

## Benefits 401

### Chapter 401: Uncles

Miss Martha disapprovingly shook her head, observing the waitresses and their seemingly frivolous antics. It was as if they had never encountered a handsome man before. Granted, the presence of five gentlemen in the cafe, each appearing as if they had just walked off a movie poster, was a rare sight. Nevertheless, there was no justification for the way they ogled at them with wide-eyed fascination, especially considering Erasmi's status as a local resident for the past few months.

However, before Miss Martha could voice her disapproval, a waitress returned with a gloating expression. She eagerly informed Miss Martha, "You won't believe it! These guys are here for Erasmi's bachelor party! He's tying the knot with his long-term sweetheart! Guess you'll have to come up with a new matchmaking plan, Big mama. I know you wanted to match him up with 'that' woman."

Miss Martha raised an eyebrow, a mix of surprise and skepticism on her face. "Well, that's news," she muttered under her breath. She stared at the other boys in the group and then at Erasmi.

Not many people knew that Erasmi was Caius' biological father. But she knew. She also knew that he was the one who had intervened in the matters about Ava's ex-husband and the problems that the mayor's wife had created for her. So, if she had thought that the little boy could have a full family then it wasn't wrong.

However, she'd never known for Erasmi to have a fiancée? And he was even going to get married to her. He should have brought his woman to meet his child, shouldn't he? But as she was staring at Erasmi, his eyes met hers and she suddenly remembered something...

Turning around, she grabbed a piece of her best tiramisu and walked to the table, placing it in front of the man.

The man looked down at the pastry and then at her, "We haven't ordered anything yet."

"This is on the house! You're a good boy, so you deserve it. You love our Erasmi." And then she patted him on the head as if he was a child.

Demetri Frost blinked while the other Frost brothers all stared in stupefied silence before bursting into laughter as Ian muttered slowly, "I never thought I'd see the day. Someone actually called Demetri 'a boy'."

"And patted him on the head..." Seb added as he waited for Demetri's reaction.

"Dam\* we should have captured that on camera!"

"Demetri, your aura has weakened since you've been with Nora. Now, even the lady is not scared of you." Gabe pointed out as he moved to take a bite of the tempting pastry in front of Demetri.

However, Demetri simply chuckled and swatted at Gabe's hand, "Hey! I'm the good boy. This is for me. Go get your own cake."

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As Miss Martha returned to behind the counter, the waitress could not help but lean over, "Big Mama? What was that about? You wished him well? Aren't you angry that he might be leading on that woman?"

"Just because you're foolish doesn't mean everyone is foolish, Penny. That is Erasmi's twin and those are his other brothers. See there?" Just then, Miss Martha spotted Erasmi walking towards the cafe with little Caius in tow.

Outside, Caius Mercer stopped and looked up at Erasmi. Over the last few months, he'd come to like this man who was his father. But now he had to meet his uncles and he was really nervous.

Erasmi noticed the hesitation in Caius and bent down to his eye level, giving him a reassuring smile. "Hey, little buddy, don't worry. My brothers are great guys. You'll like them, I promise. They're a bit goofy, but they're family. Just be yourself, and they'll love you."

Caius nodded, feeling a bit more at ease. Erasmi took his hand, and they entered the cafe together. The atmosphere shifted as all the brothers looked in the direction of the two people and specifically towards the little boy before glances were exchanged. Erasmi caught their looks and rolled his eyes, realizing

they were up to something. He also felt Caius hesitate once more but before he could be concerned, Ian stood up and walked over," Lo and behold. The youngest Frost Prince is here."

Before Caius could have a chance to feel nervous or retreat, Ian had already caught the boy's hand," Caius, I'm Ian. I'm going to be your favourite in the future. So remember me well, alright."

"This man who is your father's doppelganger is Demetri, the most boring one among us and unfortunately for you, your namesake. If you ever want to be bored to sleep with lessons about Botany, he is your man."

"The one on his right is your Uncle Lucy. He was the youngest until you so he is going to be a bit jealous of you. He can put you to sleep using numbers. No need to remember his name."

"On this side is Seb. He is a little less interesting than me. So you can consider him to be your next favourite. The one with no expressions on his face is Gabe. He has a soft heart. If you want anything in the future and everyone refuses, you can go to Gabe. He will definitely do it. He's a pushover."

Caius, a mix of confusion and amusement, listened attentively to Ian's quirky introductions. He exchanged a quick glance with Erasmi, who simply chuckled at his brothers' antics. As Ian finished, Seb jumped in, holding a mock serious expression. "He is lying. No one likes Ian. You can ask your father. I am everyone's favourite."

Lucy, the supposed jealous uncle, leaned over and whispered to Caius, "Don't listen to Seb and Ian. I'm the interesting one. I can even make math fun. Well, almost."

"They are all fooling you, kiddo. Come here and have this bite of cake. I am the best among all of them and since you have my name, you're going to be the best in the coming generation."

Soon, another round of laughter, accusations unfolded and Caius was soon dragged into talking about his interests while all the Frost brothers talked with and around him.

Miss Martha, observing the spectacle from behind the counter, couldn't help but smile at the warmth radiating from the group. Penny, the curious waitress, whispered to Miss Martha, "Looks like they've got the whole family package deal, don't they?"

Miss Martha nodded, " I think those Frost brothers are doing a great job welcoming Caius into their chaotic fold. The little kid is going to have a large family."

#### Chapter 402: A Girls' Night Out

"I can't believe that I am throwing the most boring bachelorette party ever! Nora darling, you've become BORING."

Nora chuckled and munched on the pizza slice as she scrolled through the channels. Irritated, Isabella grabbed the remote control and threw it on the side, " Nora baby! You're getting married and nothing! Nada! You told me that Demetri was okay with you having strippers. So, where are all those young guns? Forget a real one there isn't even a fake one here."

Olivia munched on her popcorn as she watched Isabella crib and whispered to Evana, " What crawled up her a\*\* tonight?"

Evana turned to look at Olivia before shrugging but Nora overheard her and answered, " Ian."

Olivia raised a brow, " Ian crawled up there? If that was the case, I'm sure she wouldn't be so grouchy. Sore, yes. Unable to sir? Yes. Grouchy? No."

Isabella picked up her popcorn and threw it at Nora as she scowled, " Ha! The only way he is getting near my a\*\* is in his dreams."

"Oh. I'm pretty sure he's already dreamt that. I promise you that he must already be finding a way to make that dream come true, Bella baby." Olivia murmured candidly, causing Nora to chuckle in agreement and Isabella to blush. "So, for the time being, since he is nowhere near your delectable a\*\*, what did he do to cause you that mood?"

Isabella harrumphed while Nora grabbed another piece of pizza and defended, " Hey? Why are you blaming Ian? Maybe Bella baby is just feeling hormonal..."

"You traitor! Just because you are now part of the Frost family, you've turned your back against me!" Isabella pouted before launching into her rant.

"You know, he's always been Mr. Perfect, that Ian of mine. Always doing everything right, always saying the right things," Isabella began, her tone a mix of frustration and admiration. "He's so annoyingly thoughtful and considerate. It's like he can't help but be a saint or something."

Nora raised an eyebrow, amused by the unexpected twist in Isabella's rant as well as not missing Isabella calling Ian hers.. "Isabella, it sounds like you're listing the qualities of a dream husband. What's the issue here?"

Isabella sighed dramatically, "That's exactly the problem, Nora! He's too perfect. It's infuriating. He's gone and done something behind my back, and it's so irritatingly and confusing that I can't even be mad properly!"

Isabella sighed, her frustration laced with a touch of fond exasperation. "And don't get me started on his impeccable memory. It's as if he's got a mental database of every significant date, every little detail. I once casually mentioned liking tulips, and guess what he surprises me with on our next date? A bouquet of the darn things!"

Olivia chuckled, sipping her drink as she listened to Isabella's humorous complaints. "Sounds like he's just trying to sweep you off your feet. What's wrong with that?"

Isabella sighed deeply, her eyes revealing a mixture of vulnerability and confusion. "You won't believe what Ian has done. He's gone and met my parents behind my back. I mean, who does that? I think he threatened them or something."

Olivia's eyes widened in surprise. "He met your parents? Without telling you first?"

Isabella nodded, her frustration evident. "Exactly! My mother called me, of all things, to give her approval of him and promised to make amends for the past. She even said that she was going to talk to my father so that they can put Emerald in some counselling sessions. I didn't even know what to say. Why can't he just let me handle my own relationships and family drama?"

Olivia, trying to understand the complexity of the situation, asked gently, "Isabella, isn't this a good thing? Your mother seems willing to reconcile, and Ian probably thought he was helping."

While Nora casually sipped her coke, "I warned you that he would do that. Frosts believe in building relations not breaking them unless they turn harmful."

Isabella sighed, "That's the thing, Nora. He's too good at this. He's turning my life into this picture-perfect story, and I'm not sure how to handle it. What if it all comes crashing down? What if he's just a dream, and the minute I blink, he disappears?"

As the girls all were quiet, finally Evana spoke, "Then you live the dream all over again in your memories, bella baby. Ian is perfect for you. Don't be mad at him."

Isabella rolled her eyes and sighed, "I know. I can't even be mad at him. See what he has done so that I would forgive me."

Everyone leaned forward and watched as Isabella opened a box that had been sitting on the table until now and then chuckled, "He wants me to vent on this."

Laughing, Nora picked up Ian's life size cut out a little further away and handed the darts over to Isabella, "Have fun venting your anger." Isabella sighed and looked down at the darts in her hand, aiming one towards his head but unfortunately it landed on the lower part causing Nora and Olivia to jeer at Isabella for wanting to end Ian's future descendants while Evana could only chuckle softly, her mind still stuck on Nora's words that the Frosts preferred building relationships.

After a few more rounds of dart-throwing and laughter, Isabella sighed, feeling a sense of catharsis. "Okay, maybe Ian has a point. It's good to let out the frustration. But I still reserve the right to be annoyed at his perfection."

Meanwhile Nora looked thoughtfully at her sister and then at Olivia before commenting, "I think this is unfair. We should have gotten a cut out for the others as well. I don't mind aiming a few darts at Demetri. What do you think, Oli?"

Olivia chuckled and closed her eyes, "Sure," I don't mind aiming a few aims at Seb."

Nora chuckled, "And you Evana? Hasn't Lucy done anything to irritate you these days?"

Evana sighed and shook her head before muttering slowly, "Does breaking up with me count?"

Olivia, Nora and Isabella all turned in shock at the words before Olivia muttered, "Okay, this officailly needs some drinks. Bella baby, grab the wine."

#### Chapter 403: The Truth

As Isabella poured the drinks for everyone, she couldn't help but exchange a worried glance with Nora and Olivia. It seemed Ian had been right when he'd guessed Lucien's behaviour in the office. But she'd never have thought that he would be so right.

According to Ian there had probably been trouble in paradise but with Evana's words, it seemed the 'paradise' was on the verge of collapse.

Nora's voice, tinged with caution, broke the heavy silence. "You and Lucy broke up? Why?"

Evana averted her gaze, her voice barely a whisper. "I don't know. He never gave me a proper reason. It was the classic, 'its me not you'. We don't have the time, etc. But his words blindsided me. I was so shocked, I couldn't find any words. I just sat there, frozen and maybe zoned out. He waited for some time then just walked out. We haven't spoken since."

Olivia probed further; her voice gentle yet precise. "So, you're suggesting that Lucien initiated the break up between you two?"

With a miserable nod, Evana confirmed their worst fears. "A break apparently. We need time away from each other because we don't have time. But isn't that the same as breaking up? I guess, he wants to try dating other women..."

As Evana silently reached for the bottle, continuing to drink with a mix of desperation and resignation, the others exchanged serious glances, each lost in thought over Lucien's shocking decision. They knew too well how deeply Lucien felt for Evana, making his sudden change of heart both bewildering and concerning.

Nora voiced her confusion first. "I just can't wrap my head around it. Lucien and Evana seemed unbreakable. Do you think something happened that we don't know about? Can it really be stress from work and the distance relationship thing?"

Olivia shook her head, "Maybe for someone else. But knowing Lucien, it doesn't add up. He's always been all in when it comes to a relationship and especially more so when it comes to Evana. He wouldn't need a break unless..." As Olivia was about to say something she paused and looked at Evana consideringly.

Between Lucien and Evana, Olivia knew Lucien better. And from she knew of this brother of hers, the only way Lucien would initiate a break was if he felt it was Evana who needed the break.

However, looking at Evana's miserable face, it seemed improbably. She looked as if someone had killed her favourite fish and then fed them to the cat. If she indeed needed a break, she should be feeling relieved, right?

As she looked up, she caught Nora's eyes and realized that like her Nora, too seemed to have come to the same conclusion. In that moment, both of them knew that there was something missing in this equation. A variable they were probably unaware of. Something they would have to find out using a different way.

Isabella cocked her head and murmured, "Unless what, Olivia? What could have triggered this? Lucien's been head over heels for Evana. Did he join a monastery and take a vow of celibacy?"

"I think he found one of those self-help books? '10 Steps to Independence: Starting with Breaking Your Own Heart'?" Olivia added as she gently took the bottle from Evana's hands and passed it to Nora. They didn't need the girl poisoning herself from alcohol.

"Break your own heart? What about my heart? Why is he doing this? I was doing fine, on my own, wasn't I? He was the one who pushed his way into my heart and now, he is trampling on it! He wants to go sleep with other women, then he should go do it. Make a clean break up with me. Giving me that false excuse and then saying that 'we need a break' is not it."



Nora nodded and patted Evana's hand as she said, "We ought to catch Lucien and question him about this. If he's really doing something foolish like this to see another girl then he is not worthy of you, Evana."

Soon, the conversation was steered towards plans to get Lucien to tell them what was going on and be honest about it. He wouldn't be truthful just because they asked so they needed to sneak an attack on him.

As plans were being hatched, Evana's thoughts were a whirlwind of confusion and hurt, barely registering the protective fervor of her friends and sister. It wasn't until Isabella's voice, tinged with a hint of suspicion, cut through the noise that Evana snapped back to the present.

"Wait a second," Isabella said, pausing as a thought struck her. "Didn't Lucien come to see you that week? He came back in such a sour mood. Was it because he broke up with you then? That ba\*tard! Me and Ian had to stay in the office for three days and nights to handle his workload. We thought we were helping your romance and that idi\*t was breaking up with you."

"Wait a minute." Evana stared in horror at Isabella's words. The room went silent as all eyes turned to Evana. Her confusion was palpable, her brow furrowing as she tried to piece together the timeline. "When did Lucien come to see me? I... I hadn't seen him in weeks until I came here for the dress fitting. We'd been sending texts before that, sure, but he never came over. What are you talking about, Isabella?"

Isabella's eyes widened, realization dawning on her. "But that doesn't make sense. He flew there as soon as Ian offered. And we know he did go to Estania because of the flight plan. Ian checked it later when Lucien returned later immediately. He thought it was odd because Lucien seemed off afterward, more withdrawn than usual. We all assumed he'd been depressed because you were busy..."

However, as Isabella continued to talk, Evana had a sinking feeling in her stomach and asked Isabella to confirm the dates. Could it be that he'd been there on that fateful day? She remembered seeing the flowers in the outer office but...

Evana broke down. She finally knew why Lucien wanted to a break.. It was all her fault.

Chapter 404: Fishing

"Uncle Ian! You're not going to get any fish if you keep that up!" Caius called out in his young voice, a mix of amusement and concern as he observed Ian Frost goofing around with the bait on the hook instead of casting it into the water.

Seb, the resident fishing expert, couldn't resist chiming in with a sly grin. "He doesn't know how to catch fish, Caius. That's why he's goofing around. So that later, when he has to show off his catch, he can say he was busy entertaining us instead."

Caius giggled at the explanation as Uncle Ian playfully tossed the bait at Uncle Seb. "Ah hah! Just for this, I'll make sushi tonight."

Caius wrinkled his nose at the thought of consuming raw fish, prompting Ian to cluck in mock disappointment.

"Oh, come on, Caius! Sushi is an art form. You'll thank me when you're older and have a sophisticated palate."

"And curse him in the morning when you have an upset stomach." Seb added wisely.

Caius burst into laughter at Seb's remark, his eyes wide with the anticipation.

"Ah, Seb, always the voice of reason. But trust me, Caius, my sushi-making skills are legendary. You'll be begging for more."

Seb shook his head with a grin. "Well, if the fish survive your 'legendary' bait dance, we might have something to work with. I am not sacrificing any fish I catch to your sushi making altar."

"I don't need your fish!" Ian, determined to prove his fishing prowess, finally cast the bait into the water with an exaggerated flourish. Caius, still giggling, watched the bait land with a splash.

"If the fish could talk, they'd be asking for refunds on that performance! Are you trying to lure the fish or warn them away?"

Just then, Seb felt a tug on his line and grinned, "And, get ready, boys, we might be having a feast after all!"

Caius leaned in, eyes wide with curiosity. "What is it? What did you catch, Uncle Seb?"

Caius leaned forward, his eyes wide with anticipation. Ian, not missing a beat, nudged Caius conspiratorially, leaning over himself.

Seb began reeling in the line, the tension building. Suddenly, a loud splash disrupted the tranquility, and a burst of laughter echoed as Seb pulled out not a fish but an old sneaker, covered in mud and dripping water.

Caius burst into laughter, his small frame shaking with amusement. Ian seized the opportunity to tease Seb as he broke into laughter looking at the dangling mess and taunted, "Guess, we won't be getting any grilled fish tonight. Unless Seb, you're planning to feed us grilled boots."

Seb shot Ian a mock glare and snapped back, "Well, at least I got a shoe, let's see what you can get."

As Caius continued to laugh and rolled over, Seb winked at Ian who winked back. Their mission had been successful for now.

With the child's laughter echoing on the large fishing boat, Gabe and Erasmi joined in curious about the reason for the hilarity. Spotting his father, Caius, still caught in fits of laughter, pointed at the muddy sneaker in Seb's hands. "Uncle Seb just caught a new shoe for himself."

"He's starting a new trend in fishing."

"Hey! Don't look down on us. I was just unlucky for a moment. Erasmi, are there even any fish in this lake? Are you trying to fool us?" Seb accused.

Before Erasmi could say more, Caius jumped to his father's defence, "Uncle Seb! You're being a fox! Just because you couldn't catch fish, you're saying there are no fish here. Last time, dad and I came here to fish! He caught three wishes in an evening! We had a feast! Tell him, dad!"

"I don't believe hearsay, kiddo! Come on 'dad', show us." Seb passed the rod to Erasmi who had frozen with a wink.

Unexpectedly, Caius had addressed Erasmi as 'dad' for the first time. And it seemed so natural from him. Even though Erasmi had been fine taking his time and building the relationship with the kid, he'd never really expected to be addressed as dad. He'd tried to tell himself that it was alright but only now, could he accept that it probably hadn't been all well with him.

Gabe grinned and understanding the situation, nudged Ian, "You go and do the vegetable cutting, you inexperienced peasant. Let me show Caius, how to catch fish. Come on Caius, I can bet that I'll catch at least four fish tonight. Break your dad's record."

Competitive, Caius shook his head, "You're on, Uncle Gabe. But I can promise you that you will lose the bet. Dad is the best at fishing!"

Gabe chuckled and challenged, "Oh really? Erasmi, you've been showing off in front of your kiddo? Let's see who the true fishing champion is."

Caius jumped up, pumping his fist into the air, "Yes! Go dad. You'll definitely win."

Erasmi rolled his eyes, having caught his emotions in check, and challenged, "Gabe, let me remind you that I am the oldest of all. I will definitely win."

"Ha! We'll see about that, you old man."

Soon, the entire side had turned lively as the four brothers bantered and competed, with laughter and the occasional cheer as a fish was caught breaking the peaceful ambiance.

Demetri shook his head and lay down to stare at the sky, enjoying the sounds of laughter as well as the peace of the day. Lucien, on the other hand, who was lying next to him, could only sigh as he spoke up softly "Demon."

"Hmm? You're ready to talk about the reason for your self-torture these past few days?"

Lucien chuckled. Could he hide nothing from his brothers?

"Maybe. I'm not too sure what to say..."

"We're in the middle of a lake, and not going anywhere. Take your time, Lucy..."

"What if someday you had to be away from Nora for a long time, and during that time, she was attracted to someone else... What would you do?"

#### Chapter 405: The Misunderstanding

Evana anxiously paced her hotel room as she waited for the visitor records from the airport back home, her stomach in knots. However, even without the plans, she had a sinking feeling that Lucien had definitely been there. After all, the timeline matched.

Before that fateful day, despite how busy they had been, Lucien had never missed her call, day or night. And he'd never ignored her messages. No, what had he said when she'd asked him why he did not reply... He'd said, 'I did reply, Evana... with silence.'

Her gut had warned her that something was wrong, but she'd attributed it to her own guilty conscience, ignoring the warning signs. The pit in her stomach deepened as she wondered how she was going to explain things to him.

Why couldn't he have stayed and confronted her? Why leave? It would have been so much better if he'd stayed there and accused her of cheating on him rather than doing this. She'd have felt much better if he'd accused her instead of breaking things off like that.

Finally, her secretary emailed her a video and the records. Her hands trembled as she checked the email and closed her eyes. Her nightmare had come true. Steeling herself to look at the video, she pressed play.

The video unfolded before her eyes, capturing Lucien's arrival at her outer office with a bouquet of flowers in hand. The familiarity of the scene intensified the ache in her chest. He walked in with

purpose, slowing down only to place the flowers on her secretary's desk. The tenderness in his gesture echoed the Lucien she once knew and the smile on his face shattered her.

And she zoomed in on the video when she noticed him pausing at the door. The transformation as he stepped back a few moments later and walked away. Throwing the phone aside, Evana crumpled to the floor, now aware of what he had witnessed. her weakest moment.

She already knew what the video would be showing next. Her walking out of the office with Henrik Pold. But that wasn't what was important. It was her slightly mussed up make up that would have given away what had happened inside.

Desperately she wiped her tears. She needed to explain things to Lucien. He must believe that she'd cheated on him. No wonder he'd offered to take for them to take a break.

She thought back to the discussion they'd had last night. Taking a break meant that maybe they wanted to explore other options. So, Lucien probably thought that she wanted to be with Henrik...

In a desperate attempt to salvage what remained of their unraveling connection, Evana dialed Lucien's number. She couldn't let this mistake continue. Each unanswered ring heightened the desperation within her, as the realization of his unreachable phone sank in.

She looked at the time. Lucien and the others must be on the way back by now and would probably reach by evening. Would he call her back then? Or would he ignore the calls like he'd been doing since announcing the break. Shaking her head, she stood up. She won't give him a chance to ignore her now. She was not going to lose him because of her own foolishness.

Clutching her car keys tightly, she rushed out of her hotel room and headed towards Lucien's home. She was going to fight for their relationship... fight him and fight herself.

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However, things that were worth fighting for were not very easily attained. As Evana pressed on through the winding roads, the first few droplets of rain began to fall on her windshield. She paid little attention,

consumed by her singular focus on reaching Lucien. But soon, the initial light drizzle evolved into a relentless downpour.

Evana's knuckles tightened on the steering wheel as the rain intensified, blurring the world outside.

Suddenly, a small creature darted across the road, startling her. In her urgency to avoid it, she swerved, narrowly avoiding a collision as she braked hard on the side of the road.

Horried at the accident, she stared wide eyed at the large tree trunk in front of her and took a calming breath. She'd almost crashed into a car. Closing her eyes, she thanked the fates for a moment before moving to restart the car. But, to make matters worse, the engine refused to start.

Desperation seeped into Evana's heart as she tried to restart the car, turning the key in the ignition repeatedly, each attempt met with the stubborn refusal of the engine.

Her mind raced, searching for a solution. In a frenzied realization, she fumbled for her phone, intending to call for help. Panic set in when her fingers traced the cracked screen of the phone that had fallen to the floor in the small crash and was now rendered useless.

A curse escaped her lips as she placed her head against the steering wheel. Was this some kind of a sign? That she was doomed to fail? Why were things stacking up against her?

She couldn't let things sit there. Already this matter had escalated and let them part ways. There was no way she would waste another moment.

With resolute steps, Evana stepped out into the pouring rain, her clothes clinging to her body, and raindrops mingling with her tears. The broken car sat on the side of the road, as she started to trudge towards his home. It wasn't far and she would get there soon.

As she walked, the dimly lit streets blurred into a watery kaleidoscope causing her difficulty in seeing the road ahead, even as her shoes bit into her flesh, making her wince with each step. The distance to Lucien's home seemed insurmountable, but her determination was unyielding.

Finally, she reached the tall apartment building where Lucien lived and hesitated for the first time, plagued by doubts. What if he refused to listen to her? Or worst still, what if he was willing to listen to her explanation but was unwilling to forgive her?

#### Chapter 406: Listen To Me

Lucien revved the engine of his bike as he rode through the rain, his eyes behind the helmet focused on the road. Thankfully, he'd parked the bike at Seb's place or they'd have had to take the road back on even more slippery roads. His eyes scanned the road, looking for anything that might come in his path.

As she passed the treacherous road, he slowed down the bike. A car had been abandoned at the side of the road, the tires burst out. Slowing down, he looked inside in case anyone needed help but saw no one. Shrugging his shoulders, he continued on, only wanting to get out of the rain for now.

However, as his house neared, the urge to turn back and go somewhere else haunted him. He did not want to return to that place. Somehow, Evana's memory seemed to have taken over the entire place so that now, he couldn't even rest peacefully in his own house.

Finally, the house was in view and he slowed down, wondering if he should turn back. Just then, he glimpsed a silhouette and frowned. Parking the bike, he got off and quickly marched to her, taking off his helmet as he did.

"Evana, what are you doing here?"

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Evana looked up from where she'd been standing to see Lucien striding towards her and felt her heart clench. He looked so good. Why did he look good when she was a mess. As he took off the helmet, Evana could only sigh. This was the difference. Her man was as soaked as she was but he looked breathtaking while she probably looked like a drowned cat.

She paused in her appreciation at his harshly growled question, but quickly tried to explain, "Lucien, I need to talk to you. There has been a misunderstanding. Listen to...Achoo!"



With a curse, Lucien grabbed Evana's arm and started to frogmarch her to the house, "What is wrong with you? Why are you waiting here in the rain? What can be so important that you could not wait till the morning?"

She'd barely taken two steps when a moan of pain left her mouth. Pausing, Lucien looked back and then at her feet which seemed to have been swollen in her heeled shoes. The curse turned even more colourful as he simply picked her up in his arms and carried her inwards to towards the elevator.

Evana felt tears threaten her as she looked at his angular face. He wasn't even looking at her and seemed angry but his actions were still the opposite. Despite believing that she'd cheated on him, he hadn't asked her to go away, when he saw her. Instead he was worried about her and was even carrying her inside.

Lucien did not put her down to even enter his home, taking her inside while punching in the password with his elbow.

"Lucien, I..."

"Be quiet, Evana."

Gently, Lucien set her down on the couch before quickly marching towards a room off the corner. Evana looked at Lucien walking away and clenched her hands. No. She couldn't let him leave. She needed to make things clear. Her eyes though nearly fell out when he came back carrying a small swiss knife a few moments later.

"What are you doing? Lucien?"

Without a word, he knelt in front of her, grabbed her foot and cut off the shoes, making her blink. Her feet felt a sudden rush of blood and it was only then that she realized that her feet had been stuck in the shoes.

"I've run a bath for you. It's warm water. Go there and soak for a while. Keep your feet elevated on the edge of the tub. Understood?"

"But..."

Any chance of a protest was cut off when Lucien simply picked her up again and carried her to the bathroom, setting her down on a small stool," You getting in on your own or you want me to put you inside."

"Lucien, I need to talk to you."

"We can talk later, once you've warmed up. I'm drenched too. I need to change. I don't know what you were thinking to get yourself into this state, but there is no need to get sick. Any talk can wait. Now, get in."

Having said his words, Lucien turned away but Evangeline caught his wrist. "I won't go in until you look at me. Do you hate me so much that you cannot even look at me anymore? Because if that is the case, then there is no way that I am not getting sick. I will stay here and get sick! Then you will take care of me and have to look at me."

Lucien shook his head and tried to make her let go of his wrist," Evana! Don't be childish."

"I want to be childish. Look at me Lucien."

With a frown, Lucien looked at Evangeline. As their eyes met, the air around them seemed to change. Evana looked at Lucien and smiled," I was thinking that you look too handsome after breaking up with me. But I feel better now to see that haggard look in your eyes. Lucien, listen to me..."

Lucien sighed and stepped away as Evana raised her hand to hold his cheek," I've already told you that we can talk later, Evana. Now, get in. I'll leave some clothes outside for you to change into."

"Lucien? Do you still love me?" Evana asked desperately. She knew he did love her. She could feel it in his actions. But at this moment, she also knew that she needed to hear him say the words. Feeling his coldness towards her, despite the gentle care, she was worried that he wouldn't give her a chance.

He paused at the door, holding the jamb carefully. "I do still love you, Evana." He said slowly without hesitation but not looking back at her.

A sigh of relief escaped her as she heard this while he continued, "I love you so much that it hurts, Evana. Loving you is hurting me."

With that, Lucien walked out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him decisively.

#### Chapter 407: Loving You Is Hurtful

Evana slowly slid off the stool, taking off her clothes slowly. "Loving you is hurting me." As she slowly sank into the warm water, she could only close her eyes as tears fell from them. Never would she have believed that she would end up hurting him. And now, it seemed that things were even more complicated than she could have imagined.

She'd believed that she only had to convince Lucien to give her a chance to explain and then everything would be fine. But would it really be fine? When she told him that she had not cheated on him, that it had all been a misunderstanding, would things really come to an end. She might have not physically committed the act of cheating, but she had definitely considered breaking things off with Lucien.

Evana had no idea how long she had been sitting there, but she was taken out of her stupor by Lucien's knocking on the door as he called out, "Evana? Are you alright?"

Evana. She felt as if she hated her name. Why couldn't he call her Angel? She wondered what he would do if she did not answer. Would he be worried? Of course he would be worried. Much more worried about her than she had been about him. He was more considerate and more loving than she had been.

Since the time, he had asked for a break, she'd thought that maybe his love for her was a bit less than what she had for him. Now she knew the truth though. Another series of knocks sounded on the door, more urgent than the previous. "Evana?"

"I'm coming, Lucien." Evana called out slowly and sighed when the knocking stopped abruptly.

Walking out of the bathroom, she looked at the clothes that had been neatly arranged there and sighed. At least he hadn't thrown out the clothing she'd left here last time. Picking up the hair drier that had

also been left plugged in, she quickly started to dry her hair, knowing that she was only wasting time in order to delay their confrontation.

Finally, she had no way to delay the confrontation and she could only sigh as she walked out. Lucien stood there, staring out of the large windows with his back turned to her. He turned his head when he heard her walk out and said, "I've heated up some soup for you. It's on the table. Have that or you'll catch a cold. The weather is getting worse by the minute. Once you're done, I'll drop you back off at the hotel."

Instead of answering, Evana walked over to him and placed her arms around him. Even as she felt him stiffen and try to walk away, she tightened her grip and whispered, "Lucien, please. I didn't cheat on you. You have to believe me. It's not what you think."

However, instead of listening to her, this time, he forcefully pushed her hands away as he turned to look at her coldly and guardedly. "If you're not hungry, then we can make a move now."

"There's no need."

"Fine. If you don't want me to drop you off, I'll arrange for a cab and driver..."

"I will not go anywhere until you have heard me and sorted things out with me. Lucien, you just told me that loving me is hurting you! I can't let that! Hurting you is killing me!"

The room hung in a tense silence, raindrops tapping against the windowpanes like a persistent reminder of the unresolved storm within. "We can't keep avoiding this, Lucien."

Finally, Lucien sighed, a weariness settling over him. He moved towards a chair and sat down, signaling for her to do the same.

"Fine, let's talk," he conceded, his tone softer but guarded. "But this doesn't mean everything will be okay."

"I understand."

Evana sat down on the couch opposite him and looked down at her fingers, wondering where to start.

"Henrik Pold was a childhood friend. He's just returned to Estania a couple of months ago and we've been working together on a project. That afternoon...He just kissed me, out of the blue, Lucy. I swear I wasn't expecting it. I didn't even think he would do something like that. I pushed him away as soon as I came to my senses. I swear that there is nothing between me and him. I also made clear to him that I was not interested in him and that he should never do something like that again."

Lucien listened, his face an impassive mask, but his eyes betrayed the storm of emotions roiling within him. When Evana finished, there was a brief, heavy silence, filled only by the sound of rain against the windows.

Finally, Lucien spoke, his voice steady but laced with the pain of betrayal. "Evana, from where I stood, it didn't look like you pushed him away immediately. It seemed... different. Like there was a moment when you didn't resist. I was there Evangeline."

Evana's heart sank at his words. She had feared this, the interpretation of a moment that had been nothing but shock on her part. She opened her mouth to explain but before she could, Lucien interrupted her coldly, "Think well before you answer my questions, Evana. You can lie to yourself, but not to me. Were you really clueless while almost everyone in Estania was aware of his intentions towards you. There had been rumors about you for weeks and not once did you think to mention this to me? Not once did you consider mentioning to me, that a person who has openly declared his admiration on national media would be accompanying you to a formal state affair as your partner when it should be me in that place?"

Evana's voice was barely above a whisper, her gaze dropping to her hands clasped tightly in her lap. "He only accompanied me as a business associate, Lucien. I thought it was clear that there was nothing more to it after all everyone knows that we are engaged. The rumors... they were just that, rumors. People talk, you know that. I didn't think I needed to bring them to you because they were baseless. I didn't want to upset you over nothing."

Lucien's expression softened momentarily before hardening again. "But it wasn't 'nothing', was it, Evana? If it was nothing, we wouldn't be here, having this conversation."

Chapter 408: Hurt

"But it wasn't 'nothing', was it, Evana? If it was nothing, we wouldn't be here, having this conversation."

Evana felt the weight of his words like a physical blow. She had never intended to exclude him. But Lucien wasn't done with what he has to say. Words that he had kept locked up in his heart, "You chose to keep me in the dark, not just about the rumors, but about Henrik's advances towards you. And there were others, weren't there? Maybe none as clear as that kiss. That's not 'nothing'. That's a choice, Evana. A choice to exclude me from a part of your life that clearly needed my attention. Why?"

Evana leaned forward, hugging herself as if to ward off a chill. She had never intended to exclude him or make him feel sidelined. Her intention had been to protect their relationship from unnecessary drama, but she saw now how her actions had led to the very outcome she had hoped to avoid.

"I... I thought I was protecting us," she admitted, her voice trembling. "I thought by handling it myself, I could spare you the stress. I... Lucy, we were barely able to take out time to catch up with each other and I feared that you might not want me to work with Henrik if you thought that he was interested in me. I did not want us to fight about something unimportant when there were.... I thought I could control things. I'd made it clear to Henrik from the beginning that I was not interested. I never believed that those rumors would grow to this extent. I know I should have trusted you to handle things with me."

"And you enjoyed the attention that he was giving you." Lucien said slowly. "It must have been an ego boost."

Evana looked up at that, "No. That is a lie, Lucien. Do you really think so less of me that I would do something like this? Do you trust me so little?"

Lucien scoffed, "Evana, trust isn't just about fidelity. It's about believing in us enough to share the burdens, the worries, and yes, even the potential threats to our relationship. By not telling me, you didn't protect us; you undermined the very foundation of our trust. And do you know what the worst part is? The worst part in everything is that even as I stood there, seeing that man come close to you, I'd held hope that you would push him away. And when you didn't, I walked out of there, thinking of excuses of why you would do this to me."

Lucien leaned back on the chair and closed his eyes tiredly, "Evana, this incidence lead me to discover something that has shaken me. There is a lore in our family. That Frosts love for life. I've seen the side effects of that with how Gabe and Erasmi have suffered. They were willing to be blind to all faults. I always thought that I was better than that. After all, I would never have to overlook anything. But there I was, sitting on the flight back from Estania, looking for excuses and way to ignore everything. I'd almost convinced myself that I could ignore this. Pretend to remain unaware."

"But I don't want to hate you Evana. And that would be the end result. While you might not be like Nellie or Arabelle, you have power over me, Evana. Too much power. So, I thought it was better to break things off when the love was still there, and hate had not taken its place."

She stood up slowly covering the distance between them. The physical distance between them was not much but the emotional distance was too much. However, she was not willing to let that distance widen. She knew she needed to cover this distance as well.

"Lucien," she murmured, her voice soft yet determined, "please look at me."

He kept his eyes closed, a visible exhaustion etched on his face, but Evana refused to be deterred. She reached out and gently touched his cheek, urging him to face her. Lucien hesitated for a moment before reluctantly opening his eyes, meeting hers with a mix of pain and resignation.

"I know my stupidity has hurt what we had built. But I never intended for that to happen. Lucifer, haven't you always been patient with me? Can you not give me another chance? I promise you, from this moment forward, no more secrets, no more omissions. I will be open and honest with you, even when it's difficult. I want us to rebuild what we had, stronger than before. Please, Lucien, give us a chance. Give me a chance to prove that my love for you is genuine, and that I've learned from my mistakes."

Lucien sighed, even as he leaned in his face into the hand, "I want to believe you, Evana," he admitted, his voice rough, "but trust is not easily repaired. The foundation has been shaken, and I don't know what will happen in the future."

Evana nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I understand, Lucien. Rebuilding trust takes time, and I'm willing to give you that time. I just hope you'll give us a chance to heal, to find our way back to each other. Don't stop loving me until then? Please?"

Carefully, he wiped her tears, gathering her in his arms so that he was sitting in his lap. Despite the pain he felt, the need to comfort her was stronger.

"I can't promise everything will be the same, Evana. But I can promise that I will always love you."

His words hung in the air, a balm to Evana's wounded heart. She clung to him, her arms wrapping around him tightly, as if afraid he might slip away.

Lucien sighed, the tension in his shoulders easing as he held her close. "Let's take everything one step at a time."

Evana nodded against him, his words breathing life into her as her tears soaked his shirt.

#### Chapter 409: Love Darts

Isabella stood in the middle of her living room and smiled, a glimpse of little evil in that lift of her lips. She stared at Ian with a dart in her hand and aimed it just right. "Now you know what happens when you make me mad, Mr. Cardboard Frost? Just keep standing there and smirking at me, Hole-y Ian."

Giggling at her own joke, she let another dart fly, watching with a mix of satisfaction and amusement as it whizzed through the air and landed with a thwack right beside a cluster of other darts on her makeshift target. "Ooh, close to the heart but not quite. Don't worry, there's plenty more where that came from. I'm going to keep sending love darts your way"

Circling the cardboard Ian, she continued, her voice taking on a teasing tone, "You know, for a piece of cardboard, you're quite the listener. Better than the real Ian sometimes. You don't interrupt, you don't argue back, and best of all, you don't distract me with your twinkling eyes and naughty hands."

She sighed and started to take out the darts that had punctured holes in Ian. "Cardboard Ian, as much fun as we've been having, there's something I've got to admit," placing the darts on the table in the corner, she stepped closer to the printed Ian, her fingers tracing his printed smile and continued, "I miss him. The real Ian. Your three-dimensional, frustratingly charming counterpart."

Isabella chuckled softly, a sound more melancholic than her previous laughter. "I miss the way he laughs and even makes me laugh, the way he calls my name in that serious tone, 'Miss Ruffalo'. I even miss the way he looks at me, like I'm the only one in the room."

Isabella paused and leaned closer to the cardboard Ian, whispering her secret, "Will you keep a secret for me, Mr Cardboard Frost. It's about Ian. I think, I've gone and fallen head over heels for him. I've been reminding myself that I shouldn't but it really is difficult. Especially when he is doing things like that. I can almost believe that he loves me too. Do you think I am right?"



As she whispered her confession to the silent confidant, Isabella felt a mix of relief and vulnerability. It was one thing to admit these feelings to herself, in the silence of the night, but quite another to voice them, even if only to a cardboard cutout.

Straightening up, she looked into Cardboard Ian's flat, printed eyes, half-expecting them to twinkle back at her with the same warmth and humor the real Ian's did. "You know, if you were the real Ian, you'd probably have some witty comeback right about now. Something that would make me laugh and blush at the same time. But since you're not, I guess it's safe to tell you everything."

"There are times, I feel like I should announce to the world that you belong to me. Maybe I will..." With a grin, she quickly walked to her room and grabbed her lipstick and came out to scribble something on his chest. Stepping back, she quickly admired her work with a nod. "See this? Now, don't you dare erase my name off you- My Ian

She then leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper, confiding in her silent partner. "YOu are mine, aren't you? I'm just scared, you know? Everything's been going so well between you and me. It's like walking on a cloud. But I keep waiting for the storm to hit, for something to come along and ruin this happiness we've found."

Before she could continue with her confession, the sharp sound of the doorbell jolted her out of her reverie. Her heart leaped. "Ian!" she exclaimed under her breath, a bright smile instantly lighting up her face.

In a flurry of excitement mixed with a dash of panic, she scrambled to hide Cardboard Ian in the closet, chuckling at the absurdity of the situation. "Sorry, love, you've got to hide. The real one's here," she whispered, giving the cutout a pat before closing the closet door. "I can't let him see you like this."

She rushed to the door, smoothing down her hair and clothes, mentally preparing herself for Ian's embrace. But when she swung the door open, her smile froze. It wasn't Ian standing there; it was her brother.

Without a word, she attempted to close the door. She'd already decided to not talk to this man anymore. If Ian could go forward and talk to her parents for her, then she would also have the courage to not talk to this toxic man.

"Isabella, listen to me. I'm here to..." Emerald tried to speak, but Isabella shook her head, "What are you here for Emerald? I don't even want to know. Just do not come here again."

As she tried to close the door again, he stopped it with his foot,

"Isabella, wait. It's your Mom. She's sick. I've been trying to call you, but it seems you've blocked my number. So, I had to come. Dad's a mess and..."

Isabella's heart sank, the earlier irritation vanishing as worry and panic took its place. "Mom? What happened?" She felt her annoyance with Emerald evaporate, replaced by concern for her mother.

"She's in the hospital. It's serious, Isabella. You need to come with me, now."

She didn't hesitate. She quickly grabbed her phone, checking for missed calls or messages, cursing herself for being so caught up in her own world. "Okay, okay, let me just grab my things. Give me a second."

Rushing back inside, she grabbed her purse, keys, and a jacket. She cast a brief glance towards the closet where Cardboard Ian was hidden, feeling a pang of guilt for the joy she'd felt moments before. As she followed Emerald, her first thought was to call Ian and tell him but just then, Emerald called out to her, "Isabella, if you are going to call your fiancé, then tell him not to come. They were having a fight because of him and Dad was really angry that Aunt Eliza was supporting him...It would be better if he did not come to the hospital until things have calmed."

#### Chapter 410: The Strike

Isabella sat on the stiff hospital chair, the screen of her phone illuminated with an image of their happier times, a stark contrast to the current tense atmosphere. Her fingers traced the edges of a particularly cherished photo, just before the return of Emerald, with her parents hugging her from both sides as she stood between them with a wide smile on her face. How long had it been since she had seen her mother smile openly like that or her father look at her with that soft gaze?

As she thought of that time, even now, she could feel the heavy gaze of her father, seated on the opposite side of the corridor. His eyes bore into her, filled with accusation as if she were responsible for her mother's current condition. Any attempt to meet his gaze or ask him anything were met with a cold, unwavering glare. She took a deep breath, focusing on the photos on her phone to shield herself from

the unspoken accusations. She did not recognise this man anymore. The father who had loved her was long gone.

Just as she was rthinkig of leaving the oppressive atmosphere, the doors to the operating room were opened and the doctor stepped out, calling their name. She stood beside her father, and even as they waited for the doctor to say something, her father seemed to want to throw out of there. She raised her chin and made no move to budge. She was going to find out her mother's condition, whether he liked it or not.

"Mrs. Ruffalo is out of immediate danger. We've stabilized her condition, she just needed a few stitches and will have a minor concussion but otherwise she is doing well, and she'll be moved to a regular room shortly," the doctor announced.

Relief washed over Isabella, her shoulders visibly relaxing as the weight on her chest lifted. She bowed her head and thanked the lord that her mother was fine. Meanwhile, Gio Ruffalo turned to talk to his daughter but Emerald stopped him, his tone gentle yet persuasive, "Dad, why don't you go home and get some rest? I'll stay here with Isabella. The doctors will let us know when Aunt Eliza is moved to a regular room. She will need you to be healthy to take care of her when she wakes up."

Gio's stern expression softened, and after a reluctant nod, he moved, casting one final disapproving look at Isabella before warning, "Don't trust anyone else to take care of her. I will return in the morning. You can ask the visitor to leave." With than, the older man walked out of the hospital, while Isabella simply collapsed on the bench.

Her father's words had hurt her. She was a visitor? Did he think she could not take care of her mother? Or she would refuse to? Just how little did he trust her? Or maybe she should ask just how low did he think she could stoop?

Seeing her on the verge of tears, Emerald sat next to her and sighed, "It's going to be okay, Isabella. Aunt is strong; she'll pull through."

Isabella managed a weak smile but felt the weight of his presence intensify her discomfort. She wasn't used to his kindness anymore. This closeness felt invasive in the midst of her weakened emotions. She stood up, pacing to the window, her body language defensive.

Emerald watched her with concern, sensing her unease. "Isabella, what's going on? You've been through a lot, but I'm here for you. I know I've done things that make me unworthy of being your brother, but trust me, everything will be fine."

She took a deep breath, turning to face him. "Emerald, I just need a moment. I'll feel better when Mom is moved to a regular room. Please don't mind me."

"Alright. I'll go and get some coffee for you."

Isabella sighed and was about to refuse but he'd already walked away. Just then, her phone rang, and a deeper sigh escaped her. It was Ian. She longed to talk to him, yet the knowledge that her father harbored blame toward both her and Ian for her mother's situation left her feeling emotionally fragile. She decided it might be best to postpone the conversation, fearing that speaking with Ian now might break her down completely.

Decisively, she put the phone on silent mode and slipped it into her purse. Not now. She would talk to him later, when she was sure that she would not end up crying like a new born baby.

When Emerald returned with the coffee, she took it with a sigh, letting the warmth of the plastic cup, warm her hands. This time, Emerald stood away from her and she was thankful for it. She did not want to be close to him.

She looked down at the coffee and was about to sip it, when Emerald broke the silence, "Isabella, have you ever wondered why Dad finds it so easy to believe the worst about you? Even in moments like this?"

When Isabella said nothing, Emerald cocked his head and continued, "I mean, sure, he doesn't think you have a good character because of your slu\*\*y ways but why does he look at you as if you are responsible for every trouble he has? Even after you have done everything you can to not trouble him?"

Isabella stiffened and turned around. Gone was the man who has pretending concern a few moments ago. He now smiled at her in a way that sent shivers down her spine.

"Now, for example, this accident. It wasn't your fault that your mother wanted to convince dad to send me to the rehab, was it? But she met with an accident and the blame for it fell on you... while you were unaware of what was transpiring.

"Emerald, what are you talking about?" Isabella asked cautiously, her unease growing with each passing moment.

He leaned in, his voice dropping to a low, ominous whisper. "You see, Isabella, there are some things that your boyfriend cannot shield you from. The pain of losing your mother is one of them. Isn't it?"