

Benefits 601

Chapter 601: Gabe's Home

It was a hotel. She was sure of that. As Autumn walked into Gabe's house, she felt a sense of disappointment. She was sure she would be able to find some more about Gabe once she went to his home. Maybe catch a glimpse of his dead wife. But here she was, in a place that looked like a luxurious hotel. There was nothing here to say that this is where someone lived.

As she walked Gabe walk into a room, that he'd told her he would prepare for her, she sighed. Why had she made that bet with Nora. Now she was caught. The woman had warned her that she should question Gabe about Arabelle. But she was scared.

If only her little sister had come here as well. But no, she'd found Caius and Dora and agreed for a sleepover as if they were best of friends. The little girl had practically invited herself. For a moment, she'd felt uneasy about sending her to Lucien Frost's home where the kids were staying but then, she'd realized that her sister was safe among the Frosts. They were a protective lot.

Of course, Lucien assuring her that they had a separate kids room with cameras that she could access was enough to satisfy her as well.

Gabe returned then and she almost jumped, "I've out fresh beddings and aired the room a bit. You can go take a rest. We'll return tomorrow then..."

Autumn watched him go towards another room and gulped, trying to gather her courage.

"Gabe?" She watched as he stopped and turned around. "About Arabelle..."

Gabe walked to her then and held her reassuringly, his hands on her shoulders, "Autumn, Arabelle is going to be fine. But if you're still worried, we can go get her."

Autumn shook her head. She'd meant to ask about his wife... Trying to find a way to gently broach the subject, she looked around and blurted out, "You have a beautiful house. Was it decorated by your wife."

She watched the visible change. It was like turning off a switch. Just now, he'd been gentle and warm and now he looked colder than ice.

"No. My wife, had never been here. We used to live in a different country, then."

"Different country? But why?"

"Why do you want to know?" Gabe asked, his posture stiff as a board.

Autumn wanted to give up then, as she felt a shiver of fear. This was probably the look that those who opposed him received. It scared her. And yet, she remembered that she needed to know. So she raised her chin and answered, "I'm curious."

"Curiosity can be dangerous," Gabe replied, his tone sharp. He took another step back, "My wife and I had our reasons for living abroad. It's not something I wish to discuss."

"I know her name was Arabelle." Autumn blurted out. She didn't know what else to say. And she didn't understand why she felt this urgency to know about that woman. The one he loved. She'd seen firsthand, the camaraderie between the brothers. And knew that none of them would choose to live away if they could be together. But Gabe had chosen to live away with his wife.

Gabe's eyes darkened, and his expression turned steely. He stepped closer to Autumn, his voice low and menacing. "Who told you about Arabelle?" he demanded, his grip on her shoulders tighten this time, scaring her and almost hurting her. "Was it one of the girls?"

Autumn's heart raced, and she opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, Gabe's eyes narrowed. "No, wait. You knew this before we came here. That's why you were behaving differently on the way here, weren't you?"

Autumn took a step back, trying to put some distance between them. "Gabe, please, I just wanted to understand—"

"Understand what?" Gabe interrupted, his voice rising. "That part of my life is over. It's none of your business... Who told you about her?"

Autumn winced then. His grip had now tightened painfully and she whispered, " Gregory Savoy." She felt the urge to flee now, scared that Gabe would hurt her.

But she failed to realize that Gabe had already let go of her shoulders the moment she winced and was even now standing there as horrified as her, feeling guilty for hurting her.

Before she could escape, Gabe quickly held her against his chest, as he murmured, " I'm sorry for just now, Autumn."

"I'm sorry for just now, Autumn," Gabe repeated, his voice softer, filled with regret. He released her slightly, giving her space but not letting her go completely. "I didn't mean to scare you or hurt you. It's just... Arabelle is a very sensitive topic for me."

Autumn stood frozen. Though she'd been scared of the outburst, it gave her an insight on just how much he was hurting. She knew then that she needed to give up. She wouldn't hurt him or question him again.

So, she sighed, " Its...I'm sorry. I shouldn't have...You must be hurting..."

"Autumn." His voice had her looking up at him and she looked up at him then. She saw the pain in his eyes and blinked, her guilt and remorse over powering her.

But then he turned and walked away, without looking back. It was only as he reached the door to the other room that he paused, " Arabelle was not right in the head. She was obsessed with Demetri and being with him, making her a danger to Demetri and Nora, so I had to keep her away... Autumn...the reason I don't want to talk about her is not because I loved her too much... It is because it reminds me that loving her was the biggest mistake of my life. If I could turn back time and return to the past, I would have stopped loving her..."

She felt his hurt then. It was something she could barely comprehend. Without a word, she walked to him and touched his arm," Gabe..." He turned to look at her and the desolate look in his eyes seemed to burn her.

She closed the distance between them then, and cupped his face," From this moment on, you're not allowed to love her." She didn't know where she got the confidence to tip toe then and kiss his lips...

Chapter 602: An Invitation

Gabe held her gently, her soft order resonating with something inside of him. The kiss was tender, filled with a mixture of gratitude and unspoken emotions. When he pulled away, he brushed a strand of hair from her face and whispered, "You should go get some rest."

Autumn looked at him then and slowly shook her head. She didn't want him to be alone tonight. He'd have those nightmares again and think of his dead wife. But then what should they do? They had to drive back tomorrow so she couldn't ask him to sit out with her.

Gabe seemed to have sensed her intent and dilemma. Without a word, he stepped into the room and said," Go, Autumn. Its a long day tomorrow."

She shook her head, then," I don't want to. I want to stay with you."

Gabe raised an eyebrow, a small smile playing on his lips, " That is a risky move, Autumn Frost. Go, sleep."

She raised her chin again, a gesture that was starting to amuse as well as attract Gabe. " I don't want to."

He stepped back then, " Autumn, I know you want to comfort me, but tonight, is not a good time. If you come here now, there will be no turning back..."

She noticed his actions and words. He'd made place for her to enter even though he spoke words of caution. His eyes never left hers as he gestured for her to enter. Autumn hesitated for only a moment before taking a step forward, her heart racing.

The moment she'd stepped into the room, Gabe let go of the door, pulling her into his arms as he bent down and kissed her. She kissed him back, her hands threading through his hair.

Gabe broke off the kiss gently, his forehead resting against hers as he whispered, "Thank you, Autumn. For being here. For everything."

She opened her eyes in confusion then. Hadn't he warned her about coming inside? She glanced at him and then the bed, feeling mortified. She'd almost thrown herself at him and he'd rejected her. She should have taken the message and not...

Red faced, she looked away and whispered, "I'll go."

However, her wrist was caught in the next moment as Gabe stopped her from leaving, "Where are you going?"

Autumn looked away... "I..."

Instead of saying anything, Gabe pulled her towards the bed and sat down on the edge patting the space beside him, "Sit here."

Autumn hesitated, her feet frozen in place as she tried to make sense of the situation. He was not attracted to her but because he could read her like a book, he knew that she was mortified and now he was going to console her? But she didn't want that! She wanted to be there for him not the other way round! She needed to make an excuse before she lost all her dignity. "Gabe, I really should—"

But before she could finish her sentence, Gabe gently but firmly pulled her towards him, making her sit on his lap. She gasped, her eyes widening as she felt his desire beneath her, as he held her close and whispered, "I want you, Autumn. So much that my body is aching..."

She looked into his eyes in confusion. "Then take me..." She whispered softly. That is what she had been expecting for tonight. She was prepared for it... she thought so at least.

Gabe, however, shook his head, " Uh huh. You're going to kill me with your honesty, sweet girl. Not tonight."

"But why? Is it because that I will get scared? I'll try not to..." Autumn tried to justify herself but he shook his head and stopped her. She tried to speak, to claim that she would not be scared. But she knew she couldn't guarantee that.

And then she felt it.. His hands on the zipper of her dress, pulling down the tab. His hand sliding beneath the fabric as he slowly but surely slid off her dress off her shoulders. He helped her stand then and she stood there, between his legs as her dress fell to her waist, and then his hands slowly pushed it down her hips, letting it fall on the floor, leaving her standing only in her undergarments.

She saw the desire and heat in his eyes and that was when she realized what it meant to hold the power in a relationship. What it was to be desired by someone she liked. Her body reacted to his gaze and instead of wanting to cover up, she wanted to... take off her clothes, see his reaction. Did she have the courage...

"Autumn...tonight.. sleep with me... just like this..."

He picked her up then, bridal style and gently laid her down on the bed, his eyes glittering with desire. Ever so slowly, he lay down next to her, his lips touching hers as he looked into her eyes. And then holding her gaze with his, he started to place small kisses all over her. Her hands clenched on the bed as Gabe's head slowly moved towards her breasts. She expected him to loosen her clothes then, but instead his mouth latched onto one nipple through the barrier of lace.. And then, he gave the same treatment to the other peak, making her almost jump off the bed as she felt herself reacting violently to his touch...

His name was a pained whisper on her lips as he moved downwards. He paused at her waist and nipped lightly, making her jump. She never knew they could be like this. He came back to her then, taking her hand in his as he brought it to him..

Autumn gulped. She could feel it, even through the clothing, she felt how hot it was... Wanting to feel more, she squeezed gently and almost pulled her hand back as she heard him give a groan. Was she not making him feel good? Determined to make him feel like he was making her, she made a decision and slipped her hand into the waistband...

Chapter 603: A Prize

It was a long time later that Autumn stared at Gabe, pulling off his t-shirt. Watching him strip after what they'd just done made her blush. Were they going to go for round two? She didn't know. After what they'd just experienced, she wanted more, yet she was scared.

"Are you admiring my body?" Gabe teased, catching her gaze.

"Yes," Autumn answered, feeling a bit... speechless. She should have denied it, but that would probably mean turning her head away from him. And he looked so beautiful.

Gabe chuckled at her straightforward response, a playful glint in his eyes as he walked back to the bed. "Well, I'm flattered. I'll work hard to keep it pleasing for you," he said, his voice low and teasing. He lay down beside her, the mattress dipping under his weight.

Autumn watched him, her heart racing with a mix of anticipation and nervousness as he slipped under the covers. She couldn't help but wonder if they were going to do 'the deed' tonight.

As if sensing her thoughts, Gabe groaned and covered her eyes with his hand. "Autumn Frost, you have no idea what you're doing to me," he muttered. "I already feel like a schoolboy for coming all over your hand... and now... close your eyes, we're going to sleep."

"Why?" Autumn asked quickly.

Gabe paused and took his hand off her eyes. He leaned over her then, his eyes scanning her face. She looked even more beautiful and contented in the dim light.

Seeing his silence, Autumn decided to repeat her question. "I meant, why not now?"

Gabe sighed, a mix of amusement and exasperation in his eyes. "Because," he said softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face, "if we don't, I'm not sure I'll have the willpower to stop, and I don't want to rush this. Especially not tonight."

She continued to send him that confused look and he pulled her to him so that she was laying on top of him and explained, "Our first time together is not going to be because you wanted to console me. You're

not a consolation prize, Autumn. You're a treasure that I've stumbled onto. And I'm going to take my sweet time plundering this treasure...In the future, when we do it, I do not want you to ever doubt that we were together because I wanted you. Not just a warm body."

Autumn's heart fluttered at his words, feeling the sincerity and affection radiating from him. She lay on top of him, their bodies pressed close, and she could feel the steady beat of his heart beneath her and her own racing wildly. She was falling for this man. Or maybe she'd already fallen. She had no idea.

Her heart raced then as she realized what she was thinking. She was in love with her husband? The very thought made her breath catch in her throat.

Even as she tried to understand this, his hands traced soothing patterns on her back as he questioned her, "Autumn? Do you understand?" he asked softly, his eyes searching hers carefully.

And that is when another thought came to her. She couldn't let him know. Not when she was feeling so raw over the fact that he was absolutely in love with his dead wife. He may hate her and have regrets but that was all there because of love.

Autumn lifted her head to look at him, trying to mask her swirling emotions as she nodded. She didn't know what she understood, what he'd asked her. But she knew that she would agree to anything he said.

"You're thinking too much," he whispered. "Relax, Autumn. Just be here with me."

She gave him a small smile, nodding slightly. "I'm trying."

Gabe's hand moved to cup her cheek, his thumb brushing against her skin. "You don't have to try so hard," he said gently. "Just let it happen. Sleep for now"

Autumn nodded again, leaning into his touch. She needed to focus on the present, on the warmth of his embrace, and the comfort of his presence. Her feelings could stay hidden for now. There was no need to complicate things. She'd be with him until they were ready to divorce.

Eventually, the steady rhythm of Gabe's heartbeat and the soothing warmth of his body lulled Autumn into a peaceful sleep. Her breathing evened out, and her face relaxed, nestled comfortably against his chest.

Gabe lay there for a while, holding her gently. He waited until he was sure she was deeply asleep before he let himself relax. He opened his eyes and stared at her sleeping face, feeling an unexpected sense of peace wash over him. Her earlier words echoed in his mind, reminding him not to think of Arabelle.

As he traced her features with his eyes, he felt himself go still. This was how he used to spend the nights with Arabelle. On nights when she was unwell, they'd just lay side by side. But he'd never felt this peace. There had always been worry about what tomorrow bring.

Gently, he pushed back a strand of hair from Autumn's face and sighed, "You have no idea what you've given me. Thank you, Autumn for pushing away the cold in my heart...I didn't even know it had been there all this time."

For the first time in a long while, he felt at peace, ready to face whatever the future held without a hint of worry. He knew that whatever happened, they'd at least be together.

Unable to help himself, he pulled her closer still and let her warmth lull him to sleep. This was what he had imagined life would be like in the past. A new day to look forward to everyday with the woman he would love forever. It was only as he lay there, almost asleep, that an errant thought entered his subconscious- He could spend a lifetime with Autumn...The thought however would soon be forgotten in the morning as he returned to wakefulness..

Chapter 604: Bad News

When Gabe fell asleep with Autumn nestled in his arms, he didn't anticipate waking up to this unusual sight. He blinked, but the view didn't change. Her feet were near his face where her head had been and he was holding onto her legs... She had pretty legs as well...so soft... and it was fortunate he didn't have a foot fetish. He wondered how she had ended up in such a position. Carefully lifting his head, he saw her peacefully sleeping face resting on his legs.

Gabe couldn't help but smile at the absurdity of it. This was a first for him. Then, an idea sparked in his mind. With a mischievous grin, he reached out and gently tickled the sole of her foot. She stirred and shifted her foot. So, he tickled again... Still half-asleep, she tried to kick him away, mumbling incoherently. Gabe caught her ankle with ease and, before she could react, he playfully nipped at her calf.

This time the reaction was instant as her leg jerked, almost hitting him on the nose and as her eyes snapped open and she sat up abruptly, wide-eyed and bewildered. She blinked carefully, taking in the scene and questioned, "What are you doing down there?"

"Me? Look around, baby, it's you who is down there..."

He watched as her mouth rounded in an 'o' and quickly tugged at her wrist, "Come here. I think someone needs a wake up kiss," he said, leaning in.

Autumn giggled at this and pushed at his bare in protest, "Gabe, no. I have't..."

Before she could say anything, his lips were already softly pressing against hers. She melted then, her fingers clenching on his chest instead of pushing him away...

Suddenly, there was a ringing in her ears. She frowned. Why were her ears ringing? Was she sick or was it because of this powerful kiss? But then, Gabe broke the kiss with a groan and cursed as he leaned over her and picked up his phone. It took her a moment.. It wasn't her ears that were ringing... but the phone.

Just as she was distracted with her thoughts, Gabe's hand caught her wrist and he threatened, "If you keep doing that, I cannot answer the phone..."

She frowned and looked down... before trying to jerk her hand back! Why were her fingers playing with his nipples. But her hand was still in his and he did not let go. Before she could struggle, Gabe answered the phone, "Lucy. You je*k! Can't you let a person sleep..."

Autumn's eyes widened. Lucy? As in Lucien, right? He was supposed to have checked the USB for them...

Before she could say more, Gabe let out a litany of curses and then paused. Autumn tried to strain and listen what was being said but felt her heartbeat restlessly as she looked at the grave look on Gabe's face.

Gabe sighed deeply, rubbing his forehead. "Alright, tell me exactly what happened," he said, his tone serious. He listened for a moment, then spoke again. "So, you're saying the USB is corrupted? How bad is it?"

Autumn's heart sank. Corrupted? She bit her lip, anxiety bubbling up inside her.

Gabe continued listening, his expression growing darker. "I see. So, the data is partially accessible, but the most crucial parts are severely damaged. And you're saying it will take at least a few more days to try and recover anything useful, if at all?"

He closed his eyes briefly, clearly frustrated. "Alright, keep me updated on any progress. Thanks, Lucy." He ended the call and looked at Autumn, who was watching him with wide, concerned eyes.

"What's going on?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper, even though she had heard everything. And yet, she wished he would deny everything. Maybe this was a nightmare because these past few days had been like a dream...

"There's a message from your mother on the pendrive. Lucy is going to share it with us. But other than that, whatever it is...it is going to take time..."

"Enough time that we will not be able to present it in court?" Autumn asked softly.

Gabe sighed and nodded...

"Then, is Arabelle in danger? Can we run away? I.... Gabe, I never would have been able to escape Gregory with Arabelle.. but you can. Can't we take Arabelle and go somewhere? Where she would be safe? I don't want her to be like me, scared to even talk to any man or... It took me a long time to even..."

Gabe pulled her close, cupping her face in his hands. "Autumn, look at me. Running away is not an option. Believe me, I've tried that in the past. The bad only becomes stronger. We can't let Gregory win like that. Taking Arabelle away would only help strengthen his case, and Arabelle deserves better than a life on the run, constantly looking over her shoulder."

"But what if we lose the case?" she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes.

"We won't lose," he said firmly. "I know it's hard to believe right now, especially with this setback, but we've come too far to give up. Lucy is the best, and if anyone can recover that data, it's him. And even without it, we have other ways to prove that he is not suitable."

"I know you're scared, Autumn," he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. "But I need you to trust me. We will win this case, and Arabelle will be safe. Gregory won't hurt you ever again."

Autumn nodded and closed her eyes. She didn't know what the future held, but the thought of losing her sister was not something she was willing to accept. Just then, she heard the beep of a message on Gabe's phone and watched as he opened it.

It was the file that Lucy had extracted. And soon her mother appeared on the screen, as she spoke swiftly, "Autumn, I sincerely hope that you never have to use this video or even see it. But if you've found it, and need to use it, then do it without hesitation. Be strong my girl.. I am sorry that I did not..."

And then the screen went blank...

Chapter 605: Character

Gabe looked down at the man who had been sneering at them. So, he had been the one who'd told Autumn about Arabelle. The question was if he'd been able to connect with Elena yet or not. And so, Gregory had probably not expected him to be present here. Too bad. This was his first mistake.

The courtroom was heavy with tension as they waited for the judge to arrive and yet, Gregory's demeanor was smug, almost taunting, as if he already knew the outcome in his favor.

And it would have been, if Gabe had not kept an eye on the judge. Gregory Savoy had actually managed to threaten and bribe the judge! The fool. Did this man really think Gabe would not be onto him. He kept an eye on the man as the judge entered the courtroom, watching him pale. Good. Let this be the second blow to Savoy.

Judge Shelly Holden was known for being as clean as a fickle and strict in the courtroom. The woman could not be threatened or bribed. as she took her seat, her piercing gaze swept over the room, landing briefly on Gregory and then him.

As expected, Gregory's lawyer stood up with a grave expression, "Your honor... Judge Franklin..."

"He is unwell and has taken an indefinite leave. Do you have a problem with me presiding, attorney Bennett?"

"No. Of course not, Your honor."

Judge Shelly Holden adjusted her glasses and leaned forward slightly, "Very well, then. Proceed, Mr. Bennett."

"Your Honor, I would like to start by presenting two key facts that establish my client's character and intentions. First, Gregory Savoy has demonstrated his upstanding character by voluntarily relinquishing any claims to his daughter, Arabelle, as well as all marital property. This selfless act showcases his willingness to prioritize his daughter's well-being over his own interests."

As Bennett spoke, Gregory straightened in his seat, his smug expression replaced by one of solemnity, as if he were a martyr in this situation.

"Secondly, my client has served the public diligently as a competent police officer. His commendable service record speaks for itself. Furthermore, Mr. Savoy is preparing to run for mayor, intending to serve the city with the same dedication and integrity he has shown throughout his career. In the past, he had believed his absence to be in the best interest of his daughter. But now, the circumstances have changed. The reason for this is Miss Autumn's character. With your permission, we would like to present a few witnesses to the stand to provide insight into Miss Autumn's character and how it affects the custody of Mr Gregory's daughter- Arabelle."

Judge Holden nodded, her expression neutral. "Proceed."

"Your Honor, first I'd like to call upon Miss Bianca, a former close friend of Miss Autumn. Miss Bianca, could you please tell the court about your and Miss Autumn's friendship?"

"Yes, of course. Autumn and I were close friends for several years. In fact since childhood. I am actually a few years older than Autumn but we'd been playmates and used to go out a lot together. Even after she went to University, we stayed in touch."

"I see. So what happened between the two of you to make you drift apart?"

"She tried to seduce my then boyfriend. Now husband. Pierce and I have known Autumn since we were kids. We all grew up together, and in a way, I understand why she might have felt close to him. They had a history, too, but it was never romantic until that point. Autumn had always been very open about her feelings and desires, sometimes to a fault."

Bennett leaned in, his expression one of feigned sympathy. "So, you believe Autumn's actions were driven by her long-standing feelings for Pierce?"

Bianca nodded, her face somber. "Yes, I did. She probably thought it was natural to act on those feelings, but it was wrong. She knew Pierce and I were together. Her behavior showed a lack of respect for our relationship, and it hurt both of us deeply. It made me question her judgment and her ability to put others before herself. But that changed when I realized there was something else as well."

"What else?"

"She didn't have feelings for only Pierce. She wanted the attention of another man as well."

"Really? Who is that man? Did miss Autumn fall in love with another man."

"I don't know about her falling for someone else. I think she just likes to chase men who are not available to her. She wanted her step father."

The courtroom buzzed with shocked whispers at Bianca's last statement. Autumn's face paled, her breath quickening as she felt the weight of the accusation. She wanted to protest and speak up, but could feel the walls closing in on him. She then felt Gabe's hand holding her wrist and tried to calm down. He'd warned her this might happen... And she needed to stay strong for it...

"Order!" Judge Holden's voice cut through the noise, her gavel striking down firmly. "We will have order in this courtroom."

Bennett, with a look of calculated concern, turned back to Bianca. "Miss Bianca, can you elaborate on this claim? Are you suggesting that Miss Autumn had inappropriate feelings for her stepfather?"

"It wasn't just a suggestion. I saw the way she looked at him, how she would act around him. It was clear she was seeking his attention in a way that wasn't appropriate. But more than that, she was the biggest reason for her mother and Mr Savoy's break up. She tried to seduce him by pretending to be scared and called him to her bed. And then her mother appeared there..."

Aunt Savoy wanted to protect her daughter so she begged Mr Savoy to keep quiet about the matter. However, he made it clear that he would not live in the same house as her. It was why, Aunt Savoy sent her away. She hated Mr Savoy for it. I think this is the reason she wants to keep Arabelle with her. For revenge against Mr Savoy."

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"Order!" Judge Holden's voice cut through the noise, her gavel striking down firmly. "We will have order in this courtroom."

Bennett, with a look of calculated concern, turned back to Bianca. "Miss Bianca, can you elaborate on this claim? Are you suggesting that Miss Autumn had inappropriate feelings for her stepfather?"

"It wasn't just a suggestion. I saw the way she looked at him, how she would act around him. It was clear she was seeking his attention in a way that wasn't appropriate. But more than that, she was the biggest reason for her mother and Mr Savoy's break up. She tried to seduce him by pretending to be scared and called him to her bed. And then her mother appeared there..."

Aunt Savoy wanted to protect her daughter so she begged Mr Savoy to keep quiet about the matter. However, he made it clear that he would not live in the same house as her. It was why, Aunt Savoy sent her away. She hated Mr Savoy for it. I think this is the reason she wants to keep Arabelle with her. For revenge against Mr Savoy."

Chapter 607: Revenge

"Am I?" Gabe's voice was cold and cutting. "Or are you the one twisting the truth, driven by jealousy and a desire to ruin Miss Autumn's life?"

Bianca's eyes blazed with fury. "No, that's not true!"

"Then explain this", Gabe demanded, "Explain why you went to such lengths to malign Autumn's character and spreading rumors. You even tried to humiliate her at work and passed on information about her to unsavoury people. Wasn't it because you couldn't stand the thought of her being close to the man you love? Wasn't it because you wanted to eliminate any perceived threat to your relationship?"

"I was only trying to protect..." Bianca crumbled. As her eyes met Gregory Savoy's blazing angry ones, she knew that she'd lost badly. Gregory would not spare her... She tried hard to cover up," Even if I was lying about Pierce, I wasn't lying about her character. She did try to seduce her step father.. She is an enchantress! Why don't you look at yourself Gabriel Frost? How long did you know her before you married her! A man like you! She could trap you! What about the others? She..."

Gabe's voice however, cut through her screaming, hitting with the finality of a nail, "Your Honor, it's clear that Miss Bianca's testimony is driven by personal animosity rather than any objective truth. I request that her statements be struck from the record as they are biased and unreliable."

"Your Honor, I must object. Mr. Frost is making baseless accusations against my witness based on the actions of others, trying to discredit her without substantial proof. Miss Bianca's testimony is crucial to understanding the true character of Miss Autumn."

Gabe turned to face Bennett, his expression calm but steely. "Your Honor, Mr. Bennett can object all he wants, but the facts speak for themselves. Miss Bianca has admitted to personal bias and jealousy, which clearly taints her testimony."

Judge Holden looked between the two lawyers, her gaze stern. "Mr. Bennett, do you have any concrete evidence to counter Mr. Frost's claims and support Miss Bianca's accusations?"

Bennett hesitated, glancing at Bianca, whose face was now pale and stricken. "Your Honor, the testimonies of other community members corroborate Miss Bianca's account. Their concerns about Miss Autumn's behavior cannot be simply dismissed. Even if Miss Bianca agreed to stand here and testify due to her own personal reasons, others in the community have long known about Autumn's attempt to seduce Mr Savoy. When they first came to know, many believed this to be a misunderstanding and approached Mrs Savoy to clear up the matter. However, her silence told them everything..."

Gabe, however, gave a short laugh at that and interjected, "Your Honor, community gossip and hearsay do not equate to credible evidence, neither does someone's silence. We need tangible proof, not rumors and biased opinions. No one knows where the rumors appeared. Tell me, Mr Bennett, if this matter was between Mr Gregory Savoy, his wife and Autumn Savoy, then how did the others in the community learn of this? Do you have any witnesses who can stand here and claim that Autumn told them that she tried to seduce her stepfather?"

Bennett shifted uncomfortably. "Your Honor, while I concede that some of the testimonies are based on community perception, it is imperative that we consider the overall impression Miss Autumn has left on those around her."

Judge Holden, shook her head and looked down at the attorney sternly, "Overall impressions' are not sufficient grounds to condemn someone's character or determine their suitability as a guardian. We need concrete, factual evidence. In this matter, I agree with Mr. Frost. Without substantial evidence to support Miss Bianca's claims, her testimony must be viewed with skepticism. I will strike her statements from the record."

Bennett opened his mouth to object again, but Judge Holden raised her hand to silence him. "We will proceed without considering her statements."

Gabe returned to his seat then and looked at Autumn's pale face. Unexpectedly, he'd barely settled back, when her hand caught his, squeezing tightly. It made him realize all over again, just how much she had to go through. Listening to the hurtful comments of the people around her and her own mother's silence had taken an invisible toll on her.

Bennett, clearly flustered, scrambled to regain his composure. "Your Honor, the next witness we call is Mr. Pierce himself. He can provide further insight into the character of Miss Autumn and her actions."

"Mr. Pierce, could you please state your relationship with Miss Autumn for the court?"

Pierce cleared his throat, his eyes avoiding Autumn's. "We were childhood friends."

"And could you describe your interactions with her during the time you were close?"

Pierce shifted uncomfortably. "We were very close, almost inseparable for many years. We shared a lot of memories and experiences. Growing up, I always thought I would marry Autumn."

"Then, why didn't you? Why did you drift apart?"

"It was around Autumn's eighteenth birthday, she stopped wanting to go out, preferring to stay home. I tried to ask her to be my girlfriend, but she rejected me and claimed that she liked older men. Yet, I thought that if I stayed by her side, she would know of my sincerity. But she started avoiding me, always using her stepfather as an excuse..."

"Her stepfather?"

"She said that he'd asked her to not get close to any other males. At first I thought it was a father's concern so I decided to approach Mr Savoy himself and ask his permission to date Autumn. But instead of being angry at me, he encouraged me to ask her out. That was when I started to doubt Autumn. Why was she using her stepfather as an excuse to not go out with me? When the man himself was so encouraging..."

Gabe laughed then and before anyone could say anything, questioned, "Mr Pierce, you started to get suspicious about Miss Autumn's character because you claim that she lied to you using her stepfather as an excuse. Did you not for a moment think that she might not have wanted to go out with you. I mean jumping from liking a girl to assuming that she has something for her stepfather are quite a jump...."

Chapter 608: Remorse

"Did you not for a moment think that she might not have wanted to go out with you? I mean jumping from liking a girl to assuming that she has some feelings for her stepfather is quite a jump...."

Before Pierce could answer, Gregory stood up, his face a mask of sorrow and regret. "Your Honor, if I may," he began, his voice heavy with emotion. Gabe turned to look at the man and almost stopped. Dar*! This rat should have been an actor... His expression was exactly spot on as that of a martyr. His eyes narrowed as he turned to look at the judge, whose expression had softened too.

Sigh! It seemed they would have to prepare for a dramatic and hypocritical performance. He walked back to the table and sat next to Autumn who was even now glaring at the man.

Gabe leaned in closer to Autumn, whispering softly, "Easy there, tiger. Save that anger for later. We don't want you burning holes into anyone just yet."

He winked at her as she sent him a surprised look and then once again held her wrist, offering her comfort while Gregory began, in an almost sobbing voice, "I want to apologize for what my lawyer is trying to do. I was not in favor of this approach, and it breaks my heart to see it come to this. This entire situation has been a terrible misunderstanding, one that has caused immense pain to everyone involved."

Gregory paused, his eyes glistening with unshed tears while Autumn muttered, under her breath, "He can even produce tears on demand?" Gregory, however, continued, "My wife and I... we had our differences. We drifted apart, and in our distance, I made mistakes. I should have been more present, more understanding. The rumors about Autumn and me are just that—rumors. They began because people saw a young girl who was struggling, and they misinterpreted her actions. Autumn never tried to seduce me. She was just a child seeking guidance, seeking love."

Gregory's voice cracked then, and he took a moment to compose himself. "I wanted nothing more than for my daughters to be happy. When the rumours began, I took a step back, not because I didn't care, but because I wanted them to be happy and at peace."

He then turned to look at Autumn with tears in his eyes. The look almost made Autumn throw up as she tightly held Gabe's hand, trying not to show her revulsion," I wanted both my daughters to have the chance to be happy. I failed in many ways, but I never stopped loving them. The misunderstandings between my wife and me made everything worse. We couldn't communicate, and in that silence, the rumors festered. I know Autumn blames me for everything."

"In fact, I blame myself for it too. But I cannot let Autumn use my little Arabelle to get back at me. "This isn't about me or Autumn. It's about Arabelle, and what's best for her. I only want what's best for my daughter, and I know deep down, Autumn does too. But we must face the reality of the situation, not be swayed by anger and past grievances."

"Autumn is young. She had to stop her studies to take care of Arabelle. I also know that Autumn has probably married because of Arabelle as well. To take care of her. I don't want my older daughter giving up her life to take care of my younger one, when I am fully capable to taking care of them both! I wish Arabelle will start her new life with peace of mind and let me care for Arabelle."

"I have recently become engaged. Previously, another one of my reason for giving up my rights was that my job was too dangerous and time consuming. I would have had to leave my young child for hours in the hands of a nanny. But now, I've retired from the police force. And my fiancée, she has twin daughters of Arabelle's age. She has happily agreed to accept Arabelle into our family as well."

"Also, I will never stop Autumn from meeting and spending time with her older sister. So, it would be a win win for Arabelle. She would have her parents whom she could rely upon, two younger sisters and the love of her older sister."

Gabe felt a chill down his spine as he noticed the judge's demeanor softening. Dam* it! This man was a much better actor than he had anticipated. He watched with narrowed eyes as Gregory Savoy bowed low and sat down. Even from here, he could feel the smug air surrounding this man. Was the judge blind?

And as he had expected, Judge Holden cleared her throat, turned to look at him and Autumn and announced," Mr. Frost, Mrs. Frost, I understand the pain and complexity of this situation. However, this court's primary concern is the well-being of the child involved. Given the deeply personal nature of the conflicts and the evident love from both parties, I strongly suggest that both sides consider reaching an amicable resolution outside of this courtroom. I am calling a short recess to allow both parties to discuss this matter further. We will reconvene in thirty minutes. I'll ask someone from the court to help mediate."

The gavel stuck then and the courtroom was dismissed for recess. As soon as the judge was out, Gabe quickly started to make calls. He needed to speed up Plan B if the judge was going to be hoodwinked by the performance of that rat- Gregory Savoy.

He noticed Autumn then, frozen in place, her eyes wide and unseeing. Gabe hung up the phone and moved to her side, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Autumn."

She blinked, her expression blank, and turned to look at him. "What does this mean, Gabe?" she asked slowly, her voice devoid of emotion.

Gabe took a deep breath, trying to maintain his calm as he looked at her. "It means the judge is leaning towards believing Gregory's sob story. She wants us to negotiate outside the court, likely hoping for a compromise."

"But..."

Chapter 609: Lost

"But we can't let that happen." Autumn blinked back her tears and stood up, ready to run away with Arabelle but Gabe caught her and hugged her slightly, "We won't let that happen, Autumn. It is a request from the judge, not an order. We can still go through the motions and not budge from our stance."

Firmly holding her hand, he guided her towards the judge's chambers where they would be going for the next part of the discussion.

As they walked, Autumn asked slowly, "Gabe, we need to warn the woman, also."

"What woman?"

"The woman he is engaged to! Didn't you hear that? The woman he is engaged with... she has two little girls! That means they are in danger."

"Autumn, calm down! We won't let anything happen."

Autumn took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "I can't believe this is happening. I feel like we're losing."

"We're not losing," Gabe said firmly. "Gregory's just putting on a show. And we are going to handle it."

"But how! He's totally changed the game..."

"Then we will change it too, Autumn." As they entered and sat down, Gabe sighed. While he was consoling Autumn, for the first time, he too felt an inkling of doubt. Specially when he read the message he had received. While Judge Holden was known for being strict and honest, she was also said to have a soft corner for 'remorseful fathers' who wanted to be involved in their children's lives. It had something to do with her own past.

But the question was how did Gregory discover this so soon and that too in the middle of the session? Or did he discover it mid-session? Could it be that he knew before hand about the change of judges?

A few minutes later, the rat and his lawyer walked in. And for the first time in a long while, Gabe had trouble keeping himself calm, as he looked at his smug face. All he wanted to do was go and punch the man's face. And it didn't help that the moment he looked at Autumn, the man gave her a lustful look, making a beeline in her direction.

Before Gregory could get any closer, Gabe stood up and stepped in front of Autumn, his stance protective. He didn't even want this man's shadow touching her. "Mr. Savoy," he said, his voice cold and authoritative, "You need to sit on the other side of the table. Now."

Gregory's smirk faltered for a moment as he met Gabe's steely gaze. His eyes flickered with uncertainty before he turned and moved to the other side of the table, his confidence momentarily shaken. Once seated, however, he quickly regained his composure, leaning back in his chair with a smug expression.

"So protective of her, tsk tsk. Are you really in love with your wife, Gabe Frost? I don't know whether to enjoy the misery that you will be going through in the future or be sad about it. You see, you can be

protective all you want. But I will win today. And when I do, Autumn will come crawling back to me to save her Arabelle. Won't you, Autumn?"

When both Autumn and Gabe did not give a reaction, Gregory's smile vanished. But then he continued, "I thought you had something against me, but looking at your expressions, it seems you were just bluffing! What will you do now, Autumn? What a waste, marrying this man just to win against me and still losing..."

Just then, the door opened again and another woman stepped in, "Good afternoon, everyone, "My name is Mrs. Riley, and I will be facilitating this discussion. Our goal here is to find a solution that serves the best interest of Arabelle."

Gregory leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms with a smug grin. "Of course, Mrs. Riley. That's what we all want."

Gabe took Autumn's hand under the table, giving it a reassuring squeeze before he spoke, "Thank you for your time, Mrs Riley. We believe Arabelle's well-being is best served by staying with Autumn, who has been her primary caregiver. We are open to Gregory having supervised visitation rights, but full custody is out of the question."

"Visitation rights are not enough. Arabelle deserves a stable family environment, which I can provide. Autumn has been doing her best, but she's young and has had to sacrifice her future. It's time for her to live her own life. Also, while I trust Autumn, I do not trust her current husband to be safe for my daughter. I do not wish to get into legal battles and air other people's dirty laundry but I will do so if need be."

Gabe's eyes narrowed at this. It was a clear threat aimed at him. Considering the fact that this man had told Autumn about Arabelle, it would be reasonable to believe that he'd gotten his hands on other things as well.

Before he could say anything, it was Autumn who interrupted, "Arabelle is my life. I don't see her as a burden or a sacrifice. She is my sister, and I will do everything to protect her."

"But she doesn't need protection from me, does she?" Gregory countered. "I am her biological father after all. Mrs Riley, you can see how unreasonable their demands are. I've already made myself clear

that I would allow visitation and unconditional access to Arabelle, should I get the custody, but Autumn is unwilling to compromise. She needs to understand that not everything is about her! I've let this go in the past because I felt bad for her! But she is not a young girl anymore and needs to understand! I want my daughter back! And if Autumn continues to be unreasonable, then I am going to demand full custody with no access to Arabelle!"

Autumn shot up then, her hands pressing on the table. "You! I will never let you take Arabelle away from me!"

Gregory leaned back, his gaze taunting. "You see, Mrs. Riley, this is what I mean. She's irrational and emotional. Not fit to make decisions for a child's future."

Mrs. Riley raised her hand to calm the room. "Everyone, please calm down. Let's focus on finding a solution."

Chapter 610: Prejudice (trigger warning)

Judge Holden looked at the people in front of her and sighed in frustration as she read the notes in front of her. It seemed Autumn Frost was intent on giving no access of the child to Gregory Savoy. This was not good. For a moment, the judge wondered if she should simply hand over the custody of the child to the father. After all, other than giving up his rights initially, there was nothing wrong with Gregory Savoy. And yet, she knew this would not be right. They would have to continue the legal battle. She hated this part of the job. When there was a clear way to compromise but one person seemed to be intent on proving that they were right.

"It seems we have not made any progress in mediation," she said, her voice stern. "Given the gravity of the situation and the welfare of the child involved, I expect all parties to conduct themselves with the utmost decorum. Mr Frost, you may present your client's case."

Gabe stood up then, "Your honour, I would request you to bring Mr Pierce back to the stand. His testimony was left in the middle."

"What is the point of Mr Pierce, Attorney. Mr Savoy has already given his statement."

"Your Honor, there are significant reasons why my client is unwilling to agree to even shared custody of her sister with Mr. Savoy. It's crucial that the court understands the full context. Please allow me the time to present her side of the story through Mr. Pierce's complete testimony."

As Pierce returned to the stand, Gregory Savoy sent them a considering look. What could Pierce have to say about anything?

"Mr Pierce? We won't go around in circles. Were you ever in a relationship with Miss Autumn."

Pierce opened his mouth to refute but before he could, Gabe reminded him, "Before you answer, please remember that you are under oath."

It took a few moments, but the man gulped and answered, "I was."

"Before or after you got into a relationship with Miss Bianca?"

"Before Bianca..."

"So you broke up with Autumn and then started going out with Bianca?"

Again, another moment of silence. Autumn watched as Pierce clenched his hands and tried to look away from Gabe. How was this man not lying? Why was he speaking the truth. She frowned and tried to think what could have forced him to speak up but only watched for now. He would lie anytime soon now. Mrs Pearl valued reputation and if Pierce were to confess that he cheated on her and married Bianca, Mrs Pearl would probably kill him.

"I cheated on Autumn with Bianca." There were a few snickers in the background then as everyone realized that Bianca had just not been lying but actually making up an entire story, trying to make Autumn the third party when she was the one at fault.

"Why?" Autumn could not help but look at Gabe then. Why was he doing this? Where was this going? Gabe told her that he had Plan B. But what was this plan B?

"Why? What do you mean?"

"I mean what was the reason you cheated on Autumn. From what I understand you're still attracted to her, you still want to be with her, so are you so weak of character that you could not..."

"Because Autumn was scared of being close to a man!" Pierce blurted out then. "We were never together in the sense of a relationship! She..."

This time there were no murmurs or whispers in the courtroom as everyone stilled.

"What do you mean she couldn't be with a man? I think everyone in the courtroom is aware of the rumors. Your own wife recounted them loudly."

Pierce shook his head then and elaborated, "When we started a relationship, Autumn was always wary and did not like to be touched. It took a long time for her to even adjust to holding hands or having my hand around her shoulder. At first I thought that it was because she was shy. However, slowly we got past that. But then... something happened on her eighteenth birthday."

"What?"

Autumn looked down then, her hands clenching on her lap. She knew now what the plan B was. Gabe had warned her that she would speak up. Since they did not have any proof, she would have to tell everyone what had happened. Only then they would be able to cast reasonable doubt. But despite his warning, she'd convinced herself that she would not have to explain her own pain.

"On the night of her eighteenth birthday, someone entered her room. She was sleeping and the person tried to force himself on her."

"And how do you know this?" Gabe asked slowly...

"She...I planned to give her a surprise and climbed up to her window before I could show myself, I saw her struggling against a man... His hand was on her mouth and he was..."

Autumn's head snapped up. Pierce was lying.. Why was he lying. She looked at him then, but his own head was bowed. Had Gabe forced him to lie? How could this be...

"What did you do? You jumped in to save her?"

Pierce shook his head then, "I didn't... I was too scared."

"So, you let your girlfriend in the hands of her attacker and fled? Without doing anything to save her?"

"No! I didn't! I did something to save her..."

"What did you do?"

"I went to Autumn's mother's window and banged there. I was scared she wouldn't hear or maybe the other man would and then things would be bad. But I couldn't not do anything. I sent Aunty to her room and then I ran from there."

"You didn't think that the attacker could have harmed Autumn's mother as well, Pierce? Why call her mother and not the police?"

"Because the man in the room was the head of the police station!"

Pierce bit out as he raised his head and glared at the man on the opposite side... "That man was no other than Autumn's step father. Gregory Savoy."