

Benefits 551

Chapter 551: A Husband

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.

"Gabriel," she whispered, her voice barely above a breath. The scent of his cologne enveloped her, something uniquely him. For a brief second, her anxiety melted into a confusing blend of relief and awareness as she realized how he had caught her so effortlessly.

Autumn's heart skipped a beat as she looked up, her gaze meeting his calm one. In that instant, she felt a rush of familiarity wash over her, as if she had known him all along and trusted him.

And then he smiled at her as he asked with concern, "Are you alright?"

Autumn nodded and answered, "Yes. I am. Thank you."

As she moved to straighten, she felt his fingers on her waist tighten. She frowned and turned her head but he was now looking at Pierce who still stood there, frozen. She stilled. She had totally forgotten about Pierce. She blinked and was about to open her mouth when Gabe spoke up, "Who are you? And why are you trying to get close to my wife?" The edge of protectiveness made her look up at him and she smiled nervously.

Had he really forgotten Pierce? And what was it with that possessiveness.

Pierce, still frozen in disbelief, stared at Gabriel for a moment before turning his gaze to Autumn. His eyes flickered with a mix of confusion and jealousy as he took in the intimate way Gabriel held her. The way his fingers spread on her stomach. He'd even noticed the way he had tightened his hold on her for a minute and then she'd calmed down.

How and when did Autumn get so close to this man? Also, it made him realise that this man had come out from the inside. So he was living with her. How long had all this been going on? Had she really been cheating on him? He'd always doubted those rumors that said Autumn had tried to break apart her parents because she was attracted to the older man. But this man, though he looked fit, he was older

than Autumn by at least five years...Did she really have a thing for such men? Had that been the reason that she had pushed him away?"

Finally, unable to contain his jealousy, Pierce asked Autumn angrily, "Did you really marry him? Who is he to you, Autumn? How long have you been seeing him? Is that why you so easily married him? You've been sleeping with him? You've been cheating on me?"

His tirade was broken by Gabriel's cold laughter as he raised an eyebrow, looking at Pierce, "Is that the pot calling the kettle black? That really is rich of you..."

"Stay out of this, you old man! No one asked you!"

"Well well." But Gabriel remained unfazed, his gaze steady as he turned to face Pierce. "It doesn't matter whether you asked me or not. She's my wife now, and I won't stand by while you accuse her without reason," he stated firmly, his voice tinged with warning.

"I don't understand. I.. How could you do this to me Autumn?"

Autumn frowned. How did she become the bad person in this? "I did something to you? Where are you living, Pierce? You married my so called best friend while asking me to wait for you outside the courthouse. You let your cousin humiliate me and yet, here you are asking me why I did this to you? Pierce, I don't want to remember the past between us. So, it would be better if you left now."

Pierce stepped forward and placed his hands on her arms. His intent to pull her away from the other man's embrace. She stood there as if she belonged to him. And he didn't like it one bit. He'd been so sure that she was going to love him forever. Hadn't he always been patient with her? Then why this?

The moment his hands touched her arms, however, a larger hand caught his wrist and put pressure. Wincing, he let go immediately and stared at Gabe, who had now pushed Autumn behind his back as he walked forward, "You have some nerve! Putting your filthy hands on my wife. My wife has already asked you to leave. So, you will leave right away. Or I show you the way out. And believe me, you won't like my methods."

Pierce felt fear course through him. This man was dangerous. He could feel it in his words and his eyes. How did Autumn get tangled with him. He needed to warn her," Autumn. Don't trust this man. He is dangerous. You're making a big mistake. You will regret it. Get rid of it. Don't let your attraction to him distract you! You have to put Arabelle first. Do you listen to me?"

"You don't have the right to take Arabelle's name, Pierce. And I don't care if Gabe is dangerous or not! The truth remains that you abandoned me when I needed you the most so asking me to trust you now is simply foolish!! Get lost! Pierce. Just go away and don't come in front of me with these useless warnings from yourself!"

With that, Autumn turned around and rushed back inside, tears streaming down her face.

Without another word, with his hands now free, Gabriel seized Pierce by the collar of his shirt in an unyielding as he dragged him towards the front gate. Pierce struggled but was no match for Gabe's superior strength and was simply dragged by him towards the front gate.

"Let me go, you ba*tard!" Pierce spat, his voice laced with venom.

"Consider yourself lucky that's all I'm doing," Gabriel growled, his voice low and menacing. "If I ever catch you near Autumn again, you'll regret it."

With one swift motion, Gabriel then pushed Pierce through the threshold, sending him stumbling onto the sidewalk outside.

Chapter 552: A Shopping Trip

Autumn ran into her room, closing the door behind her. What did he take her for? Her mind raced with a torrent of emotions—anger, frustration, disbelief. She leaned against the door and closed her eyes for a moment. The confrontation with Pierce had been more intense than she had anticipated, and it left her feeling raw and exposed.

Moments later, a soft knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. "Autumn, are you alright?" Gabriel's gentle voice sounded through the door.

She hesitated for a moment before responding. "Yes, I'm fine. Just needed a moment. Is he gone?"

She heard him sigh through the door and tried to hear intently, " Yes. I threw him out and warned him to not bother you."

Autumn nodded, " Oh.. Thank you."

There was silence after that and she wondered if he was gone. But before she could move to check, his voice sounded again, " Arabelle wants to go shopping for groceries. Would you come along. I could take her alone but I'm sure you would worry."

Autumn sighed and nodded, even though he couldn't see her, " Alright. I'll be right there. And Gabe.. thank you.."

Arabelle grinned and skipped down the street, her small hand clasped in her sister's. Today was a happy occasion. Mister Gabriel.. no Gabe had agreed to take them to the supermarket and cook something tasty. And he had thrown that bad Pierce out onto the street.. That had been so cool the way he'd picked him up and thrown him onto the street. He'd made her sister cry so many times.

She looked at his hand and carefully slipped her other hand into Gabe's. He looked down at her and she gave him a radiant smile which caused him to curl his fingers around her, making her feel happy.

Autumn glanced down at Arabelle's hand nestled in Gabriel's, and a strange, warm feeling spread through her. She felt a peculiar mix of comfort and something else she couldn't quite name. When she looked up, her eyes met Gabriel's for a fleeting moment, and she saw a flicker of something in his gaze. Before she could decipher it, the moment was broken by Arabelle's excited voice, "Gabe, what are you going to make for me tonight?", as looked up at him with wide, expectant eyes.

"Hmm. I was thinking something really tasty. I make this green salad with lots of lettuce, broccoli, green beans, etc...

"Ewww! I don't like eating vegetables! You promised me something tasty! Veggies are not tasty...," Arabelle wrinkled her nose in exaggerated disgust.

Gabriel chuckled, shaking his head. "Alright, alright. How about spaghetti with lots of cheese instead?"

Arabelle's face lit up instantly. "Yes! Spaghetti! But with extra cheese, okay? Not just a little bit."

Gabriel pretended to consider it carefully. "Extra cheese, you say? Well, I suppose I could manage that. But only if you promise to eat at least one bite of the green salad."

Arabelle pouted for a moment, then nodded solemnly. "Fine. One bite. But only if it's really, really tiny."

Gabriel laughed, and even Autumn couldn't help but smile at their playful banter. "Deal. A tiny bite of salad in exchange for extra cheesy spaghetti."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow, feigning shock. "Cookies? After all that spaghetti and salad? Are you sure you can handle it?"

"Yes, yes, yes! I can handle it!" Arabelle insisted, bouncing on her toes with excitement as she let go of their hands and clapped her own, in excitement, "I'll go and get the cookie dough, right away!" Before she ran away, she stopped and turned around, caught Gabe's hand and handed it to Autumn, "Here, take care of Gabe. He is new in B-town and could get lost!!"

Both Autumn and Gabe were taken aback by the sudden gesture and could only look down at their hands as Arabelle skipped away. Unsure what to do, Autumn was about to jerk her hand away from him when he suddenly and firmly, curled his fingers around her hand and leaned down, "Autumn, someone to the left is intently watching us."

Autumn suppressed the urge to look around and see who the woman was and simply nodded up at him, "So, what do we do?"

"We act as a new couple in love and shop around for groceries, that is what we do.. So let's grab a cart and start shopping. And we might have to talk so, keep the conversation going." Gabriel spoke softly near her ear, making her blush. She knew what he was doing and why, but everytime he leaned close to her ear, she would feel ticklish. She tried to think of some topic they might have but found herself at a loss.

As she grabbed and pulled the cart, she tried to desperately think of something and when she couldn't, she finally asked, "You can cook?"

He grinned at that and she blinked. He really did have a wonderful smile... "Too late to ask that, Miss Autumn. If I can't cook, then tonight's dinner would be a punishment. Now, while I don't claim to be a chef like my brother, I promise you, I can make some delicious meals. So, my cooking would not give anyone food poisoning, for sure."

He let go of her hand as he moved along the aisles to grab some packets of pasta and she felt bereft for a moment.. She looked down at her empty hand and frowned before placing it on the handle of the cart, watching him check the packages for their ingredients while he threw some into the cart and the others back onto the shelf.

She watched the cart fill up halfway and finally asked him wide eyes, "That is too much.. We won't be able to finish this much in months.."

Gabe shook his head, "Tsk ts. Of course, we'll be able to finish it. Autumn, now that you are married to me, you need to worry about only one thing.. The pantry needs to be well stocked at all times..."

"Do you eat a lot?" She asked him as he walked along and he shook his head, "No, I expect a few guests to come over in some weeks."

"Guests?" she asked wide eyes. She had not even thought of next week and he was already planning on entertaining into next month...

Chapter 553: Gossip

"Guests?"

"Hmm. My brothers already know about you so they will give us some time to settle and then definitely descend. And the Frosties are always a hungry lot."

"Frosties?" Autumn asked as she watched him place more snacks into the cart. She felt as if she was a bandit, out to loot the supermarket today.

"That is the nickname that Nora gave to us brothers..and it stuck."

"Nora? Is she your late wife?" Autumn asked curiously.

"Holy shi*! No. Nora is Demon's wife. And thankfully so. He is the only one who can handle her brand of crazy."

"All of you are very close? How many brothers do you have? And you call your brother, Demon?"

"Including me, there are six Frosties. And yes, Demetri is the head of the clan so he is called Demon.."

"Six brothers!!" Autumn exclaimed but Gabe continued to shock her, " Actually, we are a mix of cousins and siblings but we've forgotten along the way who is a cousin and who is a sibling. Also, Demetri and Erasmi are twins so you'll have to be careful there. Those two have a whacked sense of humor as well. Erasmi has a son, Caius and Nora has a little sister- Dora, I think those two would love to have Arabelle as a little sister too."

Saying so, Gabe caught the front edge of the trolley and gently pulled it behind him so that Autumn would not have to push the entire thing alone. What he failed to realize that, his words had somehow shocked Autumn who was now frozen in her spot. He stopped when he realized she was not following him and turned around with a frown on his face," Autumn? Whats up?"

Autumn shook her head, keeping her thoughts to herself and commented," That is a lot of people."

Gabriel chuckled softly. "Don't worry, they're all nice. And they're excited to meet you."

As Autumn absorbed this new information, a woman entered the aisle, casting a curious look between the two of them. She approached Autumn with a smile. "Hi, Autumn. Who's this handsome gentleman with you?"

Autumn was caught off guard as she looked at the woman who's just arrived. She caught Gabe's gaze as he gestured to her that this was the woman who had been watching them earlier and her eyes widened. Aunt Linda was the biggest gossip in the town...

While Autumn almost panicked, Gabe casually returned, and threw his arm around Autumn's waist, stepping close to her side, "Hellp. I am Gabe. I'm Autumn's husband."

The woman's eyes widened slightly in surprise before she gave them a speculating smile. "Oh, I didn't realize you were seeing someone, Autumn. It's nice to meet you, Gabe. I'm Linda, one of Autumn's neighbors. When did you marry?"

Gabe didn't miss a beat. He tightened his arm around Autumn's waist, pulling her closer. "Just recently," he said smoothly. "It was a simple marriage. We wanted to keep it private, you know?"

Linda's eyes gleamed with interest. "How romantic! Autumn, you must be so happy. It's been a while since... well, since you've had some good news. And you really do like your men older."

Gabe narrowed his eyes while Autumn stiffened, not missing the jibe, "Mrs Linda. I assure you I am the only older 'MAN' that my Autumn likes. Not men."

"You're wrong there. As much as I should not say anything between a couple, but you seem like a good man.. So if Autumn has been hiding her past, I can..."

The atmosphere in that moment, seemed to drop drastically as Gabe gave the older woman a cold look and cut her off, "Be careful what you say. I know much more about her past than anyone ever does, Mrs Linda. And I assure you, everyone who has ever been responsible for her pain, will hurt and regret their actions. You see, despite my name being that of an angel, I can be a devil to those who go after my people. And Autumn is my person.."

Linda's speculative smile faltered, her eyes flickering with a mix of surprise and unease. With a subdued expression, she tried to defend herself, "Well, I didn't mean any harm...I was only concerned as a neighbour..."

"I understand, Mrs. Linda. Thank you for your concern. It was nice meeting you. We'll see you around then."

The older woman nodded and stepped away hurriedly, leaving a giggling Autumn in her wake. Gabriel cast a surprised glance at her and she explained with shining eyes, "This is the first time I have seen her almost run away. She must think you really are the Devil... She never would have left in the past until she had every little detail of our love story and marriage..."

"You don't have to worry about people like her. I've got your back." Gabe squeezed her waist gently before letting his arm fall back to his side. "Now, let's finish up here."

As he said the words, he suddenly seemed to be in a hurry, making her wonder if this interaction had ruined his mood. She tried to think of some topic that would get them back to the comfortable talk they were having earlier and sighed when Arabelle found them back. She was walking with an armful of different boxes and had the most comical expression on her face when she found Gabe standing there with a cart full of snacks.

"Are we having a party?" Gabe laughed and took the boxes from her hand, placing them on top of the large pile as he said, "We will, Miss Arabelle. But not too soon. Until then, we can enjoy all these snacks..."

Even as Arabelle and Gabe walked forward, hand in hand, with Arabelle talking animatedly, Autumn remained a bit puzzled. Why did Gabe Frost agree to remain married to her. What could be his real motive? To hide his sexual preference from his brothers? Was that why he had been married previously as well?

Chapter 554: An Advice

"It is impossible for her to get the child. You need not worry," the lawyer assured the man opposite him while he gathered his things, ready to leave for the day. But when the man on the other side, continued to look at him expectantly, he sighed and explained, "Mr Savoy, I have assured you that we have the upper hand in this custody battle. Even though you did sign away your rights to Mrs Savoy, she did not leave a will, leaving her daughter in charge of the child. Rightfully, as the biological father, the child care services should have looked for you to take care of the child. The court will take that into view."

"And what about her marriage? The fact that she is married now, she will try to make the court believe that she can provide a better environment for my daughter..."

The lawyer shook his head, "First and foremost, the courts prioritize the child's best interests, and your relationship with her as her biological father gives you a significant advantage. Even though your daughter has been with her step sister for the past few months, temporary arrangements do not outweigh long-term stability. Arabelle may have been with her step-sister for a short while, but the

court will look at the entirety of her life. As for the marriage, while she might believe it strengthens her position, it can actually be used against her."

Gregory Savoy's eyes gleamed as he heard this. Using the marriage against her. That would be really interesting. But he continued to maintain his calm demeanor, "Really? How so? Isn't marriage supposed to show stability?"

The lawyer gave a small, calculated smile. "In theory, yes. But in this case, it raises several questions. Who is this man she has married? What is his background? Does he have any children of his own, and if so, how does he treat them? The suddenness of the marriage can be seen as a desperate attempt to appear more stable than she actually is."

Dunham leaned forward, "You really think that will work?"

"Yes. In fact, this is your chance. You can use your network to gather dirt on the man and on your step daughter. Investigate her new husband's background thoroughly. Any hint of instability, financial issues, or a criminal record will severely undermine her case. The court needs to be convinced that Arabelle's best interests are served by staying with you, and any uncertainty in her step-sister's new marital arrangement will work in our favor. So, you know what else can be done..."

The lawyer let the last statement hang as he watched the man pick up on the hint. He felt a hint of distaste about this case. There was something really disturbing about this man's obsession about getting his daughter from his step daughter. Something more than a parental concern. But he shrugged. A person's morals were none of his concern. He just needed to get the kid back to the father.

With a final nod, he pushed away his chair and stood up, "We have character witnesses lined up, everything is in place. For her to come out of this unscathed, she would need a miracle. And as you know, Mr Savoy, miracles are not real."

The short man nodded and watched the lawyer leave. Very good. So, this new marriage was not going to obstruct his plans to get both the girls...

A wicked smile on his face, he thought of how he would be able to use Arabelle to bring Autumn to her knees. And once she was there, he knew exactly what to do with her.

Her sudden marriage had made him worried. He'd planned so well, egging that Bianca on to seduce Pierce and marry him. And he'd even succeeded. But when he'd gone to gloat, he'd found her married to some stranger. Now, the first order of things would be to get information on Gabriel Frost.

Gabriel Frost. He repeated the name in his mind, a small time manager in the resort. This unknown variable needed to be dealt with swiftly and efficiently. The man was not just some manager, that was for sure. The question was, how powerfully connected was he to the mighty Frost Industries. It couldn't be much or he would not have been thrown into this small town and married a random girl.

He'd already put the best of his people on his trail, trying to find more about him. He'd been here a few days, and already put a wrench on two of his plans. And made things difficult for him by moving in with that girl.

Dam* it! He needed to get rid of this thorn. If he found that thing hidden in the house.. No no. Gregory shook his head. He was not going to let things fall apart so easily, specially after all he had done...

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, dialing a number from memory. He smiled when the other person sounded nervous on the phone. He liked listening to people's voices like this. Nervous and scared when they spoke to him.

"Bianca, my dear. How are you today?"

"I.. I'm good. What do you want?"

"Tsk ts. You don't reciprocate good manners? Fine. Then I'll get to the point. We have some unfinished business, Bianca."

"What do you want from me? I did what you told me to do? I seduced him and married him. What more do you want? You promised that you would let me go and live happily with Pierce."

"I willm dear. I will. Once I have had my way. Now, I need you to step up your game. First, get close to Gabriel Frost. And get to know more about him. Secondly, I need you to help me create some... misunderstandings between them. You can do that, can't you? And push Pierce back towards her... Until she is ready to run back into his arms..."

"But..."

"No, but. Do what I want or I will..."

Chapter 555: An Advice (2)

"It is not impossible to get the child, Mr Frost."

The lawyer looked at the man opposite him keenly, while the man continued to read the documents before him. When he had heard Autumn mention that she was going to marry, he had been sceptical, worried about whether it would go against her. He'd tried to probe and ask her about the identity of her fiancé, but she'd managed to avoid talking about him. It had made him worry even more regarding the future of the child, but suddenly the impossible seemed possible.

While not many people would identify this man, he did. Gabriel Frost was one of the top directors of the Frost Empire and known for his business strategies. But other than his achievements as a businessperson, Gabriel Frost was also known for his achievements. He had multiple degrees in law, business, economics and if he was not mistaken... recently in psychology. And using each of those degrees for the betterment of the poor. It was how this man had caught his attention.

He knew Gabriel Frost's assistant was already looking to set up a trust and shelter to help women who had been abused. If they were to do this in B- town then they would definitely look for lawyers locally and he had hoped for a chance, though he knew he had a slim one. But seeing the man walk into his office today, had floored him. And when he realized that Gabriel Frost was married to Autumn... who was his client... he suddenly felt hope...

While he was lost in his thoughts, Gabriel Frost seemed to have finished reading the papers as he commented, "It is not impossible. But it is not easy."

"I know, Mr Frost. It is what I told Autumn. Actually, the cards are almost all decked against her. Her reputation is not very great and she does not have any one to testify for her over here. She has recommendations from Professors but those are not going to count for much. The only thing in her favour at the moment is that Arabelle has had less to no contact with her father, other than some 'well meaning' people taking the child to meet the father, when Arabelle's mother was alive. And the fact that he'd signed away his rights. If only Mrs Savoy had left a will trusting the guardianship of the child to Autumn, things would have been so much easier. But now they are trying to create a criminal case..."

"So, you think she would get partial custody?" Gabe asked slowly, already understanding what the lawyer was hoping for.

"Yes. A complete custody might be impossible. In fact, even a partial one would be in our favour. But Autumn is being adamant..."

"Mr Baker. We will be trying to get full custody. For now, you will be handling the proceedings, but I will fight this case, eventually. I want Arabelle's full custody with Autumn."

The man's resolve shocked him. He had not expected this. Gabriel Frost really must love Autumn if he was going for the kill himself. Getting a full custody from a biological parent was almost impossible," Mr Frost, this might be more difficult. I understand her marriage to you puts her in a better position in terms of stability but the other factors..."

"You are approaching it from the wrong end, Mr Baker. We need to build a case that unequivocally demonstrates that Gregory Savoy is unfit to have custody of Arabelle."

To say he was shocked, was an understatement. The man opened his mouth to be ruthless directly. Cautious., he asked "And how do you propose we do that?"

"First, Gregory Savoy has signed away his parental rights once. That alone shows a lack of commitment and responsibility. We will emphasize that in court—highlighting that he willingly chose to forgo his role as a father. And in the meanwhile, I will be collecting more information on him..."

"Mr Frost, this would..." He looked at the man and any words of caution were flown out of his mind. "I'll hire an investigator..."

"There is no need for that. My people are already on it."

Mr. Baker nodded. He should have known..." Then, I'll handle the criminal case for now..."

"Yes. Do that. And then we can talk about the pro bono cases you've been handling. I am sure you would appreciate some compensation for those.."

Baker nodded, wondering if he was dreaming. Money was always tight and to have someone offering it to him for work he was already doing for free, "I appreciate your help, Mr Frost."

Gabriel nodded and warned, "Don't let my involvement get out for now. Mr Baker, one last thing."

"Yes?"

"Was Mr Savoy and Autumn's mother's divorce amicable?"

Baker frowned. "You know there were rumors about Autumn and Mr Savoy..."

"Yes. And I know they were nothing but cr*p. What I want to know is Savoy signed off on the divorce papers and custody rights without a fight."

"Yes.. He did..."

Baker tried hard to think. He'd been aware of the rumors then but he couldn't think.. "No, wait! Actually, he was quite angry when she first raised the matter. He threatened to ruin her and everything until his lawyer had to drag him out. But later, when they met for an out of court settlement, he agreed to sign, even though he seemed resentful..."

"I see."

"Mr Baker. Do you think, Autumn's mother did something to make him give up everything?"

Baker paused as he heard the words, shocked at what Gabriel Frost was implying. "You mean she might have blackmailed him?"

"I don't know, Mr Baker. You tell me."

Baker looked at Gabriel Frost thoughtfully and nodded slowly, "It could be a possibility. Despite his image, he is not totally clean cop. He might have some things..."

"You are going to look into it, Mr Baker. Someone in this small community might not be as blind as the others..."

"I'll get to it, Mr Frost."

Chapter 556: Right Hook

Autumn stared in the mirror at herself as she straightened her clothes . A week. Only a week had passed and yet so much had changed. She'd gone from almost marrying Pierce and being thrown behind the bars for 'illegally detaining Arabelle' by that man's schemes to being married to Gabriel Frost, getting rid of the criminal law suit and being promoted to being the night manager of the resort. It almost seemed like a dream that she did not want to wake up from.

Gabriel Frost was an enigma, that was for sure. She'd thought that it would be difficult to live with a man. But Gabriel Frost made it seem... effortless. He'd somehow seamlessly blended himself into the house and the routine. Most days, by the time she returned home from the night shift, he would have prepared breakfast for her and Arabelle and be ready to leave for the day.

And when he returned in the evening, he would make it a point to spend it playing with Arabelle, until it was time for them to leave. She could hardly believe that she was considering leaving Arabelle in his care in her absence instead of bringing her to the resort to hand her over to Mrs Norman. This ease with which he had secured her trust somewhat scared her. So, she reminded herself that she needed to be extra careful.

But she could understand why he had been assigned to bring this resort out of the flunk. That man and his assistant worked like a machine. The changes they had brought about in ten days... she would have deemed them impossible in ten weeks! The renovations were going on in a flurry. Employee dues had been cleared. Old employees had already been summoned back and offered their jobs at better rates and were being prepared to be sent for training. His arrival seemed to have brought the entire B-town back to life.

And her life, back on track. Suddenly she seemed to feel as if this was the end of the dark endless road that she had been treading. It almost seemed magical..

Shaking her head at her own fantastical thoughts, she stepped out of the changing room, her uniform in her hand. Her first night as a manager had been perfect with no problems. Of course, there wouldn't be any problems because more than half the resort was closed for the general public.. but even so.. it was a success.

But just as she turned the corner to head towards the staff lounge, her smile faded at the sight of a familiar figure standing in the hallway.

Pierce.

Her ex-fiancé was leaning casually against the wall, his sharp features softened by an uncharacteristic look of regret. Autumn's heart sank, and she instinctively tightened her grip on her uniform, the fabric creasing under her fingers.

"Autumn," Pierce called out, his voice hesitant, lacking its usual confidence. "Can we talk?"

Autumn stiffened, her body language defensive. "There's nothing to talk about, Pierce. We've already made things clear," she replied curtly.

"Look, I understand that was foolish of me to give you that proposal. I shouldn't have hurt you like that."

"You shouldn't have hurt me for a lot of things, Pierce. And your proposition was not just hurtful, it was downright insulting! This is what you think of me?"

"No! That is not true! And you know it. Have I ever treated you unfairly? I've always accepted your wishes, even when you were uncomfortable with taking things further, I stopped, no matter how much I ached. Can't you forgive me this one small thing?"

"Fine. I forgive you. Now, can you leave?" Autumn answered sharply.

"No! I know you don't mean that! Look, I am sorry for everything! Just give me some time and I will make it upto you? I got scared okay? A small child is a big responsibility. And I was unsure about it. That was why they manipulated me..."

She shook her head. It was typical Pierce. Always blaming others. Never taking responsibility. It reminded her of the time when she had told Uncle Norman. How surprised he had been about Pierce wanting to marry. What a fool she had been to think Pierce's love for her was stronger than everything. "It's too late for everything, Pierce. I've moved on. I have a new life now, and you have no place in it. So please just stop pestering me."

Pierce's expression hardened, his eyes narrowing as he rolled them in a condescending manner. "Moved on? To what, Autumn? A pathetic little job as a night manager and a sham of a marriage to some stranger? Do you really think Gabriel Frost cares about you or Arabelle? He's just using you to get what he wants."

"Gabriel has done more for me and Arabelle in a week than you did in all the time we were together. He's a better man than you'll ever be. At least he doesn't run away from responsibility."

Pierce rolled his eyes again. "He is probably hankering for your property. Did you know that he was looking for a house in this place before he caught you in his web."

"I don't care, Pierce. Isn't that what your mother wanted from me as well? What matters to me is that he was there for me when I needed him while you were not. So, you of all people, don't have the right to give me your opinion."

Pierce scoffed and rolled his eyes again, muttering about how she was naive.

Her anger flaring, Autumn flicked her hair back and commented, "Keep rolling your eyes, Pierce. Maybe you'll find your brain at the back of your head!"

As the insult registered, Pierce's face froze in a comically exaggerated expression, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open as if he'd been slapped. The absurdity of his stunned look almost made Autumn laugh, but she maintained her composure and turned around to walk away.

Chapter 557: Right Hook (2)

Happy and feeling triumphant with the insult she had dealt, she was about to walk away, when Pierce lunged forward, catching her hand in a tight grip.

He pulled her forcefully, maneuvering her so that her back was pressed against the wall, trapping her between the cold, hard surface and his looming presence as he placed both his hands on each side of her head.. Autumn's heart pounded, fear coursing through her. She did not like to feel trapped and Pierce was too close...

"Autumn, listen to me," Pierce's voice was low, almost hissing near her ear.. "We are a good match. We've always been. You know it."

"I know nothing, Pierce! Now let me go..."

She tried to push him away but he remained unmovable. The fear inside her made her tremble and she felt her stomach lurch as she broke out into a cold sweat. She saw the change in his eyes, that rush of power that he was feeling over her helplessness and suddenly another face superimposed itself on him, making her feel paralysed.

She heard Pierce's voice, as if it were coming from a distance, "Think about it. We had plans, a future together. Everything was perfect until you let Gabriel Frost come between us."

'Gabriel didn't come between us. You destroyed us with your selfishness and cowardice. You never really cared about me, only about what you could gain from me.' She wanted to scream the words but couldn't muster enough courage to speak up. She knew what this was. She was about to have a full blown anxiety attack.

She tried to ignore him, as the feeling of being trapped overpowered her and closed her eyes, telling herself to breathe deeply, to not give in to this feeling.

"Autumn," Pierce's voice pierced through the haze of her panic, "Look at me. We belong together."

In that moment, a fierce resolve gripped her. She opened her eyes, meeting his gaze with a newfound defiance. "No, Pierce," she said, her voice trembling but determined. "You and I are over. Completely over."

Pierce's expression darkened. "You don't mean that. You're just angry."

"I'm not angry," she replied, her voice gaining strength. "I'm done. I'm done with you. And now let me go."

Gabe turned the corner, only to come to a stop when he noticed Pierce and Autumn talking to each other. Without a word, he stepped back and turned around, only to be stopped by Jack who stood behind him, staring shamelessly at the people instead of turning around to give them some privacy.

"Let's go, Jack."

"That is your wife."

"I know, Jack. I have eyes in my head." Gabriel commented to Jack who only continued with his commentary on the ongoing scene as he watched... "He's holding her hand now, and not in a good way."

"Jack, come on."

"Come on, Gabe. It looks like she could use some help."

Gabriel clenched his fists. "Stay out of it, Jack. It's between them."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "And that doesn't bother you?"

Gabriel glanced back at Autumn, noticing the fear on her face. It did bother him—more than he cared to admit. He wanted to go and save her but he knew the girl was strong. He didn't need to interfere.

The moment he caged her, he almost lost his own temper and was about to march ahead when Jack stood before him, "I thought you were not going to interfere."

However, before he could push Jack out of the way, he saw Autumn and a small smile graced his face.

"Turn around, Jack. You missed something interesting."

Perplexed, Jack turned around and winced when he saw the next move..."Remind me to not get on Mrs Frost's bad side..."

Pierce's grip tightened, his face contorting with anger. "You think you can just walk away from me?"

"Watch me," she retorted.

In a single motion, her right fist flew up, connecting with Pierce's jaw with a satisfying crack. The shock and pain in his eyes were immensely gratifying, making her feel free.

As he stumbled back, she raised her knee and aimed it at his midsection. As he bent over in pain, Autumn turned around and walked away, finally away from his grip.

It was when she turned to walk away, her eyes met Gabe's and widened. Uh oh... Blushing, she tried to explain herself but the man smiled, "Miss Savoy. Please come with me."

Following behind Gabriel, she tried to think of the many excuses that she could come up with for the scene that had just taken place outside. Even though it had not been primarily her fault, she still felt irresponsible.

However, all her excuses were a waste when they entered his office and instead of scolding her, he took her hand gently in his. She looked at his concerned face and then her hand, which was already red and starting to swell. And winced. She'd never really realized that punching someone would be so painful.

"That was an impressive right hook."

"I..."

When she found herself at a loss for words, he gently pushed her into a chair and walked away, disappearing behind a small alcove and reappearing with a small ice pack, wrapped in a cloth. He took her hand in his again and casually tied the cloth around her knuckles, "This will bring down the swelling. Also, next time you feel the need to punch, go ahead and do it from here. This way you will hurt yourself less."

As he showed her the technique, Autumn blinked. Instead of scolding her for creating a scene, he was telling her the correct way to do it. And then she remembered that he was a boxer too. She'd seen him.

"Will you teach me?"

Gabe looked into her eyes at that. "You want to learn self defence?"

"Yes. Will you teach me to properly punch someone or more?"

As Gabe remained silent, she felt a bit vulnerable for asking and was about to shrug it off, when he nodded. "Of course. While we do have self defence courses for employees, I don't think you'll find it of much help here. I'll teach you."

Chapter 558: The Swing

Autumn sat staring at her hand while Arabelle lay on the floor, surrounded by her colorful crayons, drawing something diligently. It was a rare moment where both sisters could sit in peace, with nary a concern.

Arabelle stared at her sister intently before getting up from the floor and walking to her and tugging at her sleeve. Autumn looked down to see Arabelle beaming at her, "Look, Autumn. I made a picture"

As she pushed the large sheet of paper into her hand, she moved to climb into her lap as well, effectively snuggling close to her.

"It's a beautiful picture, Arabelle. Where did you get the idea for a swing like that?"

"It is outside in our yard. Gabe is putting it up."

"He is?"

"Yes. Look."

Autumn's gaze followed her pointing finger and widened her eyes. Well, there really was a swing set in their otherwise empty yard. She blinked. Just how long had she been daydreaming for?

While Autumn was still in a daze, Arabelle had already run out, leaving the drawing of the man and the swing in Autumn's hand. She watched as Arabelle hurtled and almost fell but was caught and lifted into the air by Gabe effortlessly. Even through the closed windows, she could hear the laughter of the two people.

As he placed Arabelle onto the swing, the sun caught his wedding ring, making it glint brightly. She was thrown back to a blurry memory of herself playing on a swing, her father pushing her while her mother brought cold drinks outside and joined in the play.

The nostalgia washed over her and she grinned. She could recreate the scene. So what if their relationship was not real. Gabe was her friend. He'd said so himself when he'd placed the cold compress on her hands and promised to teach her self defence.

So, no matter if her and Gabe were only a fake couple. To Arabelle they were real, so she would give her the real memories to look back on. Skipping to the kitchen, she quickly prepared a pitcher of lemonade and decidedly walked outside.

Arabelle was the first to notice her as Gabe stood behind her and pushed the swing. She laughed as the swing moved forward, calling out to her, "Autumn! Look! I am flying!"

She felt her heart jump in her throat as the girl let go of the side and she called out, "Don't let go."

"Relax. She's secure." Gabe's voice sounded close to her, and she almost jumped again. When did he walk around and come to her. "You brought lemonade. Thanks for this Autumn! I was thirsty." He picked up the pitcher and poured the glass for himself, finishing it one go.

She smiled and placed the lemonade on the small bench nearby, "I thought we could take something refreshing.

Arabelle slowed down on the swing, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Can I have some, too?"

"Of course," Autumn said, pouring a small glass and handing it to her sister. Arabelle took it eagerly, gulping down the sweet, tangy drink.

"This is so good!" Arabelle exclaimed, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Gabe chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corner, taking a sip from his own glass. "Perfect for a sunny day like this."

As Arabelle finished the glass, she summoned her personal 'servant', "Gabe! Can Autumn sit on the swing too? Can you push her?"

"No! I am not getting on that swing. I'm too big for it. I have work to do..." Autumn hurriedly stepped back, lest any of them get any ideas.

"Come on, Autumn! You can't go back inside and work! You have to play with me! Let's play a game and we can have fun together."

"A game? What kind of a game?" Autumn asked slowly.

She watched as Gabe placed the glass down and went to whisper something in Arabelle's ear. And then the two looked at her...Something was brewing.

Soon, Arabelle was taken off the swing and came to her running before catching her hand. She looked down into her sparkling eyes and blinked as Arabelle shouted, "We are playing Tag and you're it, Autumn! Come and catch us..."

As she watched Arabelle run away, she heard Gabe's playful voice, "Come on Arabelle. Better run. What are you doing, Autumn? You can't just let her get away! You'll bring shame to all the older siblings..."

She cast a glance at Gabe who stood there, grinning like a child himself and a competitive spark lit in her eyes. She took off after the little girl while Arabelle darted around the yard, her small legs pumping furiously as she tried to evade capture. Gabe stood back for a moment, watching the chase before joining in, pretending to be on Autumn's team but providing cover for Arabelle as she raced around.

Narrowing her eyes, she turned to the man who was putting a wrench in her plans and quickly changed her target. This time, pretending to go after Arabelle, she decided to tag Gabe.

But Gabe was surprisingly more agile than she anticipated, dodging Autumn's attempts to tag him while simultaneously making it difficult for her to catch Arabelle. Finally, she decided to attack him directly and charged forcefully in his direction, determined to tag him.

He stood there, challenging her as he darted to the side, narrowly avoiding her reach, but she was faster than he anticipated. With a burst of speed, she lunged forward, her fingers brushing against his arm.

"You're it!" she declared triumphantly as she bent down, holding her knees as she tried to catch her breath and watched as he took off after Arabelle, taking to his new role with alacrity.

Meanwhile she watched Arabelle squeal as she tried to run but she was no match for the man's long legs and was quickly scooped up by Gabe who spun her in the air as she squealed in protest, "You're supposed to tag me, not lift me...." But Arabelle's laughter belied her complaining... it sounded too delighted.

Chapter 559: The Swing (2)

As Gabe placed Arabelle back on her feet, he answered affectionately, "Sorry, miss Arabelle. You're just too fast for me so I have to make sure that I catch you."

Arabelle beamed at the praise and turned to look at Autumn. A look passed between the two sisters and the next minute, Autumn crept up behind Gabe and tapped him on his shoulder, "Tag. It looks like you're it again..."

With laughter echoing the two sisters then raced away from him as he narrowed his eyes, "Oh! You're going to regret that..."

It took her a moment to realise she'd really miscalculated as he turned his attention to her, chasing her relentlessly, as his long strides quickly covered the distance between them. Panicking, she darted around the swing set, trying to use that as a barrier. But even so, she was almost caught, as his fingers grazed her back, missing her barely as she managed to slip away.

As they raced around breathlessly, Autumn thought she saw someone outside the back fence and was distracted for a moment... only to be almost caught by Gabe at that point. He'd almost caught her when she realized the danger and as she tried to run away with a squeal, his arm crept around her and caught her around the waist, lifting her off the ground.

Shocked and a little thrilled, Autumn squealed and squirmed in his grip while Gabe twirled her around as easily as he had down Arabelle who was now laughing and clapping.

"Do that for me as well..." Arabelle squealed as she bounded towards the couple. Distracted, Gabe turned to look at Arabelle, only to lose his balance in the soft grass as his foot slipped.

Gabe tried to break the fall, but only barely managed, a sound of pain escaping him as they hit the ground. His hold around Autumn tightened instinctively, protecting her from the brunt of the fall.

Autumn found herself sprawled on top of Gabe, their faces inches apart, both breathless from the chase. His eyes met hers, filled with concern. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice strained but gentle.

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied, her cheeks flushed. "Are you?"

"I'll live," he said with a pained smile, shifting slightly to make sure she was comfortable.

Arabelle grinned down at the two of them on the ground, her eyes sparkling as she screamed, "Time for an Autumn sandwich..."

Letting go of her own weight, Arabelle fell on top of Autumn, squishing her into Gabe. A sudden tension took her over as she realized her precarious position. She could feel every inch of his hard contours against her, with her breasts squishing against his chest.. and was his hand caressing the side of her waist?

Her breath catching in her throat, she tried to move, only to find herself secured between these two people. Finally, Arabelle moved off her and she was able to jump off Gabe... As she tried to push off him, she realized she'd been clutching onto his shirt and even managed to tear off a button. Holding it in her fist, she hurriedly grabbed the empty pitcher from the side and raced inside, "I'm too tired to play anymore. I'll go inside."

Gabe, still on his back, watched her run inside and willed himself to breathe slowly. Arabelle had already run off to see some worm so she was saved from embarrassment. What had just happened? 'Little' Gabe had chosen this moment of all the time to come awake...

With a wince, he moved and realized he'd probably even hurt his back. He was not too young anymore. As he walked inside, he paused when he heard a voice. Someone was in the house?

His eyes sharpened and his steps slowed as he tried to recognise the voice. It was the woman... what was her name? Miss Bianca... It seemed she was trying to explain herself...

"It's only a matter of time. I promise you I will separate from him. I confess that I did wrong. I was selfish for a moment. I've always had a crush on Pierce and I thought..."

Autumn remained silent and Gabe remained quiet as well, thinking intently. Why were these people intent on getting her to forgive them. Was this some kind of odd feeling of guilt the couple was feeling or was this some trap. If the two had chosen to betray her, then it was clear that they did not care about her. Or was this the Nora and Sara situation?

As expected when she got no reply from the apologizing and reassurance, she moved onto the next plan of attack. Making her doubt herself and attacking him and their relationship.

"How are you even with Gabe Frost. He was there in my office when you came that day, crying about Pierce. So, he knows all that. Is this some kind of a contract marriage? What are the terms of your contract. And don't try to tell me that it is not. I know you. You would never let a man come near you until were in love with him. So I know this is not a real marriage..."

Before Bianca could say more, Gabe walked out from behind the wall and met the woman's eyes, while calling out Autumn's name, "You didn't tell me we are having guests over, Autumn. Who is this?" Without waiting for an answer, however, he cast a glance at Autumn and tsked, "Now look at what happened. Your hair is all mussed up. It makes me feel as if you've just climbed out of my bed.. Tsk tsk.. Come here..." As he walked to her, he pulled the satin scrunchie from her hair. Gathering her hair from the nape of her neck, he casually tied her hair in a high pony while Bianca could only look on...

Once the pony was tied up, he leaned down and placed a casual kiss on the nape of her neck before turning to look at Bianca...

Chapter 560: Family

"You're quite a lovely couple," an older woman commented, peering over her small spectacles with a discerning gaze.

Bianca stood frozen, while Autumn cast him a panicky glance. Gabe gave her a reassuring smile before turning to the woman sitting further away. "Thank you," he said. "I'm Gabe Frost. My Autumn here, is the lovely one who makes us such a great pair. And you are?"

"I'm Agatha Shelly. I work locally with the church and child protection services. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Frost. I've also been approached by the trust you're setting up to work with them."

"Mrs. Shelly, it's an honor to meet you," Gabe replied. "Thank you for all the important work you do."

"It's my duty to do so," the woman answered resolutely, while Gabe nodded.

Seeing the smooth introduction, which was much different from what Bianca had imagined, helping her woman come out of her trance and she quickly came forward to remind Mrs Shelly to do her 'duty'.

It had taken her days of listening to the woman's lecture about morals, to convince this woman to intervene in the matter about Arabelle. She'd made sure to drop enough hints to enrage the woman

about the situation over here. About how Gabe and Autumn were not living under moral circumstances and doing wrong by keeping the child away from the father.

And yet, here she was talking about how it was a pleasure to be making his acquaintance and calling them a lovely couple.

"Mr Frost. Mrs Shelly is not here for a friendly or neighborly visit but something more important."

Gabe ignored her which incensed her but at least Mrs Shelly seemed to wake up as she nodded and spoke to Autumn, "Yes, girl. We are here for Arabelle and to discuss your changed circumstances. We, as a community, feel that it would be better for Arabelle to be with her father."

"No." Autumn's sharp response had the other woman pause in surprise as she narrowed her eyes while a triumphant smile lit in Bianca's eyes.

Enraged, Autumn shook her head, "I've already said it multiple times that Arabelle will be staying with me."

Mrs Shelly pursed her lips and shook her head, "Autumn, you are being stubborn. We have to take the child's welfare in concern. These few months, we said nothing because we believed that you too needed time to heal and you were alone in the world. But now that you are not alone anymore... a child needs a parent much more than a step sibling. Arabelle has lost her mother but she still has a father so there is no reason for her to live as an orphan."

"I don't care what the community...." Autumn burst out but before she could say more, Gabe caught her hand and squeezed it gently, attracting her attention.

As she looked on, he turned to the woman, a hard look in his eyes, "Of course, Mrs. Shelly. We're more than willing to discuss Arabelle and our current situation. We want what's best for Arabelle."

Mrs Shelly turned to Gabe, and nodded in approval. At least the girl's husband was reasonable. Maybe Mr Savoy would have a chance to meet his daughter then. "It's good to hear that, Mr Frost. The child's welfare is our primary concern. We need to ensure she's in a stable and morally sound environment."

Bianca stepped forward, unable to hide her frustration. "Stable? Morally sound? Mrs. Shelly, they are living together despite being strangers. They're hiding the child from her biological father. And you know about Autumn's history with Mr Savoy...How is this stable? I think you should..."

Before she could complete the sentence, Gabe cut in, "Miss, I take offense to anyone who will dares to raise their finger against our relationship. Autumn and I are legally married and in love with each other. Yes, we did not have a courtship but I don't think that matters when a person is in love. As for Arabelle, she is in the happiest and safest place at the moment."

Bianca was about to argue when Mrs Shelly cut her off, "I am sure you think that, Mr Gabe but Mr Savoy wants to be with his daughter. He has tried many times to talk to AUtumn but she has remained stubborn. However, the man's patience is at its limits. What is important is that the child not be dragged in court. This is my reason here. I am here on behalf of the church to try and talk to you to let Arabelle meet her father."

"Her father?" Autumn scoffed, causing all three people to turn to look at her. "A father who gave up his rights when she was born? A father whom she was forced to live with for a while when my mother was sick and I wasn't here?"

"Your mother forced him to give up the rights. And you know the reason for that was you. He could not have imagined that she would die, leaving you in charge of the child..." Bianca tried to argue.

Mrs. Shelly looked between them, her discerning gaze lingering on Gabe and Autumn. "This isn't about accusations or blame or even the past. It's about finding the best path forward for Arabelle. I've heard both sides and..."

"Have you heard Arabelle's side?" Autumn asked slowly.

"What do you mean?" Mrs Shelly asked carefully.

Instead of answering her, Autumn asked, "Mrs Shelly, did you see the new addition to our yard?"

Mrs Sheely turned her head and nodded as she looked at the large swing set outside, where Arabelle was playing even now. And as she looked back, she was given a small sheaf of paper by Autumn," Arabelle drew this a little while ago."

Mrs Shelly looked down at the drawing titled, 'My Family...' and then looked at Autumn again. Arabelle had drawn a picture of the swing set and in front of it stood three rectangular figures...named Autumn, Gabe and Arabelle.