Arabelle be controlled.

"I don't care if we die together Arabelle. But why do you need Nora?"

Arabelle laughed at that, "I was waiting for it. Are you concerned about Nora's dying? Are you saying that we should die together but let Nora live? You care about her more than us?"

Gabe sensed something wrong with the words and chose the next words carefully, "I love you and care about you more than anyone and anything. But Nora is innocent. Your anger should be directed towards me only..."

Unhinged laughter escaped her as she said, "Do you know something Gabe? You believe that the most powerful feeling in the world is love. Don't you?"

Gabe nodded as he kept an eye on the road. Thankfully, other than the passing truck, they had not had any other oncoming traffic. And she was slowing down so maybe he just needed to keep talking to her. But before he could say more, she continued, "But you are wrong you know. The most powerful

emotion is hate. Let me explain it to you... See, I hate Demetri. As much as you might try to talk me into not hating me, it won't work. I will keep on hating him."

"However, Ari loves you so much. And all I had to do was put it in her head that you did not love her as much as you cared for Nora. And see, she doubted your love for her and kept quiet about Nora. A few carefully chosen words and love crumbled while hate won."

"Ari. Listen to me carefully. I love you. Only you. Please come and listen to me. I love you, Ari. Don't doubt that."

Arabelle's laughter echoed through the car, a chilling sound that underscored the complexity of the situation. "You think you can just summon Ari whenever you want? She's not your puppet. I control her, not you."

Gabe glanced at the rearview mirror, noticing a subtle movement from the backseat. Nora was stirring, her eyelids fluttering as she began to regain consciousness.

Keeping his voice steady, he tried to continue to talk to her, urging her, "Arabelle, please listen. We can find a solution together. We can work through this without anyone getting hurt."

"No, Gabe. It's too late for that. Ari wants her time with you, and I'm not going to deny her that pleasure. So, this time, Ari and Arabelle, both are going to win. The only one to lose in this game will be Demetri, as it should be."

Chapter 369: Arabelle's Decision

As they continued to talk, Gabe came to a chilling realisation. Even if Arabelle seemed to be driving in a rage, she was not driving aimlessly. She had a destination in her mind. As her ominous words hung in the air, and the passing scenery blurred outside the speeding car, a troubling suspicion began to dawn on Gabe.

Alarmed and concerned, he shifted his gaze towards Nora, who was now fully awake, her eyes wide with trepidation. Swiftly turning back to Arabelle, who remained oblivious to Nora's alertness, Gabe inquired urgently, "Arabelle, what do you mean by saying Demetri will suffer? What is your plan?"

"Tsk tsk, Gabe. You are sounding like a broken record of questions. You know me well enough to have discerned by now what it is I have planned." Arabelle replied nonchalantly.

Soon, they'd reached the curvaceous mountain road and Gabe could only stare at the road as the car picked up speed again, his heart in his throat.

"Since you seem incapable of deducing my actions, let me spell it out for you, Gabe," Arabelle continued with a sinister smile. "I am ensuring that you and I remain together, bound by an unbreakable bond—both in life and in death. Since living in peace with you is unattainable, I've made a decision for both of us: death. We shall share our existence in the realm beyond."

Nora almost gasped at Arabelle's words as she slowly tried to shift in the seat while Gabe was keeping her distracted. But looking out of the window and the way they were climbing upwards, Nora knew that they had very little time. Suddenly, Arabelle seemed to sense her movement and quickly turned back to look at her.

Thankfully, she was alert and quickly pretended to remain slumped. The car swerved dangerously with Arabelle's distraction while Gabe worked quickly and brought her attention back to him," Ari. What you are doing is foolish. And a coward's way out. Haven't we been living well over the past few months? Then what is the problem? Tell me Ari. Talk to me."

Gabe watched as Arabelle's expression wavered for a moment. He knew now that Ari was fighting for control with Arabelle and continued," Ari. Think back to all the wonderful times that we've spent together. All those days of bliss with just the two of us. Have I ever done anything to make you doubt my love for you?"

Just as the car started to slow down, and Arabelle turned to look at him, he tried to maneuver the car to the side so as to stop at the shoulder but instead sneered," Are you scared to die Gabe? You think that coaxing Ari is going to help you? What happened to your always together promise? Or was that only for living and not for dying? Do you want to run away?"

"I am willing to die with you, Arabelle. But let Nora go. She has done nothing to you."

"She has done nothing? She is the reason my entire life turned upside down! If she'd never come into Demetri's life, he would have been the one to become engaged with me. I would have been standing in front of the world with my hand in his instead of living in the shadows with you."

"I am going into the darkness that has been threatening me for a long time now. But I will not go alone. I will take you with me to accompany me while I will make sure that I leave the same darkness in Demetri's world. There's no turning back now, Demetri. You and I both know that."

Nora, still feigning unconsciousness, listened intently, her heart pounding in fear as she heard Gabe try and reason with Arabelle. Even if Gabe continued to try, Nora knew that it was going to be futile. Arabelle was not going to listen.

Slowly, she tried check the door, and calculated the speed at which the car was moving. Jumping out of the moving car was not an option as they would end up with multiple injuries and if Arabelle came back, they would easily be run over. They just needed to find a way to get Arabelle to stop the car.

An inch at a time, she slithered sideways, an idea forming in her mind. If she could incapacitate Arabelle for a moment and distract her, or grab her, then Gabe might be able to wrest control. But she would have to let Gabe know of this. It was a risky move that they'd learnt in the self defence class. How to deal if they were attacked in a car from behind. She'd never expected to end up being the one to attack instead of defend herself.

Ever so slowly, she extended her leg towards Gabe, brushing his elbow with her toe and watch as he stiffened and slowly gazed at her through the mirror. She made a quick delicate motion towards her neck while pointing at Arabelle and he nodded.

It was a relief to have him agree. For a moment, she'd worried that Gabe might not agree. Now she just had to wait for her to take another blind turn. Nora braced herself to jump as the car hurtled towards the next turn.

What happened next was a whirlwind of motion all happening at the same time. Nora lunged and Arabelle seemed to realize that Gabe had gone quiet suddenly, thus becoming alert to the shift in atmosphere.

In that split second, Arabelle's hands tightened on the steering wheel, and with a menacing grin, she swerved the car violently towards the edge of the cliff. The tires screeched, and the world outside the window transformed into a terrifying blur of rock and sky.

Panicking, Nora lunged towards Arabelle, desperately trying to pull her back into the seat while Gabe urgently reached over, even as he was thrown against the car's dashboard, gripping the wheel with all his strength and trying to turn it back towards the road and away from the cliff.

The car teetered on the precipice, the abyss below threatening to consume them.

Chapter 370: Forever Together

The car teetered on the precipice, the abyss below threatening to consume them.

Arabelle's laughter echoed through the chaos as she continued to manipulate the car towards the edge fighting Gabe with her maddening strength. Nora, struggling to maintain her grip, shouted, "Gabe, now!" and hit Arabelle's neck with all her strength, making her lose consciousness.

In that critical moment, Gabe summoned every ounce of strength. With a forceful jerk, he wrested the steering wheel from Arabelle's grasp just before she slumped and turned it towards him.. The car lurched back onto the road, but the momentum carried them dangerously close to the edge, leaving them hanging on the precipice with half the car hanging in the air.

The gravity-defying stillness that followed was punctuated only by the distant howl of the wind. The car dangled perilously, swaying on the brink. Each of them knew that a single movement might end up ending them all.

Gabe, taking a deep breath, spoke to Nora in hushed tones, "Nora, slowly slither back! Get out of the car from the other side."

Nora, her face pale but determined, refused. "We can't leave each other now, Gabe. I won't go alone. We go together. Or... we don't go at all."

Gabe shook his head with urgency, "Nora! Listen to me. Please! I can't bear the thought of something happening to you. Demetri won't forgive me, and I won't forgive myself. You need to go. Slowly, inch by

inch." He paused and tried to keep the assurance in his voice, trying to convince himself and her, "Help must be on the way. I've already sent our live location to Demetri. We'll be rescued soon."

Nora hesitated, her eyes flickering between Gabe and the edge of the precipice. Gabe continued to plead, "You have to trust me, Nora. Go now, while Arabelle is still unconscious. We don't have much time!"

Reluctantly, Nora started to inch her way back towards the side of the car that was on the road. The car swayed precariously with each movement. Gabe, his heart pounding, watched her every move, silently praying for her safety. All he wanted was to keep Nora safe. Then he would not have to worry about anything else. He was willing to go with Arabelle in peace. But he would not give up on Nora. Not yet.

Finally, after a few minutes that felt like hours on end, Nora finally reached the other side of the car, a hesitation flickered in her eyes. "Gabe. I can wait with you..."

Just then Arabelle groaned and started to shift. Gabe shook his head and whispered urgently, panic gripping him. "Nora, go! Hurry! And go far away from the car to the side of the mountain. Wait there."

Slowly, Nora opened the door of the car and with a deep breath placed a foot on the road. She dare not lunge lest the movement rock the car and push the others to death..And then she shifted her weight,until only her foot was left in the car and then fell back.

Relieved that she was out of the car, Gabe closed his eyes and muttered a silent prayer of relief. However that relief was short lived when instead of running away, Nora came forward, ready to open his car door. Immediately he locked the car from inside and shook his head," No! Go away Nora! Go and get help."

Nora shook her head, kneeling outside the door as she whispered," You have to come out too Gabe."

Gabe refused," No. Don't stop now, Nora."

Meanwhile, Arabelle, groggily awakening, started to move. Gabe, realizing the immediate threat, desperately tried to maintain control of the situation. "Nora, go now! I'll handle Arabelle."

Knowing that she couldn't stay longer or she would end up distracting Gabe who needed to focus on controlling Arabelle, Nora finally crawled backwards.

As Nora disappeared from sight, Gabe turned his attention back to Arabelle, who was regaining consciousness with each passing second.

Arabelle stirred, her eyes fluttering open as she groaned. The car dangled and she suddenly looked around in panic, realizing the precarious position of the car.

Ari's voice filled the car. "What... what's happening? Where are we? Gabe, what's going on?"

Gabe looked at the girl in front of him carefully, unsure if this was Arabelle or Ari but kept his voice calm, "It's okay, Ari. We had a bit of an accident, but I'm here. We need to stay calm. Can you stay calm, Ari?"

Ari's eyes widened, fear evident in her gaze. "An accident? Oh no, no, no. Gabe, we're hanging on the edge! We're going to fall! What do we do?"

"Ari, I need you to stay calm. We're working on getting out of this. Just trust me, okay?" Gabe whispered.

Ari nodded frantically, her hands gripping the edges of the car seat. Arabelle stirred, her eyes fluttering open as she groaned. In that moment, a transformation seemed to occur within her. The laughter and madness that had characterized Arabelle vanished, replaced by a more timid and terrified persona – Ari. She looked around in panic, realizing the precarious position of the car.

Ari's voice, trembling and scared, filled the car. "What... what's happening? Where are we? Gabe, what's going on?"

Gabe, maintaining a calm exterior despite the chaos around them, tried to reassure Ari, "It's okay, Ari. We had a bit of an accident, but I'm here. We need to stay calm. Can you stay calm, Ari?"

Ari's eyes widened, fear evident in her gaze. "An accident? Oh no, no, no. Gabe, we're hanging on the edge! We're going to fall! What do we do?"

Gabe, keeping a firm grip on the situation, responded, "Ari, I need you to stay calm. We're working on getting out of this. Just trust me, okay?"

Ari nodded frantically, her hands gripping the edges of the car seat. Gabe continued to talk to her, keeping his attention on the road ahead.

As Ari rambled in fear, Gabe's focus remained on the approaching vehicles. Relief washed over him as he recognized the headlights. Help was finally on the way. He could see the outline of a rescue team approaching.

He spoke to Ari while maintaining a watchful eye on the approaching help. "Ari, we've got people coming to get us. Just stay calm. I need you to trust me and let me handle this. Can you do that for me?"

As Ari nodded however, a shift overcame her expression as she said, "I can do that, Gabe. But what do I do? I don't want to."