

Benefits 561

Chapter 561: A Visit

"I have fulfilled the oath of brotherhood. You can't blame me now."

Gabe read Ian's warning message and frowned. What was this guy talking about now? What oath of brother... and his train of thought trailed off as he read the message Ian had sent before this one..."Hey, bro. Heads up, all the Frostie girls are on their way to your place to meet you and Autumn. Should be there in like 15 mins. Surprise!"

His eyes darted to the clock on the wall. "Fifteen minutes? You've got to be kidding me!" He swiped the phone screen furiously, typing a rapid response. "What the hell, Ian? Couldn't you have told me sooner?" But even as he typed, he realized that the message had been sent ten minutes ago... And Ian had probably risked his neck to warn me... Idiot*! Couldn't he have taken this risk earlier?

"Useless! Absolutely useless! I'm going to kill him later."

The person they wanted to meet was not even home, so how was he supposed to warn them... As he glanced at the time, he could not help but groan. There was no time...He did not have anything to hide about Autumn but Arabelle...He grimaced as the sound of a blaring honk sounded outside the gate... They were here... Time to jump into the fray...

Autumn and Arabelle returned from the supermarket holding hands. It was a necessity since Arabelle had the habit of running or rather hurtling forward without any care for danger. Meanwhile Autumn could only walk slowly with all the things in her hand. Arabelle had gotten into her head that since Gabe could cook and he was home today, he was supposed to slave away in the kitchen for her. And that man had been agreed to it with only a single puppy eyed look from her sister.

She shook her head. Gabe Frost was a softie on the inside. She could just imagine that if he ever adopted a dog, the animal would be living like a king with Gabe as a willing slave.

As they turned the corner, she felt Arabelle tug at her hand and looked down at her sister who was now oohing and aahing as if she had seen her favourite celebrity. As she followed her gaze, she frowned. A beautiful car stood right outside their gate. She didn't know what car it was but what a beauty..."Wow."

The next minute, she was forced to turn her gaze from the car as four women stepped out of the car almost simultaneously. Each more beautiful than the other... Autumn and Arabelle looked at each other and then at the beauties... "Wow..."

But another minute later, she watched as her husband stepped out of the gate and the four women rushed to him, enveloping him in a group hug as they squealed and called his name... "Wow again."

As she watched, the group hug came to an end and Gabe hugged and kissed the cheek of each woman individually... what a ladies' man. Who were these women? And why did she feel a sudden dislike for them?

While she was observing the entire scene, Arabelle had no qualms about rushing forward and demanding an introduction. As Arabelle rushed forward, and hugged Gabe possessively, she saw the girls step back and turn their head in unison towards her...

Feeling exposed, Autumn gave them all a smile and started to walk forward slowly. Thankfully, the women did not keep staring at her but turned to talk to Arabelle who quickly warmed up to them.

Autumn's mind raced as she approached the group, her smile firmly in place despite the flutter of anxiety in her chest. The four women were talking animatedly with Arabelle, their voices a harmonious blend of excitement and curiosity. Gabe noticed Autumn approaching and extricated himself from the cluster, moving towards her with an apologetic look on his face.

"I think I may have warned you about this. I'm sorry they just decided to surprise us..."

Autumn nodded. "It's okay. I believe you gave me a fair warning. So..."

Even though she pretended to be nonchalant, as she noticed the women's gazes, she felt a bit apprehensive. Were they here to judge her? But then she squared her shoulders and put on her bravest face. So what if they wanted to judge her. They could.

She'd had others judge her. It made no difference. Gabe was a friend, sure. But his family had nothing to do with her in the long term. They knew the barebones that he had married her under not so normal circumstances so the fact that she was willing to host them should have been enough.

However, she was not prepared for the surprise that she received. Instead of judging her, they simply and quickly introduced themselves by their names and then hugged her just as warmly as they had just done Gabe, even kissing her on the cheek... and then went on to compliment her.

"You are so beautiful! You fit right in with us Frostie Girls." commented the one called Nora. She called her beautiful. When the girl was drop dead gorgeous and probably younger than her...

"Frostie girls?", she asked in confusion...

"Yeah! See, these are the Frostie brothers so we've decided to call ourselves Frostie Girls..."

"I suggested that we call ourselves the Frostie Princesses but these two are not agreeing. What do you think, Autumn? Frostie girls or Frostie Princesses?", asked the one called Evana.

"I don't know..."

"Think then and let us know! You are a Frostie too now."

"Stop that Evana. You're just giving yourself more importance. Don't listen to her, Autumn. She's already a princess in real life and she wants to call us a princess too. Thanks but no thanks! You're not becoming a double princess." Isabella pointed out...

Autumn's eyes widened and even Arabelle who had only been listening in until now, wide eyed squeaked, "A real princess?"

"Yes yes. This one here is Princess Evangeline Something Something... Just call her Evana though.. We don't want her feeling extra important."

As everyone laughed at that, the group naturally moved in, making Autumn totally forget about any awkwardness or defensiveness...

Chapter 562: Surprise

Autumn was in a bad mood. And that wasn't all. The worst part was she didn't know why she felt this way. The three women-Nora, Evana and Isabella had come to visit were extremely friendly to her, Arabelle, and Gabe. Even though they had shown up without warning, they brought lots of food and gifts for Arabelle, much to Arabelle's delight and 'to not be a bother' to her. The thing she had feared—that they would be snooty and stuck-up—had not happened. There had been an odd moment when Arabelle had introduced herself but she hadn't been able to make that out.

Yet, she still felt unhappy with them. As she put away the dinnerware that Gabe and Isabella had washed and dried, she realized she felt envious of the easy camaraderie these women shared with Gabe. It was a sobering realization to understand that while she had started to consider her husband as her friend, she was not his only friend. All his sisters-in-law were his friends too.

And somehow, knowing she wasn't all that different from others in his life left a bitter taste in her mouth. A sudden knock on the door of the kitchen had her turning around and she smiled at Nora who stood there, while trying to compose herself so as not to show the confusion on her face.

"Did you need something?"

"Nah! I figured I'd come get you since you've been here for a while. I was starting to think you were hiding from us. Not that I would blame you. I am sure if Ian had informed Gabe beforehand then he would have made sure to hide you. The se men are all like that.. super protective of their women."

And that is when she realised another thing.. taking a deep breath, she looked directly at the girl, " But that is the thing. I am not his woman. So I do not understand the reason for this visit and... "

"And us coming here to judge you? We know you are not the woman in his heart. But you are the first woman he has chosen to protect after his... wife. And we came here to not judge whether you were his woman or what not.. we came here to make sure that the woman he had chosen to protect this time did not end up hurting him."

"Why would I hurt him? He has protected me and stood by me when I had no one. I would never hurt him.. not even in my dreams! In fact, I hope some day I would be able to return the favour and...

She paused in her words when she noticed Nora staring at her with a slight smile. "What is it?"

"Autumn, thank you."

"What for?" Autumn looked at her in confusion.

"For caring about him."

"I don't.. I... we're friends. It's a fake marriage..."

"Do you know I and Demon had a contract marriage as well?"

"You did? But... Gabe mentioned that you and him are madly in love."

"Yes. We are. That wasn't how it started though. I married Demon for protection."

Autumn stilled. "For protection?"

"Uh huh. Its a long story. But your and mine... circumstances are not so different. And from what I have seen, you really do consider him a friend..."

Autumn nodded. She didn't know what could be similar in the circumstances of this pretty girl and her but she could believe it. She saw the pain in her eyes. In terms of age, she might be older than Nora but from the look in her eyes... Nora had lived a lifetime too.

Before she could say anything, Nora hugged her, before quickly stepping back," Autumn. Welcome to the Frost family. We don't care about your relationship status. As long as you are with Gabe, as a friend or as his nominal wife, you will always find a friend in us."

Autumn nodded in appreciation. It felt as if she had gained a sister. She could see the truth in the words. It was a genuine welcome and not just lip service. Of course the moment was short lived as Nora then squeezed her hands and warned, " But remember Autumn, if you ever hurt Gabe... you will find that the Frosts can be the worst enemies..."

Autumn nodded at that. There was truth in that as well. But she didn't try to explain herself. She'd already said she would never do it. "I don't think I hold that kind of power in my hands."

Nora gave a mysterious smile at that, " We never know the power we hold...Anyway, thats enough of a discussion. Let's go out. Another minute and Gabe is going to be here looking for you, wondering if I have eaten you up or something."

Autumn laughed at that. " He wouldn't do that."

"Ha! Lets make it a bet. I'll count to hundred and Gabe will appear in that doorway before that."

Autumn giggled. Nora Frost really had a way about her. Even now, the way she was looking at her over a silly bet, made her want to agree...

"Okay.. What happens if you win?"

"If I win, then you will accompany Gabe to the city when he next comes."

Autumn nodded. " Fair... And what if I win?"

"You tell me." She shrugged.

Autumn tried to think but couldn't come up with anything but somehow blurted out, " Then next time you bring the Frost brothers too..."

Nora laughed at that, " Agreed." while Autumn was flummoxed. How did that happen. How did she end up inviting Nora and the entire gang again and this time with Gabe's brothers. What was wrong with her? Just a few minutes ago, she had been unhappy.

While she was thinking, Nora had already started counting and reached a happy 'five' when Gabe walked into the kitchen with a plate in his hand and a worried glance on his face.

Nora sent her a smug look as she winked at her before walking to Gabe and taking the plate out of his hand, " Relax, Mr Guard. I was just chatting to your 'friend' here."

Chapter 563: A Premonition

The 'Frostie girls' came in a flurry and left in one as well. All Autumn and Arabelle had done all day was sit and chat with the women but they were already exhausted. In the time that Gabe had gone to see them off, Arabelle had already slumped on the couch, asleep. Those women were powerhouses of energy.

Even she felt as if she'd run a marathon. She looked at Arabelle's sideways lolling face and sighed. In a minute. In a minute, she would get up and put the girl to bed and then go to her room...The thought was left incomplete as she too fell asleep.

When Gabe returned, he saw the two of them fast asleep in their respective places and sighed. Exactly what he had expected. Those girls really were something. Quietly, he approached and gently picked up Arabelle, careful not to wake her. The little girl stirred but didn't wake as he carried her to her room, tucking her in with care. He smiled when she curled up under the blanket and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

As he returned to the drawing room, he looked down at Autumn's sleeping form and hesitated. She, too was asleep. But carrying her to her room would be wrong. At least she was lying comfortably so she may not have any cricks in her neck if she slept here.

Returning to his room, he fetched a blanket and carefully draped it over her. As he would have moved back, her eyes snapped open and stared at him with fear. He frowned over seeing that in her but was assured when she relaxed immediately and smiled at him softly. "Thank you for this."

He nodded but couldn't tear his eyes away as she sat up and stretched slowly. It was something so unexpectedly and innocently seductive that he was stumped. The way she moved and her dress slipped down...

She looked up at him when he made no sound and Gabe had to immediately look away, not wanting her to feel scared of him. Little strands of her hair had come out of her hair-band, and he was reminded of what he had done the other day, gathered her hair and pulled it into the scrunchie... Maybe he should do that again...

He involuntarily moved but before he could do anything about it, she was already moving towards the stairs, slowly sliding up. His eyes traced the perfect contours of her body, lighting up with a small spark of desire before he caught himself and looked away, striding out of the house. He needed to go on a long walk or maybe boxing...

Upstairs, Autumn suddenly felt energized. The small nap had energized her while the walk from there to her room had gotten rid of the remnants of sleep. She looked up at the ceiling of her room, her thoughts in a whirl.

Now that she was not sleepy anymore, Nora's words seemed to be echoing in her ear... One thing that seemed to be jumping around her head was that she had said that Gabe would not be hurt again.

She did not know much about Gabe's past. Did those words mean that Gabe's wife had hurt him? Or was it someone else? Or it could also be that his wife's death had hurt him. She didn't know what it was but she was curious about him now. And his past.

"You want to return the favour for what he has done for you? Help him heal, Autumn. You can do it."

How could she do it? How was she supposed to heal him when she didn't even know or understand his hurt. She shook her head. Nora was probably overthinking. She did not have that kind of a power.

Shaking her head at her own whimsy, she tried to sleep but it continued to remain elusive. With a sigh, she cursed. This is what happened when your body clock remained fused to the night timings. It was the curse of the night shift job.

Jerkily, she pushed away the blanket and walked out of her room. She'd make a warm glass of milk for herself. That would definitely help her sleep. As expected, the first sip of the warm milk made her feel soothed. She could hear the sound of ticking and smiled. Milk was the best comfort food.

Her peaceful moment was interrupted by the backdoor suddenly opening. She jumped, startled by the movement, causing the milk to spill down her front.

She gasped and looked down at the mess she had made. Before she could curse, however, Gabe walked in, his eyes immediately catching sight of her. He froze, his gaze following the trail of milk that had soaked through her shirt, highlighting the curves of her body.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Gabe's eyes lingered on her, his expression unreadable. Autumn felt a flush rising to her cheeks, acutely aware of how the wet fabric clung to her skin. "I..."

Feeling awkward, she tried to cover herself and run away but found herself frozen under his gaze, until he eventually looked away, "I'm sorry. I thought you would be asleep now.." As he said this, he moved to get a towel and quickly returned to her. She moved to take the towel from his hand but instead of handing it to her, he placed the towel against her, gently wiping the milk that was even now trickling down her clothes slowly.

She tried to take the towel from his hand when her fingers brushed against his, jolting her. She looked into his eyes and quickly looked away, "Thank you. I can do it." Quickly snatching the towel from his hand, she tried to dry off as much as she could... but realized that it was useless when his soft voice broke through, "I think you should just go change. I'll prepare a fresh glass of milk for you..."

She looked up at him and shook her head, "No.. its okay..."

"Just go and change, Autumn. I'll bring the milk to you."

Chapter 564: Training

Autumn turned around and shivered. She didn't know why, but she felt someone was watching her. She paused and looked around again, hoping to see someone maybe standing across the street, gawking but there was no one. Unconsciously she began to walk faster as she felt chills running down her back and goosebumps on her arms.

Finally, she reached her house and hurried up the two steps to the door. Her hands trembled as she slid the key into the lock. Once inside, she slammed the door shut and twisted the lock with a decisive click. Leaning against the door, she took a deep breath, her heart still racing.

With a sigh, she rubbed a hand over her face. Usually, she felt safe walking from the resort to her house, as the sun rose, making her feel happy. But today... she'd come to a conclusion. She had been avoiding what Gabe had suggested. That she learn self defence from him. But now, as she had imagined someone jumping her from behind a bush or a building, she felt the need for it.

Placing her bag on the table she walked to the kitchen, trying to tell herself that everything was going to be okay. So what if she felt attracted to Gabe? He was not interested in her as a woman. So, when they were training, the only fear she would have was her jumping him. And that was impossible.

As she peeped outside the window to make sure there was no one, she blew out a breath. Maybe she had over reacted but this solved her dilemma of whether to learn from him or not.

Ever since the night he had helped 'wipe' the milk on her, she had come to realize what attraction was. And it was a dangerous disease. Everytime she met his eyes, she felt as if her heart was going to jump out of her throat.

Never in her life, had she imagined that she would want to feel someone hug her or get close to her. Maybe it was because she knew things between them were impossible that she felt comfortable feeling attracted to him.

Just then, she looked up to see him coming down the stairs and sighed. He really was too good looking. She took a deep breath and gathered her courage as she nodded to herself. "I'm ready for the training you mentioned."

She'd spoken out of the blue when Gabe her a confused look. Okay, that was sudden. The man had just woken up... so maybe he needed a reminder. "Uhh. You mentioned teaching me self defence, right? So, I'm ready if you have the time."

Gabe nodded and she sighed. Thankfully, he hadn't decided to back out. Actually, she'd tried to learn it in the past... after everything happened but she'd had a panic attack when the instructor had tried to hold her...

"Okay. That is good. I've already prepared the room. The question is... why?"

As she frowned at the abrupt question, he walked to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water... She watched as he drank it slowly and the way his Adam's apple moved...Oh no.. what did he ask her... why...

"What do you mean why? You offered to teach me how to defend myself."

"And you've been avoiding that. So, what brought this on today?"

"I just wanted to learn..."

She watched as he walked closer and looked into her eyes, forcing her to look away.

"Did something happen?"

"No. I... I just got scared and thought that you were right. I should learn." Slowly, she explained what had just happened and watched his eyes harden. That was another thing about it. His eyes seemed to always keep changing colors...

"I see. Alright. Lets begin. Change your clothes and come to the basement."

She nodded, a bit curious. The basement had always been empty so when he had asked her if he could use it, she had agreed. As she hurriedly went to her room and changed, she wondered what changes he'd made to the basement.

As she went down, she looked around curiously. Her empty basement had been changed into a full fledged gym...There was even a couch and a... TV screen... That was unexpected.

Her stomach clenched with butterflies, not quite believing she was going to go through with letting him teach her self-defense. Grabbing her rubber band, she tied her hair in a tight ponytail, not wanting to give him a chance to do THAT again... and then looked at Gabe who walked out from behind a small screen dressed in a tank top and short shorts. She hadn't realized that he would change too... And what was with the shorts.. Why were they short...

Ohh... She'd never paid attention to his legs in the past.. But those thighs... She blinked. What was wrong with her? Why was she objectifying the man? That was simply wrong.

She felt his eyes run over her as he took in her clothes and looked at his disapproving frown. And felt justified. He was judging her clothes too. But then, her justification was ruined because as she glanced down at her loose pyjamas and oversized t shirt, he asked, "What kind of workout clothes are those?" He wasn't objectifying her...

"It's what I always wear," she said. Not that she wore these often. They'd come out of the wardrobe, no more than a few times in the past many years...

"These won't do. You need to get new ones. I'll do it today."

She tried to say that he didn't have to but he simply sent her a look and then pointed to the mat, motioning for her to stand there. He came to stand in front of her and she once again realized just how much taller he was than her. Somehow she always felt that they were the same height but now, she could see that she had to look up at him..."We'll start with the light stretching."

Chapter 565: Hurting

"He called it light sretching?" Autumn cursed in her heart as she felt her legs almost ready to fall off her body. He'd mentioned beginning with stretching and then some running to 'loosen' the muscles. All of which had been alright. But then, he'd started with teaching her how to kick...and then moved on to block each and every kick, much to her frustration until finally she was ready to give up and give in.

But did he let her go then? No. He wanted her to take a breath and relax her muscles some more. She'd begun the session with wanting to learn how to defend herself but it seemed she was going to end the session with wanting to kick that man.

She'd tried to move and strike out so many times. But all to hear him complain about how she was not in good physical shape.

"I'll be adding some weight training to your routine from the next session."

"I wish I could throw the weight at your head." she thought to herself.

But outwardly only nodded tiredly. She was never coming into this torture chamber again.

"Did you say something?" Gabe asked her as he stared at her intently and she shook her head. "No. Nothing. I said that I will look forward to it. Thanks Gabe."

He paused and looked at her carefully. She was struggling to catch her breath and she seemed agreeable but her expression seemed sassy...

"Good. That is good. Then I'll see you here tomorrow."

She nodded and raced out of the basement before he could say more. He shook his head. He'd scared the poor girl away. But that was good.

What she didn't know was that she would have been a bit unsafe here if she'd stayed here with him. He sighed and picked up his water bottle, sipping from it carefully. He accepted the fact that he was attracted to the woman. He liked when she moved, even wanting to kick him. And the fact that he'd been battling with? About his guilt and confusion over her, he would handle them. He was not in a hurry to sleep with her. He would take his time and get her comfortable... They could be lovers before parting ways... if she agreed.

"I need to know where he is. Only then can I seduce him."

Elena Winthrope looked at the woman in front of him and smiled. The girl looked exactly like her Arabelle. She did not have her grace and mannerisms but those could be thought. What a stroke of luck.

Elena smiled. When she'd been looking at Emma's file while handling things with Sebastian, she had never thought that she would stumble onto this piece of treasure. A girl who looked so much like her Arabelle. Only a little tweaking here and there and Arabelle was right in the flesh.

"If you go in front of him now, he will recognise you and throw you out in a flash. No. You need to learn to be like her..."

"But how does it matter? I'm going to pretend to have no memories. So, if I seduce him..."

"Do you really think it is so easy to seduce Gabe. No. Not even with that face. So listen to me carefully, girl. You will stay here and learn Arabelle's mannerisms. Only when you have her ways down to a pat will I place you in Gabe's path. This time, I have to bring him down. I will not risk everything I have, only for you to ruin it. So, learn and become like Arabelle. Alright?"

Elena rolled her eyes as she watched the woman slump and walked out of there. Heck, she was willing to put this girl in Gabe's path right now. The problem was she did not know where Gabe was. The Frosts had become too tight lipped about it and they'd been sniffing closer onto her trail for a while now.

She would have to look for other ways to get information about the man.. Just as she was wondering what to do next, her man came inside," Mam... There is information about Gabriel Frost."

Elena perked up. It seemed the fates were finally on her side.

"What kind of information. Tell me quick. Have you been able to find him?"

The man shook his head, and she made a face. What was the point of any other information? She needed to know where Gabriel Frost was to carry on the next part of her plan. And if he was away from the other Frosts, like he was now, then that would be the cherry on the top.

"Ma'am. It is not information about him but if we can find this person then there is a chance we can find Gabe Frost too. My contacts in the police department told me that someone is looking for information about Gabriel Frost. They are actually looking for dirt."

"For dirt? Really? Tell me more," Elena asked with a smile. It seemed Gabe had another enemy.

"It is some dirty cop or someone within the force because they are being quite tight lipped about who is looking into him. But if we reach this person...And get him to collaborate with us..."

"Then the enemy of an enemy is a friend... Very good. Look deeper. Use the bait method. They want dirt on Gabe. Hint that you have it. State a price. And when they take the bait, lets see how they work with us."

Her man nodded and immediately left to make the arrangements while Elena smiled. Good. This was good. At least her people were good enough to get information. She knew this was her last chance. If she failed in ruining Gabe this time then it would be the end of her. And that reminded her.. She needed to practice shooting. After all, if she failed, her last option would be to kill him. Goodbye Gabriel Frost, soon it would be time for you to meet your creator...

Chapter 566: His Bed

Autumn paused at the entrance when she noticed his gaze and gulped. Yes, she knew that he'd already ordered work out clothes for her. A variety of them.. but they were... all too form fitting. She understood his reasoning that they needed to be that way, for optimal movement and performance, but still, she felt self-conscious.

His direct stare had her gulping and she raised the bag in her hand," I will change..."

He was pacified with her agreement and she quickly walked behind the screen and sighed. taking a moment to steady herself, her fingers trembling slightly as she opened the bag and got out of her comfortable clothes.

She pulled out the shorts first, which came to the midline of her thighs and clung like a second skin. And reminded herself that it was as good as a skirt.... in terms of length...

But the top was worse. It was scoop-necked, showing the tops of her full breasts, and had no sleeves at all; it was a tank that left her midriff completely bare. She would never wear something so revealing, not even to the gym. Over the years, she had unconsciously taken to wearing clothes that covered her skin and not reveal so much of it...

She realized that this was normal gym wear. Ang most girls her age wore it. But it made her feel...attractive in a good way instead of feeling exposed. "You can do this," she whispered to her reflection, then stepped out from behind the screen, ready to face him. But that courage did not last for long as she noticed him in his work out shorts and tank.

Nah.. She needed to get back into her usual clothes.. But before she could run away, he turned around and gave her a once over. She waited for that feeling of awkwardness to come over. To feel the ants crawling over her skin, but instead she only felt...hot. And then he snapped," Come on, Autumn. Start stretching. We don't have all day."

She jerked as if a can of cold water had been poured over her. What was she expecting? Was he suddenly supposed to stop liking men and start liking women? Duh.

The next hour was a torture and not just because he tested the limits of her strength, as he made her train with weights and work hard... It was something entirely unexpected. She was tortured not because she was sweating and exerting but because of him. It was the way he sometimes touched her, on the inside of the knee as he guided her with the weights. Or when he guided her legs to move into a different position. Or his hand gliding up her arm, telling her to keep the weights steady

Finally, the longest hour was over and she sighed. Ready to leave for the day. But her happiness was once again shortlived.

"Not so fast," he said, blocking her path. "We still have some more work to do."

"I'm exhausted," she complained, her voice tinged with frustration. "I can barely move."

He simply crossed his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow, "Your attacker won't care if you're tired, Autumn. You need to train harder."

Her usually non-existent temper flared. "Fine," she snapped, stepping into the sparring ring. "Let's get this over with."

Today, she was going to have revenge and kick him. All these days, he had been making her hit the air and taunting but now... With narrowed eyes, she took her position and waited for him to take his.

Without waiting for his next instruction, she lifted her foot and her knee snapped out, ready to kick him in the stomach, almost making her successful in her mission. But her keyword for fate today seemed to be 'almost', because before her knee could connect with its mark, his hand caught her knee, making her go off balance as she fell against him.

As she clutched onto his chest for balance, her momentary anger was almost forgotten and she grinned at him and bragged, "I almost got you."

"Almost doesn't count." Gabe raised her leg to his hip, making her lean onto him even more. It was then she realized that their workout clothes were too thin between them. She was pressed against him in the most intimate way...and she could feel the heat of his body through the fabric, making her heart race even faster.

She was sure his gaze fell to her lips and she licked them unconsciously. Would he kiss her? Her breath hitched as their eyes locked again, and for a moment, everything else faded away. She felt the tension crackling between them. She didn't understand it and was even somewhat scared of it...

She felt his grip tighten slightly on her leg, and he leaned in closer. She gulped. What would she do if he did kiss her? Did she want him to kiss her? Or not? But she didn't have to think so much as his low voice sounded close to her ear, "Focus, Autumn. Don't let your guard down. Shift and twist. Get out of the hold."

The instruction was enough to remind her that he was probably not affected by her. With a determined nod, she shifted her weight and twisted, like he had thought her, and broke free from his hold. "I won't lose focus," she replied, her voice steady, masking the turmoil inside her.

Finally, happy that she remembered the move, Gab let her escape. She sighed and hurried up the stairs, but missed the look of hunger that the man had sent her way. If she had, she would have seen that Gabe had probably been as affected by her closeness as she had been.

And the way his eyes were now scanning her silhouette, she might as well have been naked.

With a shake of his head, Gabe turned away and walked to the punching bag hanging on the side. She was going to be ending up in his bed some day... But that day seemed to be far away...He could seduce her now if he wanted to... he saw the desire unfurling in her eyes. But she was not yet ready for that...

Chapter 567: A Letter

Gabe ascended the basement stairs, wiping his hands on a rag as he emerged into the dimly lit living room. He paused, his gaze falling on Autumn, who sat on the couch in her workout clothes, her eyes distant and clouded with worry. She didn't even notice his arrival. That was odd. Why had she not yet changed?

Walking over to her, he noticed her staring into space and raised an eyebrow, placing his hand on her shoulder." What happened?"

Autumn blinked, as if jolted back to reality, but said nothing, her stricken gaze sending him a devastated look before her eyes flicked to the coffee table where a letter lay.

Gabe followed her gaze and moved to take the letter from the table. It was from the court.

"He's sued for exclusive custody.", her voice trembled as she spoke the words out loud, scared as the weight of the words threatened to overwhelm her. She'd known that this day would come. Especially when Gabe had gotten rid of the criminal case he had filed.

She gulped and looked at him. His calm gaze gave her hope as he spoke," We expected this, Autumn. Don't worry."

Autumn nodded, her voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know what to do, Gabe. He's got money, lawyers... and I'm just... me."

"You're not just you, Autumn. There is me as well." Gabe sat down beside her, placing the letter carefully back on the table. He took her hands in his, squeezing them reassuringly.

"We'll fight this," he said firmly. "You're not alone in this, Autumn. We'll get through it together."

A tear slid down Autumn's cheek, and she quickly wiped it away with the back of her hand. "But what if we lose? What if he takes her away from me? When he's been quiet for so long... I thought he got scared off and... I think I was too optimistic...Did you see the end of the summons. If he wins the case then he would take Arabelle. I know we can reapply, but I cannot take the risk. What would he do to her if she was alone with him. I can't lose her. They've already revoked the fact that he signed away the rights. That was in our favour."

Gabe looked away even as he let her head rest on his shoulder... it was finally time for him to ask the question that he had been waiting to ask her.

"Autumn... why did he sign away the rights in the first place. Even if he and your mother divorced, he could have insisted on joint custody."

Autumn frowned. And tried to think back. Those days, all of that had happened had been fresh in her mind...

"I think he created a fuss about the joint custody. He even tried to force my mother by slandering me and blaming me so that she would back down from the divorce. I was sure she would lose but then... something happened. I don't know what.. But he signed away the rights and even agreed to let go of the house and an amicable divorce."

"But you don't know why?"

Autumn shook her head. She had just been relieved that it was over, that her mother and little sister were finally safe.

Gabe sighed deeply, his mind racing with possibilities. He had always suspected there was more to the story, something hidden that had forced that man to back down. And now, Autumn's story seemed to coincide with his suspicions.

"Okay," Gabe said softly, rubbing her back gently. "We need to find out what happened back then. There might be something we can use, something that will help us keep Arabelle with you."

"What do you mean?" Autumn asked slowly.

"It means that your mother had something on him that she used to get rid of him."

"My mother?" She frowned. "My mother was not so cunning."

"She was a woman who needed to protect her daughters, Autumn. She would have gone to any lengths. Try to think well if she mentioned something..."

Autumn shook her head. "My mother never talked about this. I... I think it was because of me. I just wanted to move on from everything that happened and not remember anything."

Gabe sighed. And tried to think. He had a feeling that whatever it was, it could be in this house. It was what his instinct told him. He thought back to the robbery from that night...

"Do you think there's anyone who might know? Any of your mom's friends, or maybe some place she trusted to hide things?"

"Autumn thought for a moment, her brow furrowing in concentration. "There was... there was one friend, Mrs. Jenkins. She and my mom were really close. If anyone knows, it would be her."

Gabe nodded. "Then we need to look for her..."

"But she moved away last year... I don't know anyone who might still be in touch with her. She sent a condolence letter when mother passed away..."

She paused. "I never looked through mom's things. Maybe she left it here in her room. I think I placed Mrs Jenkins' letter over there as well. Her address would be on the letter. And if my mom left a hint, it would be in the room. I'll go and look now."

She stood up and raced to her mother's room, leaving behind Gabe who was already making a call. He needed to look into the person who had handled the man's divorce. That lawyer might have an idea what had caused his client to back down.

And another thing that they needed right now was something that Autumn had not paid attention to. The only sure shot way of getting rid of the man was to prove in court that he was a danger to Arabelle. And the only way to do that was to expose old wounds. Only when the truth about the Savoy's divorce was revealed and the man thrown behind the bars, will it be possible to get rid of this problem forever...

Chapter 568: A Hearing- A Battle Lost

"Good morning. We are here today to consider Mr. Gregory Savoy's petition to reinstate his parental rights to his daughter, Miss Arabelle Savoy, following the unfortunate passing of Mrs. Katherine Savoy. Let's begin with introductions." The presiding judge stared over his spectacles at the two parties sitting on either side, ready to battle it out.

"Good morning, Your Honor. I'm Attorney Samuel Benson, representing Mr. Gregory Savoy, the petitioner."

"Good day, your honor, I am Attorner Baker, representing the late Mrs Savoy and ad litem of Miss Arabelle Savoy."

The judge nodded before turning back to the petetioner himself," Mr Savoy. Before we proceed, I want to address the serious nature of this petition. I understand you previously relinquished your parental rights. Can you explain why you are now seeking to reclaim them?"

Gregory stood, his movements deliberate and measured. He took a deep breath, his eyes momentarily closing as if to steady himself before he opened them and stated in an emotional voice," Your honor, the circumstance between then and now have changed. My ex-wife was an excellent woman and mother. We were in love with each other and our separation was due to some circumstances that we couldn't avoid. We always planned to get together again. But until the situation was resolved, we decided that it would be best for Arabelle to be in the sole custody of her mother."

Autumn scoffed. Gregory Savoy should have been an author. Her mother and him planned to get together again. What a load of cra*!

However, Gabe had a very serious expression on his face. According to his own investigation, Gregory Savoy was a very cunning man and as slippery as an eel. Even now, he had managed to create a scene where they would be on the back foot. Now, they would need to prove that he was an irresponsible man or even a danger to Arabelle. He'd expected that the man would have a strong backing though.

Meanwhile, the man was continuing, "since then, I've worked tirelessly to improve my situation. I've secured stable employment, moved into a better home, and attended parenting classes. I want to be the father Arabelle deserves. When Katherine passed away, it made me realize just how much Arabelle needs me now."

The judge nodded and turned to Mr Baker, who quickly took the cue and began, "Your Honor, while Mr. Savoy's intentions might seem commendable, we must consider the stability and emotional well-being of Miss Arabelle. She has just lost her mother and has been living with her older sister, sheltered and adapting to her circumstances. With Mr Savoy's wanting to be a good parent and reclaiming his rights, she faces another personal major upheaval."

The judge turned to look at the man who was already prepared, "Your Honor, I understand the importance of stability for Arabelle. I've arranged for a family therapist to work with us, to ensure a smooth transition. I'm also committed to maintaining a strong relationship between Arabelle and my step daughter Autumn, so she won't feel like she's losing her family. My goal is to provide her with a stable, loving home where she can thrive. I would welcome Autumn into my family as well, but we've had incorrigible differences and I believe she would not be willing."

"Your Honor, while Mr. Savoy's promises are admirable, we must look at his history. Relinquishing his parental rights indicates a serious lapse in judgment. If he is to be believed and him and the late Mrs Savoy planned to get together, then why sign away the rights? They could have maintained a superficial relationship and Mr Savoy could have asked for a joint custody."

This time it was Attorney Benson who spoke up, "Your Honor, if I may interject, it's important to consider all aspects of this situation. While my client, Mr. Savoy, acknowledges his past decisions, we must also address the role played by Mrs. Katherine Savoy's older daughter, Autumn Savoy. Autumn Savoy has a history of strained relations with my client, Mr. Gregory Savoy. Her influence on Mrs. Savoy's decisions cannot be overlooked. We have evidence that Autumn played a significant role in the separation between Mr. Savoy and Mrs. Savoy."

Furthermore, it's concerning that Autumn has been withholding Arabelle from her father, denying him the opportunity to build a relationship with his own daughter. If Autumn truly had Arabelle's best interests at heart, she would facilitate their relationship rather than impeding it."

"Arabelle's relationship with her father is crucial for her well-being. Denying her that relationship could be detrimental to her emotional development."

A look passed between Baker and Gabe before the man objected, "Your Honor, I object to this line of insinuation. Autumn has been Arabelle's primary caregiver, ensuring her safety and well-being. Any insinuations about her character are unfounded and inappropriate."

"Your honor. This is not insinuation. We have witnesses and evidence. The only reason we have not raised them until now is because Mr Savoy wishes to respect his late wife's

"Ex wife..." Autumn snapped loudly, unable to control herself.

Attorney Benson cast a look at Autumn before correcting himself, "Mr Savoy, wished to respect his late wife's desire to protect her daughter. However, when it comes to choosing between protecting an adult or a small child, Mr Savoy would choose his little daughter unconditionally."

The judge looked between the two parties and Autumn closed her eyes, praying. Gabe had warned her that they might lose today, but she still prayed. If the judge rejected this petition, then there would be no custody case. And Arabelle would be safe.

However, her prayers were unanswered as the judge spoke sternly, "Mr. Savoy, while I appreciate the efforts you've made to improve your circumstances, I must reiterate the significance of your previous decision to relinquish your parental rights. This court takes the well-being of children very seriously, and any decision regarding parental rights must be made with the utmost care and consideration."

"However," the judge continued, "it is also clear that Miss Arabelle's relationship with her father is crucial for her emotional development. Therefore, I am inclined to grant Mr. Savoy's petition to reinstate his parental rights and allow him to pursue custody of Miss Arabelle Savoy. I will grant a continuance to allow both parties time to gather evidence and prepare their arguments. We will

reconvene in two weeks to hear the evidence and determine the best course of action for Miss Arabelle Savoy, until then, she will continue to stay with her sister."

Chapter 569: Evidence

Outside the court, everything seemed to fade into the background as Gregory Savoy stepped out, a smug smirk plastered across his face. He adjusted his tie with an air of confidence, relishing in his moment of victory. This was a many of first as far as he was concerned.

He glanced at Autumn who stood a few feet away, her fists clenched at her sides, her eyes blazing with fury and frustration. This is what he liked about her. She gave such honest reactions. He was always mesmerized by them.

Unable to stop himself and not even wanting to stop, he walked to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. Or at least tried to. She seemed to have developed some radar against him, and jumped away just before he could feel her. And then she glanced at him with hostility. He felt a thrill of excitement at her expression. So adorable.

"You still think you will win, don't you, Autumn. But you are wrong. You will lose this war just like you lost today's battle." He mocked her.

Autumn stared at the man's evil face and clenched her hands. She was trembling from his closeness as well as the fact that she had lost today. But she was not going to let him gloat over this. She would trust Gabe, when he promised that he would make sure that Arabelle was protected.

"You won today, Savoy," she spat out his name like a curse, "but this isn't over. I won't let you take Arabelle away from me."

Gregory chuckled condescendingly, his gaze sweeping over her with disdain. "Oh, but you can't stop me, can you? You're just a scared little girl playing at being a guardian. Face it, Autumn, you've already lost."

Autumn's hands trembled with anger, but she stood her ground, refusing to back down. "You don't know the first thing about being a parent, Savoy. You're nothing but an abuser!"

Gregory's smirk widened, his confidence growing with each passing moment. "Is that so? Well, we'll see about that, won't we? In two weeks' time, I'll have custody of Arabelle, and there's nothing you can do to stop me. And then, I will do to her what I couldn't do to you... As for abuser... you have no way to prove it."

"We'll see about that, Savoy. I won't let you ruin Arabelle's life like you ruined mine. As for evidence... do you really think I don't have it?"

Gregory paused for a moment, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face before he quickly masked it with arrogance. "You're delusional, Autumn. But go ahead, keep fighting. It'll be all the more satisfying when I finally win."

As she watched him walk away, she closed her eyes and slumped. It was then she felt him, behind her back. Uncaring, she leaned against him and lay her head against his shoulder. She felt him rub her arm soothingly, as he whispered, "You did well, Autumn."

She nodded before opening her eyes and glancing at him, "What do you think?"

"There is evidence, Autumn. It was clear from his expression when you mentioned it. And like us, he doesn't know where it is."

"We'll find it.. Autumn. Let's go."

Unknown to them, someone was watching them from afar and not very happy with what she was seeing.

Gregory Savoy paced his house as he waited for his man to let him know the details. Finally, he received the call, "Mrs Jenkins seems to not know, Sir. She has been suffering from dementia for the past few months. So, she won't be able to step up as a witness as well."

"Does she have bouts of sober moments?" Gregory asked carefully. If the USB was with Jenkins and she would have moments when she was not delusional then it would be dangerous if she revealed the whereabouts of the USB. He needed to get rid of anything that might endanger his plan. The fact that Autumn knew about the existence of this evidence was enough to make him worry.

"She does have sober moments, Sir. Do you want me to take care of that? She is living in a care home. Accidents happen..."

He was tempted. That was the truth. Getting rid of that woman would be so easy. Easier than it had been killing Kat... He paused. No. One accident was enough. A second one would push suspicion on him. He didn't need that. Especially with that Gabe Frost standing beside Autumn.

He was dangerous. Gregory had been a police officer all his life. He recognized danger when it was around. Gabriel Frost was not as simple as the background checks told him. There was more to him. That man was like a haunting ghost to him somehow.

"No, don't do anything to Mrs. Jenkins," Gregory instructed firmly. "We can't risk any more complications. Just keep an eye on her for now. If she starts to become a problem, we'll deal with it then."

"Understood, Sir," his man replied before disconnecting the call.

He had thought he had everything under control, but now, with Autumn and Gabe closing in on the evidence, he felt the walls closing in around him.

He needed to stay one step ahead of them, no matter the cost. And if that meant playing dirty, he was more than willing to do so. But he had to be careful. One wrong move and everything he had worked for would come crashing down around him. He couldn't let that happen.

Picking up his phone, he made another call. "Did you find something on him?"

"Yes and no," the other man replied, continuing, "There is something or someone who has been willing to reach out and provide dirt on Gabriel Frost. But we are being extra careful. The Frosts are too powerful. We lost our previous informer to such a lead. We can't afford any missteps."

"Just hurry up. I don't have long! I need the evidence against him within this week!"

Chapter 570: A Clue

"Look, Gabe! This is when I lost my first tooth," Arabelle said, pointing to a picture of herself grinning with a gap-toothed smile. "And this is my first birthday! Look at all the balloons!"

Gabe smiled warmly, as he squished her cheeks between his palms. "You were so tiny, Arabelle. Like a little balloon yourself. And I see that you have your gaze on the prize.. So, did you eat all of the cake that you are eyeing?"

Arabelle pouted like a little duck and rolled her eyes, "I don't remember. But I was a growing kid and Mum said that children who are growing should not worry about eating well."

"I agree with your mum so don't get all pouty on me, Missy." Gabe rolled his eyes, even as he glanced at Autumn, who was sifting through another box in the corner of the room.

Her movements were tense, her face a mask of concentration and frustration. Papers, trinkets, and old letters are spread out around her in a chaotic mess. Gabe's eyes flicked over the mess before going back to her, noticing the deepening furrow in her brow. He could see the frustration mounting in her every movement.

Feeling frustrated would not be good for her. It would only increase her worry and chances of missing something important. Deciding to intervene, he gently nudged Arabelle and whispered to her conspirationally, "Miss Arabelle, why don't we look at another album? Maybe we can find some funny pictures of your sister when she was little."

Arabelle giggled, the sound light and joyful, breaking through the room, even causing Autumn to glance at her with a fond smile, "Okay, Gabe! Let's me show you Autumn's baby pictures!" She clapped her hands together, her eyes bright with mischief. "There is one where she is..."

Before Arabelle could grab the album and show it to him, Autumn had rushed to snatch the album away as she threatened, "Arabelle! Just you wait. How can you expose your sister like that..."

"Aww! Autumn! How can you say that. It is such a cute picture."

"Uh huh. Why don't I take you for a picture like that..."

Gabe smiled as he looked at Autumn's distracted face and joined in on the fun, "Come on, Autumn. Who doesn't have a few embarrassing pictures from childhood. Let us see..."

Autumn glared at him and clutched the album to her chest, backing away, "I am not going to show any pictures. Get out of this room, the two of you! Stop distracting me..."

"But we are helping you." Gabe pointed out innocently while Arabelle giggled. The only help they were doing was creating background chatter as they talked and looked at things.

Autumn scoffed at Gabe's claim that he was helping her and turned to walk back to the opened box, murmuring, "Its a wonder I haven't put on noise blocking device thanks to your 'help'. Now go."

Gabe and Arabelle exchanged mischievous winks and then began to move, pretending to comply with Autumn's command. However, the moment her back was turned...Arabelle snatched the album from her, letting out a triumphant giggle and making a mad dash to the other side of the room.

"Arabelle!" Autumn squealed, spinning around and reaching for her sister, but Arabelle was already out of reach, running around the small coffee table in the center of the room.

Gabe chuckled, watching the scene unfold with amusement. Autumn's eyes narrowed playfully as she circled the coffee table, her movements mirrored by Arabelle, who kept the album just out of her grasp.

"Get back here, you little rascal!"

"Not until I've shown Gabe, the real you!"

"Gabe, look at this!" Arabelle turned the album towards Gabe as she ran, opening it to the page with Autumn's picture in it.

The picture showed a tiny chubby baby sitting in a high chair, her face, hair, and clothes smeared with spaghetti and its sauce. The long pasta dangled from her ears like earrings, and head and she had a wide, toothless grin on her face, clearly delighted with her culinary masterpiece. Her chubby hands were cupped in front of her, as she seemed to be trying to eat the spaghetti.

Gabe's eyes lit up with amusement as he glanced at the picture. "Oh, now this is priceless! Spaghetti everywhere but the mouth!"

Autumn rolled her eyes and grabbed the album. "This is the most embarrassing picture I've ever had taken. I was a baby, of course, you can't expect me to have table etiquettes..."

However, Gabe burst out laughing as he looked at her duck-like pout and answered, "You two sisters even pout the same way... Cute."

With that little compliment, Gabe and Arabelle walked out of the room, leaving a slightly stunned Autumn behind. He thought she was 'cute'? Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she quickly hid the photo album in the box before going back to the task at hand.

As she looked at the box in front of her, she felt a pang in her chest. She'd been putting off doing this because having these things scattered around always made her feel as if her mother was still around. That she would come back soon. But now, it was time. Carefully, she picked up her mother's favourite bracelet from the dresser drawer and placed it back into the box.

Her fingers trembled slightly as her hand left the delicate silver chain, adorned with tiny, intricately designed charms. It had always been a treasured keepsake to her though it was not pricey. She took a deep breath, trying to steady her emotions. This task was necessary, she reminded herself, even if it was painful.

As she did this, her hand brushed against the photo album, causing it to fall. Autumn frowned and moved to pick it up, when she realized that a piece of paper had slipped out of from there.

It was an invoice. She frowned. Why would her mother have kept an invoice in the photo album. With a frown, she looked at it carefully but the name gave her no hints...

As she stood there, staring at the invoice with numerous questions running through her mind, Gabe returned to the room. "What is it?"

"I found this in the photo album. It's an invoice, but I have no idea what it's for."

Gabe took the invoice from her hand and looked at it carefully. It detailed orders of some commissioned order, but the company's names gave no hints. With a frown, he took out his phone and made a call, "Find out about L and K Company."

As he disconnected the call, he continued to peruse the invoice and pointed out, "This is interesting."

"What? You know who it belongs to?"

"No. But the date. The invoice is for something commissioned. But the date is a few days before her divorce was finalized with Gregory Savoy..."

Just then, he received a message and his eyes lit up.. He turned to Autumn and spoke happily, "L & K stands for Locks and Key Company. Locks & Keys is a company that specializes in custom-made lockers. Apparently, they create unique items to serve as keys for the lockers."

Autumn's eyes widened in surprise. "Lockers? What kind of lockers?"

Gabe shrugged. "I'm not sure, but it sounds like they make lockers for storing valuables or important documents. Maybe your mom had something commissioned from them before the divorce. Did she have any valuables?"

"Not really..."

Gabe nodded. "This means that there are chances that she would have hidden whatever it was within this locker to keep it safe from Gregory Savoy. And she hid the invoice inside your album...We should call Locks & Keys and see if they can give us more information about the locker. Maybe they can tell us where it's located or what was stored inside."

Autumn nodded in agreement, her heart pounding with anticipation and hope. If her mother had substantial proof that made Gregory give in, in the past then it could work this time too. "Let's do it."

Gabe dialed the number for Locks & Keys and put the call on speaker, and after a few rings, someone answered on the other end. "Locks & Keys, how can I help you?"

"Hi, this is Gabe Frost. We found an invoice for a custom-made locker and we're trying to track down more information about it. Can you help us?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line before the voice replied cautiously, "I'm sorry, but I can't give out any information over the phone. If you want more details, you'll have to come to our headquarters in person."

Desperate, Autumn spoke up, "It was commissioned by my mother. It is urgent. Please can you tell us..."

"I'm sorry ma'am. It is against our policy. If you can bring with you the receipt, maybe we could help you... but other than that, I apologize but it is against policy and I cannot help you."