

Benefits 541

Chapter 541: Shock

Autumn was in shock. Or maybe she was dreaming or in a nightmare. She had no idea. She had been walking around in a daze since this afternoon. She stared at the shiny fork sitting in front of her as if it would answer all her questions.

Pierce and Bianca... The very fact that she could not process their betrayal and cry was proof that she was numb at the moment. It was okay if they wanted to marry each other. One was the boy she loved and the other, her best friend. She would have wished them happy if they had told her. But why did they do what they did today?

They planned to hurt her. It was a carefully calculated way to hurt her. And she couldn't understand why. When she'd left B town, it had been these two who had supported her, trusted her. Pierce had vowed that he loved her, had always been talking to her on the phone, emails, etc. He'd even confessed his love and proposed on the phone! And he was the one who had said that she should meet him at the courthouse today.

She shuddered as she thought back to the scene from this afternoon. She'd been sitting for almost an hour then, when she first saw Pierce walking towards her. He'd looked so handsome, dressed to the nines in his suit. The relief and happiness she'd felt at that moment...

Then she saw his cousins. They were following him, all well dressed as well and she felt some more warmth. So Mrs Pearl had not approved their marriage but Pierce's cousins had all come out to support him. She smiled at Pierce when he looked her way, but suddenly, he jerked his eyes away, turning his head to the side.

And that was when she had seen... Bianca dressed in an all white lace dress, her arm threading through Pierce's holding his hand. The hand that already had a wedding ring on it.

And then she heard the malicious comments from the cousins, "Pierce, she really is like a loyal dog.. She's still waiting here for you."

"They stopped a few feet away from her, and made no attempt to lower their voices," I told you, there was no need to have this farce. Now see, she is going to create a scene and spoil your day."

"You should've just messaged her that you were not marrying her."

"Did she really think you were going to marry her? Miss 'Beautiful', did you really think that our cousin would marry a hoe like you? What is wrong with you? You should have run away when he did not turn up."

"I think she is pretty shameless. Forget leaving before they came here. She's still here, even after Pierce and Bianca are standing before her."

"Oh please. She's earned her reputation for her shamelessness. Hasn't Aunt Pearl told you already?"

Autumn was already used to those taunts and comments so she simply ignored those and stared at Bianca and Pierce, "What is going on?"

In fact, she wanted to ask so much more than just that one question but she couldn't. Her mind was blank and she could think nothing else.

She expected Pierce to speak up but it was Bianca who did. "Autumn, I know this must have come as a shock to you. But this is what it is. Pierce is in love with me and I am in love with Pierce. We wanted to tell you this but your mother had recently passed away so we were trying to be supportive friends. Pierce proposed last year and we had our church wedding today."

"I know you have a crush on Pierce so I decided against calling you to the wedding. But Pierce told me you've been harassing him all this time, trying to get close to him. Look, I know you find this thrilling. Going after men who are committed. It is also why we hid our relationship from you so that you wouldn't consider winning Pierce a challenge. However, I don't want to hide anymore. So, I told Pierce to invite you here. We are registering our marriage in an hour. If you want to wish us well, then you are welcome to stay here. Otherwise... leave and don't come back into our lives..."

The words 'going after men who are committed' echoed in her mind. Bianca had known the truth. She'd been the first person she had gone to when everything had happened, even before confiding in her mother. Why was she doing this?

Another of Pierce's cousins, stepped forward, grabbing the form from her hand, " You are expecting her to wish you well? She is standing here, wearing a white dress and and with your husband's name on the marriage form and you think she is going to bless your wedding. What is wrong with you, Bia! Tell her to get lost."

"Give me that file. I don't believe it."

Even as Bianca grabbed the file, for the first time, Autumn glimpsed the malice in her eyes. Bianca wanted to see for herself the form that she had filled. She wanted to humiliate her even more.

She fought the urge to grab the file back. Thankfully, she had not been able to fill the form. At least she would have some sort of dignity left. What harm had she done to Pierce and Bianca that they did not just want to betray her but also strip her of a last piece of dignity.

Before Bianca could open the file, a man stepped between her and the rest. With his back to the group, the others could only frown while Autumn looked up at the tall man and blinked. He...Why was he here? However, what he said next, rendered her even more mute...

"Autumn! What are you standing here for? The councillor is waiting for us inside. Come on, my pretty bride. It is time you said 'yes' to me forever. I can't wait to make you mine."

With that, he held her wrist and grabbed the file from Bianca's hand and started to walk along, while she felt her body follow him in a daze.

Chapter 542: Married

With that, he held her wrist and grabbed the file from Bianca's hand and started to walk along, while she felt her body follow him in a daze.

Finally, he stopped and guided her into a small waiting room. She saw him slip something to the doorman who nodded and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. It was the closing of the door that jarred her from her shock. With a single inhale of her breath, she stumbled and collapsed onto the hard bench. As she sat there, trembling and disoriented, she felt the world closing in around her.

She saw as Gabriel Frost opened the file and glanced at the form. "You didn't fill it out?"

She shook her head, "No. I..."

"Why?"

"Why?" She repeated his question numbly.

"Why did you not fill out the form yet?"

"I... don't know. I... somehow it didn't feel right."

Just then, there was a knock on the door and Gabe went to open the door. It was the doorman who whispered to him. After a hushed conversation, the man stepped out again, closing the door behind him.

Autumn looked down at her fingers and clenched her fingers. What was she supposed to do now? She felt the walls closing in around her and started to have difficulty breathing. Her breaths came in shallow, rapid gasps as panic threatened to overwhelm her.

Just as panic started to engulf her, pushing her into a dark fog, she heard Gabe's voice coming through. She opened her eyes and straightened, only to find him kneeling in front of her. She didn't know what he was saying, but he seemed to be asking her something. She nodded and then shook her head, trying to clear her mind.

He extended the form he had just taken from her and she looked at it in confusion. Why did he fill it? What was the point? Did he not see the things they had... She looked up at him. Why was his name there on the form? And how did he know things about her?

"I read your resume just this morning, so I know all this. As for this, the people outside, who wanted to humiliate you, they are waiting it seems. They want to see if you really got married."

She gave a bitter laugh at that. What a joke. They'd carefully planned to strip her of dignity. But Gabe Frost's timely arrival had saved her from that, thus thwarting their plans. However, they were not satisfied, with what they had already done? They were waiting to see if she had really been rescued or she had really planned to marry someone else?

Feeling a mixture of defiance and anger, running through her, she read the form with his name in the Groom's place one last time and made a decision. She would marry Gabe Frost. Today and Now. She refused to let their cruelty win.

With a firm nod, she stood up and marched towards the door, ready to go out and marry this man. She would not let anyone else control her, least of all the two people who had stabbed her in the back.

Just as she reached for the door handle, a hand grasped her wrist, stopping her in her tracks. Startled, she turned around to find Gabe standing close. She flinched instinctively, but he shook his head gently, his voice a soothing whisper, "Wipe your tears, Autumn. You want them to believe that you won this round, and they lost it quite thoroughly."

It was at this moment, she realized the truth. She was crying. With trembling fingers, she wiped her tears, brushing away the remnants of the love she had felt. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and opened the door.

She looked down at the hand that was still holding her wrist and gently tugged at it. And when he did let go of her wrist, she slipped her hand into his. Without turning to look at him, she spoke softly, " Lets go."

It was as they stood in front of the marriage registrar, that Autumn felt fear. What was she doing? She had always planned everything carefully, then why was she taking such a big decision of her life on impulse. Why was she marrying a man she didn't know. But even as the question resounded in her mind, a part of her mocked her. She'd known Pierce and Bianca all her life, it hadn't helped her, had it?

Even so, the last bit of sanity warned her to not tie this knot with a stranger. She turned to step away from him but just then glimpsed Bianca's reflection in the glass and stilled. No, she wouldn't let her win.

She heard then, the registrar asking for their documents and she handed over her papers with trembling hands, her fingers brushing against Gabe's as he passed his own documents. Why was he here? And why

was he carrying her personal documents? They were questions that fleetingly entered her mind but she ignored them and continued to watch the registrar, as he checked the documents.

Finally, the man spoke up, matter of factly, "Everything seems to be in order," he then motioned towards a nearby register. "If you could both sign here, please."

Autumn hesitated for a moment, her gaze flickering to Gabe before she picked up the pen and scrawled her signature onto the page. Gabe followed suit, scrawling his name next to hers in bold strokes.

With the formalities completed, the registrar glanced up, "Do you have rings?"

She watched as Gabe looked at her expectantly. Of course he wouldn't have the rings. But she did. She'd grabbed her father's and mother's wedding bands before coming here, hoping their love would..Shaking her head to push away the thought...she pulled out the set from the box in her purse..And they exchanged the rings quietly.

The registrar nodded then, "Very well, " gesturing towards a door at the far end of the room. "If you could proceed to the next room, you can have your photograph taken, and then you may collect your marriage certificate. You are now officially married. Congratulations Mr and Mrs Frost."

Chapter 543: Lets Stay... Married

"Autumn."

Autumn looked up to see Gabe Frost standing there in front of her and tried to give him a smile, though she was sure it looked like a grimace.

However, he too, could only smile slightly and she watched him pull the chair across from her and sit. Her eyes caught the glint of the metal on his fingers and she felt her heart thud. It wasn't a dream. She really had gone insane and married Gabe Frost. That ring was the evidence right there.

As Gabe settled into the chair opposite her, Autumn fidgeted with the edge of her shirt, suddenly feeling self-conscious under his gaze."How are you feeling?"

She shrugged, "Confused, I guess. I don't know..."

Gabe nodded, "I understand it is a lot to take in. You can take your time to process this. Whenever you're ready, we can go through the annulment process."

As she was about to nod, she stopped. He was talking about annulment... Why had she not thought of this? Through out the hours that she had been sitting here, trying to process everything, not once had she thought of a way of getting out of this 'odd' marriage. In fact, the marriage had felt like a soothing balm on the wounds that Pierce and Bianca had given her.

Which was ridiculous and silly for her. She couldn't cling to Gabe when he had done so much for her. If he had not stepped in when he had, she would have been utterly humiliated by those people... which reminded her..." Thank you for stepping in. I don't know why they did what they did, but if you had not..."

She watched as his eyes hardened and he spoke with clenched teeth, "I overheard them before I knew that they were planning to target you. They misguided you purposely to come to the registrar because they wanted to humiliate you. It seems they have been discussing this entire scenario over the entire weekend. I was enraged to know that someone would be this malicious, but when I knew they were going to be targeting you, I decided to step in. I just didn't expect to... really get married."

Autumn nodded, her gaze still fixed on the ring on his finger. Why did it fit him so perfectly?

Gabe noticed her gaze on his hand and felt a jolt when he realized he was still wearing the ring she had slipped onto his finger. He had planned to take it off as soon as he left the office. Feeling foolish, he started to take off the ring, "Here, I'm sorry I should have returned this to you first thing...It's an heirloom?"

Autumn nodded, "The set belonged to my parents. You... were recently married? " Autumn asked as she noticed the pale mark on his finger when he slipped off the ring that she had given him.

After that question, the atmosphere seemed to change subtly, but Autumn failed to notice it as she asked curiously, "Are you divorced?"

Gabe clenched his teeth as he looked at her, "Widowed."

That seemed to jolt her and she nodded, "Ah. I'm sorry."

Gabe nodded and extended the ring to her. The faster he got rid of this evidence of his insanity, the better. However, she made no move to take the ring and instead looked at him.

That gaze from those eyes should be illegal, he thought in passing as she said something which he missed. He was busy trying to write frame the law about people with doe eyes not being allowed to give puppy gazes...

"Pardon me. Can you please repeat what you said?"

"I asked... can we stay married?" Autumn asked, feeling nervous. She had never expected that she would do something like this. Ask a stranger to stay married to her. But as the lawyer's words from this morning, repeated in her mind, she knew she needed someone. She had a feeling, that somehow that man was involved in today's incident as well with Pierce and Bianca.

Gabe blinked, caught off guard by Autumn's unexpected question. He had not expected this. His first instinct was an unequivocal 'NO'. But then, as his mind connected the things that he had heard and seen, he knew that this girl needed his help. The question was, did he want to help? And did she deserve his help?

He watched her fidget nervously but try to maintain her composure and admired the girl for staying strong. If it had been anyone else, they might not have held up. And there was something in her gaze that reminded him of himself. A desperation. Whatever her reason for wanting to get married quickly to that man or to stay in a marriage with him was, she was desperate for it.

Finally, she seemed to have gathered her courage as she squared her shoulders and firmed her chin, "I.. I know it's a lot to ask, but... and I don't want to rush into anything, especially considering what you did for me today, however, this marriage is my only hope for now. So, if you do not have any other commitments, could you please stay married to me for a year at least? A marriage in name only. We can get it annulled next year... I can compensate you for your time..."

Gabe raised an eyebrow at that. Was she offering him money to stay married to her? She nodded and continued, "I.. I don't have much, but I promise to pay you something when our marriage comes to an end. I have some savings and they will definitely multiply in a year..."

Gabe cleared his throat and answered her carefully, "I don't need your money. But before I agree to anything, I need to know what or who is after you and why? In clarity. I won't be accepting any vague answers."

Autumn's eyes widened in alarm, and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "It's... complicated. And personal. Right now, can't you just stay married. I promise it is nothing unlawful..."

Chapter 544: Father

Gabe stared at her, his expression unreadable. In that moment, she knew that he wouldn't agree to her request if she didn't come clean and tell him everything. And she was proven right when he warned, "If you need my help, Autumn, you have to tell me everything."

Autumn nodded and bit her lip, still unsure where to begin. Should she reveal every dark detail or hide the unnecessary details? Before she could decide either way, she saw someone walk into the cafe and felt a chill down her spine as the man's gaze connected to hers, the moment he entered. As if he knew that she would be sitting in exactly this place.

Extending her hand, she caught Gabe's, curling his fingers around the ring that was still sitting in his palm," her voice barely above a whisper, she agreed hurriedly "Alright. But... can we at least pretend for now? Just until I'm ready to tell you everything?"

It didn't take a rocket science degree to know that she had just spotted someone whom she wanted to hide from. Cautiously he gave her a nod and slowly wrapped his fingers around her hand, gently trying to reassure her as she stared at someone behind him.

As expected, a slightly nasally voice reached his ears, before the man himself came to stand next to where he was sitting. "Autumn, my dear, what a pleasant surprise to find you here!"

Gabe watched as the man spoke with an air of false kindness. And it was false, he could feel the 'fake' coming from a mile away. The man ignored his presence, his small eyes fixed on Autumn. The man reminded him of a rat. The way those things stared at their prey...

"Mr Savoy. I assure you it is not a pleasant surprise. In fact it is not pleasant anything. Not seeing you ever would be pleasant."

Gabe stared at Autumn in surprise. This was unexpected. She was trembling. He could feel her nails digging into his palm but she was answering the man... with guts. And she called the man Mr Savoy? So this was her step father? Or someone related to the family?

The man on the other hand, continued to pretend that she had never said anything, and continued, "Tell me, my dear, have you been well? I heard about the... incident at the registrar's office. Dreadful business, truly. Did Pierce and Biance humiliate you? You can tell me. You may not think of me like that, but you will always be my daughter..."

Autumn recoiled, as she heard the man claim her as his daughter. It was like getting physically slapped in the face.

Gabe continued to watch the changes on her face. She was repulsed. Was this the woman who supposedly tried to 'seduce' this man?

The oily smile on the man's face never faltered even as she looked ready to throw up.

"What do you want, Mr. Savoy?" Autumn asked coldly.

Mr. Savoy's smile widened, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Just checking in on my dear daughter, of course. Making sure she's alright after the... unfortunate incident at the registrar's office."

Despite the nausea threatening to overwhelm her, she narrowed her eyes, suddenly feeling someone squeeze her fingers gently. She looked down at their joined hands and met his gaze and suddenly, she felt herself relax.

Raising her chin, she gave the man a confused look and asked, "What unfortunate incident are you talking about?"

"The marriage? You were supposed to get married to Pierce today but he married..."

Before the man could continue, Autumn gave a low chuckle, "Mr Savoy. Why would I marry Pierce? I was supposed to get married today. And I did marry. I don't know who gave you the false information about this so called unfortunate incident?"

Finally, the man's expression changed, a look of incredulity on his face. With narrowed eyes, he took a step closer to Autumn, his hand reaching out as if to touch her forehead. "Are you sick, my dear? Perhaps this morning has addled your mind..."

Autumn recoiled instinctively, her body tensing as she leaned away from his touch. "Don't you dare touch me," she spat, her voice laced with venom.

It was the fear in her eyes that finally snapped Gabe's patience and he warned, "My wife is not sick. And I suggest you keep your hands to yourself."

The man seemed to notice him for the first time, as he turned to him and questioned, "Who are you?"

Gabe stood up and looked down at the man, literally. Any attempt the man would have tried to make intimidate Gabe was pushed back as he stared up at him

With a half smile, that could be more threatening than words themselves, Gabe answered, "I am the man Autumn married. And I assure you that our marriage took place very smoothly with nothing dreadful. So, whoever gave you your information is dreadfully wrong. Now, I suggest you leave us..."

The man, however was much more thick skinned and after a quick calculating minute, he continued, "I've never heard of you. Forgive me if I've offended you. I am Autumn's father..."

Gabe raised an eyebrow at that, "Her father? Shouldn't you be in your six feet under the earth? In your grave? Why are you outside? You look very healthy for a dead man..."

The man stared at the question while Autumn was shocked at first before almost laughing out loud. "What do you mean? Why would I be in a grave? Why would I be dead?"

"Why you should be dead? I am sure, Autumn can answer that question better than me. As for why I think you should be in a grave? Autumn's father passed away a long time ago. And you claim you are her father, so naturally...."

Ignoring the man, Mr Savoy turned back to Autumn, " You married him? Who is this man?"

"Who I am, is none of your business, Mr Savoy. But, you really are testing my patience. So, would you like to leave by yourself or should I arrange for a stretcher to carry you out?"

Chapter 545: Arabelle

It was the stillness of the night that attracted him to this place. B- town was scenic and quiet. A perfect combination. He could imagine people coming here and letting go of the stress of their bad emotions.

He let his mind drift as he watched the tiny ripples in the water. Even those ripples were that of calm adding to the harmony of the place instead of taking from it. Absently, he twisted the ring on his hand, his mind focused on Autumn and his own actions towards her.

There were countless girls and women in the world who were going through troubles. It was why he had been setting up the Trust to help them. Then why did he make Autumn his personal business? It was a mystery to him. It wasn't as if he had planned to marry her after rescuing her. He's only asked the person in the waiting room to keep an eye on those people so that he would be able to send her home then.

And now, he was not just married to her but also staying married to her for a year at least. And he's agreed without her having to give him the explanation he'd asked for. He'd already told Jack of his marriage so he knew without saying that he would be getting a call from one or more of the other Frosties soon. To investigate the matters. And if he didn't have some answers by then...The Frosties and their girl gang would probably descend here.

He smiled at that. He'd taken to calling the others and himself as Frosties as well because of Nora and the girl gang. Those girls were no less than mafia. And that reminded him of Nora's situation. Hadn't she been in a similar predicament? To be jilted at the altar by her sister and the man she loved? But she'd discovered their plan timely and turned the tables.

But Autumn hadn't had the chance. She would have been spared some humiliation since she had not filled that form... but not much more... And that man in the restaurant. That was the most worrisome. His instincts were telling him something that he did not want to believe but it was most likely.

He watched as a little bird came and perched on the side of the pool and smiled. Somehow, it felt as if Autumn was as delicate as this bird. But she wasn't. It needed strength to stand firm in facing all those rumors and looks. He'd give her until tomorrow to clarify everything before...

Just as he would have closed his eyes, he saw a movement in the corner that made him frown. There was someone trying to hide behind the fake bushes on the other side of the pool.

With a frown, he stood up to check it out in case someone was thinking to cause mischief. However, as he closed upon the small foliage, he could not help but smile. Looking at the little girl, trying to hide, he asked in amusement, "Well well well..what do we have here?"

The little girl turned around and flashed him a cheeky smile, "Mister Gabriel. You caught me!"

Gabriel smiled even as he hesitated to call out the name, "Miss Arabelle. It seems like I did. But what were you doing that needed you to hide from me?"

"Hush! I am not hiding from you. I am looking for a monster."

"A monster? But we don't have any. We just sent the few resident ones to Scotland yesterday. So if you're scared, you need not be."

Instead of being relieved the little girl's face crumpled and she looked ready to cry, "Mister Gabriel? Can you not ask them to bring one back? Only one? The most scary one? Please? He should be really really scary."

He looked down at the girl who was now tugging at his pant leg and almost crying for him to fetch a monster for her

Gabe sighed. What was he supposed to do? He looked around, hoping to see her parents emerge from somewhere but no one did. Raising his hands in surrende=rd, he tried to calm the little girl by asking her about it but she looked ready to have a full blown tantrum..

Hurriedly, he picked her up in his arms and carried her from there, gently placing her on the lounge chair, "So, Miss Arabelle, why do you want to have a chat with a monster?"

"To save someone..."

"To save someone? But you would need a Hero for that, won't you? How can a monster save someone?"

"See, I told Aunty N the same thing but she said that heroes are a figment of the imagination and only monsters are real..."

Gabe blinked, trying to process the little girl's words. "Aunty N said that did she?" he murmured, more to himself than to Arabelle.

Arabelle nodded vigorously, her small face serious. "Yes, Mister Gabriel. Aunty N says that heroes are just make-believe, like unicorns or dragons. But monsters... monsters are real. They can do things that heroes can't.

Gabe felt a twinge of concern. What sort of ideas was the little kid being exposed to? He knew that children often had vivid imaginations, but this seemed more than just a flight of fancy. "And who do you want to save with this monster, Arabelle?" he asked gently.

Arabelle frowned and looked at him with hesitation.

But Gabe stilled. Holy shifff.... The eyes, the gaze.. He knew already. He knew whom this little girl wanted to save and suddenly, he didn't want to hear it. He stood up, ready to flee. Just what had he gotten himself tangled in?

What kind of a fool was he? Why did he not investigate things properly before taking action. But his fear was proven right when he heard the name from the little kid, "I want to save my sister. From a monster."

Gabe felt his stomach drop! This is what he had feared. But he still ought to confirm it..

"Your Sister? You mean Autumn?"

Chapter 546: What?

"You know my sister, Mister?"

Gabe felt a pang in his chest as he looked into the innocent, trusting eyes of the little girl. Her words stirred a mixture of emotions within him, but her sweetness and vulnerability melted his heart.

With a smile, he crouched down to her level, feeling a rush of tenderness toward her. "You know, you have the most adorable smile," he said softly, unable to resist looking at her.

He wanted to curse even as he felt helpless against the little girl. Had he just been thinking a few minutes ago about continuing this marriage for a year? Exploring what he was feeling about being protective of Autumn? And now... this.. The one name he wanted to forget...was the name that this little one had been burdened with. At least she was as different as she could be, from the one he had known.

"Thank you, mister. But you didn't tell me, do you know my sister?"

Gabe bowed his head, before ruffling her hair, "I.. yes. I do know your sister."

The little girl smiled widely at that, " You know her? She is the best! But Aunt N said that because she is good, that some bad people want to harm her. And they are going to try and take me from her. So, since you know her, can you not help me with bringing a monster back? Only until he scares away all the bad people?"

"There is no need to bring a monster back." Gabe smiled at her, charmed by her innocence. He knew that the woman who was taking care of her probably had not meant monsters in the real sense.

The girl pouted and those tears that had disappeared only a moment ago reappeared immediately, "Why not? I'm not asking you to bring all of them back. Just one or two..."

Gabe smiled this time, amused, "You don't need monsters, Miss Arabelle. And neither does your sister. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because you have a strong sister. I know Miss Autumn and it seems she could crush all the monsters herself. So, you need not worry about them."

"Really?" Arabelle asked, her eyes brightening.

"Yes, really. But I am more worried about you."

"Me? Why?", the little girl asked, pointing a finger to herself.

"Yes. You, Miss Arabelle. It seems, there are some leaky taps in your eyes. They keep leaking those tears."

Arabelle giggled, the sweet sound making him smile wider as he gave her a surprised expression, "What is this, Miss Arabelle! You sweet smile appears again? Quickly hide it away or someone light steal it."

The small giggle turned into tinkling laughter and Gabe sighed. This little girl was going to be a heart stealer.

"Mister Gabriel? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, you can. What is it do you want to know? I have all the knowledge..."

"Will you help my sister if she is not able to fight them?"

Gabe paused. He really would have to insist that Autumn come clear. But maybe he could...

"I will help her, if she needs it... Miss Arabelle, can you tell me who these bad people are?"

" I don't know. I..." Arabelle bit her lip and whispered, " I overheard her talking to Uncle N about this. They don't tell me anything. Please don't scold me, okay? I did not mean to listen in..."

Gabe smiled, " Okay okay. I won't scold you or tell on you. But you have to promise me something?"

"What?"

"Next time the older people are talking, you will not listen in."

Arabelle pouted. If she didn't listen in, then she would not know what was going on. She just told Mister Gabriel that no one ever told her anything. But...

"Okay. I will promise you. But you have to promise that you will help my sister."

Gabe hesitated for a moment, weighing the implications of such a promise. But as he looked into Arabelle's pleading eyes, he knew he couldn't turn her down as much as he might want to. How was he to tell the girl, that at this moment, his biggest hesitation was her own name?

"I promise, Miss Arabelle," he said softly, reaching out to gently squeeze her hand. "I'll do everything in my power to help you and your sister, no matter what."

A bright smile spread across Arabelle's face, and before Gabe could react, she threw her arms around him in a tight hug. Surprised but touched by her affection, Gabe instinctively hugged her back, feeling a rush of warmth and protectiveness toward her.

A bright smile spread across Arabelle's face, and before Gabe could react, she threw her arms around his neck in a tight hug. Surprised but touched by her affection, Gabe instinctively hugged her back, feeling a rush of warmth and protectiveness toward the little girl even as he called himself all kinds of fools.

His heart had been cold towards everyone since Arabelle and yet, this Arabelle had come into his life and wormed her way in, in just two short meetings. What was he going to do now?

Just then, the sound of footsteps approached, and Gabe glanced up to see Autumn hurrying toward them. He watched as her worried expression changed to horror when she saw the little girl in his arms.

"You! You let go of her!" She almost screamed, coming towards him at a run, in a panic.

Hearing her sister's voice, Arabelle let go of him and turned to smile at her sister, but before she could do anything, Autumn had picked her up and carried her away from the Mister Gabriel.

"Arabelle? Are you alright? Did he hurt you?"

His brow furrowed in confusion, Gabe asked cautiously, "What is going on, Autumn?"

It took her a moment to realise that her sister was safe. She'd forgotten that Gabe was gay.. Even as she felt relief, she tried to cover up her panic, "I.. I am sorry. I just over reacted."

Chapter 547: A Chat

Gabe sat in his room, seething. He didn't have a right to be, but he was. And the anger coursing through him had nothing to do with the fear he had seen in Autumn's eyes. Because it was that fear that told him things that her words couldn't.

He tried to tell himself that she wasn't the reason for his anger. Or rather her suffering was not the reason. It was the existence of the people who put that fear there were what made him angry. Thankfully, before he could smash something, his phone interrupted his thoughts.

It was the phone call he had been expecting and almost dreading. But right now, it seemed like a lifesaver..."Erasmi."

He winced at the desperation in his voice and from the silence on the other end, he knew that it was already too late to compose himself.

"Gabe. What happened?" Erasmi asked quietly.

Gabe sighed, " Nothing happened, Eras. I was just thinking of something... How are you doing?"

"I was doing quite alright actually. Until I received the news that my only unmarried brother, the one I could trust to be an eternal bachelor with me, had suddenly married someone..."

Gabe smiled, "News sure travels fast. It only took a few hours to get to you."

"Nah. I received it immediately. I just thought to give you some time to come to terms with your new status. So? What drug did you take?"

Gabe sighed, " Believe me, I wouldn't sign anything under the effect of a drug. I think it is the air here."

Erasmi chuckled, " What kind of air is this? Hmm? The Autumn air?"

Gabe laughed at that even as he felt it odd to hear.." Jack really has been acting like a news reported, uh! He even gave you a name..."

Erasmi chuckled at that and added," Just don't let her use our surname directly.. People will make fun.. Autumn Frost..."

Gabe outright grinned at that. Poor girl... She was really going to suffer a lot of teasing for her name once she joined the family group... And once again, Gabe was shocked by his own thoughts which were

moving too fast for him. She was just someone he had decided to help. Why then was he thinking of a future with her?

The laughter from his thoughts and face disappeared as he sighed, "Eras...What am I going to do?"

"You'll have to tell me more, Gabe, if you want answers..." Erasmi answered quietly, knowing that Gabe was ready to share the turmoil within him. He knew of course that this marriage was just a sham. All of them did. The question here was why? What prompted Gabe to do this? Only then they would be able to understand the course of future action. Autumn Savoy was a stranger at the moment. Her acceptance into the family depended on Gabe's feelings.

"Okay.. I don't know how I found myself married... It just happened..." Slowly, Gabe recounted the entire story of how he ended up being married and later everything he knew or guessed about the situation. He wondered what Erasmi would have to say about this. But the guy remained silent.

"Eras?"

"You did all this because you felt protective of this girl- Autumn?"

"Yes." Gabe answered.

"And it was before you knew her little sister was called Arabelle?"

"I didn't know they were sisters. I... just discovered this... And I've promised her to protect her sister... So I might let this sham continue for sometime."

"Are you sure you want to do this? Haven't you hurt yourself enough over that name?", Erasmi asked angrily.

Gabe sighed. Well, Arabelle had always been his kryptonite. But, " I didn't make the decision to marry because of the little girl. And it has nothing to do with her name, Eras. Its more of a... I don't know. I feel protective of the two..."

Erasmi was quiet once again. " I understand the feeling, Gabe. I know I felt it for Caius the moment I saw him. He was mine. And to a certain extent, I feel it for Ava because she is his mother. Just... be careful. Don't end up getting hurt."

Gabe nodded, even though Erasmi couldn't see him," Thanks, Eras. Your support means a lot."

"Don't let it mean too much, okay. Remember, I might be morn before you but your world experience is more than mine. I'm still in my early twenties...."

Gabe chuckled," So, you've stopped being sensitive about that now?"

Erasmi chuckled," Its not like I have an option. Caius is too old to have a twenty something father. I have to buckle up."

"You don't really need to do that Eras. You were already going on thirty when you were eighteen. So, the lack of experience is not going to make a difference."

Erasmi sighed and silently acknowledged Gabe before continuing." Just, clarify everything matter with Autumn and keep us in the loop. Don't hesitate to ask for help."

"I won't. Thanks, Eras. Just tell the others to stay off my back too for the time being..."

"No guarantees there. As far as I know Ian and Lucy have already packed their bags to come there. Seb would have come too but Livi is too close to the date so he won't be coming any time soon."

"Tell Lucy and Ian that I'll kick their bu**s if they dare to step foot in B-town until I say so."

Erasmi laughed at that and Gabe half smiled. Even though it sounded like they were kidding, he trusted that Ian and Lucy would respect his wishes...He just wished that by the time their patience had come to an end, he would have solved this enough to at least provide an explanation.

Tired, he switched off the phone and tried to push all thoughts out of his mind. He needed a good night's rest if he had to sort things out. He just hoped that he would have it tonight.

Chapter 548: Waking Up

Gabe jolted awake, his body drenched in cold sweat, his mind still haunted in the grip of a familiar nightmare. Just as he was about to let loose a few curses, he stilled. Was that a knock on the door? He listened intently, and there was a small knock on the door again. He glanced at the watch. It was barely morning. Who could it be at this hour?

With a grimace, he grabbed a napkin and dabbed his face as he opened the door and was surprised to see the person standing there. "Autumn."

Autumn stood at the door and prayed that it wouldn't open. She knew that she needed to talk to him but was at a loss. She clutched the napkin in her hand and knocked even more slowly. He would be asleep at this moment and not listen, right? But she would say that she had tried to talk to him...

It was a coward's way but she really had no courage at the moment. When the door remained closed, she breathed a sigh of relief and was about to escape when she heard the click of the lock opening. Dam* it! Why did he wake up. She needed to escape now. But before she could get her feet to move, it was too late.

He stood there with... his bare chest glistening with sweat and his hair sticking up in all directions. She quickly averted her eyes even as her face flushed. Did this guy hate clothing? The last time also.. in the gym...

Her flushed face probably gave her away and she watched as he looked down at himself in confusion, before his mouth kicked up in a smile, "Sorry about that." He moved and quickly grabbed a shirt from the side and slipped it over his head. As he did so, he turned around and she glimpsed a tattoo there, but before she could make out what it was, it had been covered.

Clearing her throat, Autumn forced herself to meet Gabe's gaze, her hands trembling at her sides. "I... I should go," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "You were sleeping, and I shouldn't have disturbed you."

Gabe shook his head, as he took a step closer to her. "No, it's okay. We need to talk, and since you're here... we might as well do it now."

She nodded her head and tried to gather her courage to speak up, "I am sorry about last night. I...uh.."

Before she could continue with her apology, he interrupted her, "Autumn, come inside."

Her eyes widened at that and she shook her head, "No. I'm fine here."

"I am not. What we have to discuss is private and we cannot do that if you stand there. So come on inside. I don't bite."

Autumn's heart hammered in her chest as she weighed her options. She had never entered a man's room like this... even Pierce... he'd invited her into his room that horrible afternoon but his dog had been there.. Should she...No. He was her husband now and a man she had asked for help. She would have to trust him..

With a shaky breath, she entered the room and took a few steps inside, while trying to ignore the large bed behind him. 'Why did he take this small room and not the large suite room?' was an errant thought in her mind but that quickly passed when he walked closer to her. He stopped next to her and closed the door firmly. The sound made her wary and she felt as if her resolve would crumble..

"Is there a need to lock..." She tried to speak louder but there was fear in her voice...

She watched as he shot her a look and then moved away from her stopping almost at the other end of the room.

"I am far away from you and there is nothing between you and the door. You can leave at any time, Autumn. Without fear. So take a seat wherever you are comfortable."

With hesitant steps, she moved further into the room, her gaze darting to the couch as she weighed her options. Finally, she settled on perching gingerly on the edge of a nearby chair, her hands twisting

nervously in her lap. She knew what he needed. But she hadn't yet gathered the courage to speak of it again.

The last time she had tried to speak of the matter, she had been ruthlessly silenced. By her mother first and then the others. And no had suffered the consequences but her...

She could feel his gaze over her and that made her even more scared.

Gabe watched the girl being as meek as a mouse and grimaced. He wanted to comfort her but knew that would simply scare her off even more. So he settled for being straightforward.

"Autumn. Look at me." He kept his voice low but commanding, making sure that she wouldn't feel threatened.

She looked up at him and he gazed into her eyes. "Just nod or shake your head, Autumn at what I have surmized."

"Did someone abuse you in the past?"

Her eyes widened. It was an answer and yet he felt even more enraged when she nodded slowly.

"Was that person your step father? The man we saw during dinner?"

Her lips trembled and he watched as tears filled her eyes, while she slowly nodded again. Once. Before looking away, her body trembling from painful memories.

This time, he did not control his impulse to curse and let loose a strong of curse words.

Autumn looked at him as he continued to curse. The words were harsh with anger but as she observed him, she realized... that he was angry on her behalf. He did not look skeptically or try to ask her that she was not mistaken or trying to make her stepfather look bad. He seemed to know that she had suffered.

In a low voice, she asked him, "How?"

He stopped and turned to her. The anger on his face scared her but also made her feel... protected so she repeated her question, "How did you know what he did?"

Chapter 549: A Revelation

He wanted to lie. But as he looked at her hopeful and trustworthy expression, Gabe explained himself, "My wife."

Autumn frowned. What did he mean by his wife? The one who had passed away? Has she also suffered something similar?

"No." He seemed to read her mind and cut off her thought process, "She grew up pampered and protected. But...she was not right in the head. I tried to protect her and be with her but it was a difficult task, with what she was suffering. So, to understand her better and provide better care, I studied psychology and body language. You are uncomfortable around men but you were trembling when that man approached you in the cafe. That was the first clue. But later, your reaction to your little sister hugging me, was enough to tell me the truth."

Autumn nodded. Was it so easy to see? Then why did no one else see it all these years?

Gabe sighed, "Sometimes people are blind or they choose to remain blind. We can't change that. Now, we will not touch the subject that has hurt you and instead you can tell me how having a temporary husband can help you.."

"He sued me on criminal charges."

As Autumn explained the entire detail of what had happened, Gabe could only frown. There were multiple problems in this matter and her chances of winning were slim. Even with a husband, there was low chance that the court would give her the custody instead of a biological father... unless...

He sighed when Autumn finished explaining, "So, my mother's friend advised that I should get a new lawyer. I need to go to town again soon and..."

"There is no need for that. I have a degree in law and I can handle this just as well. I need to question your lawyer about it. Arrange a meeting for this afternoon. And we need to have a discussion about our arrangement as well."

"What kind of a discussion?", Autumn asked, stunned by this man's ability. He'd almost taken over her entire schedule without any trouble whatsoever. He was almost used to it.

"Autumn, if we are to prove that you and I are husband and wife, then we need to move in together. More than that, we need to have a familiarity with each other that only lovers have. This is important. Because, the only way you even have a fighting chance of winning the case is if you promise the court that you can provide the child with a full family instead of letting her be raised by a single parent with a hazardous job."

"I know. I... that is why I.... But do we need to live together?"

"Yes. Because if he is able to prove that we married just to help you win her custody, it can be considered trying to defraud the court with ill intent. So, before the court date is upon us, we have to become one happy family. I've been looking for a house here in B-town. Once I find it, I'll arrange...."

"You can simply move in with us." Autumn muttered hurriedly. " We have an extra room and it would be more believable."

Gabe nodded. He'd been thinking that but..." Are you sure you would be comfortable? I don't need you panicking every minute I am there that I might hurt you or the kid."

"I... I'll try not to worry. I've been so used to... But its okay... I know you are not interested in... women.."

Gabe sighed. That is what he was worried about. The only reason she was getting comfortable around him was because she firmly believed that he was not interested in the fairer sex... Even if she'd believed that he was interested in Jacks, what made her think that he couldn't be interested in her? What kind of innocent foolishness was this?

"For the last time, Autumn, you are wrong. I am a straight man..."

But she nodded like she didn't believe him. Fine. So be it. If that is what gave her peace, he would let her live with it.

"Arabelle! Do you think I am a planet and you are a satellite? Why are you orbiting around me?"

"Because I want to help you. Mister Gabriel is moving into our home and he is going to live with us. That means, he will have a better chance of protecting you! I like Mister Gabriel. I am happy that he is coming here."

Autumn shook her head. Her little sister was totally smitten with Gabriel Frost. Since the moment, she had been told that Gabe was coming to live with them, she could not stop babbling happily making Autumn feel that she would definitely go deaf soon.

"Why do you like him so much?" Autumn asked in amusement.

"Because he gave me his pancakes. And he didn't scold me for approaching him. He's a nice person. He even discovered Aunt N asleep one morning and didn't tell her anything. I like Mister Gabriel."

"Pancakes and no scolding? You placed your trust in him just because of that?"

"Of course? Who shares pancakes these days? No one."

Just then, the sound of someone's voice stopped Arabelle and she peered outside, before giving up her satellite duties in favour of rocket duties as she launched herself at the man, who had just entered the gate.

She watched as he laughed and caught the little girl hurtling towards him, before he scooped her into his arms and pretended to throw her into the air. It had been so long since she had seen the little girl so happy.

"Mister Gabriel, you're here! Did you bring any pancakes? I want pancakes! And I have a new drawing to show you. I made it for you..."

She turned around and wiped her tears carefully when she realized that the man was observing her. She couldn't meet his eyes. She didn't know...

Arabelle, the little girl noticed the man staring at her sister and put a hand to his cheek, tilting his face to meet hers. "Look at me, Mister Gabriel," she said earnestly, her eyes wide and earnest. "Don't make my big sister sad, okay? You promised to help us, so you have to make her happy!"

"I know, Miss Arabelle. I wouldn't dare to..."

Chapter 550: Fall

Autumn was distracted and sleepy. As she moved around the pots and pans, putting everything back in its place, she just couldn't concentrate. She could hear the voices coming from the room upstairs and knew she should not worry.

Gabriel Frost was very perceptive. He had deliberately left the door to Arabelle's room open so she wouldn't worry. And yet, she could not relax. It made her feel odd, to think of living with a man, she barely knew. But she could recognise his laugh, for sure. The man had a hearty laugh and with the way he seemed to be eating at Arabelle's pretend restaurant, a hearty imagination for food. He'd kept her busy making all sorts of things in her pretend kitchen, much to her enjoyment.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang, breaking her thoughts. Autumn wiped her hands on a towel and walked to the door, checking to see who it could be. No one visited her usually. Whoever it was, after attending to them, she was going to sleep. The one good thing about having someone she trusted living with her was that she did not have to wait for a sitter or go to leave her to Mrs N's place. She could catch a nap right here...

Her thoughts crashed when she opened the door to see the man standing at the door. "Pierce."

The man stared at her and suddenly, his presence, which would have comforted her in the past, made her feel uneasy. Cautiously, she stepped out and closed the door behind her, "What do you want?"

"Aren't you going to invite me inside? I came to talk to you. Clarify things."

Autumn frowned and shook her head, "No. We have nothing to talk about."

"Yes. We do. Autumn, I need to apologize and explain things. I.. I really didn't plan all this with Bianca. Things just turned out that way."

Autumn crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing. "And you think an apology will fix everything? That it will erase the hurt and confusion you caused? Also, what exactly do you mean by 'things happened'? Did you suddenly wake up in church and find yourself saying 'I do'? You are the one who two timed me, so why don't you just accept that and leave me alone."

Pierce winced, taking a deep breath. "I know it sounds bad, but Bianca's family and my family pressured me. There were business deals and expectations. I didn't have a choice. It is why mum tried told you to sign over this house to me. Our business needed the money. When you refused, she had no choice but to accept their offer. There was also your reputation. It would not have helped us much so.. I had to make a sacrifice. But I miss you already, Autumn."

Autumn stared. Did he really think that explaining these things would make her forget that he had deliberately tried to humiliate her... When he saw that she remained quiet, he continued eagerly, "We can still be together. We can see each other in secret while I work on getting a divorce."

Autumn stared at him, her eyes wide with disbelief before she let out a sarcastic laugh. "Wow, Pierce. That's some plan. So, let me get this straight. You want me to be your secret mistress while you sort out your 'complicated' life with Bianca? How romantic. You must think very highly of yourself if you believe I'd even consider that."

"Autumn, please," Pierce implored, stepping closer. "I love you and you love me. We can make this work, just until I can fix things."

"And what happens while you fix things. My so-called reputation is already a problem with you. I already have many tags attached to my name, but you want me to solidify the home breaker tag? Your way of showing love is truly unique. Pierce, stop thinking of yourself for a moment and wake up."

"Autumn, can you please try to understand? I am telling you all this will be a secret, so naturally no one in the town will know about us. So how would they put label on you?"

"Understand? Pierce, I understand perfectly. You made your bed with Bianca, now lie in it. I deserve better. Goodbye, Pierce. Don't come here again."

Pierce reached out then, trying to pull her into an embrace. Autumn stiffened. She wanted to reject his hug, yet a part of her still hurt. She could see it in his eyes—he really had expected her to forgive him. Just what sort of fool did he think she was?

"Autumn, please," he murmured imploringly again, his arms moving to encircle her.

She stepped back quickly, putting distance between them. "No, Pierce." She couldn't accept his hug. She could not encourage any rumors and she'd already seen a few people passing through

But her attempt at putting some distance failed as he simply followed her step and moved forward, closing the gap she had created. Panic surged within her, her breath quickening as she glanced around for any means of escape, cursing herself for closing the door. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have been trapped like this.

"Just let me hold you once, Autumn. Once you've felt me again, you won't be so cold."

She shook her head vehemently, "No.. Pierce..."

Even as she prepared to scream, while she felt Pierce stepping closer, the door behind her suddenly moved. With all her weight on the door, she lost her balance and a gasp escaped her as she found herself tumbling backwards.

"In her flailing attempt to catch herself, her hand flew up and smacked Pierce squarely on the jaw. He grunted and stepped away in disbelief, rubbing his jaw with a wince while she fell back against a solid chest."

An arm wrapped securely around her waist just in time, his hand pressing gently against her stomach, just under her breast, to steady her. She felt the warmth of his touch through her thin shirt, his firm hold both comforting and electrifying as she looked up at the man who had caught her.