

Benefits 571

Chapter 571: A Picnic

"We're going on a picnic, Lets go! lets go! Nothing can stop us! Oh no! On no!"

Gabe glanced in the rear view as the two girls grinned and screamed in the back. Early in the morning, when they left for the company to investigate the invoice that Autumn had found, the two girls had been sleepy. Which was why he'd placed them in the back seat. And now, after a few hours of sleep, the two were singing on top of their voices.

Gabe chuckled, shaking his head slightly. "You two sure know how to wake up the entire neighborhood," he called out over his shoulder.

Autumn chuckled, while Arabelle screamed on top of her voice, " We're going on a picnic! Its the best day ever! I can't wait to see the ducks at the pond and then feed the birds and jump into the waterfall!"

"Wow, Miss Arabelle, you sure have a long list of things you want to do."

"Yes! I'm old enough for a picnic now! I am having fun already!"

Autumn on the other hand chuckled and reminded her sister, " Remember, Gabe has some work first. Only after that is done, can we go for a picnic."

As they drove along the winding road, Gabe's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror again. An old beige sedan, had been trailing them for the last few miles. There was nothing noticable about it other than the fact that it was too common. It disappeared at some turns but continued to reappear. His jaw tightened as he shifted in his seat, keeping his movements casual. It was time to check if the car really was going in the same direction or following them?

If it was going in the same direction, well and good. If it wasn't...

"Hey, everyone, make sure your seatbelts are tight," Gabe said, his voice light but firm. "We're going on a trip."

Arabelle laughed. "Gabe, we're already on a trip!"

Gabe smiled and shrugged his shoulders, "I know that, Miss Arabelle. I mean, keep the belts on as I'm gonna go and get there faster!"

He glanced at Autumn in the rearview mirror again, meeting her gaze. She caught his look and immediately understood. Something was wrong. And if he was speeding up? Her eyes widened. Someone was following them?

She started to turn around to check for herself, but Gabe's voice stopped her. "Autumn." She froze and met his gaze again. She understood the warning and nodded. Any panic on her end would scare Arabelle.

"Keep singing, girls," Gabe prompted, his voice a bit more cheerful than before. "We need to keep the energy up!"

Autumn remained silent, trying to compose herself while Arabelle, oblivious to the tension, resumed singing, her voice loud and carefree. "We're going on a picnic, let's go! Let's go! Nothing can stop us! Oh no! Oh no!"

Gabe's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror again. The beige sedan was still there, matching their speed. He took a deep breath, his hands gripping the steering wheel a little tighter. He needed to lose them without alarming Arabelle.

Autumn joined in, her voice a little strained but trying to match Arabelle's enthusiasm. "We're going on a picnic, let's go! Let's go! Nothing can stop us! Oh no! Oh no!"

He took a sharp turn onto a narrow, less-traveled road, hoping to throw off their tail. The beige sedan followed, sticking close. His eyes narrowed. Without warning, he swerved and slammed on the brakes, causing everyone to be thrown forward. Meanwhile the sedan, still speeding, could not brake as that would mean revealing their covers. While the sedan continued forward, Gabe quickly turned around the car, speeding away.

Arabelle, still unaware that this was not a game but something else, squealed happily.

"That was awesome!", her eyes wide with excitement. "Can we do that again?"

Autumn smiled, her heart rate slowly returning to normal. "Maybe next time, Arabelle. Let's focus on getting to the picnic spot first." As they sped off, Autumn continued to look back but finally calmed down when the sedan did not appear for a while.

Gabe kept his eyes on the road, his grip on the steering wheel relaxing slightly as the tension eased. He glanced at Autumn in the rearview mirror and gave her a small nod of reassurance as well. He could see the worry in her eyes.

As he refocused, he decided to make another call. Autumn had mentioned that she'd felt someone following her but his people had been unable to find anything. However, today was proof. They'd picked her up directly after her shift so whoever had been there had decided to follow them.

"We're here!" Gabe announced, pulling the car to a stop. "Time to unpack and enjoy our picnic!"

Arabelle jumped out of the car, her excitement renewed. "Yay! Ducks, here we come!" But then paused and turned around, "Are we not going to get to wherever you wanted to go first?"

"Nah! With all your singing, I've decided that I'll do that later! Time for a picnic first! Go look for a goo"

As Arabelle jumped away and went ahead first, Autumn and Gabe walked side by side. I don't know if those people would have any idea, so I thought we'll make it a proper picnic and then we can later go and check it out..."

Autumn nodded, "Do you think that they've been keeping an eye on us all the time or is this a coincidence?"

Gabe shook his head. "If they'd been keeping an eye on me, I would have known. I think they've jsut been keeping an eye on you, but not as a threat."

Autumn nodded, her hand holding his wrist, "Thank you for guarding us, Gabe..."

Gabe smiled and somehow, unknowingly and naturally, caught her hand in his, "It's my duty, Autumn. Don't over think it. Lets go... The ducks are probably starving without us."

Autumn laughed and followed the path Arabelle had taken, a small light shining in her eyes as she held hands with Gabe.

Chapter 572: A Clue

The invoice indeed belongs to us, but it will take us some time to determine its origin and other details—at least a day. Additionally, it is against our company policy to disclose information. Our clients are very particular about maintaining their privacy. An invoice alone is not sufficient for us to release the details. Even if you had the locker with you, we would still need more information.

Gabe nodded but leaned in and tried to persuade the woman, "Of course, I understand. But the person who commissioned this has passed away, and we have no idea what the locker or the key looks like. How are we supposed to proceed if we cannot even know what the locker looks like? You must have some way of finding out..."

The woman behind the counter hesitated, glancing around nervously as if weighing her options. Finally, she leaned in slightly, lowering her voice. "I understand your predicament, and I want to help, but our hands are tied by strict policies. Let me check with my manager to see if there's anything we can do given the circumstances. The thing is that this is one of the initial commissions so there was not much details as they are now. Maybe the manager will be able to help you."

Gabe smiled gratefully and looked at the woman expectantly while she stared at his face before shaking her head and going back. "Thank you, miss. I really appreciate any help you can provide."

Autumn, who had been watching everything rolled her eyes. She had never imagined she would see something like this. Gabe Frost knew how to dole out the charm. And his voice had even fallen an octave. The man was like a siren attracting unwary sailors. She could practically see the dazed look on the poor receptionist's face when she went back.

The woman disappeared through a door behind the counter, while they left to wait anxiously.

"Good afternoon," the manager greeted Gabe. "I've been informed of your situation. While we are limited in what we can disclose, we do have protocols for dealing with cases involving deceased clients. If you can provide proof of the commissioner's death and any documentation linking you to them, we may be able to assist you further.

This time Autumn walked forward and nodded eagerly. "I can get those documents. What exactly do you need?"

"The death certificate and any legal documents, such as a will or a letter of administration, proving your connection to the deceased," the manager replied. "Once we have those, we can proceed within the bounds of our policy. Can you show me the invoice for the time being?"

Immediately, Autumn showed the invoice and the manager took it with a smile. However, the smile immediately vanished and he looked at the two people with a slightly hostile expression. "I'm sorry. There might be a problem with this. I don't think we can help you. We're sorry for the inconvenience."

Gabe and Autumn exchanged a glance. Already guessing that something was wrong. However, before the manager could retreat, Gabe stepped forward and leaned in, his expression shifting from friendly to serious. "Can you please clarify what the problem is?" he asked, keeping his voice calm but firm.

The manager's eyes darted between Gabe and Autumn, his earlier friendliness now replaced with a guarded demeanor. Before he could say something, Gabe spoke up, "Mr Cook. I'm sure, we can have a discussion about this... inside with a modicum of privacy..."

The manager hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Alright, let's discuss this inside." He led Gabe and Autumn into a small office, closing the door behind them.

"I understand this situation is frustrating," the manager began, his tone more subdued. "But I need to explain something important. A few months ago, someone else came inquiring about this invoice number. They didn't have the actual invoice but were adamant about getting information."

Gabe and Autumn exchanged glances already guessing who it could be and worried about what he had discovered and if they were too late. The manager continued, "When we couldn't provide any information due to a lack of proper documentation, this person created quite a scene. They were extremely persistent and even returned with the police, attempting to seize our records."

Autumn's eyebrows shot up. "The police?"

The manager nodded. "Yes, it was a significant disruption. The man was some sort of an officer himself. He claimed there was something extremely valuable connected to that locker."

Gabe leaned forward, a thoughtful expression on his face. "And what happened after that? Did the police find anything?"

The manager shook his head. "No, they didn't. Our records are confidential, and we ensured that all protocols were followed. The police left without finding anything, but the incident left us wary of this particular inquiry. Also, our owner was very enraged at that and even took away all the records. He claimed that the only way this particular invoice information would be revealed was if the person themselves came here to ask for it."

Gabe nodded and continued, "Do you have any idea who that person was or why they were so desperate to get information? Or any way of identifying them?"

The manager sighed. "We never got their full name. They identified themselves only as a concerned relative, but they didn't provide enough documentation to back up their claim. But we do have a recording. However, that too is with the owner... If you still need information, I can help you contact him. But I doubt he will be helpful. That person caused us quite a few heavy losses..."

"Why don't you arrange a meeting and we'll see if I can convince your boss."

"But the boss is going to return the day after tomorrow. He is on leave.."

"Then we'll wait here in townC till he returns. Please just arrange it at the soonest. We don't have much time..."

"I'll try to do what I can, Sir."

Chapter 573: Sleep Together

Arabelle was over the moon. She glanced secretly at Autumn, who was standing on the other side of the room, and then at the door, hoping Gabe would arrive soon. Tonight, they were all going to sleep in the same bed, just like how all her friends slept between their parents. Today's picnic had turned out to be the best day ever. It was even better than her first day.

Even though Autumn was her older sister, Auntie N had said that since Mama had left her with Autumn before going to heaven so she should treat Autumn like her mother. And if Autumn was like her mother, then Gabe was like her father, right? So tonight, she could sleep between Gabe and Autumn and pretend to be sleeping with her parents. They could cuddle and read stories.

On the other side of the room, Autumn was feeling scared. If only the matter had been completed today. They wouldn't have to worry about staying in this place overnight where the rooms were all booked and they were forced to share a room. Sharing a room with Gabe...

She glanced at Arabelle, who was so full of excitement and innocence, and wished she could feel the same way. But she was nervous... She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep all night. Thankfully, he'd gone out and she'd had time to mentally prepare herself.

The door creaked open, and Gabe walked in, his face tired and somewhat worried. The look of worry on his face made Autumn feel a little better. She was not the only one who was a mess about tonight.

On the other hand, Arabelle's face lit up happily, "Yes! Come on, Gabe, let's get into bed! Time to sleep."

With feet as heavy as lead, Autumn walked to the bed and gingerly got into bed. Arabelle quickly grabbed her hand, pulling her arm over her and sliding close to her as Gabe walked into bed from the other side. His arm was also grabbed similarly so that both their arms lay together on top of little Arabelle, who was now pink in the face with happiness.

Autumn was acutely aware of Gabe lying on the bed. His presence was palpable, his fingers nearly brushing against her stomach. Each small movement he made sent a wave of anxiousness and an unexpected thrill through her. She tried to steady her breathing, focusing on the rhythmic rise and fall of Arabelle's chest instead.

Arabelle's soft voice broke through her reverie. "Gabe, tell us a story," she whispered, her eyes already half-closed and her voice sleepy. Gabe shifted slightly, his fingers inadvertently grazing Autumn's side,

sending a shiver down her spine. "Alright, Arabelle," he said gently. "How about the one about the magical forest?"

Arabelle nodded, her hand tightening on them, "Yes. That would be good."

Autumn firmly believed that she would not be able to sleep all night. However, as she heard Gabe's soothing voice, starting with a magical talking forest, she felt her own eyes close. It was oddly reassuring, and she could feel her eyes close on their own. Through half closed eyes, she glanced at Gabe, noticing the way his eyes softened as he spoke and patted Arabelle and smiled.

Arabelle let out a contented sigh, her breathing evening out as she fell asleep and so did Autumn, leaving Gabe the only one awake.

Gabe continued speaking softly, his voice barely above a whisper, as he noticed both Arabelle and Autumn drifting off to sleep. He gently patted Arabelle's back, her little hand still clutching his as he gently took it out of her grasp. Autumn's breathing had deepened, her grip on Arabelle's hand relaxed and the two were deeply asleep.

He lay back down, his hand still protectively lying over Arabelle and sighed. As the room settled into silence, he listened to the soft breaths of the two girls beside him. He could feel the warmth of Arabelle's small body nestled against him and Autumn's subtle closeness. The sense of family, even in this makeshift arrangement, brought him a surprising comfort. Soemthing he had not expected. As he almost fell asleep, he felt Arabelle flinch slightly, and instinctively moved his hand on her, patting her to comfort her.

Autumn sleepily did the same so that their hands were now on each others. Autumn's eyes fluttered open slightly, meeting Gabe's gaze in the dim light. There was a silent understanding, a shared connection that passed between them. She gave a small, sleepy smile, "Goodnight, Gabe," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

"Goodnight, Autumn," he replied softly, neither moving their hand away.

Gabe stared at the small hand under his and sighed. He didn't want to sleep. Even though his nightmared had come under control, there were times when he woke up in the middle of the night, with

nightmares about Arabelle's last moments. He didn't want to scare Arabelle or Autumn if they woke up from his scream of his thrashing. It would be better to stay awake.

Or maybe he could go to the washroom and sleep in the bath tub there... With a sigh, he decided that this would be for the best. He needed a few hours of sleep at least to stay on top of everything so he should go there..That way, even if he did wake up, he would not disturb Arabelle or Autumn. He could stay for a little while longer, make sure they remained undisturbed. In a minute, he would extract his hand away from the girls and slip out...

Unexpectedly, his thoughts started to fade away and exhaustion took over, making him fall asleep, uncaring of his fear of nightmares.

It was only as the sun rose up that Gabe's eyes snapped open and he woke up. Worried, he looked around and realized that he'd been sleeping peacefully and had woken up similarly.. not due to a nightmare....he closed his eyes and thanked the fates for sparing him this night.

Chapter 574: Nightmares

Autumn stared at Gabe as he played with Arabelle, helping her tie up her hair and sighed. Who would have thought that the man who was always so calm and smiling would be in so much pain. He seemed unaware of what had transpired last night and she was thankful for that... maybe. She didn't think he would want her to know his pain or his weakness. However, this made her heart ache even more...

She'd woken up due to pain. With a frown of fear, as old memories threatened, her eyes snapped open and she realized that this was different. The only pain she had was centred on her hand. As she looked down, she realized that Gabe's hand had inadvertently tightened its hold on her. He was holding her as if afraid that she would be gone.

She tried to disentangle her hand from him, but his grip tightened further, as he called out an anguished, " No..."

She reached out tentatively, her fingertips grazing his cheek, covered with slight stubble, hoping to soothe him somehow... Unexpectedly, his other hand caught hers, and he pushed his cheek further into her hand... his breathy voice calling out something she didn't understand.

Feeling his distress, Autumn hesitated for a moment before gently withdrawing her hand from his grasp. She knew she shouldn't wake him, that disrupting his sleep might only worsen his turmoil. With a sigh, she carefully slid out of bed, silently padding around to his side.

As she approached him, she could see the tension etched on his face, his brow furrowed with worry even in sleep. She reached out to brush his hair back from his forehead, before hesitating. His forehead was soaked.

Fetching a tissue from the bedside table, she dampened it with water and gently dabbed at his forehead, wiping away the sweat that had gathered there. He stirred slightly at her touch, but didn't wake, still lost in the depths of his dreams, murmuring something unintelligible.

His features were drawn tight with tension, his brow furrowed as if battling unseen demons. And she wondered what demons he was fighting. Was it something related to his late wife? She could understand some broken words, as she continued to wipe his forehead, "Ari.. don't...let go."

His plea tugged at her heartstrings, and she leaned in closer, her voice soft and soothing as she whispered close to his ear, "I'm here, Gabe. I won't let go."

His grip on her hand tightened suddenly and he tugged at her causing her to lose her balance until she fell against his chest. And then he caught her, enveloping her in a tight embrace, his arms holding her as if afraid she would slip away. Autumn's breath caught in her throat at the unexpected intimacy. She could feel his heartbeat under her ear...

She licked her lips and tried to pat his arm, her hand grazing against his chest. She felt him rub his nose against her hair and sigh, the rise and fall of his chest, moving her with him. Finally a few moments later, he sighed heavily, his body relaxing against hers as he probably found a measure of peace. His breathing slowed, his features softening into a more tranquil expression. For a while, they remained like that, wrapped in each other's arms and Autumn felt at peace. She hoped that she would be able to bring him peace as well some day.

Feeling his arms loosen around her, Autumn felt a tug of disappointment, but slowly moved away, feeling the loss of his warmth as she stepped back. With a lingering glance at his sleeping form, she slipped back to her side of the bed, and placed her hand back on Arabelle and closing her eyes. She felt him move in his sleep until he turned once again and caught her hand over Arabelle.

Gabe turned his back to Autumn who was lost in thought and raised an eyebrow. He could see that she was actually not looking at him and was thinking of something, but even so, he didn't know why it felt as if she was looking at him differently.

Sensing Gabe's movement, Autumn's thoughts were abruptly pulled back to the present moment. She blinked, realizing she had been lost in her own thoughts, with her gaze fixed on him and now he and Arabelle were both looking at her. She blinked as he raised his eyebrow and shrugged, giving him an awkward smile, "Sorry. I was lost in thought."

It was Arabelle who smiled and shook her head, running to her, "Autumn! Did you go to gather wool?"

Autumn laughed at that and nodded, "I guess I did. So, Miss Arabelle, what did you ask?"

"I didn't. Gabe asked if you wanted to go down for breakfast with us or come down later."

"I'll come down later. You guys go."

Arabelle nodded and quickly caught Gabe, pulling him towards the door, "Alright, let's go Gabe. I am super hungry..."

As Gabe and Arabelle left the room, Autumn let out a sigh and stood there for a moment, before deciding to take a shower to clear her mind of her thoughts all this time.

As she began to undress, lifting her t-shirt over her head, a sudden noise at the door made her freeze. She turned, startled, to see Gabe standing there, his eyes widening in surprise at the sight before him, his hand still on the door handle, the door half closed.

Their eyes met for a brief, awkward moment, and Autumn instinctively moved to cover herself, pulling the t-shirt back but one of her arms was stuck in the sleeve, making her more entangled. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

Gabe quickly averted his gaze, clearing his throat awkwardly as he closed the door quickly, standing outside.

"I, uh... sorry, Autumn," he stammered, his voice slightly muffled through the closed door. "I-I just came back for my phone. Left it on the bedside table. Could you please pass it to me..."

Chapter 575: Locker

Gabe and Autumn sat across from Mr. Emerson, the elusive owner of the L & K , in his dimly lit office. Mr. Emerson continued to fidget with his pen, avoiding their gaze. "I must admit, I'm still hesitant to disclose the details of the locker. It's not just any piece of furniture, you see."

Gabe sighed. They'd been going around this topic for almost an hour. The man had been adamant in his refusal first due to the past incidence. Then, once they'd proven that this would not be a repeat, the man was still hesitant...and dawdling over providing them the details.

"There is a reason our patrons prefer coming to us. They want to protect their privacy. I am willing to show you the locker but I will not disclose the key's design. Only if you bring the locker to me, then I can show you the key."

With that, the man stood up and walked to a bookshelf, "Here. This is the file."

Gabe pulled the file and immediately studied the requirements that had been stated by Autumn's mother and frowned. The locker commissioned was quite small. He exchanged a glance with Autumn before turning the page, to study the picture of the locker.

As expected, it was small and made to look like a figurine that could be displayed. Something you would use to hide things in plain sight. But... he'd never seen something like this in Autumn's home. He turned to look at Autumn and sighed. Yep. There it was. The same look of confusion.

Still, he asked, "Do you recognise it?"

She shook her head, disappointed, "I've never seen it."

Gabe nodded and was prepared to coax Mr Emerson for the key as well when he noticed the man staring at his hand.

He raised an eyebrow at that and tapped his fingers before asking, "Mr Emerson, are you sure you cannot show us the key?"

Mr Emerson cleared his throat before sighing, " Yes, big you must know, Mr Frost, I did not make a key for this locker."

Gabe frowned at this, "You did not make a key? Then how does this..."

"Actually Mrs Savoy was one of my earliest customers. At the time, I was personally doing everything so I had another option for my customers. They could bring me the key and I would make a lock for it."

Autumn frowned. What did that even mean. Seeing their bewildered expressions, Emerson explained, "For this particular figurine, the key is something that was close to Mrs Savoy. So it is not a traditional looking key. But something like a puzzle. Only when the piece that Mrs Savoy chose as the key is fitted into the mechanism, the mechanism will move."

"So, unless you bring this locker to me, I won't know what the key is."

"I see, the figurine looks quite delicate Mr Emerson. Wouldn't it be easy to simply break the piece and get whatever is hidden inside.." Gabe asked, still studying the picture. He was sure that he'd seen it somewhere. Just not at Autumn's house.

"That is the beauty of my work, Mr Frost. It won't be so easy. You see, only the outside is delicate. The inside is made with steel and cement. Almost impossible to even cut through. And breaking the figurine will only reveal the locker not the mechanism to open it."

Gabe nodded while Autumn asked, "Mr Emerson, did my mother ever mention what she planned to keep inside it? Or what she planned to do with it?"

Emerson frowned and shook his head, "Miss Autumn. I've made thousands of such lockers since I started. How would I remember..."

"But you've written things about the locker haven't you?" Autumn pointed at the strange hand written symbols that could be seen in the picture along with the locker. The man looked at Autumn in surprise, questioning, "You understand this?"

Autumn shook her head, "I know this is some type of a shorthand but I don't know what you've written."

The man nodded and gave another look to the two, "You're quite astute. Those are my reference notes. Basically what the client told me when she commissioned the locker."

"So?" Autumn prompted him when the man didn't continue and Emerson sighed, " It mentions here that she wanted to hide something really small in it. She planned to gift this to her daughter for her safekeeping and that..."

Emerson hesitated again before continuing, " What I have written next is not something that she wanted to tell me. She just muttered it to herself. She said that...she hoped her daughter never had to use this. But if something were to happen to her, this thing would work as her protection. This is why I refused to show this to the police or that man who came here. When I saw this note, I had to refuse... But I do find it odd that she did not give the little locker to you. From what I understand she intended to give it away."

Autumn had no explanation for this question and simply thanked the man and left with a picture of the locker.

The two people however did not notice the look of concentration that Emerson had as he watched them walk away while he murmured to himself... "They have the key but not the locker... How decidedly odd."

As they walked out of Mr. Emerson's office, Gabe felt a persistent itch in the back of his mind. The image of the small figurine locker kept resurfacing, tugging at a memory. He'd definitely seen it somewhere and quite recently...Autumn seemed equally lost in thought, her brow furrowed as she kept trying to figure out where the locker could be.

"I've seen it somewhere, Autumn," he muttered, more to himself than to her.

Autumn turned to him, hope flickering in her eyes. "Where? Do you remember where? It seems familiar to me too but I know for sure I've never seen it with Mum."

Chapter 576: Lost

"Come on Auty! Let me watch only one episode! Pretty please?"

Autumn rolled her eyes at Arabelle's antics and sighed. The girl was adamant about watching her weekly episode of animated series, even though they were about to travel back.

"I don't even know where I've kept my phone, Arabelle. Wait for some time. Once I find it, I will..."

"I'll find it. Gabe! I'm using your phone to call Autumn..."

Arabelle shouted out loud, while Gabe gave a muffled reply from the other side of the door or the washroom...

Arabelle quickly dialled her sisters number but as the phone started to ring, she continued to stare at Gabe's phone.

Autumn rolled her eyes at Arabelle and moved to grab her phone when Arabelle called out, "Gabe! Why do you have Autumn's name saved as Panda on your phone? She doesn't look like a panda!"

Autumn who had just grabbed her phone almost dropped it as she stared at the phone in Arabelle's hand in horror even as her cheeks flushed red.

Her hope from this morning had been crushed...

She'd joined Gabe and Arabelle with a red face in the morning after 'that incident'. She'd considered dawdling and hiding in the room but understood that was pointless. She couldn't really hide forever. But she had no idea about how to face Gabe. How much had he seen? She'd almost taken off her T-shirt but not totally... so he must not have seen that... right? Sigh.. she would have to face him to know what he did or did not see.

Thankfully, when she reached downstairs, he'd simply pushed the breakfast plate towards her, making her feel calm as she quickly gorged on the delicacies. Maybe he'd really been a gentleman and turned away or not been able to see much. He'd seen her in workout clothes so this was not much different than that..right?

Gabe emerged from the bathroom, a towel around his neck and a cheeky grin on his face. He glanced at the phone in Arabelle's hand, then at Autumn, whose face was a mix of embarrassment and accusation.

"Uh, it's because she likes pandas," Gabe explained, laughing as he directed the question to the girl who was frozen like a statue. "Right, Autumn?"

Arabelle however was satisfied with this explanation and nodded. "Okay, that makes sense. Pandas are cute."

And then without waiting for Autumn's response, took her phone from her hand and raced away. "Thanks, sis! I'm going to watch my episode now!"

As Gabe picked up his phone, Autumn hurried to him with blazing eyes and accused, "How could you do this? Change the name right now."

Gabe looked at her hand gripping his wrist and pretended to be clueless, a teasing grin playing on his lips. "Do what? Why are you so angry?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about!" she hissed under her breath, her face growing redder. "You were supposed to be a gentleman!"

Gabe chuckled. "And I was. I didn't look—much."

"Not much?" Autumn's voice was a high-pitched whisper. "You... you saw enough to name me Panda! You have to change that name."

"Why should I?" Gabe asked, leaning against the wall, enjoying her discomfort. She looked so cute with that little pout and furrow on her forehead.

"Because..." Autumn hesitated, her face growing hotter by the second. She lowered her voice, glancing around to make sure Arabelle was out of earshot. "Because you named it after seeing the undergarments print of panda that I was wearing."

Gabe's teasing grin widened. "Okay, maybe I did see a bit more than I let on. But it was an honest mistake."

"Then you should have forgotten the mistake! How can you change my name to that?"

Autumn crossed her arms, still fuming. "Change it. Now."

Gabe looked at her arms crossed just below her breasts, enhancing their look and gave her another teasing glance, "Have you changed that? What print is it now? Cat? Dog?"

She blushed even more and Gabe couldn't hold himself back anymore as he laughed out loud and raised his hands in surrender, "Okay okay. I'll change it. But you have to admit that it is a little funny. I never took you for an animal print kind of a girl..."

Autumn's face turned an even deeper shade of red as she glared at Gabe. "It's not funny, and I am not an animal print kind of girl! That was a one-time thing."

Gabe's grin didn't falter as he pulled out his phone, making a show of changing her contact name. "Alright, alright, I'll change it. No more pandas..."

As Autumn watched him change back her name, she nodded in satisfaction but then immediately straightened face, giving him a warning look.

Gabe chuckled some more at that and then leaned in conspiratorial look, "Let me tell you though, the little kitten print would have suited you much better...I like the design..."

As Autumn's mouth fell open over his audacity, Gabe had already turned away with a wink, leaving her standing there with a red face.

It was only after a few moments that Autumn got over her shock and she almost screamed his name threateningly, "Gabe Frost! Wait until I turn the tables."

But he simply shrugged his broad shoulders and laughed, "You're welcome to see me at any time, sweet panda! You've already done so a few times..."

Autumn's cheeks burned hotter as Gabe's teasing words echoed in her mind. She watched him saunter away with that infuriatingly confident stride, his laughter still hanging in the air. Her fists clenched and she owed, "One day, she was going to get the better of him! And then she would have the last laugh..."

However, with a deflated grin for now, she walked back to Arabelle and watched the show for little kids with her...

It was only as she dozed off from boredom that the image of the locker appeared in front of her again and her eyes snapped open...

Chapter 577: The Figurine

"Here.. this is it.." Gabe stared at the picture that Autumn placed before him, confused for a moment. Why was she showing him Arabelle's birthday picture? But then his gaze sharpened, catching on. It was the figurine they were looking for—the one in the locker, visible in Arabelle's third birthday photo.

"So this is where I saw the figurine. This is good work Autumn. So, where was this picture taken?"

Autumn sighed, " Finding the picture is as good as useless. Mrs Jenkins was my mother's good friend. But she moved away four years ago. Sold everything since she has Alzheimer's and no family to care for. I don't even know if she kept the figurine or understood it's importance. She might have sold it and we wouldn't know."

Gabe inhaled slowly. The days each felt like a roller coaster ride. One moment they would have a clue and hope but they next, they'd be lost again. But they only had about ten days left so...

"It's worth a try... it is not as if we have any other leads..."

Autumn nodded and looked at the picture again. That was the truth. Doing something was better than just sitting and waiting.

Gabe rubbed his temples, feeling the pressure as he wondered if his people had found out anything. If they had, then even if this locker turned out to be of no use, they would have something. "Alright, let's not waste any time. We need to find out where Mrs. Jenkins is now. Do you have any idea where she might be staying?"

"She mentioned moving to a health center, but I can't remember the name. Let me check the address where she sent the card from. Hurriedly, Autumn looked through the things, hoping to find something that might be helpful to them. And breathed a sigh of relief when she finally found it.

Gabe handed her his phone, and Autumn dialed the number with slightly trembling fingers. The phone rang several times before a voice answered.

"Cedar Grove Health Center, how may I assist you?"

"Hello," Autumn began, trying to keep her voice steady. "I'm trying to reach Mrs. Jenkins. She used to live here, and we were wondering if we could speak to her."

There was a pause on the other end, and Autumn could hear the clicking of a keyboard. "I'm afraid Mrs. Jenkins isn't doing very well. She has advanced Alzheimer's and doesn't remember much. She might not be able to speak on the phone. You could leave a message. When she is in her more lucid moments, we can pass the message."

"Is there any way we can get more information from her? Can we visit?"

"Visits will be distressing for her. Or... actually, a close friend of Mrs. Jenkins is visiting her tomorrow. He's been diagnosed sick and wants to come say goodbye. Maybe you can come with him and he might be able to help you out. Having visitors together to try and remember might be better and less unsettling than having to recognise each person individually."

"A friend?" As far as Autumn knew Mrs Jenkins was too prickly to have too many friends. And most of her friends were already gone.. Feeling an inkling of worry, she tried to ask casually, " Could you tell me the name of this friend? There is a possibility I might know him..."

"Sure. Let me check... Hold on a moment please....Its Mr Gregory Savoy..."

Gabe and Autumn exchanged a look of horror at the mention of Mr. Savoy. He was the last person they wanted to encounter or have meet Mrs Jenkins."

Autumn's hand clenched around the phone, knuckles turning white.

"Mr. Savoy?" Autumn asked, her voice strained, hoping that she had heard the woman wrong. "Did you say Mr. Savoy is visiting Mrs. Jenkins tomorrow?"

"Yes," the receptionist replied. "He's a close friend of hers. He was actually here today, but we had to send him back because she didn't recognize him. That's why he's coming again tomorrow."

Autumn felt a chill run down her spine. "Do you know what time he's coming?" Did Gregory really find out the location of the figurine? What would that man do now? Could he be dangerous to Mrs Jenkins. She wondered if she needed to warn the people at the care centre...

Meanwhile, the receptionist hesitated at the question. "I don't have the exact time, but he arrived in the morning. So he might come in the morning as well. Would you like to leave your names, so he knows you're coming?"

"No, that's alright. We'll come by ourselves and then talk to him," she replied hastily.

The receptionist sounded a bit puzzled but remained polite. "Okay, see you tomorrow then."

As Autumn disconnected the call, she let out a breath and asked shakily, " Could this really be a key to stop him from getting Arabelle? I mean... can't we just prove that we are better parents for Arabelle?"

Gabe looked at Arabelle carefully. The girl was too innocent. Even now she was looking at everything through rose colored glasses.

"Autumn, why do you think that Gregory is trying to get his hands on this?"

"Because it has something against him. I know that. But is it as important as getting Arabelle? If we are arriving at dead ends, maybe we should go the other way about it."

"Autumn, the only way to permanently get rid of that man is to prove that he is... unsafe and may mean harm to Arabelle.."

Autumn stiffened at that, understanding the implications and then paled. The lawyer had been trying to tell her this repeatedly but she'd been unwilling to accept it. And yet, now that she looked at Gabe, she could see the inevitable. If they wanted to get Arabelle forever, then only exposing him as an unworthy parent might not work... she would have to work on herself to make some revelations and prove them... Only by exposing his true self would Arabelle be safe...

"But then... what about Arabelle?" She asked tremulously. Her sister would have to live with the fact that her birth father was a...

"Arabelle... we will protect her..."

Chapter 578: Investigation

"Are you sure we should let him meet, Mrs Jenkins?" Autumn asked hesitantly as she looked at the room. Somehow, Gabe's person had managed to invade the care centre, set up a listening and video device in the room, within a night. Even though this was good for them in a way, he suddenly realized that her husband was probably a powerful man. And that scared her.

Gregory Savoy was a powerful man too. Only, his power was limited to the police services and his connections to politics. And yet, despite his limited power, he had almost succeeded in ruining her and her mother. So, in comparison, if she ever ended up on the wrong side of Gabe, what would he do?

She jumped when his hand grazed her and he looked at her with a raised brow. He had such gentle eyes... She shook her head. She was scaring herself for no reason. Gabe Frost was too soft in the heart to do her any harm.

"He's here." She nodded and immediately clenched her hands, her fingers gripping. She saw him wince and give her a look from the corner of her eye but ignored it as she stared at the screen intently where Gregory had just entered the room with a doctor.

Mrs. Jenkins sat in her chair, looking frail but dignified, her hands resting on a book she had been 'reading'. The doctor tried to introduce the two and they watched as Mrs Jenkins showed no sign of recognition.

"Mrs. Jenkins," the doctor spoke softly, trying again to coax a response from her. "Do you know who this is? He is a friend of yours from B-Town? Do you remember B-town?"

Mrs Jenkins seemed to have a flicker of recognition at the name of her town but that too soon faded and she continued to stare blankly ahead, her lips pressing into a thin line, giving no indication that she recognized the man in front of her.

Gregory Savoy, however was not put out about this. Instead he made of a show of his concern, and spoke, voice dripping with false sincerity. "It's alright, Doctor. I understand. Just give us a moment, please. I'll just say goodbye now even if she is not able to recognise me."

The doctor hesitated, his eyes flicking between Mrs. Jenkins and Savoy. "Alright, but I'll be just outside if you need anything,". His reluctance was obvious. He didn't want his patient disturbed for no good reason.

However, as soon as they were alone, Savoy's demeanor changed, the mask of concern disappearing from his face. He sat opposite Mrs. Jenkins, and gave a sigh worthy of a theatrical award, "Oh, Mrs. Jenkins," he murmured, his voice taking on the patronizing tone that Autumn recognized all too well. "It's such a pity your condition is worsening so rapidly. A few months ago, you still had many more moments of clarity. You even remembered to send a condolence card to Katherine's daughter... Autumn."

At the mention of Autumn's name, Mrs. Jenkins's eyes snapped into focus. For a brief moment, it was as if the fog had lifted, and she was her old self again. The sudden clarity in her eyes was undeniable, and Savoy's lips curled into a triumphant smile while Autumn's hands clenched tighter. While she could not see Mrs Jenkins' expression very well, the flinch was undeniably a reaction from her.

"Ah, there you are," he said softly, leaning closer. "You remember Autumn, don't you?"

Mrs. Jenkins's gaze sharpened, and she glared at him, her hands trembling on her lap. "Get out," she whispered, her voice hoarse from having spoken in a long while but still firm like her old self.

Savoy chuckled, shaking his head. "Now, now, no need for hostility. I just wanted to see how you were doing. After all, I do care about your well-being."

"You care about no one but yourself," Mrs. Jenkins retorted, her voice gaining strength. "Stay away from Autumn. Stay away from Katherine and her family! You deserve to be punished for your sins."

"You're in no position to make demands, Mrs. Jenkins," he said coldly. "Your precious Autumn is in over her head, and she knows it. She'll never escape what's coming. As for staying away from Katherine? Don't worry, I have no intention of going to her anytime soon... But I need something from you... I'm sure you remember it..."

"You will never have it. As long as Katherine is alive, you will never get close to Autumn. You underestimated Katherine, didn't you? And in the end she outsmarted you. Autumn will do the same."

Savoy leaned back before leaning close to Mrs. Jenkins. He then whispered something in her ear that had her gasping for breath as she tried to raise her hand and point it at him.

Stepping back, he watched her try to breathe, before speaking, "Mrs. Jenkins. I need that thing. And if you can't give it to me, I will make sure that Autumn does not have it either."

With that, he turned to the door and quickly called out, "Doctor, please come in. I think Mrs. Jenkins is having trouble breathing. I think her asthma is working up..."

The doctor rushed back into the room and quickly scanned the surroundings. "Mrs. Jenkins, are you alright?" he asked, quickly moving to check her vitals.

Savoy stepped back, feigning worry. "I don't know what happened. She seemed fine, and then suddenly she was struggling to breathe."

The doctor shot him a suspicious look but focused on Mrs. Jenkins, who was wheezing, her breaths coming in shallow gasps. He reached for the oxygen mask and placed it over her face, murmuring soothing words as he did so.

"Mrs. Jenkins, just breathe slowly," the doctor said softly. "You're going to be okay."

Mrs. Jenkins's breathing began to stabilize under the medication. And her eyes, though still filled with pain, regained some of their clarity. She clutched the doctor's hand, her grip surprisingly strong and wheezed, "Get rid of that man."

Chapter 579: Lean On Me

"What did he say to Mrs Jenkins?" Autumn asked aloud as she watched the doctor glance angrily at Savoy and ask him to leave.

Even as she wondered this, she heard Gabe say, "Autumn, you need to let go."

She frowned, "Let go? How can I let this go? What are you talking about..."

She heard him grimace even as her eyes remained glued to the screen, "Autumn you need to let my hand go... unless you want me to bleed?"

Autumn frowned at that.. Let his hand go? Bleed? It took her a moment to realize but then she looked down and her eyes widened... She'd been clutching his hand and wrist with both her hands in a vice like grip...

Autumn looked down at his hand and gulped. There were crescent moon like marks on his hand.. All ten of them.. And some were even bleeding...

"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry.I'll get some ointment right away!"

She jumped up and rushed to the bathroom, her heart pounding with anxiety. How did she not realize she was holding onto him? Gabe watched her go, a small, amused smile playing on his lips despite the discomfort. She looked so horrified as if she'd stabbed him...When she returned, she had a tube of antiseptic ointment and a few bandages in hand.

"Antiseptic is fine, Autumn. I don't need bandages." He tried to speak up but she gave him a look and quickly grabbed his hand." Just let me take care of that," she said sitting close to him on the couch. He smiled as he looked at her down turned face. She seemed to be applying that with the focus of a surgeon.. Her eyes narrowed and nose all scrunched up.

"The tables have turned finally... Instead of me applying the medicine... its the other way..."

Autumn grimaced at that and pointed out," Well, but you were applying medicine on wounds given by others.. while I gave you this..."

As she said this, she quietened down. She'd actually done that... She'd hurt him unintentionally... Hadn't Nora warned her about something like this.. That she might hurt him easily.

Gabe looked at the sudden pensive frown on her face and frowned. The girl kept getting lost in her own thoughts. Even now she was applying medicine around the wound...

Clicking his fingers in front of her, he raised an eyebrow," So? Autumn, these are nothing... just battle scars..."

She smiled and looked away, feeling emotional.. She didn't know why but suddenly she felt like crying. Just a few minutes ago, she'd watched Mrs Jenking being threatened and even as old and as sick she was, she'd had the strength to tell that man to get away.. while she lacked even that... She'd had to rely on...

Gabe seemed to have sensed her mood as he made her look up,"Autumn, sometimes its okay, to lean on others. Stop overthinking. You"

"Will you lean on me? If you ever need it?" Autumn asked him and watched as he went quiet... and turned back to the video where Mrs Jenkins was now being helped into the bed...

"I'll see if they can cut out the noise factor to see what Savoy told Mrs Jenkins. But here is something interesting..."

Autumn stared at him, realizing that he had not answered her and moved her gaze away. It had been a stupid question as it is. What had she done for him to rely on her... So, pushing away her feelings, she decided to concentrate on the matter at hand.

"What is interesting?"

"He didn't question her about the whereabouts of the figurine. No, he wanted to know if she would have a reaction over your name or whatever it was that he told her. Why? Why go all the way there only to look for a reaction. He is trying to get some information from her..."

"He went there to agitate her? Because... he doesn't know what he is looking for?" Autumn answered the unasked question.

"Yep... which is good. But also explains the burglary attempt, you feeling someone following you and that car trailing us. He knows something is up, but he doesn't know where that thing is. And since he's known longer about this than you... it means he's already negated other options... so he hopes to use you... Autumn, do you remember anything that might have been discussed only between you and your mother?"

Autumn shook her head, "There've been many things, but nothing stands out..."

"Autumn, I need you to really think about it. Think about any conversations you had with your mom, anything that might have seemed out of place or unusual. Even the smallest detail could be important."

"I'm trying to think but I cannot get it..."

"It's okay... Just take your time. And I'll start looking at things from another perspective..."

"Another perspective?"

Gabe nodded, a far-away look on his face, " Yes. Just go and rest for now... We can do this later." He watched Autumn leave with a confused look on her face and sighed."

"I need you to look into something. Katherine Savoy's death. I want every detail, no matter how small. This might not be an accident at all.. It could be a murder.. also find out where Mrs Savoy was coming from..."

As he ordered the other person, he clenched his jaw, if what Gregory Savoy had told Mrs Jenkins was true... then that man had just gotten more dangerous... and keeping Arabelle and Autumn out of his clutches, even more dangerous.

"I got rid of Katherine and the proof she had against me. And soon, I will have Autumn. Tell her that when she comes looking for you... Tell her that she was supposed to be with me, always.. you'll do that for me, won't you? Play the person in the middle the way you did for Kathering and me? Do it okay... be a good friend...if you remember it of course..."

Chapter 580: Thoughts

It was the middle of the night when Gabe woke up next. He'd been thinking about the murder when he fell asleep. As he padded outside and poured himself a drink, his thoughts however, were different. Usually, at the hour when thoughts of Her plagued him, tonight he was thinking about Autumn and her words.

Outside, he sat on the swing and looked up at the sky. It had been so long... "Ari... are you okay up there? You are aren't you? Away from all the monsters that haunted you? Away from the voices and the hurt? hmm?"

Of course the only answer her got was the blowing of the wind. He inhaled deeply, trying to suppress the tears that threatened to fall. " You must be okay, alright? Do you remember the time when we used to play together, you were such a snooty little brat...I... I'm sorry, Ari...for not being able to protect you... for not giving you a choice in your protection."

His thoughts moved to the peaceful time that they'd spent together in the haven he prepared for her," That was a good place, wasn't it? We were so farther away from everything..."

After a moment of silence, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying to think back to those days. Unexpectedly, what appeared before him was not Arabelle, but a pair of big doe-loke eyes, asking if he would lean on her.

His eyes snapped open in confusion and horror. He looked around, as if he'd cheated on Arabelle.

Gabe breathed deeply, trying to curb the confusion within him. His eyes traced the little scars that Autumn had left on him and he sighed. This wasn't cheating on Arabelle. It was something that he had just not expected. And that is why it had syumped him.

He gulped and tried to explain himself," Ari, I... Autumn is not you. I know I've been protective of her since I meet her. But its not you. So you don't have to worry. Of course you never did worry..."

"Autumn... she is different from you. You were frail and yet not strong enough to accept it. To accept help. But Autumn... she looks frail too, brings out my protective instincts like you did, but she is strong. She is able to accept help when she needs it and she wants to return that as well."

He snorted a bit and sipped his drink," Can you believe she wants me to lean on her? She looked cute when she said that..."

The smile on his face disappeared the next moment as he sighed," I was tempted, Ari. I was tempted to lean on her. To hold her and get rid of this loneliness that you've left behind. But she's too innocent. I can't burden her with my darkness, can I?"

Carefully, he traced the marks," I think I like her... as a life partner. I know its not going to be a forever marriage but if it was... I think I might not mind it too much. I like playing house with her."

"I'm quite a fool, aren't I? Always wanting to play house. Ari... I'll never love or have a family. You know that. But playing family is good too..." "

Autumn had woken up scared. The sound of the door opening and closing in the middle of the night had her almost calling the police when she realized that an intruder might not make too much sound. So it was probably, Gabe.

Looking out of the window, she saw him come to sit on the swing, a glass in his hand... and look up at the sky...

He looked so lonely and dejected. The thought shook her. Gabe Frost was a powerful man with a powerful presence. There was no lack of people willing to fawn over him. She'd seen it herself... And yet, seeing him sitting there, looking at the sky, he seemed the loneliest and saddest man on the planet...

She turned away from the window, feeling like an intruder. She didn't know why she felt like that but she also understood that he wouldn't want her to see him like this.

However, even as she backed away, a part of her questioned, "You didn't want anyone seeing you at your lowest, did you Autumn? And yet, did he step away? He came to you, without a care for your boundaries, just so he could be there for you. So... why can't you be there for him? Why think about how he might not want it... Think about how much he needs it..."

Autumn turned back and looked at his lonely back again. He did look like he needed to not be alone at the moment.

She sighed and finally nodded to herself. Making a decision. She'd offered for him to lean on her. Maybe she could give that offer again... Show it to him that she was there for him.

As he stared into the darkness, trying to reconcile his emotions, the silence was interrupted by the sound of footsteps. With a frown, he looked back to see Autumn, wrapped in a cozy blanket, appeared at the door, looking hesitant as she explained, "I saw you sitting here. So I came to ask... are you okay?"

For a moment, he wanted to ask her to leave but despite that, he made another error in judgement. Instead, he extended his hand and invited her to sit with him.

She came and sat next to him and he felt his emotions settle a bit and smiled, "I just couldn't sleep. I'm sorry for disturbing your rest..."

She shook her head, " No, you didn't disturb me. So, did you have that nightmare again?"

He frowned at that and sent her a sharp look... how did she know about his nightmares?

Seeing his confusion, she explained hurriedly, "That night when we stayed over in C town.. you had a nightmare...you were sweating and muttering..."

Gabe felt himself go still..He'd had a nightmare and not woken up from it... that was odd...