

Benefits 381

Chapter 381: A Relationship

"I'd like to see Ian Frost, please," the woman said with an air of confidence, her striking features drawing the receptionist's attention.

The receptionist looked up at the beautiful stranger and offered a warm smile. "Of course, ma'am. May I inquire if you have an appointment?"

"No appointment, but he will see me. Just tell him it's Erica," she replied, a subtle smirk playing on her lips.

"Mr. Frost hasn't arrived yet, Miss Erica. If you don't mind waiting, I can give him a call..."

The woman shrugged casually, gesturing for the receptionist to proceed. As she settled into a chair, her flowing auburn hair framed a face adorned with an air of mystery, complemented by sharp, emerald-green eyes, seemed to catch the attention of every passerby.

The receptionist quickly tried calling Isabella, hoping to ask her about Ian's schedule but before she could, do so, Ian Frost himself walked in, followed by Isabella herself.

Before anyone could blink, Erica had already spotted Ian and raced towards him, "Ian!"

As Ian turned around in surprise at the sound of his name, the woman had already reached him and leaped into his arms. Surprised, Ian caught her just, almost losing his own balance as her feet left the ground for a moment. Steadying himself, he carefully held her and set her down before looking at her with a pleased expression.

"Erica. It's been a long time. I didn't expect to see you here." Ian asked as he gestured for her to walk with him.

"I was in town and thought I'd drop by. I've been missing you. And you never call. You don't like your friends anymore?" Erica complained.

While the two walked forward, Isabella walked behind the two people, her head bowed, almost unnoticed by anyone else.

As they walked into the elevator, Erica threaded her arm through Ian's and started to talk, "Anyway. So, I thought I'll surprise you. What do you think about my surprise?"

Ian smiled, "It is a pleasant surprise to be sure..." Before he could continue, Erica interrupted his words as she questioned, "And who might you be? Why are you entering the elevator with us?"

Taken aback, Isabella almost looked around before quickly realising that the woman was talking to her. Giving her a calm smile, she tried to maintain her professional demeanor and answered, "I am Isabella Ruffalo. Mr Frost's assistant."

"Perfect," Erica said, as if making a decision. "Isabella, change Ian's morning schedule. Clear up some time for us to chat. You know, friends catching up. And you can take the next elevator. We'd like some privacy."

Her dismissiveness further shocked Isabella but she quickly stepped out of the elevator as the doors started to close. In the next instant, the door was stopped, and Ian ordered calmly, "Miss Ruffalo. Please come in. And you can push back my meetings by an hour. Thank you."

Erica pouted and quickly complained, "What is this? I come all the way here, and all I get is an hour of your time? It's not fair, Ian. There was a time when an hour would not have been enough for you," she finished her words suggestively, rubbing his arm slowly.

Ian, maintaining his composure, gently removed his arm from Erica's grasp. "Erica, I appreciate you dropping by, but my schedule is tight. Let's make the most of the time we have." He shot a subtle glance at Isabella, who had discreetly entered the elevator, maintaining her professional expression.

He needed to get rid of this trouble as soon as possible. Of all the times for Erica to return, it had to be today when he wanted to declare his intentions to Isabella. Why?

As the elevator ascended, Erica continued to playfully complain, attempting to rekindle the past. "Ian, you used to be more spontaneous and carefree. What happened to the adventurous guy I used to know? Since when you care about people and work more than friends?"

"Priorities change, Erica. And you know I have never been casual about business."

"Fine fine. I'll take the hour. But you are joining me for the party tonight. I need to go there and I need a date. And after that we can go back to my hotel room..."

The elevator doors opened, and Ian briskly stepped out, feeling a sudden urge to escape the confined space before Erica unleashed another barrage of comments in front of Isabella. It seemed like the universe, in its ironic sense of humor, had decided to avenge all those people whom he had teased mercilessly over the years for making a mess of their relationships.

He had successfully avoided attachment for so long that now, as he stood on the precipice of giving up his bachelorhood, the cosmic comedy writers of fate had decided to throw in a plot twist and make a mess of him!

With a bemused expression, Ian contemplated the irony. "Of course," he muttered to himself, "just when I decide to declare my intentions to Isabella, the universe sends Erica as a reminder of my 'glorious' past."

With a resigned shake of his head, Ian motioned for Erica to follow him down the hallway while avoiding looking at Isabella. He had no idea how he was going to explain this to Isabella.

"Miss Ruffles, please make sure that no one disturbs us for the next hour." Erica said, seemingly unaware of Ian's tension before adding, "Unless, of course, they are voyeurs..."

Ian winced at that and so did Isabella while Erica chuckled. Quickly, Ian opened the door to his cabin, let Erica enter and closed the door at a record speed.

Isabella, with an incredulous expression, exchanged glances with the closed door, still processing the unexpected situation. She couldn't help but mutter under her breath, "Well, that's a new level of urgency..."

As she returned to her desk, Isabella couldn't shake off the awkwardness in the air as well as her own rather tumultuous feelings. She busied herself with work, attempting to maintain a professional demeanor while Erica's suggestive comment lingered in the atmosphere, making her feel extremely uncomfortable...

Chapter 382: Lunch Time

Ian stared at the empty chair where his assistant had been until a few moments ago and sighed. Why was nothing going in his favour today? First, he'd been tortured by Nora and the horrible hot chocolate instead of his usual cup of coffee. On the way to the office, he'd received a 'thank you for the gift for my wife' message from Demetri that somehow sounded like a promise of retribution.

Thankfully, he'd met Isabella at the entrance and thought that his day would improve from then on. Only for his bubble to burst when he entered the building. There was Erica, a woman whom he hadn't seen in months, but she'd now decided to stick to him like velcro and when he'd barely gotten rid of her, he did not have a moment to talk to Isabella to clarify things!

And now that he had time, Isabella had already gone away for lunch, probably. He looked at the app where he was about to make a lunch booking and sighed. He'd just eat in the office and finish his work as soon as possible so that he could clear any misunderstandings before leaving for the day.

As if the universe were conspiring against him today, Sebastian strolled towards Ian with a mischievous grin that never promised anything good.

"Ian, my dear brother."

"Get lost, Seb."

"Hey! What kind of a welcome is that?" Sebastian complained, feigning hurt as he raised his hands to showcase a few bags. "I even got your favorite food. And what do you do? You disdain my presence?" He raised an eyebrow, his grin widening, fully aware that his mere existence seemed to rile Ian up.

Ian glared at the bags and crossed his arms, blocking Seb from entering his office as he questioned, "Do those bags have Thai food?"

"Ooh! I always knew that you had the nose of a bloodhound. You're good brother. Now, why are you being a block? Get out of my way."

"No! I hate Thai food. That is your favourite food. Go and eat it in your office."

Seb grinned and shrugged, "Thai is not your favourite? I could have sworn... fine fine. I'll remember to bring Italian next time. But for this time you have to accompany me... Come on, Ian. You're my favourite brother."

Ian rolled his eyes at that claim and reluctantly moved aside, knowing that Seb would continue to pester him unless he got what he wanted.

The aroma of Thai food filled the air as Seb spread out the containers on Ian's desk, grinning triumphantly as he said, "You really need to come out of the closet, Ian. I know for a fact that you do love Thai..."

"Kept telling yourself that to assuage your guilt, Seb."

"Fine then. Don't eat."

However, Ian was already feeling hungry and as he eyed the array of dishes, his stomach seemed to be rumbling. Snorting, he glared at Seb and said, "As if I'd let food go to waste." He lunged for a container however Seb was faster and snatched it away. "Oh no, not until you confess your love for Thai!"

"Seb, don't be ridiculous." Ian retaliated, attempting to reach for another container, only to be met with another evasion.

"Confess, Ian!"

"Never!" Ian glared while Seb seemed ready to defend the food.

Narrowing his eyes, Ian smiled thinly at Seb and stepped back, "Fine. you can enjoy the food. I have a sudden craving for some panini so I'm going to Olivia's..."

Seb straightened and sat back in the chair with a thump, "That's a low blow, Ian."

Ian shrugged and grabbed the food, "Well, you're the one with the problem."

Seb sulked and leaned back in his chair, "Fine. Just eat. I hope you have indigestion."

"Wish you the same, Seb."

After a bit of silence, when the two brothers had eaten their fill, Seb finally sighed and questioned, "How was your morning?"

"Busy." Ian muttered, not wanting to look back on the past miserable hours that he'd spent.

Seb's mouth kicked up at that and he shook his head, "I'm planning to go to Gin's party tonight. You want to join?"

"I might." Ian muttered again, already beginning to gather the containers.

This time Seb was surprised as he stared at Ian, "Really?"

"Hmm. For a little while though. I have to payback a favour."

"Ahh... A favour named Erica Jameson?"

Ian paused in his task and looked up at that, "You're quite well informed. Well done."

Seb shrugged and passed on the lids of the container on his side to Ian as well. The man had some kind of an OCD about cleaning things after eating food in his space! It was why he usually preferred to come here. No need to clean up after himself.

"Hmm...I think I might have a proposition that might be of help to you."

Ian raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "A proposition, you say. Let's hear it."

As Seb outlined his own plan, Ian suppressed his smile at the cleverness and instead questioned, "What's in it for you?"

Seb winked, "I'm sure you can guess, brother."

Ian grimaced and nodded, "Fine, I'll agree to it. Let's go."

However, Seb shook his head, "Uh huh huh. Nope. I have another condition."

Ian scowled, "What?"

"I'll have the first dance with the bride at your wedding."

Ian paused at that and carefully asked, "What wedding? What are you smoking? Me and Isabella are not the ones getting married. It's Demetri and then Lucien probably..."

Seb laughed at that, "Who said anything about Isabella? I just meant your wedding in the future...But it's good to know what your intentions are."

Ian: ".."

How did he fall into a trap that was not even a trap? Cursing his own IQ which seemed to have fallen considerably today, Ian followed Seb out of the office. As he passed Isabella's desk, he paused and quickly scribbled a note...before walking out of there decisively.

Chapter 383: Miss, my foot!

"Miss Ruffalo, I'm leaving early today. You can too. See you later" - Ian

Isabella stared at the note in her hand and frowned. Miss Ruffalo? Was Ian avoiding her? She had no idea. Yesterday, their discussion had been side tracked and then, later, when he'd dropped her home, they'd almost done it in the car itself. It was like he'd been unable to keep his hands off her. Meanwhile her brain seemed to have crashed and stopped working.

This morning, she'd come with the intention of clarifying things, only to be met with Miss Erica. And since then... Ian had been avoiding her. She'd waited a few minutes into the lunch break, hoping he'd come out and probably give them a chance to talk but he had not. She'd been disappointed but had consoled herself that they would be going home together as they always did, so it was going to be okay. But here it was. He'd asked her to leave for the day... with a note...

Of course, he had a date tonight with Miss Erica. Isabella wanted to crumple the note in her hand and toss it into the bin, while imagining his face on it! Dam* it! Usually, he was so clear about things but now he wanted to play games with her.

Miss Ruffalo, my foot! Did he remember calling her all those sugary names yesterday? What happened to sweetheart, Isi and doll? As she almost crumpled the note, she happened to glimpse herself in the mirror and sighed. She was not being herself. Since when did she start to become clingy.

Slowly, she breathed deeply and placed the note down carefully smoothing out its edges. She was Isabella, known for the long line of men who were waiting to flirt with her. She should not let the malicious office gossip and her mother's remarks get to her.

She grimaced at the thought, quickly striding towards the elevator. Why did she have to think back to her mother. Wasn't it a good thing that Ian's topic had kept her mind off the fact that she'd just had a lunch with her mother who'd actually dared to question her about Ian.

Stabbing at the elevator button as if it was personally responsible for all the confusion in her life, she clenched her teeth and waited for the elevator to close.

However, it seemed she was not to be relieved as a bunch of other employees decided to enter the elevator at the next floor.

As expected, they snickered at her, refusing to acknowledge her while they deliberately gossiped amongst themselves, "What will she do now?"

"What can she do? She is only good enough to warm a man's bed."

"Oh please. Who would want her to warm their bed? I'm pretty sure he doesn't even take her to bed and dirty his sheets."

"I don't think that assistant will last long. I know women like Erica Jameson. They are pretty possessive of their men."

"The woman who came in the morning. Her name is Erica Jameson?"

"Yes! Don't you know? She is a model and fashion designer. She established her own brand at the age of nineteen after modelling for three years. And has been known to cater to only Hollywood A listers or Royalty."

"Good for her. Such a woman would definitely be worthy of our boss. Unlike someone who used her viles."

Isabella had had enough and turned around with a wicked grin, eyeing each of the women with a mix of amusement and disdain. "Well, well, well," she drawled, her voice laced with mockery. "It's truly fascinating to witness such profound interest in people's personal affairs. I had no idea I was the highlight of your water cooler discussions."

She sauntered closer, making deliberate eye contact with the ringleader of the gossip brigade. "You know, I can understand the envy. It must be frustrating to watch someone live a life you can only dream of while you're stuck in this mundane office, counting the minutes until your next coffee break."

Isabella leaned in, her tone lowering to a conspiratorial whisper, "I get it, really. Not everyone has the courage to pursue what they desire. Some people are content hiding behind their desks, speculating about the lives of others because they lack the audacity to live their own dreams."

"But you know what, you are too foolish if you think that someone like Ian Frost would need to sleep with someone and then offer them a job. He's so hot in bed that a girl would get on her knees to thank him for the opportunity to be with him. As for Erica Jameson? She is free to try and take him. You see, I am much more possessive of what is mine."

With a wink, Isabella walked out of the elevator, a smirk on her face as her heels clicked against the tiled floor, feeling lighter than candy floss.

It was only as she walked out of the office building and hailed a cab that she realized what she had done. She had declared that she was sleeping with Ian Frost. Something that she had been denying since coming here. All her previous efforts were wasted!

Banging a fist against her forehead, Isabella cursed herself for her foolishness. She'd really lost her equilibrium today thanks to her mother and not someone called Erica or Ian, she reminded herself. It was time to go out and party. Ever since she had returned, she had refrained from going along with the party crowd, to prove that she was able to give that up. But tonight... she needed the loud music and energy.

There was no way she was going to sit at home and think about a certain someone and his date.

As the city lights blurred past the cab's window, Isabella started messaging her old 'friends' to see what the best place was to have a night out and let her hair down. Tonight was going to be all about drinking and dancing. As for work tomorrow... she'll think something later.

Chapter 384: Really?

Isabella stood in front of her wardrobe with a frown on her face. Her fingers trailed over the array of fabrics that had been left untouched for a while now. Finally, her hands stopped on a little creation, delighting her. This was it. This dress was what she would wear for tonight.

Grabbing the little thing, she caressed it slightly and murmured lovingly, "I've been unfair to you, haven't I? Never wearing you outside when you are meant to be shown off?"

Holding the dress in front of her as she stood in front of the mirror, she grinned at it. This was the most audacious dress she had bought till date. On first look, it looked like a simply short black dress but on the second look...

The dress was so short that it bothered on this side of being decent. The boudoir look neckline was covered by translucent lace, giving a tantalising view as someone moved while the butterfly designed lace made it look as if its wings were fluttering. The dress moulded her body and was tight enough that she dare not breathe deeply or she risked the dress coming apart.

Shaking her head, she wiggled out of her office clothing, "Don't worry, I'll give up a bit of oxygen to look awesome tonight."

Soon, Isabella stood in front of the mirror again, staring at her reflection as she chose between two earrings, finally settling on the longer thin one that brushed against her shoulders, their subtle jingle pleasing her.

Just then the bell rang making her frown. Who could it be? As she walked towards the door, she played with the second earring in her hand, humming to a random tune.

"Wh.. What are you doing here?"

Ian stood at the door, with a bouquet of flowers in his hand. But seeing the vision in front of him, he seemed to forget everything else. His eyes scanned her from head to toe, taking in the short dress that clung to her. For the first time in his life, he was lost for words.

Without a word, he caught her wrist and pulled her to him, taking her mouth in a hot kiss. Isabella was caught off guard and as his mouth moved over hers, she closed her eyes and kissed him back, forgetting her resolve to stick to their professional relationship.

Finally, as his hand slowly moved over her hips, Isabella gasped and remembered his date with Erica Jameson tonight. Quickly she pushed at his chest but she might as well have been an ant trying to move a wall, with the effect it had on him. So, she did the next best thing... she bit his lip... hard and tasted blood.

Isabella took a step back, her eyes narrowing at Ian as she maintained the distance between them. The air crackled with tension, and her pulse quickened as she prepared for the impending confrontation.

"What was that about?" Ian repeated, confusion etched across his face. Isabella sighed, a mixture of frustration and determination in her eyes.

"I asked you why you are here?" she reiterated, her tone firm.

"I thought I'd try my luck with a new business idea. Door to door flower delivery. Here. these are for you." Ian extended the bouquet of flowers to Isabella, hoping she would like them.

Unexpectedly, Isabella stepped back as if he was offering her a can of worms and he raised his eyebrows in confusion, "What's up with you?"

"Did your date ditch you?" Isabella questioned him.

Ian frowned in confusion at the question, "My date?"

"Yes. Weren't you supposed to be going out on a date with Miss Jameson?" Isabella muttered. Not giving him a chance to answer, she continued, "Not that it is any of my business. But really, I don't need flowers meant for someone else. And if you have nothing else to say, then I need to go out. Bye..."

Before the door could be closed in his face, Ian quickly shoved his foot in, "Wait a minute. I left you a note saying that I'll be coming by. Did you not get it?"

Isabella frowned. "Yes. I did get a note that mentioned you'd be seeing me 'later'. There was nothing about you coming over."

He scratched the back of his head, a sheepish grin playing on his lips. "Well, now is later, isn't it?"

Isabella rolled her eyes, unimpressed by his attempt at humor. "Later doesn't mean 'show up unannounced.' I have plans tonight, Ian. Goodbye."

His gaze lingered on her as he questioned with a mix of curiosity and disappointment, "Ahh. So the dress is not for me?"

Isabella stared at him in confusion for a moment, wondering if he really expected her to continue an affair with him after seeing him be with that woman in the morning. Inhaling sharply, she cocked her head and pointed out, "No Ian. This dress would not look good on you even if you somehow managed to get into it. You can ask Miss Jameson to design a dress for you if you really are interested in dresses though."

Ian chuckled, a realization dawning on him. "Is someone feeling a bit jealous?"

Isabella's eyes narrowed, her patience wearing thin. "Jealous? Don't flatter yourself, Ian."

His grin widened, amused by her reaction. "Come on, Isabella. You can admit it. You're jealous because you think I have a date tonight."

Isabella rolled her eyes and snapped, "Why would I be jealous? And now you really need to leave. I've got friends waiting for me."

Ian shrugged, "I can see that. Where are you going? I'll drop you."

Isabella scowled and walked back to grab her phone, and stabbing at the screen a couple of times, "Ian Frost. Let me show you something. This is a mobile application. It is used for booking cabs. I know how to use one. So, I do not need a taxi service. Now... go! And I'll be seeing you later, of course that means tomorrow in the office."

Chapter 385: Really (2)

Instead of walking away, Ian chose to step inside, casually leaning against the wall. "Well, you might not be jealous but let me be honest with you—I'm completely jealous of anyone who gets to see you tonight. I can't fathom why you picked that killer dress, but just the idea of you stepping out like that has me burning with envy. I don't think I'll be going anywhere. But don't mind me. You can continue, I won't be disrupting your plans."

Isabella stared at the man. He was jealous? What for? But she was not going to ask. Knowing Ian Frost, he would keep on finding ways to keep her here all night, caught between his net of words until she forgot everything and stayed there. Nah! She wasn't going to fall for his trickery. "Fine! Suit yourself. I'll be leaving. You can close the door when you are ready to go."

With that, she turned back, walked to her room, grabbed the little clutch and marched out, "I'm going. Bye."

"Wait a minute." Ian stopped her, stepping into her path.

Isabella smirked. She knew it! Ian Frost may sound like he was letting you have your way but he was too crafty to let anyone do that. It was always his way or no way!

"What?"

"Are you going out like that?"

"No. I wore the dress for modelling it at home! Of course, I am going out like this."

"I'm not talking about the dress doll. I'm talking about your bare..."

Isabella frowned. She knew the dress left a lot of bare skin on display but did the man have to point that out? And what right did he have to question her about her clothing choice. As she got in a huff, ready to scold him, he finished his words... "...feet."

Isabella blinked and then glanced down at her feet, realization dawning on her. She had meticulously planned her outfit, and here she was, ready to make a grand exit without a stitch on her feet.

Ian couldn't help but chuckle at her horrified expression. "Well, going barefoot might make a fashion statement, but I think you would be in a lot of pain tomorrow. Or maybe not. From what I've heard those heels that you like to wear are not quite feet-friendly..."

Isabella shot him a glare. "This is all your fault distracting me!"

Ian grinned, unabashedly enjoying the situation. "Blame it on me then. But don't worry, I have a solution."

Using the perfect excuse, the man directly walked into her house and then to her bedroom while Isabella stood there muttering to herself about her own stupidity*. She'd actually forgotten to wear shoes!

Soon, he returned holding a pair of heels in his hand. Isabella glanced at those frowned and decided she really did not like Ian Frost! The man could be bad at something, couldn't he? He'd chosen the perfect pair that would go with the dress.

Making a face, she walked forward to take the heels from him but instead he took them away from her reach, holding the shoes away from her.

"What? Now you want to wear my heels?" Isabella frowned, glancing at the time. Already the man had been here for twenty minutes and showed no signs of leaving or letting her leave.

"Sit," Ian ordered calmly, gesturing towards the couch with a nod of his head.

She wanted to protest and she would have but there was something in his eyes that stopped her. As if her feet had a mind of their own, they moved her there and soon she was sitting on the couch with Ian kneeling in front of her.

She watched as his hands wrapped around her ankle, the touch feather-light yet purposeful and felt a delicate shiver as he gently slipped her feet into the gladiator heels. His fingers lingered for a moment longer than necessary, and Isabella couldn't ignore the electric charge that seemed to spark between them as goosebumps covered her, making her shiver.

Ian looked up at her in this moment and she felt the world melt away. Ever so slowly, he started to thread the straps around her calves, looping them around her as his fingers continue to graze her skin, leaving a trail of heat on her skin. He did the same to the other leg with deliberate slowness and as the

air continued to thicken around them, Isabella had long forgotten her irritation with him as well as his date with another woman and her own plans.

Her entire being was focused on Ian's hands which were now resting on her knees, his thumb casually stroking her skin there. "You've got the most beautiful legs, doll." Her eyes widened as he slowly leaned his close to her, making her wonder what he would do. And when his lips slowly touched the inside of her thigh, she was almost ready to surrender.

It was the ringing of her cell phone that brought her back to reality, shaking her. As she jerked, his hands on her knees tightened and he watched as she fumbled with the purse in her hand, taking out her phone.

Isabella tried to move her legs away even as she answered the phone and as a friend spoke from the phone, asking her about her plans, she watched as Ian's head dipped low again, kissing her on the other thigh.

With a shiver, she mumbled something into the phone and disconnected it before pushing at his shoulder as she murmured, "Ian... Let me go."

Ian smiled smugly at her as he shrugged his shoulders, simply leaning away from her, "Go, doll. I said I won't be disrupting your plans."

What was he doing if not disrupting? Isabella wanted to ask the question but avoided that. No talking or else, she reminded herself and simply stood up on shaky legs. "Nice. I like the thongs, doll." she heard him murmur.

Isabella quickly moved away from him and glared at him, "You pervert! How can you stare under my dress."

"Hey! I was just sitting here. You can't blame me!"

"Do not engage." Isabella reminded herself and quickly walked towards the door. Only to be stopped by his voice as he called her name once again.

Chapter 386: Run Away, baby!

Isabella closed her eyes and counted to ten. She was going to run away in the next thirty seconds. She was not going to get distracted by him. As she repeated this mantra in her head and turned around, her heart sank.

There he was, brandishing her earring like a triumphant pirate discovering hidden treasure. Isabella's eyes widened in disbelief. When and how had her earring reached him? She was pretty sure she'd already been wearing those when he came... Or maybe not.

As he started to walk towards her, she knew he was going to take up this game a notch. His intentions were clear. And she would not survive. She knew that too! She was not going to let him near her...

Hurriedly, she took a step back and turned on her heels, "I'm not wearing the second ear ring. You can keep it. It's out of fashion to wear earrings on both ears. Bye."

As Isabella raced out of her own home like a thief, followed by the sound of Ian's amused laughter, she knew she was in deep. That man was laughing at her and instead of confronting him, she was fleeing!

Ian whistled as he drove towards the club, drumming his fingers on the wheel as he sang along to the song on the radio. As his phone rang and he answered, he heard Seb's irritated voice over the phone, "Why would you change the venue at the last moment?"

"How is everything with Jameson?"

"She is going to be busy for quite some time and won't have time for you. Sorry. Also, what's up with you? I thought you were going to take Isabella out on a date? And now you've cancelled the reservation."

Ian shook his head and braced himself for the teasing that was going to follow his confession, "She'd already made plans to go out."

Silence and then Seb broke into laughter as he realized that while Ian had been meticulously planning a date to explain the entire 'Erica' fiasco to Isabella, the girl had dumped him and made her own plans.

Ian grimaced and growled at Seb, "Shut up, Seb."

But Seb, reveling in Ian's misfortune, taunted, "Serves you right. Keep your intentions clear next time. You got what you deserve."

"If you don't shut your trap, I will..."

"Blah blah blah, Ian. Threats won't change your fate. New reservations have been made. VIP room awaits. I'll be there to witness the upcoming show."

Ian shook his head and sighed. What he was about to do was definitely going to earn him a 'glare' from Isabella but he had no choice. He knew for himself the moves she had and the way men seemed to be attracted to her like bees to flowers. And dressed like she was today, she might end up causing a riot. Nah. He needed to be there tonight for his own sanity but he was going to use the excuse that he was going there for her safety. Yes.

Humming, he watched as the long line outside the club extended around the corner and wondered if Isabella had already made it inside. What if her and her friends had decided to go to a different club? Nah. He'd just go inside and take a look.

Ian nursed the drink in his hand as he looked down at the scene below with a scowl. Meanwhile, Seb's mouth seemed to be stretching from end to end as he looked at the same scene while flitting glances to his brother.

Sipping her own beer, he leaned back and shook his head, "I have to say this. You've got a good eye."

"Eyes off, Seb." Ian snapped at his brother.

Seb chuckled at that, " Didn't I tell you your threats won't work anymore? And me? I'm keeping my eyes off since she's officially entered the 'sister' category. But what are you going to do about the others? I'm pretty sure you've noticed the many men trying to approach her."

"And she's chancing them all away. As long as she is refuting them, I'm not going to interfere."

Seb outright laughed at that, " You're not going to interfere? Tell me if I'm wrong but that woman over there who is dancing a little further down from Isabella, isn't she one of your personally chosen heads of security at our downtown hotel? And the woman on the other side is in charge of the security at..."

"What is your point? Frost Industries is huge so a couple of employees being here at the same place to let their hair down is no biggie."

Seb smirked and took another sip of his beer, " Of course it isn't. And it is an added bonus when they are expertly keeping the troublesome men away from Isabella. Tsk tsk. You, Ian Frost, are a basta*d."

Ian glared at his brother and raised his bottle in a toast, " Takes one to know one, Seb. You want me to give you a number of men who have somehow become sick in the middle of a date with Olivi..."

With a scowl that mirrored Ian's, Seb stood up and muttered something unintelligible as he walked out of the room ready to head home. It was no fun to tease his brother if he was going to fight dirty.

As Ian continued to nurse his drink, he watched, another bold suitor approach Isabella, trying to get close to her under the guise of dancing. The floor was getting crowded and despite their best efforts the women were unable to redirect all the unwanted men.

With a determined thud, he placed his half-empty bottle on the table, and stood up. There was no way he was going to be a spectator anymore. It was time to intervene.

Ian descended into the fray, with his gaze fixed on Isabella, the crowd of people parted instinctively as his aura seemed to threaten the others. He watched as she tried to get rid of the persistent man and clenched his fingers as the man leaned close to her.

Soon, before the other man could move, Isabella was pulled into strong arms as Ian held her possessively while glaring at the man in front of her.

Chapter 387: Exclusive

"What are you doing?" Isabella asked with a perplexed frown while attempting to extricate herself from Ian's grasp which proved expectedly futile. The other man, sensing the sudden tension in the air, hastily scurried away.

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, Ian responded to her question with action as he spun her away expertly before deftly pulling her back in, against his body, his hand on the small of her back as he pulled her close as he asked her teasingly, "What does it look like I'm doing, doll?"

"It looks like you're stalking me! You promised not to disrupt my plans. Why are you here?" Isabella demanded, a mix of frustration and curiosity etched across her features. All evening she'd been trying to forget him and the way his touch lit her up, and here he was again, touching her again!

Ian chuckled, the low and melodious sound sending shivers down her spine. He'd chuckled like this when he'd been 'eating' breakfast while treating her as the 'plate' and she'd moaned every time his tongue slid against her skin... "It was a coincidence. I had a meeting with Seb," he explained, his voice carrying a casual nonchalance, distracting her from the images that were playing in her head.

"A meeting with Seb? Where is he then?" Isabella inquired, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"He just went home. I was about to leave too but then I spotted you."

Isabella frowned and narrowed her eyes, "And you thought that you'd come and be the knight in shining armour? Save me from some random man?"

"Nah! I thought I'd ask a beautiful girl to dance with me. I'm pretty sure you can handle any man." Ian answered truthfully.

Isabella scowled, confused by his words. What did he mean she could handle any man? Was he talking about her flirting with everyone? However, he knew that she did not have many lovers. So why would he taunt her... However, that was not the question she asked, instead pointing out, "But you haven't asked. You've simply grabbed me and you are not even dancing."

"Hey! My feet are moving at least a few centimeters. So, I'm dancing. Will you say yes if I ask you?", Ian countered, a teasing glimmer in his eyes.

"Ask and find out," Isabella retorted, her challenge hanging in the air.

Ian sighed and caressed her cheek with his hand, feeling her hands on his shoulders clench a bit at his touch. Good. He liked that he affected her as much as she affected him, "Isabella Ruffalo? May I have the pleasure of a dance?"

Isabella smiled and cocked her head before answering sweetly, "No."

Ian chuckled and Isabella thought that this sound should also be outlawed among other things and tried to once again get away from him, "See. Now you know why I did not ask."

Isabella rolled her eyes, a smirk playing on her lips as she retorted, "Oh, your powers of deduction are truly awe-inspiring. Do you understand the concept of personal space?"

"Yes. I do. And I must say I like being in your personal space. It's quiet cozy..." Ian murmured while continuing to sway to the music, which was the opposite of slow, as his hand slid lower, caressing the curve of her a**.

Isabella's breath caught and she almost whimpered, "Ian, please."

Ian smiled and leaned close to her ear, "Please what? Please you? I want to please you, Isabella. Tell me..."

"Ian..."

"Isi..."

Isabelle inhaled deeply before stepping back, only to be pushed toward again as the crowd around them got rowdier.

Instead of being able to let go of him, Isabella was pulled away from the dance floor by Ian who finally dragged her away.

She looked up at him helplessly before reminding herself that she was not vulnerable. As he leaned against the wall of the quiet corridor, pulling her close to him, she sighed and asked him directly, "Ian. I don't want to repeat myself but..."

Ian sighed and shook his head, placing his finger over her mouth, "Isabella Ruffalo. Let me be clear here. I know you asked me the parameters of this relationship last time and we got side tracked..."

Isabella widened her eyes. So he did remember and had probably held off because he had no answer... So she interrupted him, "Is this a relationship Ian? I thought we were just having a bit of fun. And it is over now. I know you like to play around and you are probably worried because of what I revealed about my experience. But trust me, I am not expecting any sort of a relationship. As for this morning, I was a little awkward but it won't happen again. I assure you I know to separate personal and professional commitments. And no, I am not asking you for any commitment."

With each word, Ian's scowl deepened until his forehead seemed to have deep indents and his spectacles almost threatened to slip down his nose. Instead of answering her, his hand itched to slap her a** so he did, causing her to quieten up and stare at him with anger and some confusion.

With his nose almost twitching, Ian leaned down and warned her, "Isabella Ruffalo! You will not open your mouth until I tell you to or else you will have a red butt!"

Isabella opened her mouth to argue but quickly shut it when his hand pinched the flesh there in warning.

As he watched her shut her mouth without argument, he nodded and continued, "Now, listen to me really carefully. You and I, that means Isabella and Ian are in a relationship since the moment we slept together. An EXCLUSIVE relationship, understand?"

"But this morning..."

Ian tapped her a** in warning again, "Don't talk. Now, I will repeat this for you and if you want, I can even give it in writing, "You and I are in an exclusive relationship and I will not be seeing anyone else while we are together."

Chapter 388: Dazed

Isabella was in a daze as she stared up at the roof in her room. She should be sleeping. She'd been up since early this morning, had no rest over the weekend and needed to go to work in the morning again, but that sleep seemed to have disappeared. Her brain seemed to be treating Ian's words as some sort of catchy music as his words repeated there, as if in a loop.

"We are in an exclusive relationship. This means you won't be seeing anyone and neither would I. Also, about this morning, I did not do whatever your overactive imagination has you thinking! Erica was there for business and thought that she could use me to get it. All we did was talk business. Capsice? Understood?"

She'd nodded without comprehending but he wasn't satisfied. Instead he'd continued to scold her! "And what do you mean it was just a bit of fun? Are you looking down on yourself. Don't you dare do that! I cherish that you trusted me and angry that you trusted so little? And why are you not expecting a relationship? For that matter, even if you are not, you have a right to ask questions about us! So, am I clear about my intentions?"

And instead of answering him, she'd continued to stare at him as he stared at her. And then he'd smiled and caressed her cheek, "Isabella, repeat after me. Ian and Isabella are in a relationship. I expect him to be totally committed to this relationship. And if he dares to break my trust, I will break his bones."

Isabella shook her head, sighed and muttered to herself, "And like a fool, I even repeated the words."

But as she closed her eyes, she knew that there was a warmth in her heart. All these years, she'd assured herself that she was being herself. Even if it meant going against the expectations of her parents. But in little time, Ian had changed things around.

Everytime, he made her see a different version of herself. He'd somehow made her trust him and open up so that she realized that everything she had been doing until now had been a rebellion of sorts, trying to challenge her parents and test their love for her.

Unfortunately for them and even more so for herself, they'd been failing miserably. On the other hand, Ian seemed to take everything in stride and treat her differently. Not by his words, but by his actions he had proven to her that people's opinion of her or even her own low opinion of herself made no difference to him. He... cared for her. For her.

It made her feel ticklish inside. As if a thousand butterflies were dancing in her stomach. Maybe this was what it felt to be a female lead in a romance novel? Giggling, she caught the pillow on the side and hugged it to herself before something reminded her to ruin her mood.

Ian said that they were in a relationship. But he did not mention anything related to romance or even any future to this relationship. He'd probably meant that they were going to be exclusive to each other while they got this 'lust' out of their system and like a fool she'd started to imagine romance.

Once again she sighed to herself. "Isabella Ruffalo! If there were Olympic competitions for over-thinking you'd probably get a gold medal."

It did not matter whether the relationship had a future or not. She knew her heart and it was falling for Ian slowly and surely. But she was going to let it and not stop herself. And if that meant heartbreak in the end, she would experience that as well and let herself feel it. Time to go with the flow and not think too much. With a smile, she closed her eyes and sighed. Tomorrow onwards, she would be with Ian without any fears and past prejudices.

The next morning, Isabella woke up almost late for work as she hurried around her house, getting her stuff. As she stared at her panda eyes in the mirror, she shook her head. This is what happened when you went partying on a weeknight. Carefully, she applied her make up and patted her cheeks, hoping to feel fresher.

Just then her phone started to ring and she almost groaned. Ian Frost. She'd forgotten this man was a machine. He could party all night and still go to the office in the morning. Sigh! Had he already reached the office? Her heart skipped a beat as she answered the phone and heard his voice. Ian Frost, in his entirety, needed to be outlawed.

"Come down when you're ready, doll."

Isabella's eyes widened and she hurriedly moved to look out of her window, "You're here?"

"Yes." Ian answered her while she quickly looked around her house, throwing a glance at the kitchen. She needed to start keeping those breakfast bars for emergencies. Now she was going to have to rush around without any breakfast.

As she reached the parking, she slowed down and tried to calm her thumping heart, reminding herself that he was her boss at the moment not her lover.

Ian stood there leaning against his car as he watched her walk towards him and she felt her cheeks heat up as he looked her over from head to toe. Tentatively, she smiled at him, "Hi."

Ian smiled and raised the two bags in his hand, "Hi." Pushing the two bags into her hand, he quickly pulled her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly.

Finally, just as she was about to forget everything, he moved back and whispered, "Good morning, doll. You look as edible as ever."

Isabella rolled her eyes at the 'compliment' and sat in the car, curious about the bags. The first one held breakfast and she could only sigh in her heart. The man was really too perfect. But the second bag held the lipstick that she used.

Turning to Ian, she questioned, "What is this?"

"It's a lipstick, Isi. I think the modern term for it is lip crayon?"

Isabella rolled her eyes, "Oh. I had no idea. You know what I meant! So?"

Ian grinned and pointed to the mirror, "This is a spare lipstick for you to keep in my car. See, I am going to kiss you every chance I get, which will mean that your lipstick will be inevitably smudged..."

Isabella giggled at his meaning and quickly reapplied the lipstick that he'd kissed off before placing the little crayon into the dashboard console... What was she supposed to do with this man?

Chapter 389: Sleeping On

Isabella woke up lazily, unwilling to open her eyes and sighed as she heard the steady Ian's steady heartbeat under her ears. Closing her eyes, she let herself hear it and smiled to herself. A few months ago, she never would have imagined sleeping with Ian Frost let alone sleeping on him as if he were her own personal bed.

The soft morning light filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow on the room. Isabella, still nestled on Ian's chest, marveled at how her life had taken such a turn. They'd been sleeping together for a month, spending each night with each other until they were exhausted and then doing it all over again. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest as he slept seemed to be like a lullaby for her.

He hadn't even let her alone during that time of the month, instead insisting on holding her through the painful time, while making all sorts of nutritious dishes for her. Ian Frost had spoiled her rotten and while getting a man like him, who lit her on fire in the bed was impossible, this pampering was even harder to beat. Sigh! She was never going to get a life partner at this rate. Whoever the girl this man chose to be his life partner would definitely have been blessed.

A melancholic thought threatened to ruin her mood, but she forcefully pushed it to the back of her mind and instead slowly moved her head to look at Ian. Carefully, she traced his face, rubbing his lips before tracing an imaginary line over his chest as she admired his naked chest and lean abs.

As she continued to admire Ian's sleeping form, a soft chuckle broke the silence. Isabella's gaze snapped up to meet Ian's amused eyes, which were now open, observing her with a playful glint.

"Caught red-handed, doll," Ian teased, a lazy smile playing on his lips. "I always knew I was too irresistible."

Isabella chuckled and instead of retreating, she traced around his navel, "Umm. I know you think highly of yourself Ian but you really need to pull in that ego. I don't need to burst it on me."

Ian caught her naughty hand that was teasing him and quickly rolled sideways, throwing his thigh over hers as he stopped her movements, "Forget the ego. You've got something else ready to burst." Ian

spoke meaningfully, making Isabella blush as she tried to pull her hand away but it was quickly caught in place by Ian who stared at her challengingly.

Isabella rolled her eyes and gently dug her nails into his flesh as she said, " Ian, darling, you need to let go of my hand. Aren't you scared that your 'thing' will fall off if you continue at this rate?"

Ian chuckled and brought her closer to himself and rubbed her nose with his, " What are you? A little kid? Who even calls a co*k a 'thing'.

"Hey! Be thankful I'm not a little kid or you'd be in jail. And I call it 'thing'. Do you think I should give it a name? Something like the one eyed monster?"

Ian chuckled and closed his eyes, " Please don't name my 'thing'. Thank you very much. And since you're worried about 'it' falling off, I won't be doing anything for now. Save it for the right time."

Isabella, with her nose now squished into his chest, breathed deeply and closed her eyes. She liked the way he held her, throwing his leg over her. Somehow it made her feel safe being in the cocoon of his arms.

He inhaled deeply and she felt his chest reverbate a bit as he asked her, " What are you thinking?"

Isabella smiled and closed her eyes, enjoying this little illusion of their own little world, ' Just marvelling at the fact that I am sleeping with Ian Frost."

"Uh huh. You're not just sleeping with Ian, doll. You're sleeping on him."

Isabella chuckled and then winced as she felt him gently pinch her bottom. "YOU're not just sleeping with him. You're also sleeping 'on' him."

Isabella chuckled at that and nodded her head, "Hmm. You might be right. Maybe I should start my social media channel that promotes the health benefits of having you as a pillow."

"Hey! You think anyone can have a premium product like me to rest their head? I'm exclusive and unaffordable by anyone else. And one of a kind."

"Really? I'd have to go and test some other pillows like yourself to give a proper review. But I don't think you are that premium..."

Ian feigned offense, "Switch to a different one? Doll, there's no competition. Ian Frost Pillow is in a league of its own. Once you go Frost, you never go back."

Isabella burst into laughter at his proclamation. Hadn't she been thinking just that a while ago? But only Ian Frost could say it so shamelessly and still get away with it.

As she burst into laughter, she claimed, "I think that should be the next tagline for the new chain of cafes that you are investing in. Wouldn't it be great? Once you go Frost you never go back."

Ian chuckled and nuzzled her neck, "I see that you are trying to get business into our bed. That not done, Miss Ruffalo. Let's keep the business out of bed."

"But imagine the millions..."

"I am imagining the millions of ways that I am going to get your head out of the business and back in here, Miss Ruffalo. You really are incorrigible, trying to get rid of me..."

As he said this, Ian grabbed Isabella, tickling and teasing her mercilessly until she inevitably promised to hold onto the 'Ian Frost Pillow' exclusively for life.

And as Isabella watched him walk away a little while later, she could only sigh at the bliss she felt. This pillow was probably going to give her a headache for years to come but she still couldn't let go of him.

Chapter 390: Favours

"No." Lucien glanced at his brother and directly refused the request, before turning back to the work on his screen. He knew of course if he continued to look at his brother, Ian would definitely succeed easily. And he wasn't going to give in.

Ian scowled back at the man and groaned, "Come on Lucy! I'm asking for a favour. And you know I will return the favour when the time comes and you need me."

"I know that but you really need to find someone else for your plan."

"You are the best option Lucy."

"No. I am not."

"Hey! I am the older brother! I know best! And when I say it is you, then it is you!" Ian asserted.

Lucien rolled his eyes and pointed out, "Really? You are going to use that assertion? Do I need to remind you that the last time you used this reasoning, I almost got blown to pieces?"

Ian's scowl deepened even further, "That wasn't my fault. I asked you to check the fuel in the car. How was I to know that you would dare to use a candle to peep inside because it was dark?"

Lucien chuckled at the memory. "Well, maybe if you didn't show me the way to light a candle then..."

Ian shook his head and chuckled, "You were almost blown to pieces Lucy, but I almost lost my life when I saw you standing there with that candle so close to the car! You were such a dum dum!"

Lucien shook his head, "Ah, yes you were worried for my life. I remember you screaming some rather cruel words and then scolding me for almost getting you into trouble. You were not concerned about me becoming ashes! You were concerned that Grandfather would.... what were the words you used... ah yes, 'tan your hide' because I died on your watch! You even kindly suggested that I could do this when Demetri or Erasmi were babysitting."

Ian guffawed at the memory now. It really had been funny. Though his heart had almost stopped and his soul had probably evaporated for a moment, when he'd seen the kiddo standing like that, he could laugh at it now. Lucien's little eyes had turned watery and so wide while his cheeks had puffed up.

"You'd been cute back then, Lucy! Such a good little boy. Why did you have to grow up so soon?" Saying that, Ian quickly walked around the desk and pulled Lucien's lean cheeks as if he was still the round faced little boy, before squishing his cheeks.

Lucien rolled his eyes and pushed at Ian's hands, laughing, "You have no limits! You are going to treat me like that to get your way?"

"If it works," Ian shrugged off, as he shook Lucien's head quickly as if he were petting a little dog.

"Get off me, you joker! Fine, fine. I'll give in. But remember when the time comes, I'll..."

"My cute little brother. Don't worry. When it is time for you to propose to Evana..."

Lucien rolled his eyes and pointed out, "I am smarter than you all. I am not going to be needing your help."

Ian shook his head and returned to his seat, satisfied at having Lucien's agreement, "Well, we'll see about that. So, why haven't you proposed to Evana yet? And when are you going to Estania?"

Lucien sighed and shook his head, "She's coming next weekend. Nora has her dress fittings. And final tastings or something. Then she'll be here till the wedding next month. As for proposing, I'd do it tomorrow but..."

"She'd not yet ready?" Ian continued with a sigh.

"She is."

Ian was surprised at this. "So whats the problem?"

"It's the circumstances. She needs to focus on her career at the moment and the things back here with Gabe and Erasmi away..."

"You are the one who is suffering?" Ian finished quietly.

"Not suffering. I have a competent team and Gabe is handling things off site also but things are a bit..."

Ian frowned. He'd noticed Lucien a bit listless over the past few days but had thought he was merely tired. But now...

"Is the distance and time difference taking a toll on your relationship?"

"Long distance relationships are not easy and with both of us having such high pressure work environments..." Lucien shook his head. He was hardly getting a few minutes a day to chat with Evana.

And while the two of them trusted each other implicitly, sometimes your soulmate's absence hurt like a physical thorn. He'd see Evana's tired face over the video call and wanted nothing more than to hold her. And sometimes, she would stop herself from saying something so that he wouldn't worry, but she seemed to forget that he could read her like an open book. And he could see her pulling away from him. And he did not like that...not a single bit...

Ian sighed guiltily. With everything going on, they'd forgotten their little Lucy and his initial plan to shift his base to Estania. First there was grandfather's death, then Erasmi leaving them to move away and then Gabe and Arabelle's death. Too much was happening at the same time.

"I'll tell you what. Call in that favour that I am going to owe you, Lucy."

Lucien looked up at Ian, torn from his thoughts abruptly, in confusion, "What do you mean?"

"I mean dump all your work on me and go to Estania. Surprise Evana and spend the rest of the time with her before she has to come here. You will be able to have some quality time with each other."

"But the work..."

"You just said you have a competent team and I'll take a look for anything else. If there is anything urgent, I'll have them check in with you."

Lucien lit up at the idea. Yes. He could do that. Dam* it! Why did he not think of this earlier. Nodding, he accepted the offer, "Fine. Then we are square. I'll work on what you want and you can do this for me. Also, call the pilot on standby. I'm going home to pack."

Ian laughed as Lucien raced out of there while Lucien also felt free. However, he could not have imagined that he would be the one to be shocked when he reached Estania eventually...