

Benefits 411

Chapter 411: A Resignation

Ian stared at his silent phone for the nth time. His Isabella was still not talking to him apparently. Maybe he needed to send her something stronger than a cutout of himself and some darts. With a sigh of frustration, he decided he needed to do something more for her.. hmm what should he?

A glance at his watch told him that it was already time for her to report in. She was late today of all days when she'd never been late ever before? It seems she was intent on punishing him to the core. Fine. He'd could wait for her till the end of time..

Finally, she walked in, and he felt his heart tremble. It always seemed to do that when he saw her. He was pretty sure it was unhealthy for him but he loved it.. he tried to read her expression, and whatever it was that he saw, he did not like.

He waited until she was in his office before ordering her to close the door, which she did. But somehow, she failed to look at him, instead moving to place something on his desk. He looked at the envelope on his desk as if it were a snake and raised an eyebrow, "What is this?"

"It's my resignation, Mr Frost."

Ian paused and stared at her in confusion, "What are you talking about? Resignation?"

"Mr Frost, I initially took up this position because you needed someone who could not be bribed or blackmailed into selling your secrets. That threat has already passed. So, as per my original intention, this is my resignation."

"Is this some kind of a joke, Isabella? Are you so angry at me?" Ian asked carefully, though if this really was a prank, he did not like it one bit.

Isabella sighed and looked up for a moment before looking down at the carpet again, "It is not a prank, I assure you. I've been offered a position elsewhere and after careful consideration, I think that it is most suitable for me. I will be taking on that position soon. But don't worry, I'll be leaving after this weekend so I will train my successor immediately."

When Ian remained silent at Isabella's words, she continued, "I know that I am required to serve a notice period of 14 days but I will be willingly foregoing my pay for this month in lieu of cutting short the notice period. The job is out of the country so I have to leave at the earliest."

Ian once again remained silent as he stared at Isabella. She sighed and peeked one more time at Ian before continuing, "Then, I'll go and report things to the HR so that they can make sure to arrange someone for you at the earliest."

Isabella breathed a sigh of relief when she reached the door. She knew she did not have long before Ian questioned her. She needed to avoid that at any rate.

As her hand reached for the door handle, she suddenly found herself caged between the door and Ian, who had quickly closed the distance between them without making a sound. Hesitantly she turns around to him, his presence imposing and his face unreadable except for the intensity in his eyes. She felt herself almost tremble in fear when he bit out, "Go and sit down, Isabella. Let me understand this..."

Isabella, wanting to avoid this conversation, hesitated for a moment. But that seemed to test Ian's patience as the air between them seemed even more charged, a mix of tension and unspoken emotions. Slowly, she turned back and walks towards the chair, feeling the weight of Ian's gaze on her as she tried to reassure herself that she would survive this.

Ian took a moment to compose himself as he stared at her stiff back. It seemed there was something that he had missed out. Instead of going around to his chair, he moved next to her, sitting instead on the edge of his desk.

"Let's go over this again," he said, his voice calmer, "You're leaving because you believe your role here is done. And you've got another offer, out of the country, that you think is better suited for you?"

Isabella nodded at the summary, her posture rigid. "Yes, Mr. Frost. That's correct," she replied, her voice steady but lower than usual.

"I see. And you are going to train a suitable assistant for me?"

"Yes."

"Would you also train her how to please me in bed? Was that also a part of the so-called role? After all, from where I stand, you did not seem to think to inform me of your departure plans."

Isabella's hands clenched when she heard his biting and taunting tone but she was already prepared for that, "Our relationship came to an end the moment you crossed my boundaries. I don't appreciate someone pushing past their limits. So, as far as I am concerned, whatever we had is over. As for your assistant needing to sleep with you, I am sure you can train better if you feel the need."

"Get out, Miss Ruffalo."

The door had barely closed behind her, when Ian clenched his jaw, his fist hitting the desk with a loud crack. However, the blow that shook his arm seemed to have made no impact on him as his blood boiled at her audacity. At her indifference.

His heart pounded against his chest, a mix of anger, confusion, and loss. How had it come to this? His mind replayed their exchange, each word slicing through him. How could she leave him so abruptly? The timing felt off, too convenient. Something was amiss.

As the initial wave of anger subsided, replaced by a cold, calculating suspicion. Did she really think that she could get away from him so easily without a credible explanation? It was time to teach his doll what overstepping boundaries meant. Picking up the phone, he made a call... If she won't tell him the truth, he had ways of finding it.

Chapter 412: Isabella's Pain

Isabella returned home, utterly exhausted. She had always been aware that the Frosts could be as chilling as their surname suggested, but today she had felt it firsthand. Without uttering a single word, his presence alone had pierced her as though she'd been stabbed a thousand times.

As she peeled off her jacket, a profound sense of emptiness engulfed her, her emotions a tangled mess of indecision and hurt. When she'd handed her resignation, she didn't know what she'd expected or feared but that biting sting of cold indifference, she had not been prepared for. He'd questioned her, sure. But nothing else.

Tears brimmed in her eyes as she whispered to herself in a voice laced with despair, "What were you expecting, Isi? That he would desperately beg you to stay? Or somehow force you to remain by his side?

You're dealing with Ian Frost. To him, women are just a multitude, endlessly adoring at his feet. Just because he made you feel like you were the exception doesn't mean you truly were anything special to him."

"Also, aren't you being a hypocrite, Isi? If you really want him to be with you, shouldn't you have been truthful to him? Tell him that you loved him and needed him for everything? Why lie to him about boundaries and sh*t like that?" Her inner voice seemed to have no sympathy for herself

Her hands trembled as she wiped away the tears that now freely streamed down her cheeks. The room felt colder, the isolation wrapping around her like a shroud. "I had no choice, Ian. I'm sorry," she whispered into the emptiness, her voice a broken mix of defiance and sorrow. "I did it to protect my mother. I never would have thought that Emerald would go to these lengths."

She closed her eyes, thinking back to the confrontation which she had with Emerald in the hospital last night.

"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?"

Her eyes widened with a mix of confusion and dread as she attempted to grasp the gravity of his insinuation.

"What are you saying, Emerald? What does my mother have to do with any of this?" Her voice quivered, the uncertainty adding an edge to her tone.

A malevolent smirk played on his lips as he reveled in the discomfort he was causing. "Your mother, dear Isabella, is at the heart of it all. You see, our dear father's hatred for you isn't entirely natural. I've been carefully cultivating it with misinformation about you. But your mother, bless her heart, always tried to reason with him, but always failed miserably. However, she'd started to see through me so she started making things difficult. However, I knew she wouldn't go against me outright so I was letting her do what she wanted.

But then Ian Frost interfered. Your precious Ian posed a threat to my plans. Your mother was finally standing firm against our father's irrational hatred, thanks to him. I couldn't allow that to happen. She actually threatened to leave him if he did not put aside his prejudice. And you know father. He would never do that since he loves your mother so much."

Isabella's breath caught in her throat, a mixture of shock and disbelief contorting her features as she heard his words.

As he spoke, Isabella's fists clenched at her sides, her nails digging into her palms. "Tsk tsk. Don't worry. I don't hate Aunt Eliza. So, I thought hard about a solution that would be suitable for her well being." "So, I'm giving you a choice," Emerald continued, a wicked smile playing on his lips. "Leave Ian Frost, and your job, and disappear from their lives forever, or watch them suffer the consequences of your defiance. The thing is I just want Gio Ruffalo to suffer for losing his child. He did not value me and let me go while keeping you close to him. Now, it has to be the other way round. Okay?"

"I can't... I can't just leave them without an explanation. Nora is getting married..."

"Don't worry, I'll give you a week. Resign first and leave that man. And pack your bags. The moment your friend is wedded, you will be gone. Clear?"

All night, she'd been staring at that phone, of picking it up and calling Ian, telling him everything. But she dared not. Emerald had already proven that he could harm mama and...

Finally, Isabella wiped her eyes with determination. No. She'd done what Emerald had told her, but she would find a way to get back at him, to protect her parents. She was not going to abandon everything without a fight. As for Ian, she would hold her love for him deep in her heart.

Just then, the ringing of a phone broke through the silence of the night. She looked down at the name on the phone and hugged it to herself. Isabella hesitated, her thumb hovering over the answer button. With a deep breath, she let the call ring out, allowing the room to return to the heavy silence that enveloped her. She dared not talk to Ian. Decisively, she turned off her cell phone and closed her eyes against the thoughts that were torturing her, shutting out the world.

Curled up on the couch, she hugged herself, and her breathing gradually steadied as she succumbed to the fatigue that weighed heavy on her shoulders. While she remained unaware of the world, Ian stood

outside her house with his phone in his hand. With a resolute exhale, he typed a message for her and pocketed his phone before heading towards his car. He had things to do before he could be with his Isabella peacefully.

"I'll be back soon, doll." he murmured before driving away.

Chapter 413: Miss Eliza

Emerald Ruffalo meticulously peeled the apple, patiently cutting it into precise, thin slices before arranging them neatly on a plate. As he observed his father attempting to engage Aunt Eliza in conversation, he couldn't help but consider how Aunt Eliza's accident had been both a blessing and a curse.

On the one hand, he'd finally been able to back Isabella into a corner and scare her into agreeing to leave that powerful man as well as this country. Now all he had to do was get her there, and then he would make special arrangements for her that he would be able to showcase Ian Frost and get him to hate Isabella as well. This would successfully cut off any chance of her ever returning.

But what was happening now was a curse. Gio Ruffalo was so scared of losing his wife that he was not willing to say or hear a single bad thing about Isabella because his wife did not like it.

Slowly, he picked up another apple and started to peel it. Well, not a problem. Just because he wasn't talking doesn't mean he wasn't thinking bad about her. After all, she had not come to visit her mother. And as Aunt Eliza's eyes continued to flit to the door, Gio Ruffalo was getting even more angry about his unfilial daughter.

"Gio, you promise Isabella knows about me?"

Gio Ruffalo frowned and adjusted his wife's pillows to make her comfortable. Of course she knows. She even came here last night. Emerald had to go himself to bring her because the girl wouldn't answer our calls. And then she stayed here, until I left. The moment I was gone, she dropped all pretense of caring for you and left the hospital. You can ask Emerald."

Emerald raised his eyebrows and stood up with the platter of fruit as and said, "Father, I told you she was tired so she needed to go back. She even had work in the morning. That doesn't mean that she does not care for aunty. Here, aunty, have some fruit."

"Hmpf. And has she called you a single time to ask about her mother? Or is work more important than Eliza."

Before Emerald could say anymore, Eliza cut off, "Gio, if you are bent on talking bad about my daughter, then please go. I will not listen to you badmouthing her anymore without any evidence."

"Isn't her absence the biggest evidence?" Gio Ruffalo blustered but did not say anymore while Emerald's face tightened. He would need to make Eliza Ruffalo give up on Isabella. But the question was how?

Placing the platter of fruit on the bedside table, he spoke in a calm yet firm tone.

"Aunt Eliza, Dad is just worried. We all are. Isabella has her own way of dealing with things that are sometimes hard to figure out. I... I'll try and talk to her. Maybe that would help."

Eliza said nothing, looking at Emerald carefully while Gio nodded, "Yes, you do that, Emerald. Just make sure she knows how serious this is."

Before Emerald could say anything more, the door of the hospital room swung open with a sudden, jarring force, startling the three occupants inside. Emerald, Gio, and Eliza watched in confusion as a silent wave of imposing figures flooded in, dressed in dark attire that seemed to absorb the light around them. Their entrance was deliberate, each step resonating with an ominous weight that filled the room. Emerald's eyes widened, a mixture of fear and confusion etched across his face as he took in the sight of the ten mysterious men who now surrounded them.

Had the loan shark found out that he'd lost and sent his men to break his legs? No no. That shouldn't be it. He would have to find a way to handle this situation before they revealed anything to his father.

He felt the tension escalate within him, his mind racing to decipher the motives behind the sudden intrusion. With a façade of false bravado, he stepped forward, his voice attempting to cut through the oppressive silence that hung in the air. "I demand to know who you are and why you're barging into this hospital room!"

The men, unmoved by Emerald's bluster, continued their stoic stance, their impassive faces revealing nothing. His futile attempt to assert authority only fueled the rising anxiety in the room.

Growing frustrated, Emerald turned to his father, who had a look of bewilderment mixed with concern. "Dad, do something! Ask them why they're here!"

Gio, his face a mix of confusion and frustration, stepped forward. "Who are you people, and what business do you have here? Do you not understand that there is a patient here?" His voice held a firm tone, but the lack of response from the mysterious figures left them all unsettled.

Just then, as the room seemed on the brink of chaos, the door opened once more. In walked Ian Frost, carrying an air of composed authority. His entrance was met with an abrupt silence from the dark-clad figures, their attention shifting towards him. Ian's gaze swept across the room, acknowledging the perplexed faces and the palpable tension.

"Good afternoon, Ruffalo family," Ian greeted, his voice smooth and unruffled. He glanced at the encircling figures, a subtle smirk playing on his lips. "I see we have unexpected guests. Allow me to clarify the situation."

For the first time, Emerald felt fear. He had made sure that Isabella has resigned today and he was also certain that she would not have blabbed to this man. Then how did he know? And why was he here?

Angered, he walked forward to intercept the man, but before he could move a step, a vice-like grip closed around his neck, preventing him from making a sound.

Meanwhile, Ian placed the bouquet of flowers on the small table next to the bed, casually pushing the plate of fruit to topple onto the floor.

Next he leaned down and kissed the older woman's cheek, affectionately, "How are you doing, mama?"

Chapter 414: Ian's Anger

Eliza's eyes widened when she met Ian's gaze. There seemed to be a dangerous glint to him. Her eyes turned to Emerald who was almost being choked and she could not help but think of the last time in the hospital room when Ian had held Emerald against the wall.

"I am doing much better. Thank you." Eliza said hesitantly before throwing a concerned glance at the men who were holding back Emerald. "What is the meaning of this? Why are all these people here? And why are they manhandling Emerald?"

"Manhandling Emerald?" Ian turned around, as if in surprise as he cast a look at the man before turning back to the older woman, "It is nothing, mama. Don't worry. They are not going to hurt him... not at the moment at least."

"What do you mean by calling her mama? Look, Ian Frost, you might belong to the mighty Frosts family, but that does not give you the right to come here and harm our family!"

"Mr Ruffalo, that is where you are mistaken. You see, I can do anything."

This time, there was a dangerous edge to Ian, making everyone shiver, something no one would have ever heard before. Everyone who had ever heard of the Frosts knew that Ian Frost was the most laid back and easy going. But people seemed to mistake his easy going personality for him being a pushover. They seemed to forget he was second in command of an empire that dealt with all sorts of people.

"Yes. Don't be shocked. I can do anything and get away with it. No one would dare to touch me. Now, Mr. Ruffalo, the only reason my men have not yet stopped you is because you are Isabella's father. However, this consideration extends only so far." He then turned to the lady on the bed and smiled as if he had not just threatened two of her family members. "So, mama? What happened to you so suddenly? When we met a few days ago, you were doing well."

Eliza tried to smile, still a bit concerned about what was transpiring just now, but answered carefully, "Its nothing. I'd been going about my daily routine when I suddenly felt dizzy and slipped down the stairs. It was actually foolish of me because I'd even skipped breakfast and should have had something." As she paused, she could not help but glance at the door again, "Where is Isabella? Is she not coming?"

"Not tonight, Mama. She will see you in the morning. She is a little... unwell."

"What happened to her?"

"I think she was worried sick about her mother." Ian replied with a smile before finally providing an explanation," Mama. These men are going to be stationed here for the time being. They are my personal security men. They've come here for your protection."

"My protection? Ian, everything that happened was just an accident. There is no need for this..."

"Are you sure it was an accident, mama?" Ian asked quietly, his piercing gaze fixed on her.

Eliza Ruffalo looked back at him confusedly until the man sighed and waved his hand. One of the men walked forward and soon, played a video on the phone, handing it to her," Here aunty. You must have been bored all day. I brought something along for your amusement."

Soon, a surveillance video played on the phone. It did not take Eliza Ruffalo long to recognise the place as this hospital. She watched and heard as Emerald tried to console Isabella while even Gio held back from ranting at Isabella when she'd come in pale faced. However, soon, after, the scene changed and suddenly she was able to hear the conversation between the two people... until she finally heard the threat that Emerald had uttered," So, I'm giving you a choice," Emerald continued, a wicked smile playing on his lips. "Leave Ian Frost, and your job, and disappear from their lives forever, or watch them suffer the consequences of your defiance. "

She looked up in disbelief and pain as she'd heard the entire conversation about how Emerald hated Gio and had therefore done so many things to keep Isabella away from him and punish him.

Eliza's hands trembled as she handed the phone back, her gaze shifting between Emerald and Gio Ruffalo, who wore a puzzled expression. After all, he had not seen the video, but he had definitely recognised his children's voice. "Emerald, is this true? Were you behind all of this?" Her voice quivered with a mix of disbelief and hurt.

Emerald's eyes darted nervously, attempting to maintain composure. "Mama, it's not what it seems. That video is fake, a manipulation. I would never do such a thing. Ian Frost is trying to frame me. It must be Isabella's doing. She is jealous of my relationship with you and dad! That is why she is deciding to drive a wedge between us."

Emerald stammered, desperately attempting to salvage the situation. "Dad, I swear, that video is doctored. Ian Frost has a vendetta against me because of all the lies Isabella has told about me. He's trying to ruin our family to please Isabella and avenge her. Please don't trust him."

However, Eliza was already recalling all those instances when she had felt unsure of the words that Emerald had spoken. Somehow, even though he had never spoken much against her in her presence, she'd always wondered how and why Glo started hating their daughter so much.

Her eyes hardened and as she opened her mouth to speak, but Emerald beat her to it. "Daddy! Do you really believe I would do something like that? In this video, me and Isabella were chatting normally. I have no idea who has asked to dub a voice like mine and Isabella's. This is all some kind of careful planning by this man."

Ian smiled and leaned back, "Why don't I give you this video and you can have it checked for authenticity?"

Chapter 415: Miserable

Isabella sat still on the bed, her gaze fixed on the life-size cutout of the man she had been forced to relinquish. "Aren't you too cruel, Ian? I was willing to serve the notice period, wasn't I?" she murmured to the silent figure, her voice laced with a blend of accusation and longing. "That way I could have seen you a few more days. Committed more little things about you to my memories. But no. You had to have a clean-cut break. If I'd known you would do something like this, I would have looked at you for a bit longer yesterday before I marched out of the office."

Even now, she could almost see him, the way his glasses would slowly inch down the bridge of his nose as he poured over documents and spreadsheets. It was an unconscious gesture, that momentary lapse in his usual composure when he would push them back up with a single, fluid motion, never once looking away from his work. Or when he slowly stirred the coffee in his cup. It never needed stirring but he still would... and she would be captivated with the movement of his fingers.

Or the way those same fingers moved over her, gently sometimes and making her breath catch at others. The memories brought a ghost of a smile to her lips, despite the ache in her heart. "I never even realized how much I loved those small, unguarded moments, you know? Or that I was taking note of all those things about you. What are you doing now? It is the middle of the day and I am talking to your cardboard cutout, hmm? Are you still working on that horrible drainage project or training your assistant? You must be pleased that you found an assistant so quickly and could tell the HR to tell me not to come anymore, hmm?"

She felt a pang at her own words as she thought of what she had told him... implying that sleeping with him had only been a part of her job as his assistant. Gosh! She could still see the anger in his eyes when she'd said that. If he had lazer vision, she would have been riddled full of holes in that moment. "I wish you come back to me. Foolish of me isn't it?"

Her talking was broken off when the doorbell chimed. She looked at her own bedroom door, wondering who it could be, before her focus returned to the silent cardboard companion that stood as a testament to her solitude. "Who do you think it could be, Ian?" she murmured, more to herself than the inanimate figure before her. "Perhaps a lost soul at the wrong address? I'm not about to leave this sanctuary, not even to chase away an unwelcome visitor. I desire no company but yours, however one-sided our conversation might be. Pathetic, isn't it?" The doorbell's insistence pierced the quiet again, drawing a frown from Isabella as she whispered to the empty room, "Just leave... There's nothing for you here."

With a gesture born of frustration and a desire to shut out the world, she lay back on the bed and pulled a pillow over her face, seeking refuge in darkness and muffled silence.

Unfortunately(or fortunately, depending on how you look at it) for her, the pillow did its job all too well, enveloping her in a cocoon that the persistent ringing couldn't penetrate. Thus, she remained blissfully unaware of the sound of her apartment door cautiously being opened, the soft but determined footsteps that followed, or even the gentle push against her own bedroom door.

Ian stood at the threshold, his silhouette framed by the doorway, as he took in the scene before him. His gaze found her first, lying on the bed, her form curled beneath a pillow as if seeking shelter from an invisible storm. Muffled sounds, the faintest hints of words, escaped from beneath her makeshift sanctuary, though he could not understand what she was saying.

His attention then shifted to the cardboard Ian that he had sent her. A mix of amusement and a pang of something deeper flickered across his features as he looked at the many holes in it. Frowning, he tried to read something that had been written on the cutout and walked closer, pushing up his glasses as he did, to lean in and read. A smile of happiness and something more graced his face as he read the words and turned to look at the figure on the bed. So she at least had some awareness.

Taking a deep breath, Ian considered his next move. The room was quiet, save for the soft, indistinct sounds of Isabella's muffled sobs. Sigh. It was time to attack. The only way he could get Isabella to understand things, it seemed when he launched a surprise attack.

He observed the subtle rise and fall of her shoulders and made a few quick calculations.

In one fluid motion, born of a decisiveness that had served him well in both his personal and professional life, Ian reached down and gently but firmly grasped Isabella by her shoulders. With a practiced ease, he lifted her from the bed, pulling the pillow away with his other hand as he did so. Before she could fully register what was happening or unleash the scream that was building at the back of her throat, he had already seated himself on the bed and positioned her onto his lap, cradling her against his chest.

The suddenness of his movements left Isabella momentarily stunned, her body tensing as her mind raced to catch up with the reality of her situation. The initial impulse to scream, to fight against the unexpected embrace, faded as quickly as it had arisen when she realized who it was that held her. Her breath hitched in her throat, a mix of shock, relief, and a thousand unspoken emotions swirling within her.

Before she could speak more, one of his arms wrapped securely around her waist while his other hand moved to cradle the back of her head, his fingers threading through her hair as he brought her lips to his slowly, deliberately.

Chapter 416: Confessions

As Isabella leaned into him, the realization that Ian was here for her, that he had somehow found his way to her, was overwhelming. The floodgates of emotions she had tried so hard to dam broke free, tears streaming down her cheeks, not just from fear or surprise, but from a well of feelings too complex to name. Yet, in the safety of Ian's embrace, surrounded by his warmth and the undeniable reality of his presence, she found a sense of peace she hadn't known she could have.

Unable to help himself, Ian patted her back and teased her, "Ahh, now you cry like a baby. What happened to all that 'I'm breaking up with you' stiffness?"

And in that moment, she remembered the threat that Emerald had given her. Hurriedly, she scrambled off his lap and wiped her tears, without daring to look at him, "You need to go. I told you already that we are breaking up? Why did you come here then? Is it your ego that is hurt because I broke up with you? If that is the case, then go ahead and you break up with me."

"We are not breaking up." Ian said coolly as he looked at the girl who'd been crying in his arms a moment ago.

"We've already broken up." Isabella answered, unable to keep the tremor out of her voice.

The air crackled with tension as Isabella finally glared at Ian, her eyes still glistening with unshed tears. Ian, on the other hand, maintained his composure, his expression calm and determined, as if he was not discussing anything more important than the weather.

Isabella crossed her arms in a defensive stance as she retorted, "Ian, we can't just ignore the fact that I ended things. I meant it."

Ian sighed, "No you didn't. And that is the problem. If you'd ended things honestly, I wouldn't be here. But you are hiding something. And trying to push me away. That doesn't work on me Isabella."

She scoffed, a mixture of anger and hurt in her voice. "Oh, so now you're going to decide if I'm honest or not?"

Ian sighed and pushed up his glass with a mutter of irritation, 'I did not come here to pick a fight with you. So stop that.'

"Well, then, what did you come here for? Did you think I would welcome you when I have specifically told you that I have no interest in you? Nothing changes the fact that we're broken up."

Finally, Ian sighed and covered her mouth with his hand, "Get it through your head, Isabella Ruffalo. I love you, and you love me. So, we cannot break up."

The room fell into an uneasy silence as Isabella stared at Ian, her wide eyes searching his face for any sign of uncertainty. Ian, maintaining his calm demeanor, raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to process his words as he removed his hand from her mouth.

Slowly, as if trying to grasp the reality of the situation, Isabella questioned, her voice barely a whisper, "You love me?"

Ian nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. His hand now cupping her face as he gently caressed her cheek with his thumb. "That's what I said, doll. I love you."

Isabella's eyes widened even further, almost as if they would fall out, as disbelief and confusion swirled in their depths. Her mind raced, trying to reconcile Ian's declaration with everything...

"I... I love you?" she stammered the question hesitantly.

Any other man would have hesitated or doubted himself at her question. But this was Ian. He couldn't help but roll his eyes with a hint of exasperation in his expression. "Isabella, why are you changing factual statements into questions? Yes, you love me. That's a fact."

Isabella's brows furrowed as she tried to process the revelation. The weight of her own emotions and the unexpected turn of events left her grappling. Was she dreaming? Had she somehow slipped into some alternate reality?

"Why?" she finally asked, her voice a mix of vulnerability and curiosity.

Ian let out a dramatic sigh and repeated her question, "Why?" and then grinned mischievously, as he raised his fingers to count, pretending to misunderstand her, "Oh, let me count the reasons, Isabella. You love me because I am undeniably handsome, I always care for you, I have a great sense of humor, and let's not forget, I'm exceptional in bed. Plus, I'm an incredible cook, a patient listener, a skilled dancer, and I can recite Shakespeare in my sleep. That is the most important point. What's not to love in me, doll?"

He raised an eyebrow playfully as Isabella's eyes widened with a mix of surprise and amusement before she broke out into a chuckle with tears still streaming down her face. Unable to understand herself, she threw her arms around Ian and buried her face in his neck, "You doofus. You're right. I do love you."

"I know. You're too smart not to. But I still like it when you say it. I love you Isabella Ruffalo, for all your eccentricities, your naughtiness, your determination even your silly stubbornness that you've been displaying for the past few days. Did you know that your smile can make the darkest day brighter than the sunlight?"

Isabella moved back and looked at him with wide eyes as he smiled down at her, "I bet you didn't know that. Isi baby, you're not just someone I love, you're someone I admire and respect. You bring out the best in me, and I want to be the person who brings out the best in you, too. So, no matter what

challenges come our way, I'm here for you, and I love you for all that you are. Okay? From now on, there would be no talks about breaking up."

It was as if someone had doused water on her. Isabella bit her lip as she looked at Ian, wondering if she should tell him about Emerald but worried about it. She knew he could handle things... and it was so tempting to lean on him...

Chapter 417: A Plan

Isabella bit her lip, her gaze locking onto Ian's with hesitant eyes before she took a deep breath. "Ian, I do love you. But we cannot be together. I need time. I have to go away."

Ian sighed, a mix of understanding and concern etched on his face, as he held her close. "Isabella, are you going to say that you need to break up with me again? We haven't even gotten together again yet."

Isabella sighed, her eyes momentarily dropping before meeting his gaze once more. "Maybe we can take a break... Knowing you love me gives me the strength to face everything."

Ian chuckled, a playful glint in his eyes. "My little doll, do you really think I wouldn't know what is going on with you when I say I love you? Who was the one who accused me of not knowing my boundaries? Of always pushing limits? I thought you knew me well..."

Isabella stilled, her eyes widening in surprise. "What did you do?"

Ian feigned innocence; his expression comically exaggerated. "Me? I'm an angel, Isabella. Always have been. But seriously, love, no tricks. Just an uncanny ability to read between the lines. Now spill, what's going on?"

Isabella looked into his eyes carefully. In that moment, she knew that he was aware of everything that had transpired. And yet, he wanted her to confide in him. And so, she did... letting everything out between sobs as she reiterated the entire conversation, almost word for word, of what had transpired between her and Emerald.

"I knew he did not like me. I always understood that. It is why I never said anything when he spoke all those things against me. I hoped that someday his hatred would run out and he would see the error of

his ways. Even when I accepted the offer from Country N, I had hoped things would have changed when I returned. But this time, it felt different. More than anger at the past."

"It felt like a real threat, Ian. and I couldn't help but think about Nora and her own hopes about her mother? Wasn't I making the same mistake? Hoping that enduring everything will make him see the truth. I'd been considering things but I never thought he really would harm my mama."

When he told me he had orchestrated the accident and that he would hurt mama, I couldn't bear the thought of losing her or dad or you. I was worried that he would go further on his threats and harm any of you. I would never have forgiven myself then.. So I said what he wanted to hear. I agreed to going back to Country N and never return. I agreed to break up with you."

Ian held Isabella a little tighter, his gaze searching hers, "There's something I need to understand. Why didn't you tell me directly about all of this? Did you think I wouldn't be able to handle it or that I wouldn't support you? Do you not trust me?"

Isabella took a deep breath, her eyes reflecting a blend of vulnerability and regret. "I... I was ashamed. My life has been a mess for so long that I seem to have forgotten what it is like to have a normal life. You've already seen what it's like. You've seen me at the worst. But that was before I fell for you. It's foolish to differentiate, but when I did not love you, it was easy to convince myself that any ill opinion you had of me made no difference to me. But now, it's different."

She paused, searching for the right words. "I love you, Ian. And I was afraid that if you knew the extent of the chaos in my life, it might change how you see me. I didn't want you to look at me with pity or disdain. I wanted you to see the person you fell in love with, not the mess that I've been trying to escape from."

"So, when I dragged you into all that mess with Nora, or Gabe, did you love me any less?"

Isabella was horrified. "How can you say that? That was Nora... and of course I did what I had to..."

"Then why hide things from her and from me? When you can do something for someone and not love them any less then..."

Isabella gave a sheepish smile at that. She'd never thought it like that. Ian saw the realization in her eyes and smiled, "Doll, my love for you is not bound by the circumstances we find ourselves in. I fell in love with the strong, resilient, and caring person that you are. The chaos around us doesn't change that."

Isabella bit her lip, her eyes reflecting her insecurity. "I didn't mean to deceive you, Ian. I just... I was scared that..."

"You were scared that I would stop loving you like your father did? Fall out of love with you?"

"I... yes. Growing up, I idolized him, Ian. I always believed that any love in this world could vanish but my parents' would never stop loving me. Even when they misunderstood me, my rebellion, I always believed that beneath the misunderstandings the love was still there."

"Isabella, your father may be angry, confused, or disappointed right now, but one thing is certain – the love a parent has for their child is an unbreakable bond. No matter the misunderstandings, he loves you. It might take time for him to see things clearly, but love has a way of softening even the hardest hearts."

Of course Ian failed to tell her that he had already seen to it that Gio Ruffalo would be able to see the real colours of his dear son. And even if after this, the man failed to see the truth, then he would personally make things better. But knowing Eliza Ruffalo, she'd take care of her husband for them. Very soon, this little thorn in Isabella's heart would be taken care of.

Isabella nodded against his chest but then continued, "Nothing matters as of now other than my parents' and your security. But now that I know what Emerald can do, I will not just disappear from their lives just because he said so. I will find a way to expose him..."

With that single vow to herself and Ian, she looked at Ian to promise him but, as her eyes met his, she noticed a hint of guilt lingering in his features. Her brows furrowed in suspicion, and she tilted her head, studying him more intently. "There's something you're not telling me. What did you do?"

Ian's eyes darted away, a guilty expression flickering across his face. He shifted uncomfortably, avoiding direct eye contact. Isabella's concern deepened, and she gently placed a hand on his cheek, coaxing him to look at her. " Ian Frost, you better come clean. What did you do? Did you harm Emerald? Is he now buried somewhere six feet under the earth? Please don't tell me you did something stup*d."

Ian pouted and poked her cheek, "Ha! You think I'm so stupid so as to bury him sex feet under only? I overestimated your intelligence, probably because I love you. Now, as a punishment, I won't tell you anything. But I cannot punish you for long since I love you so maybe some day, if you coax me well and tell me that you love me..."

Isabella cast him a stern look, he was avoiding telling her the truth... And she could feel herself getting worried by the second. She knew Ian... And he could be dangerous...if he felt the need to protect those he loved. She felt a momentary thrill at the thought that he loved her and considered her under his protection, but she was still worried.

"Ian Frost, tell me right now." Isabella threatened with a look.

Ian rolled his eyes and shook his head, "Nope. Not until you promise me that you won't hold it against me."

Isabella bit her lip, "I cannot promise you that."

"Fine fine. I might have come on too strong but I swear I did nothing to harm him... at least physically."

"Stop going around in circles Ian Frost and come clean."

"Alright. First things first, just so you are reassured, Emerald did not do anything to harm your mother. It really was an accident which he decided to use to his advantage."

Even as Isabella felt relief coursing through her that Emerald had not gone to this extent, she dare not show it to Ian, and continue to stare at him, making him sigh. "Alright. I went to see your mother... And I might have used a bit of shock and awe tactics and taken a few.. okay a dozen men with me there. And they might or might not have kind of manhandled him into telling the truth when I showed him the surveillance video where he was threatening you and confessing all his misdeeds."

Chapter 418: The Most Beautiful Bride

"You are the most beautiful bride ever, Nora! Today is going to be awesome."

Nora met Isabella's eyes in the mirror, and their shared laughter drew curious looks from Evana and Olivia.

"What? You really do look stunning!" Evana added, making the two women laugh even more.

Nora rolled her eyes and mock-fanned herself. "Of course, I'm aware."

Evana narrowed her eyes, sure there was something going on that she didn't know, while Isabella chuckled. "Okay, here's the backstory for the two of you- this is what I told her when she was dressed as a bride the previous time. This girl, she had me fooled that she was really marrying Antonio. And gosh, I hated that man. But I was trying to be supportive... while she looked pale. Who could have thought that she was that good an actress."

Evana smiled at that, " I'm just glad that you never married him, and we had this chance to be sisters. Also, I agree with Isabella, I totally did not like him. The first time I met him, I seriously questioned if you were making decisions with the intelligence quotient of a room temperature—during the cold and in Celsius, that is—before you lost your memory."

"Of course she was foolish, back then. I'm pretty sure she's steeling all the smartness from Demetri, even now. She lost hers a long while ago..."

Nora, feigning indignation, picked up a flower and tossed it at Isabella. "Oh, please, Bella baby. I still managed to capture Demetri's heart, didn't I? With my lower intelligence? And had the courage to confess my love to him, unlike someone who needed to be informed that she was in love with Ian."

Isabella caught the flower gracefully and lobbed it back at Nora. "That's not fair! Ian was just too impatient and took it upon himself to declare my love for him."

Evana and Olivia both chuckled at Isabella's look before teasing her, " You're lucky he did that. You were the one who was foolishly trying to break up with him."

Isabella blushed and pointed out angrily, " Well then, he could have proclaimed his love for me... But he took it upon himself to declare my love for him as well."

"Don't pretend to be angry, Bella baby! You were quite happy that he did that. You were totally over the moon."

"I was saved from making a special declaration or gesture to him so of course, I was happy."

As their shared laughter echoed, Olivia sighed. "But Demetri is going to lose his mind when he sees you today as a bride."

Isabella's eyes widened with curiosity. "Wait, what? When was this? Where was I? Oh, I was there. how did I not see him?"

Nora smirked mischievously. "Oh, it was during the Antonio fiasco. You were busy glaring daggers at Antonio. Demetri was there at the church when Antonio dramatically objected to the marriage."

Isabella gasped. "No way! Why haven't you told us this before? Ohh. You'd already married him by then, hadn't you? What did he think he was going to do if you really went ahead with the wedding?"

"He claims that he would have carried me away before I could say, 'I do'."

"Aww! That would have been so much fun to watch. Dam* that Antonio! He ruined the show even then."

Evana joined in with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Well, maybe we can arrange for a little show today. You know, just to spice things up?"

Nora widened her eyes at that and shook her head, "No way! Lets just stick to the original plan. We don't want any more surprises after what the boys are planning."

As the excitement bubbled in the room, Olivia's eyes sparkled with mischief. "The boys are planning something? Dar*! They've grown guts to prank Demetri now? What are they doing? Come on, spill it!"

Nora chuckled, "It's not just one, alright. They're doing a few things..."

"Holy shi*! And Ian did not even tell me a single prank! How dare he? Let me give him a piece of my mind..." Isabella was about to go out in a huff...

However, Nora giggled and caught her. "Oh, shu* up! You'll watch it live and love the entire fun."

Evana, sensing the perfect moment for celebration, reached for a champagne bottle, popping it open with a satisfying pop. "Well then, let's toast to Nora! May your wedding day be filled with love, laughter, and just the right amount of mischief."

They each grabbed a glass, and Olivia raised hers high. "To Nora, the most stunning bride and the mastermind behind the best pranks. May your marriage be as joyous and thrilling as your sense of humor."

Isabella joined in with a mischievous grin. "May Demetri survive the pranks and cherish the laughter, just like he cherishes you, Nora."

Nora blushed at the heartfelt words, lifting her glass. "To love, laughter, and a lifetime of happy pranks. Cheers!"

They clinked glasses, and the room echoed with laughter and the fizzy sound of champagne being poured.

Meanwhile, in the groom's room, champagne had been popped as well... but the atmosphere was not right. The groom stood... in his under clothes, staring at his brothers...

Meanwhile, in the groom's room, champagne had been popped as well, but the atmosphere was far from celebratory. Demetri stood in his suit, which seemed to have shrunk two sizes at the very least, a bewildered expression on his face as he stared at his mischievous brothers.

Ian, trying to contain his laughter, explained, "Well, Demetri, we thought we'd start the wedding day with a bit of humor. It's going to be a new tradition, you know."

Demetri sighed, "I'm all for traditions, but does it have to involve me standing here wrapped like a sausage? Where is my suit, guys?"

"Ahh.. this one?"

Lucien moved aside to show another suit which looked like Demetri's but with a giant hole in the middle.

"Oh no! He means this one." Erasmi brought forward, yet another similar suit, this one smeared with something red..." This is the best. When she sees you in this, she will be so worried that you are bleeding that she will run down the aisle to you."

Demetri rubbed his forehead and glared at them, "I can see you all are having a great fun at my expense."

Seb, stood up and moved the curtain to reveal a mannaquin hidden there as he popped a chicken popcorn into his mouth, while adding, "Of course, we are. And here is your pristine white suit. You, who has never worn white in his life is wearing that. We are entitled to some fun!"

Having said so, he casually wiped his hand on the sleeve of the suit, making the others scream in horror, "Seb, that is the original suit..."

"Oops sorry."

Finally, Demetri, who'd almost believed that his real suit had also been damaged, got rid of the extra tihht clothing and lounged on the couch, "Fine. You can keep laughing. I can go out like this while you guys can explain yourself to Nora."

The room echoed with laughter as the brothers, pretending to be scared of Nora's potential wrath, quickly dispersed, leaving Demetri to prepare for the wedding in peace, his kidnapped suit, handed back to him...

Chapter 419: The Wedding

The air was thick with anticipation as Demetri stood at the end of the aisle, his heart pounding. For the first time in his life, he was nervous, though he had no idea why. His eyes kept going to the closed doors, wondering how long it would be till he would be able to see her walking towards him. Only then would his heart calm down.

Behind Demetri, his groomsmen—Ian, Erasmi, Seb, Lucien, and Gabe—huddled together, engaged in a spirited discussion. Their topic of choice: contingency plans for his potential escape or, more humorously, what they'd do if Nora decided to make a break for it. Demetri fought the urge to roll his eyes at their antics. As if Nora, would ever consider such a thing.

Impatiently he alternated glances between his watch and the church clock. Time seemed to stretch, each half-minute dragging on as if determined to savor every moment. Demetri couldn't help but wonder if his mischievous brothers had tampered with the timepieces to intensify his anticipation. Before he could cast them a suspicious look, soft romantic music started to play and the doors slowly opened.

Dora was the first to appear, adorned in a charming pink gown. With infectious excitement, she waved eagerly at him, her enthusiasm almost causing her to fumble the basket of flowers she held. A swift blush painted her cheeks, but she recovered gracefully, offering a friendly wave to the cheering crowd. Without missing a beat, she proceeded down the aisle, dropping rose petals with each step.

The romantic melody swelled again, signaling the entrance of the next bridesmaid. Evana, radiant in a lavender gown, stepped into view. Her graceful strides matched the rhythm of the music, and she carried herself with an air of elegance. She gave a quick smile to Demetri before her gaze shot to Lucien, who was being elbowed by Ian as he stared at her with shining eyes, maybe imaging her as she walked down the aisle to him, she hoped.

Following Evana, Olivia emerged, draped in a stunning shade of azure. Her eyes met Demetri's, and a warm smile passed between them before her gaze too, moved to the man behind Demetri. However, Seb wasn't even looking at her, his gaze fixed somewhere behind her.

Finally, as Isabella emerged, Demetri sighed. The previous time, his Nora had a wedding, she'd had only one bridesmaid. And now there were so many of them... He should have simply replaced Antonio the last time instead of waiting all this while. They were already married so why did he have to be subjected through this torture.

However, he did not show his thoughts to Isabella, who had yet to look at him and was busy winking at Ian. And then she took her place.

Now it was time for his Nora to walk out... As his eyes remained glued to the door, Demetri of course had no idea of what was going on behind his back, where Ian had just winked to someone in the crowd.

As the doors slowly swung open, the audience collectively held its breath, eager to catch the first glimpse of the bride. The soft notes of the music guided the entrance, adding a touch of magic to the moment.

The crowd's initial gasps turned into a mix of laughter and surprise, as two little dogs walked down the aisle eagerly, dancing down the aisle, yipping and yapping, as they made their way eagerly towards Demetri and then sitting at his feet, as if awaiting a treat.

Demetri turned to glare at his brothers, knowing that there unexpected little guests were their doing and patted Kitten and Gaia on their heads. As he straightened and turned, his eyes caught hers. His heart, once pounding with nerves, now skipped a beat as he finally glimpsed her, her eyes twinkling with mischief. So his little kitten had been in on the prank. He should have guessed.

She seemed to be glowing with happiness and he couldn't get enough of that look. When he'd first seen her dressed as a bride for someone else, even then his heart had seemed to fail him. But seeing her now, walk down towards him, Demetri knew that he'd fallen for her all over again.

His eyes never left her, even as he accepted that he would continue to fall in love with her everyday, and he smiled at her. As she drew nearer, the world seemed to narrow down to just the two of them. His heard pounded when she stopped a little away from him. Why did she stop?

And then he felt a nudge behind him and a few snickers while Nora raised her hand for him to take, giving him a teasing look. He'd forgotten to take her hand for the last few steps. With a bit of worry, he wondered if he remembered how to walk, but thankfully, muscle memory saved him and he walked forward, quickly taking her hand in his.

Finally, she was close to him, and he did what he'd been yearning to do. Quickly, he bent down and kissed her cheek, even through the veil, causing everyone to cheer and his brothers to complain, "At least wait until you say your vows."

The officiant too cleared his throat to remind, "You're supposed to kiss the bride After the ceremony."

Demetri shrugged, " I'll do that as well."

Laughter echoing in the church, Nora and Demetri looked at each other, as they held their hands. Nora's smile widened as she looked at the man who had stolen her heart. Everything was perfect just she had always dreamt. She had a big family with laughter everywhere. And the love of her life, holding her hand.

Just as they held hands, the officiant asked, " If anyone has any objections to their union then please speak now or forever hold your peace."

This time, Nora winked at Demetri who smiled back. However, suddenly someone cleared their throat and called out, "I object..."

Demetri and Nora, both stiffened as they looked at each other, wondering if this was a prank too...

Behind the couple, the groomsmen and the bridesmaids also looked at each other, wondering if this was a prank too... But the stranger grinned and raised his hands, " I object to wasting time in asking this question. Get to it fast!" He then winked at Demetri who raised an eyebrow at Nora, letting her know that it was his prank, making her giggle as the officiant had them repeat their vows.

Chapter 420: Dancing

"Erasmi Frost, I can hardly believe you were the mastermind behind that prank," Isabella remarked, her eyes rolling in mock disapproval as she swayed in Erasmi's arms. His laughter echoed around her and he shrugged, making her look at him in surprise.

"Oh, come now. I couldn't let my younger brothers steal the limelight, could I? What kind of example would I be setting for my son? That his father can't execute a decent prank?" Erasmi replied with a twirl, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Isabella squinted at him, teasingly accusing, "So, you decided to recruit someone to dress up as a zombie and give them a scare right after the ceremony? Fortunately, Nora showed remarkable restraint and didn't unleash any self-defense moves on the poor zombie. But Demetri..."

Erasmi shook his head, chuckling, "Who would have thought to instruct a zombie to wait? Even if he couldn't be scared, did he have to be so laidback about it? Thankfully, Nora was sufficiently scared. My plan almost crumbled, thanks to Demetri."

"Almost being the operative word," Erasmi added, his grin widening as he led Isabella away from a certain someone..

"And here you are, reveling in your another brother's predicament," Isabella observed, a playful smile on her lips as she followed Erasmi's lead.

Erasmi shrugged nonchalantly, a mischievous spark in his eyes, "Guilty as charged. If Ian keeps shooting those looks my way, I might end up with a back full of holes."

"Well, considering the fact that you are hoarding his girlfriend, who you had explosive chemistry with and almost slept with, its a wonder he's not using a real gun."

Erasmi grinned," You make it sound so wrong! Our chemistry and almost sleeping together were before you became his girlfriend, you know.. And again...almost being the operative word..."

Isabella smiled and patted Erasmi's shoulder," I think its great seeing you like this. You look much better than that time. Your eyes at the time... I was scared for my Nora baby if she was going to be with you.."

Erasmi rolled his eyes and sighed," Well, for all your silliness, I must say that you have a good head on your shoulders. It'll be good for Ian to marry you."

Isabella paused and almost stumbled. "Marry? Who said anything about marriage? We are only seeing each other... we've just become a couple..."

Erasmi chuckled, "Do you think that possessive bast*rd, who is even now fuming because you are dancing with his brother, will let you be free for long?"

Isabella's eyes widened, her steps faltering for a moment as the realization hit her. She quickly recovered, trying to maintain her composure, but the surprise lingered on her face as she realized that Erasmi was probably correct. Ian was moving at a very high speed. Hadn't he already made inroads with her parents.

Looking at her face, Erasmi, glanced at the man coming their way from the mirror on the opposite side and grinned, "Speak of the devil. Watch this."

Before Isabella could react, Erasmi pulled her into a dramatic dip, his eyes locked on the man's approach behind him. The move caught Isabella off guard, but she couldn't help but laugh.

Erasmi then smoothly brought Isabella back to an upright position, a sly smile on his face as her eyes met with Ian's dark gaze, making her laughter catch in her throat. Her eyes shot to Erasmi as she whispered urgently, "What are you doing?"

Erasmi grinned, "Just stirring the pot a little. Keeps things interesting, don't you think?"

Isabella chuckled, shaking her head, "You're incorrigible, Erasmi Frost. Now..."

"I'd like my girlfriend back, Eras." Ian's voice cut in smoothly.

Erasmi chuckled, releasing Isabella with a theatrical bow. "Your girlfriend, of course. I was merely keeping her entertained, brother."

Ian shot Erasmi a pointed look, a subtle warning in his gaze. "Don't push it, Eras."

"Oh, come on, Ian. Just having a bit of fun," Erasmi said, his tone light but challenging.

Isabella watched the exchange, her amusement evident, since there was no underlying tension between the two. They were merely having fun at her expense! As Erasmi stepped back, he winked at her, leaving her with a bemused smile.

Even as she watched him leave, she was pulled into Ian's arms, who held her close to him. She could not help but look up at him and in the cutest move possible, she watched as he declared with a pout, "I am jealous."

Isabella chuckled and shook her head, "Why would you be jealous?"

"I like being the one to make you laugh the most. And he was making you laugh..."

Isabella chuckled at that but inside, her heart was thumping at the words. She couldn't help but think back to what just Erasmi had said about marriage...

Blushing a bit, she shook her head and quickly sought a topic to discuss. Spying Lucien and Evana who were finally on the dance floor, she could not help but murmur, "It seems things are improving between, Lucien and Evana. Do you think that Evana will be the one to catch the bouquet? I'm pretty sure that she will be thrilled."

With a mysterious smile on his face, Ian answered casually, "Well, sometimes fate has its way of surprising us."

Isabella furrowed her brow, a mixture of curiosity and suspicion clouding her features. "What do you mean, Ian?"

He chuckled, his fingers gently tracing patterns on her back. "Let's just say, that maybe Evana can catch the bouquet at the next wedding... Things between the two of them are strained. Adding the pressure for a wedding will not be helping them mend their relationship."

Isabella nodded to his words, however, her mind seemed to be trying to point out to something, but she was distracted by his fingers until her brain finally pointed out... 'What did he mean by catch the bouquet at the the next wedding?'

However, before she could ask what he meant, the emcee announced that it was time for cutting the cake and bouquet toss.