

Benefits 661

Chapter 661: Honeymoon

Erasmi stared at the closed door and sighed, rubbing a hand over his face as his smile vanished. His brothers had planned the 'honeymoon' for them as a wedding gift before everything had spiraled out of control.

He wanted to refuse, clarify everything, and demand that they cancel the trip, but Caius's hopeful and happy expression made him hesitate. How could he disappoint his son, who was so excited about the future? The weight of Caius's joy and expectations pressed on him, making him question his every move.

And that is how they were now here, in this small airplane, flying off to a secluded destination he didn't know, for the next ten days. With a shake of his head, he took a seat, sending another glance at the door where Ava had vanished. Maybe it was a good thing they would have time to themselves. He would simply treat it as a vacation. Give them both some space and time to cool down.

Maybe during this time, they could even come to an agreement about the annulment. It wasn't what he had envisioned for them, but it seemed the most practical solution. They could simply annul the wedding and continue to live together, keeping the facade for Caius's sake and avoiding the scandal of a public separation.

As the plane hummed quietly, Erasmi looked out of the window at the passing clouds, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts. How did they end up like this? From strangers to friends to strangers again?

As he was lost in thought, the door to the bedroom creaked open. Ava stepped out, still in her wedding dress, her eyes avoiding his. She took a deep breath and finally spoke, her voice soft but steady. "Erasmi, can you help me?"

He looked up, a bit surprised by the request. "Sure. What is it?"

Ava turned her back to him, revealing that her zipper was stuck. "It's jammed," she said, avoiding looking into his eyes.

Without a word, he walked to her and reached for the zipper, his fingers gently tugging at it. It was indeed stuck, the fabric caught in the teeth of the zipper. He tried to pull it down, but it wouldn't budge. "Hold still," he murmured, focusing on the task at hand.

Ava stood still, her breathing shallow as Erasmi worked on the zipper. The tension between them was palpable, a mix of awkwardness and unspoken words hanging in the air. She could feel his fingers graze her back and her own response to his nearness. As Erasmi tugged at the dress a bit more forcefully, the zipper remained stubbornly stuck. But she almost lose her balance.

He steadied her with a hand on her waist and then without a word, leaned down, his face close to her back to look at the zipper carefully. Ava stiffened slightly but didn't move away even though she wanted to. And then she felt a warm breath on her skin. She turned her head to see Erasmi taking the zipper between his teeth. Her eyes widened as he tugged again, trying to free the fabric caught in the zipper's teeth.

Ava's breath hitched, and she could feel the warmth radiating from him. With another careful pull, the zipper gave way and Ava hurriedly clutched the bodice to keep it from falling away.

"Thank you," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper as she watched him straighten and rushed back into the room, without waiting for his response. But, before she could close the door, she heard him call her name. She stopped, but did not turn around as he said, "Ava. We need to talk. Please come back when you are changed."

Ava nodded and went into the room, closing the door behind her firmly. As she changed into a simple dress, she laid the wedding dress carefully on the small bed and took out the note from her purse, reading it all over again, "You think he is your hero? He is nothing but a villain and killer. The moment, he returned to his senses, he killed Lara Anderson, her lover and her daughter. If you want to save yourself from a killer, don't marry him. Take your son and run."

She stared at the note, debating whether to show it to Erasmi or not. When she'd received the note, she had thought it was a cruel prank. Someone trying to create trouble. But then, when they'd gone to the city, during Gabe's rescue she'd heard them discussing the kidnapper's demand.

And then, Erasmi had accepted everything today... She was conflicted. Over the last year, she had come to see a side of him that was gentle and caring. But now, knowing he was capable of something so... inhuman, made her scared.

No. She wouldn't show it to Erasmi. What was done was done. He had given her a chance to walk away. And she had not. She had chosen to marry that man. She would need to find a way to come to terms with everything so that they could go back to the past, when she'd never seen the note. Carefully, she folded the note and decided to go back out.

She would have to take this chance. For Caius.

As she walked outside, she saw the man's profile as he was looking out of the windows. She breathed in deeply and walked towards him. He seemed to sense her approach and turned to look at her, following her every move as she went to take a seat opposite him.

However, as she met his glittering gaze, she couldn't speak up and looked out.

"You can't even look at me now?" Erasmi asked and her eyes shot to his.

She looked at him then, carefully, as if seeing him for the first time. And maybe it was the first time. For he looked different suddenly. Colder. It made her realise that he'd kept this part of himself suppressed with them. But now...

Without a word, he pushed a file in her direction. "What is this?"

Erasmi looked at her carefully, his eyes observing every change in expression, "Marriage annulment papers."

Chapter 662: What Is This?

Ava heard the words and felt a sharp pang in her chest. Her breath hitched as confusion and hurt crashed over her like a tidal wave. How could he be so ruthless, so matter-of-fact? It had been so easy for him to propose, and now, just as easily, he was presenting her with these papers.

She forced a bitter smile, trying to mask the turmoil inside. What else had she expected? After all, theirs was not a love match. Erasmi had proposed marriage as a practical solution for Caius to live with both his parents.

Ava's mind whirled, memories of their brief marriage flashing before her eyes. The late-night talks, the shared laughter, the silent understanding in their co-parenting. Had she really thought it would be different? She glanced down at the papers again, her heart heavy with indecision. Was annulment truly the right path? Hadn't she chosen to marry him to try to understand why he did what he did?

"Is this what you really want?" she asked quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Is this what's best for Caius?"

"I thought it was what you wanted too," he replied, his tone flat. "I don't want to force you into anything. If you're not comfortable with me, then I don't see a point in dragging this out."

Ava took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "I'm not sure," she admitted, her voice trembling. "I'm not sure what's right anymore."

Erasmi stood up and walked to the mini bar. Casually, he poured himself a drink. "You don't have to force yourself, Ava. You're unable to bring yourself to even look at me. Let's just cut things off before matters get worse."

Ava looked up, her eyes staring at his back. "That's not fair, Erasmi. It's not like that. Can you not give me some time to think things through? What about Caius?"

Erasmi sighed. "Sure. Take your time, Ava. You have a week. As for Caius, we don't need to make everything about him. There's no need to tell him or anyone anything. We can simply continue living together without..."

His voice trailed off as he felt a pair of arms wrap around him. Ava's touch was hesitant but firm. "I do trust you, Erasmi. I know it doesn't seem like it, but it's the truth. The truth threw me for a loop, but it's not that I suddenly think of you as a monster."

Erasmi felt something ease inside him at her words. He turned around slowly, his eyes searching hers for any sign of a lie. But as he looked into her eyes, he could see the truth of the words.

In a daring move that shocked even her, let alone Erasmi, Ava leaned up and pressed her lips to his.

Erasmi stiffened in surprise for a moment before responding, his arms tightening around her. The kiss deepened, and Ava felt a spark ignite between them. There were so many times, Ava had wanted to do this. Days when she had hoped desperately that she would be as healthy as other women, just so she could be with him.

When they finally broke apart, both were breathing heavily. Ava searched Erasmi's eyes, looking for any sign of regret or hesitation on his part.

"Ava..." he began, but she silenced him with another kiss, this one more urgent, more demanding. She needed to show him, to prove to herself and to him, that there was something real between them. There was no way they were going to annul their marriage.

Ava's hands roamed over Erasmi's back, feeling the strength in his muscles. She had often wondered what it would be like to be held by him, to feel his warmth, and now that it was happening, it felt even more intense than she had imagined. Her fingers slipped under his shirt, seeking the heat of his skin.

Erasmi broke the kiss, his breath ragged. He looked down at her, his eyes dark with desire. "Ava, are you sure about this?"

She nodded, her eyes never leaving his. "Yes, Erasmi. I'm sure. I want this. I want us. I don't want to annul the marriage."

He didn't need any more encouragement. Scooping her up in his arms, he carried her to the small bedroom at the back. Ava's heart pounded in her chest, a mixture of excitement and nervousness coursing through her. As he gently laid her down on the bed, she felt a thrill of anticipation.

She watched as he got rid of the jacket and then the shirt. She knelt up on the bed, her fingers trembling slightly as she worked the buckle of Erasmi's belt, her heart pounding louder with each passing second. She looked up into his eyes, seeking reassurance and finding a fiery determination that mirrored her own. His hands gently covered hers, helping her finish the task before letting his trousers fall to the floor.

Erasmi cupped her face, his touch tender yet explosive. "Ava, if at any point you feel unsure, just tell me."

She nodded, feeling a swell of emotion at his words. "I won't," she whispered, her voice steady. "I want this. I want you."

Erasmi's hands moved to the hem of her shirt, lifting it over her head and tossing it aside. His gaze swept over her, taking in every curve, every inch of her skin. "You're beautiful," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

Erasmi closed the distance between them then. He didn't know what had made her come to the decision to trust him. But he was grateful for it. For the trust that she was giving him. As he entered her slowly, he vowed that he would never let her regret putting her trust in him.

Ava gasped, the sensation overwhelming her. It had been so long she'd been with anyone. And this was the first time that... She wrapped her arms around Erasmi, pulling him closer. And when they finally collapsed in each other's arms, their future seemed to have taken a different direction than each had imagined.

Chapter 663: Gabe's Secret

Autumn woke up with a grin on her face. It was so good to be back home and at work. The resort's grand reopening was just around the corner, signaling the start of what promised to be a bustling tourist season. Even more thrilling was the major booking they had secured—a destination wedding to be held shortly after the reopening. Rubbing her hands together in anticipation, Autumn couldn't wait to dive into the whirlwind of organization and planning that lay ahead.

As she walked out of the room, her eyes caught Gabe, who was still working at the table and she shook her head, "You are injured. You have no business slogging away in the kitchen, mister."

Gabe spread his arms and she quickly walked into them hugging him close, "Arabelle is coming back today. I need to whip up a treat for the little girl or she will start considering Ian her favourite. He's been spoiling her these days with all sorts of foods."

Autumn giggled, "I think the main beneficiary between all you brothers competing is Arabelle. I think she is going to be spoilt rotten."

Gabe smiled, "Of course. She deserves it for being the cutest kid."

Autumn chuckled and shook her head, as she muttered shyly, "I shudder to think how you would spoil our future kids."

Gabe stilled then as he looked at her turned back, reminded of what he still hadn't come clean about...yet.

He placed down the plate in his hand and took a step closer to her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into a warm embrace. "You know," he murmured into her hair, "I've been thinking about what you said. How many kids do you want in the future?"

Autumn's cheeks flushed slightly, and she looked up at him with a shy smile. "I don't really know," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I suppose I've never really thought about it."

Gabe nodded and held her face in his hands, "Autumn, what if... we cannot have children?"

Autumn looked up at him, confused about his words. Why would he think of something like this? She watched as he stepped back and felt an inkling of something foreboding.

"Gabe?"

He rubbed a hand over his face and sat down on the stool behind him. Taking her wrists in his hand, he confessed slowly, "I.. I had a vasectomy a few years ago. Before marrying Arabelle."

Autumn knew what he said, what he meant but it took her a moment to understand what he said. He'd chosen to not have kids.. But... "why? Why did you not want kids?" she whispered in confusion.

Gabe looked away, "It wasn't that I did not want them. Its just that.. I wanted them only with Arabelle. And with her sickness being genetic, there was a chance that it would be passed down. So, I didn't want to take a risk..."

Suddenly, Autumn felt extremely angrily. Everytime she thought that they were past that woman's shadow, something would tell her just how deep a hold that woman had on him. Did that mean him and her would never have kids. It made her feel bitter. If it had been some reason that they could not have children, she would have accepted it. She was happy with only being with Gabe. But this choice of his...

She felt him hold her wrists and looked at him in a daze, knowing he was waiting for her to say something. She shook her head, "Gabe... I don't know what to say."

Gabe sighed and took her into his arms, even though she remained stiff, "Don't say anything. Just listen to me."

Autumn shook her head, "I want children with you, Gabe. Do you understand. Why does the ghost of that woman always have to...."

Before she could say more, Gabe stopped her. As she looked up at him, with his finger on her lips, she felt a tinge of anger and was about to stomp her foot on his, when he said, "I want children with you too, Autumn. I... already had the surgery to have the procedure reversed while in the hospital."

Autumn blinked at that. He'd already had it reversed? Then why did he ask about them not having kids?

Gabe looked deeply into her eyes, his voice earnest. "I know it might seem like a lot to take in all at once, but I wanted to make things right. I do want a future with you, and I want it to be one where we can have a family if that's what we choose. It's just that... this procedure even though reversed, doesn't guarantee that it might work."

"It is why I asked you. I know it doesn't erase the past or make everything perfect, but I wanted you to know that I'm committed to our future together, whatever that looks like. So, Autumn, if you want to have kids in the future and we cannot, I want you to know..."

Autumn covered his lips with her hand this time. "Gabe! Don't invite trouble for now. We'll cross the bridge when the time comes.. But just so you know, the more I love you, the more I hate that woman and the more I doubt if it was you who was insane..."

"I was.. You are the one who made me Sane in love... Autumn Frost." Gabe accepted, as he felt a weight lift off his shoulders. Autumn's hand remained on Gabe's lips, a soft smile breaking through her earlier tension. "You were worried, weren't you? About my reaction."

Gabe grimaced. Of course he was worried about her reaction." Of course I was. I don't want you to be hurt or...."

Autumn smiled and shook her head, "I just want us to be together and happy."

Gabe smiled and quickly kissed her finger, before kissing her lips, "I want that for us too."

Autumn grinned and hugged Gabe, before remembering, "You haven't told me who the wedding at the resort is for?"

Chapter 664: A Past

"Hi, Ava. You've been ignoring me, hmm?"

Ava jumped at the sudden voice, her heart pounding as if it were trying to escape her chest. She turned to see a young woman gracefully slide into the seat opposite her, a confident smirk playing on her lips. The woman exuded an air of casual menace, her eyes gleaming with mischief even as she had a smile on her face.

"What are you doing here?" Ava's voice was a mix of shock and horror, her eyes darting around the room as if seeking an escape route. She had come to this upscale café for a job interview, hoping to start fresh in her new life. After all, that was all that was left to do. Now that she had recovered from her health and Erasmi had been so supportive, she wanted to work and become independent.

But this...

"What? Are you not supposed to greet an old friend well?" The woman's tone dripped with sarcasm as she saw Ava still frozen in her spot. "What is this attitude, Ava? You didn't even invite me to your wedding and treating me as a stranger. What is it, Ava? Are you ashamed of your past? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Look. I am here to look for a job. Please just leave. I don't want to..."

"Don't worry. Your job interview will not be affected." The woman leaned forward and muttered casually, "See, the thing is that you've been ignoring me, so I thought to use this opportunity to bring you here. How will your job interview be affected when there is no job for you? So, Ava, tell me truthfully, are you ashamed of the past?"

"It's not like that." Ava tried to defend herself but the woman shrugged her shoulders and asked, "Sure seems that way to me. Otherwise, why would you ignore old friends?"

Ava clenched her hands under the table, her knuckles turning white. "We are not old friends. In fact, we never were friends. All we had was a give and take relationship. Where I gave and you took. I've long left the old life behind. So, I don't know why you're trying to contact me repeatedly."

The woman shook her head and tsked, her smirk widening. "Come on, Ava. Do you really think you can get away with that? And are you being bitter about giving me? I took yes. But I also gave you protection! What do you think would have happened to you if I had not taken you under my wing then? And now, you've married a gold mine called Frost and you refuse to share the spoils? I don't think so. Tell me, did he make you sign a prenup? Or did you use your cleverness to avoid it."

Ava's hand clenched tighter under the table and she blanched, but the woman noticed her expression. "You're still a cunning one. I can see from your expression that you dodged that bullet. How smart of you. First, you played the weakling and married that old man. Then, you adopted the kid of another rich man becoming a martyr. And then you used the kid's family to get rid of your husband before snagging the kid's biological father. I almost pitied you when you married and became a mother so young."

"But now that I look back, I can't help but think you were far more cunning than I could have anticipated. You're not even thirty and already set for life. You used your youth to your advantage."

Ava took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "I don't know what you're talking about. I've worked hard for everything I have."

"Oh, save the sob story for someone who cares." The woman's eyes sparkled with malicious glee. "You're happily settled now, aren't you? A cushy life, a rich husband, everything you ever wanted."

Ava stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. "I don't have time for this. I need to go."

The woman reached out and grabbed Ava's wrist, her grip surprisingly strong. "Not so fast. I don't like how you're living the high life while I've been left in the dust. Do you know how that feels? Seeing someone like you get everything you want?"

Ava's heart raced as she tried to pull her hand free. "What do you want? Money?"

The woman shook her head, her smirk returning. "Money? That would come to an end eventually. No, I want a long-term solution."

"I can't help you with that," Ava said through gritted teeth.

The woman's eyes darkened, and her voice dropped to a threatening whisper. "Then I'll have no choice but to reveal everything to your new husband. How do you think he'll react when he finds out about your past? About all the things you've done to secure your cushy life?"

Ava felt a wave of panic wash over her. She couldn't let this woman ruin everything she had worked so hard to build. And she could. If Erasmi discovered her past..."Please, don't do this."

"Then you better find a way to help me," the woman said, her grip tightening. "Because I won't hesitate to destroy your perfect little world if you don't help me."

Ava's breath quickened as she realized the gravity of the situation. "What exactly do you want from me? I can't undo the past, and I'm not going to let you blackmail me."

The woman leaned back, crossing her arms with a smug expression. "It's simple, really. I want a piece of your new life. Introduce me to your husband's circle, get me in the door, and make sure I get the opportunities I've missed out on."

Ava's eyes widened in disbelief and fear, "You want me to bring you into my life, into my husband's life, so you can climb the social ladder?"

"Exactly," the woman replied, her smile widening. "And if you don't, well, you know what happens next. Your perfect little world comes crashing down."

Chapter 665: Fear

Ava left the café, the woman's words echoing in her head. As she walked down the busy street, her thoughts spiraled. The fear of her past being revealed gnawed at her, more intense now than ever before.

The last week had been magical. She'd never felt so cherished or even loved in her life. She knew of course Erasmi didn't love her, but she also knew that he cared for her and even valued her. And as she'd basked in that feeling, she'd forgotten the fears that she had kept locked inside.

Ava could still feel the woman's grip on her wrist, a chilling reminder of the power she held. She had to find a way to stop this, to protect herself and her new life. She thought of Erasmi, again. When she'd discovered the way he had punished those who had offended him. How would he react when he discovered her own deception. That she wasn't as upright and honest as he believed her to be?

Would he believe her? After all, that woman had not been lying. Even though she had not planned everything in the same sinister way that she had mentioned, everything had indeed turned to be well in her favour. And when presented in a way coupled with her past, even she would have found it difficult to believe herself.

She stopped at a park bench and sat down, burying her face in her hands, trying to think. There had to be a way out of this. Some way that could save and not let everything be destroyed.

How could she have been so careless? Letting herself believe, even for a moment, that she could outrun her past? She had known better, always kept her guard up. But Erasmi had made her feel safe, had given her a sense of stability she hadn't felt in years. She had let her guard down, and now she was being asked to pay the price.

Could she come clean to Erasmi. Maybe if she told him everything, she would be able to explain everything. He might even believe her. But even as the thought entered her mind, she dispelled it.

No, coming clean to Erasmi wasn't an option. His sense of honor was too rigid, too unforgiving. The risk was too great. She couldn't bear to lose Caius. And she couldn't bear to lose... Erasmi.

If only, she had insisted on signing the pre nuptial agreement then everything would have been okay. She wouldn't have to worry about losing Caius...What was she supposed to do?

Ava took a deep breath and rose from the bench, forcing herself to move forward. She walked home in a daze, her mind racing with a mix of fear and uncertainty. At least for now, she'd managed to dodge the bullet and convinced her that she needed some time to think this through.

When she finally reached home, she hesitated for a moment at the door, gathering her composure. Pushing it open, she was greeted by the warmth of the house and the familiar scent of home.

Suddenly, she was held from behind and as she felt Erasmi's scent around her, she felt herself relax. As he turned her around, kissing her slowly, she felt herself forgetting all about her fear and melting into him.

As he pulled back, he looked into her eyes, concern flickering across his features. "How did the job interview go?"

Ava shook her head dejectedly, not trusting herself to speak. The worry must have shown in her eyes because Erasmi immediately pulled her into a comforting hug.

"It's okay," he murmured into her hair. "There must be other better options for you."

Ava nodded against his chest, even as she felt a pang of guilt.

Erasmi pulled back slightly, studying her face. He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a file, extending it to her with a gentle smile.

"What's this?" Ava asked, not making a move to take it.

"It was a wedding gift," Erasmi said, his eyes twinkling with affection. "but things changed so quickly that I forgot to give it. I planned to give it back when we came back, but then you had this job interview lined up and you were so excited about it..."

Ava's heart skipped a beat. She took the file with trembling hands and opened it slowly, her eyes scanning the contents. It was a deed to the biggest commercial building in town.

"Erasmi, this is..."

"It's for you. I know you were planning to start your own business before you fell sick and then everything came crashing down. So, now that everything is back on track, I think you can consider re-starting everything..."

Ava felt tears welling up in her eyes. The gesture was so thoughtful, so generous. So...trusting. She shook her head, "I cannot take this. I didn't marry you for your money, Erasmi. Or for what you could do for me. I... cannot take this."

Erasmi smiled, his eyes softening as he cupped her face in his hands. "I know, Ava. But this isn't about money. It's about giving you the opportunity to pursue your dreams. I want you to have the freedom to be who you are meant to be."

Ava felt a lump in her throat, the weight of his words settling heavily on her heart. She wanted to tell him everything, to explain the turmoil inside her, but fear held her back. How could she risk losing this, losing him?

"I don't know what to say," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "You've given me so much already."

Erasmi pulled her into another hug, his embrace warm and reassuring. "Just say you'll think about it. No pressure, no rush. I believe in you, Ava. Whatever you choose to do, I'll support you."

And those words which should have comforted her, given her hope for the future, crushed her, settling into her heart like a stone.

As they stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, Ava made a silent vow to herself. She would find a way to protect this happiness.

Chapter 666: Friends

"Come on mom, hurry up!" Caius shouted, bouncing with excitement as he and Erasmi spread out the checkered blanket for a picnic. It was their day out and of course they had a list of things to do!

"Hold your horses, buddy," Erasmi laughed, unpacking the wicker basket that he placed on the blanket..
"We've got all day."

Caius buzzed around like a little bee, darting from one spot to another as he made sure to place everything properly. "Can I have a sandwich? Oh, and some strawberries! I am starved!"

Ava shook her head, already prepared for the hunger pang. Caius was always hungry these days.

Erasmi, on the other hand chuckled as he passed the sandwich, "At this rate, you will be giving Seb a run for his money!"

Caius rolled his eyes, "Uncle Seb has already lost to me! You don't know, when the two of you were away, Uncle Seb and I had a competition! He lost! And then he claimed that it was because I was a growing boy that he decided to lose."

Erasmi laughed at that, "Well, it could be. Seb can be..."

"Dad! You're my dad! You have to say that I won and not side with Uncle Sebby!"

"Okay okay! I'm sure you won fair and square." Erasmi chuckled as Caius munched on his sandwich.

Ava, on the other hand passed a sandwich to Erasmi, distracted with her own thoughts. Before he could ask more, Caius stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth as he let out a muffled shout, "Look, a dragonfly!" He dashed off to chase the insect, his laughter ringing through the air before Erasmi could even ask him to not shout with his mouth full. Chuckling, he turned his head to look at Ava who was distracted and frowned.

"Whats up, Ava? You seem distracted..."

Ava shook her head and gave him a smile. "I think I am just tired from someone not letting me sleep."

Erasmi grinned, clearly pleased with the blame Ava was placing on him. "Oh, so it was me keeping you up all night, huh?" he teased.

Ava rolled her eyes, "Wasn't it? You are such a beast Eras! Sometimes I wonder how you survived a year of celibacy..."

Erasmi grinned and shook his head, "Who told you to be so responsive to my touch, hmm? I can't stop myself. So you can't blame me..."

Ava glared at him as he winked at her and looked away. It was true. She really had not expected herself to always light up the moment he touched her. Why had she not realized just how attracted to him she was?

As she was lost in her thoughts, Erasmi quickly stood up and went to sit behind her. He then gently pulled her back to lean against his chest, his thighs on either side of her. "Sleep now," he murmured into her ear, his breath warm against her skin.

She tried to protest, her face turning a deeper shade of red. "Erasmi, we're in public..."

He chuckled softly, his voice full of playful affection. "Oh, so you don't want to be caught snuggling with your husband?"

Ava laughed despite herself, shaking her head. "That's not what I meant."

Ava sighed, letting herself lean back against him, feeling the warmth and strength of his body enveloping her. She watched as Caius dashed around the park, chasing after dragonflies and laughing with pure joy. His energy was boundless, and his laughter was infectious.

"Look at him go," she murmured, a smile tugging at her lips. Erasmi pressed a kiss to her temple as he looked at his son. These were the moments, he lived for.. Just looking at his son.

"He's started to look like Nora, a bit, hasn't he?" Ava murmured and felt Erasmi stiffen. It took her a moment then to realise what she'd said. Of course, thinking of Caius looking like Nora would have reminded him of Caius' birth mother...

"Erasmi, I..." But Erasmi cut her off, "He might look like her, but he is a frost through and through! And he is picking up Demetri's habits look!" Erasmi pointed out in amusement.

Ava turned her head to see Caius looking at the plants carefully, "I don't think that is bad..."

Erasmi chuckled and nodded, "Yeah! Demetri has the tamest of hobbies, after all."

Ava felt her eyes close a little while later, letting the gentle breeze and the distant sounds of Caius and the other children playing wash over her. The steady rhythm of Erasmi's breathing and the warmth of his embrace created a perfect moment of peace. She snuggled into him, feeling safe and content of all intrusive thoughts that had been plaguing her.

Erasmi looked down at her as she drifted off to sleep, a gentle smile playing on his lips. She looked so cute sleeping like this, her face serene and peaceful. He hugged her softly, tightening his arms around her protectively.

In the distance, he watched as a little dog bounded towards Caius, who gleefully played with it.

Just then, Erasmi saw Caius slip and his heart leapt. He almost called out, but before he could, he saw a woman who was strolling by catch him, steadying him. Erasmi watched as the woman probably asked Caius about his parents and he quickly stepped away and pointed at them.

Erasmi watched as Caius led the woman and the dog toward them and raised an eyebrow.

"Mom, Dad, look! This is Ruby!" Caius announced, pointing to the dog. But before he could say more, he noticed his mother had fallen asleep and quickly lowered his voice, "And this is her owner. She saved me when I almost fell!"

Erasmi smiled, adjusting his hold on Ava, who remained blissfully asleep. "Thank you for that."

"No problem at all," the woman replied with a kind smile. "Ruby is always making friends, and Caius here seems to be quite the charmer."

"Absolutely," she nodded. "I'm Hannah, by the way." She extended a hand.

"Erasmi," he introduced himself, shaking her hand. "And this is my wife, Ava." He gestured to Ava, still sleeping peacefully against his chest. "She was just taking a nap. We had a long night."

Emma smiled softly. "It's nice to see a husband taking such good care of his wife. You must be quite the team."

Hannah glanced at her watch. "I should probably get going. It was lovely meeting you."

"Likewise," Erasmi said. "And thanks again for helping Caius."

As Erasmi watched the woman and the dog leave, he was soon distracted by Caius, forgetting all about the woman...unaware of the storm that she might bring in their lives.

Chapter 667: Coincidence

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" Erasmi turned around slowly, rubbing his back where the shopping cart had bumped him. The woman who had nearly run him over was hopping on one foot, clearly embarrassed and wincing with every step.

Erasmi raised a hand to show he was fine. "No harm done. Are you alright?" He asked carefully, as he observed the woman holding her foot.

The woman stopped hopping and looked up at him with a mix of relief and mortification. "I'm so sorry! I lost control of the cart and I swear I did try to catch it... But.. are you alright. It must've really bumped you."

She glanced down at her foot and then back at him, clearly trying to hide her discomfort. "I'm sure it's nothing. I just—"

Before she could finish, she winced again. "Okay, maybe it's a little sore. I'm such a klutz."

Erasmi noticed her wincing and quickly moved to her side offering her a hand. "Let me help you. There's a bench over here. It might be a good idea to sit down for a moment."

Erasmi offered his hand, and the woman gave him a wary look, as if unsure of his intentions. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm really fine. I don't want to impose." Erasmi looked at her carefully then and realized that the woman was actually wary of him.

Raising his hand as if in surrendered, "I swear I only mean to help you sit there, Hannah."

Her eyes widened and she pointed a finger at him, "How do you know my name?"

Erasmi smiled, "We met at the picnic spot the other day. You saved my son from a fall- Caius."

"Ahhh! Yes! You are Erasmi! The one with the sleeping wife."

Erasmi chuckled at that and once again extended his hand. He could see that Hannah had already turned pale from the effort it took her to continue to stand. "Come on. I'll just help you to the bench there."

Hannah hesitated for a moment but then took Erasmi's hand, gripping it tightly as if to steady herself. Her nails left faint marks on his skin, but Erasmi didn't flinch. He guided her carefully to the nearby bench, making sure she was comfortable before letting go of her hand.

"Thank you so much," she said, her voice tinged with both relief and embarrassment. She carefully raised her foot, showing him the area that had been bumped by the cart. "See this! It's almost swelling, isn't it? Can you help me elevate it a bit?"

Erasmi glanced down with a quick look before stepping away, "I think you should keep it like this for a moment. I'll go get someone from the staff for first aid."

Hannah sighed and carefully placed her foot down before her eyes widened," Oh my God! I hurt you again!" As she moved to grab Erasmi's hand, he quickly moved it and smiled," Its just a few scratches. Just wait here for a minute. I'll be right back."

Hannah watched him hurry away and breathed a long sigh. How did she end up in this situation? Her eyes followed him as he went to the help desk further away and then returned with a woman in tow, carrying a first aid box and an ice pack.

"Thanks, Erasmi. I really appreciate your help," Hannah said, her voice softening with gratitude. "It's not every day you run into someone so kind, especially after nearly knocking them over. And I am so sorry for being such a mess. Actually, I am only recently shifting here and kind of lost.."

"It's not a big deal. We all have those moments."

Hannah shook her head,"Still, it was really nice of you to go out of your way for a stranger like this."

Erasmi shook off the gratitude and quickly bid goodbye, noticing that he was almost late to go and pick Caius from school.

It was as he moved away that Hannah called out," Erasmi, can we exchange contact details? Like I said, I am new here. So, once I have moved in, maybe I could invite your family for a get together. I am actually missing my family and being around Cai is like being around my nephew."

Not thinking much of it, Erasmi exchanged numbers with Hannah before hurrying away.

Unknown to him, the woman's soft smile changed from one of innocence to that of triumph as she watched him. It had been much easier getting his number than she had estimated...

As the staff member began to assess her foot, asking if she needed a doctor, Hannah's mind raced with possibilities. Swiftly, she jerked her foot, making the woman almost lose her balance as she stood up," I'm okay. But I won't be buying anything from your store after I hurt myself here."

With that, she walked out of the store, with nary a limp or sign of pain. As she climbed into her vehicle, her mind was already buzzing with the opportunities she would need to set everything with Erasmi be set into motion.

Sitting behind the wheel, she pulled out her phone and glanced at the contact details Erasmi had given her. With a smirk, she typed out a quick message to him:

"Hi Erasmi! Thanks again for your help today. I'm looking forward to having you and your family over once I'm all settled in. Hope you have a great rest of your day!"

Yes. She'd definitely like to meet Ava. She'd warned her to help her out, but Ava had thought to ignore her warning. So, Ava did not want to introduce her to his rich friends. Fine by her. She would simply catch Erasmi in her net. By the time, Ava knew what was going on, Erasmi would already have been hers...

Whistling a happy tune, she drove towards her new home, which just conveniently happened to be in the same neighborhood as Ava and Erasmi. Now, all she needed to do was keep Ava away a couple of days and then Erasmi would be in her trap neatly.

Chapter 668: Confession

Ava stood staring at the mirror, trying to remind herself to breathe. The decision had not come easily, but it was time to confess everything to Erasmi. Her reflection looked back at her, eyes wide with fear and uncertainty. She inhaled sharply, summoning the courage to speak the words aloud. "Erasmi... there is something you need to know..." she began, her voice faltering. But then she paused, the weight of her secrets pressing down on her like a physical burden. She had no idea where to begin.

he buried her face in her hands, subduing the urge to cry. Why? Why couldn't the past just stay where it belonged? If only Hannah had never returned, she would have never needed to reveal anything. She could have forgotten about her own shameful past. She could have moved on, built a life with Erasmi free from the shadows that haunted her.

But Hannah had returned, and with her, the threat of exposure. The woman had always been a master manipulator, skilled in the art of coercion and deceit. Ava knew that if she gave in to Hannah's demands, it would never end. Once Hannah understood that she could blackmail her, she would stop at nothing to get whatever she wanted. Hannah was like that—relentless and merciless. Surrender to her once, and you would never escape her grasp.

Ava's thoughts drifted back to their meeting at the café. The casual cruelty in Hannah's eyes as she laid out her terms, the smug satisfaction in her voice as she reminded Ava of everything she had to lose. It had taken every ounce of Ava's strength not to crumble then and there. The power Hannah wielded over her was terrifying, a dark cloud looming over her every move.

She couldn't let Hannah win. She couldn't let her destroy the life she had worked so hard to build. But how could she protect herself and Erasmi from the fallout? How could she reveal the truth without losing everything?

But then she shook her head from the negative thoughts. No. If Erasmi came to know about her past from someone else, he might hate her. But what if she confessed to him? When she'd read that note about him being responsible for those people's deaths, hadn't her first thought been that why didn't Erasmi tell her himself?

And so, she took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. She needed to be strong. She needed to confront her past head-on, no matter how shameful it might be. The only way to break free from Hannah's hold was to bring everything into the open. Erasmi deserved to know the truth, no matter how much it might hurt. Their relationship wouldn't survive otherwise.

It would not be a big deal for Erasmi to break off this relationship. After all, hadn't he already proposed an annulment earlier? Even though he'd claimed that it was for her sake as well. The truth was Erasmi was a decisive man and once he let go of something, it would be impossible for him to accept that person.

"Erasmi," she whispered again, her voice stronger this time as she stared at herself in the mirror. She would find the words. Taking a deep breath, she began again, "There is something you need to know... about my past. There are things I have done in the past that I am not proud of. And I know it is no excuse, but I needed to do them for surviving..."

She trailed off, knowing she would find the words when the time came.

Summoning all her courage, Ava stepped out of the bathroom, her heart pounding in her chest. As she stepped outside, however, she froze. Erasmi was standing there, his expression cold and unreadable. The intensity in his eyes made her stomach churn with dread.

"Erasmi," she began, her voice trembling.

He cut her off, his tone sharp. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Panic surged through her. Had he discovered the truth already? Oh God! What was she going to do now! She looked at his cold face and stammered, "I... I didn't know how," tears welling up in her eyes. "I didn't know..."

Instead of fighting or arguing, Erasmi's expression softened slightly, but his eyes still held a glint of coldness as he said. "You should have told me, Ava. You should have trusted me."

Her heart ached at his words. She opened her mouth to confess, to come clean, feeling the burden pressing down upon her. She looked down for a moment before raising her head to face him. And yet, before she could say anything, she noticed Erasmi holding a piece of folded paper up in front of her to see.

Ava's eyes widened as she recognized the note—the message telling her about the way Lara had died... She hadn't realized it had fallen out of her bag.

"Ava, you should have told me about this. I couldn't understand why you were so scared when we got married but now, I know. I didn't even think that this is how you discovered everything. Who gave you the note, Ava?"

Ava didn't know whether to be relieved or not as she felt her courage disappear the moment he hugged her and said, "Who sent you this note, Ava?"

She shook her head, her voice muffled against his chest as she said, "I don't know. It appeared in my purse one day. I don't even know how long it had been there."

She felt him kiss the top of her head as he said, "Okay. Don't worry. I'll get to the bottom of this. Don't worry, Ava, my past will never intrude on our future."

"Erasmi, I'm so sorry," she whispered, her voice trembling. "I should have told you sooner. I was just so scared."

Erasmi held her tighter, his voice gentle but firm. "It's alright, Ava. I understand why you didn't. It was my fault for never telling you. But from now on, no more secrets. You already know everything, so we face everything together, okay?"

Ava felt her heart break as she realized she had no courage to tell him everything. And they still had secrets between them...

Chapter 669: Hannah's Moves

"Mr. Frost, you need to come to the school. It's about Caius."

Erasmi frowned as he listened to the principal. The last time he had needed to visit the school principal was when he'd first come here. Once he'd set things straight, the man had never dared to do anything against his Cai or anyone else for that matter. But now, hearing the slightly gloating tone in the man's voice, Erasmi knew something was up.

He just hoped that the principal was not looking to find trouble. Because if he was, he would not be so lenient like the last time.

When he arrived, the principal's secretary greeted him with a tense smile. "Mr. Frost, please follow me."

Once inside, he noticed the principal, sitting behind his desk with an expression that he could only describe as smug... Across from him sat Cai, looking uncharacteristically subdued.

"Mr. Frost, please have a seat," the principal began, gesturing to the chair next to Cai. "We have a serious matter to discuss."

Erasmi sat down, his eyes flicking to his son. Cai avoided his gaze, staring intently at a spot on the floor.

"What's this about?"

"Cai was involved in an incident earlier today. He and another student got into a physical altercation."

Erasmi's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Cai? Fighting?"

The principal nodded. "Yes, and the other student is currently in the nurse's office with a broken nose. According to witnesses, Cai threw the first punch."

"Mr. Frost, violence of any kind is strictly prohibited. Regardless of the circumstances, we cannot condone such behavior. Our school prides itself on maintaining a safe and respectful environment. This incident is particularly troubling, given Caius'... anyway, as you know, we require strict action in situations like this. However, Caius' class teacher has requested to handle this matter personally. She believes she can address the underlying issues more effectively. You'll need to take Caius to her classroom."

"Thank you, Mr. Thompson," Erasmi said curtly, turning on his heel and heading towards the door. Cai trailed behind him, still looking downcast.

As they walked down the hallway, Erasmi kept his voice low. "Cai, what happened?"

Cai shrugged, his shoulders slumping further. "It doesn't matter," he mumbled, barely audible.

Erasmi stopped, placing a gentle but firm hand on his son's shoulder until he looked up into his eyes. "It matters to me. Please, Cai, talk to me."

Cai hesitated, glancing up at his father for a brief moment before looking away again. "He..."

Before Cai could continue, a familiar voice interrupted. "Erasmi?"

Erasmi turned to see Hannah standing in the doorway, a look of surprise on her face. "Hannah? You're Cai's teacher?"

Hannah nodded, recovering from her initial shock. "Yes, I am. I had no idea you would be here. It is usually the moms who come rushing. Where is Caius' mom? I thought she would be here as well."

"She's busy. Can you tell me what this is about?"

Hannah seemed to understand and nodded. "Of course. Let's talk in my office." She gestured towards the open door behind her. "Cai, can you wait outside for a moment? I need to speak with your father."

Once inside, Hannah closed the door gently and motioned for Erasmi to take a seat on the opposite side as she moved to her desk.

"Erasmi, Caius is a good kid. He's respectful, kind, and usually very composed. But today was different."

"What happened, Hannah? Why did Caius get into a fight?"

Hannah took a deep breath, her expression serious. "Apparently, another student said something incredibly hurtful to Caius. He told him that his mother stole him from his biological mother just so she could marry you, his rich father. Those words made Caius lose his temper and he lashed out."

Erasmi's face hardened. "He said that?"

Hannah nodded. "Yes. It was a deeply personal and cruel thing to say. I've already issued a warning to the child. I just don't understand how some people can gossip relentlessly in front of an impressionable child, when there is so much in the world to.... I can understand why Caius reacted the way he did, but we still need to teach him that violence is not the answer."

Hannah reached out, placing a comforting hand on Erasmi's arm that was placed on the table. "It's a difficult situation, but we need to address it constructively. I suggest we have Caius participate in a conflict resolution program after school. It's designed to teach students how to handle goading situations like this without resorting to violence. Additionally, a one-on-one conversation with the school counselor might help him process his feelings."

Erasmi took his hand off the table and nodded, "Don't worry, I will talk to him. Thank you for your concern."

Hannah pulled her hand back and nodded, "It's alright. The fact is that I did what I did just because it was Caius. He is a wonderful kid. I didn't want him to be punished just because he had been provoked."

Erasmi stood up with a smile and nodded, "I will take care of this. Thank you once again."

"Cai, let's go."

Once in the car, before Erasmi could say anything, Caius spoke up, "I know, Dad. I know I should not have reacted like that. I'm sorry. I just... I didn't expect him to say something like that. He was my friend."

People can surprise you, Cai. Sometimes in good ways, and sometimes in bad. It's important to stay calm and think before you act, especially when you're angry."

Cai looked up at his father, his eyes pleading. "Dad, please don't tell Mom about this. She'll be so disappointed in me."

Erasmi raised an eyebrow then, "You know the rule about keeping secrets, Cai." Cai slumped. Okay okay. I'll tell mom myself. But you can't say anything!"

"I won't tell her until you do, but you need to promise me that you'll handle things differently next time. Can you do that?"

Cai nodded and looked out of the window as he wondered about what Miss Hannah had told him. He needed to lie to his mother or else she would be hurt...

Chapter 670: Erasmi's Trouble

Erasmi struck the ball with more force than necessary, watching it ricochet off the wall before hurtling back toward him.

As he played squash, his mind was elsewhere, consumed with thoughts of Ava. Lately, she had seemed distant, a growing chasm that he couldn't quite bridge. And he didn't understand what was going on. He'd tried reassuring her and approaching her, but she seemed to have pulled herself into some kind of a shell.

With every hit, Erasmi tried to focus on the game but the memories of their happier times kept intruding. He remembered her laughter, the warmth in her eyes, the way she used to look at him when they were just friends. That openness and trust was what he'd come to value. Now, there was a coldness, a detachment that unsettled him. He'd thought he'd married his good friend but suddenly, it seemed as if he'd lost the friend.

He missed the next shot, and the ball bounced away as his frustration grew. Taking a deep breath, he wiped the sweat from his brow and prepared for the next rally. It couldn't be because of the note about his past. He was sure they were already past that. And while he had yet to find the person who had left her the dam*ed note, his priority was to find what was wrong with Ava.

It would have been alright if it had been only him, but somehow she was pulling away from Cai as well. And he could see his son's confusion over his mother avoiding him.

Erasmi's concentration was abruptly broken by the sound of his phone ringing. Pausing the game, he caught the ball and wiped the sweat from his brow as he walked over to his bag, where the phone was vibrating insistently. He glanced at the screen and saw Gabe's name flashing.

"Hey, Gabe," Erasmi answered, trying to mask the frustration in his voice.

But of course, he failed miserably and even before greeting him, Gabe asked, "Woah! Someone is frustrated. What did you do to get to the dog house?"

"Who said I am in the dog house?" Erasmi retorted, forcing a lightness into his voice.

"Come on, man, I can hear it in your voice. What happened? Did you forget her birthday or something?"

Erasmi rolled his eyes, a small smile tugging at his lips. "For your information, I didn't forget anything. Ava's birthday is next month."

"Well then, tell me whatever is troubling you... Come on come on, come clean to Uncle Gabe."

Erasmi rolled his eyes and smiled despite himself, "Eww, Gabe Frost. You sound like a lecher."

Gabe laughed despite himself and then cursed as his sides ached. Erasmi shook his head and asked, "So, why did you call me?"

"I called to ask you something. But it is unimportant. So, come on, don't think you can change the topic. Come on, Eras. We are brothers who help each other."

Erasmi sighed and explained, "Ava's just been... distant lately."

"Distant how? Did you leave your dirty socks lying around and she realized how smelly you are?" Gabe chuckled.

"Ha ha, very funny. No, it's different this time. She's not annoyed or anything. She seems... withdrawn, like she's carrying some heavy burden I can't see."

Gabe's tone grew more serious. "Have you talked to her about it?"

"Of course, I have. But she just brushed it off, says everything's fine. But I know it's not. And it's affecting Cai too. She's been avoiding him, and he doesn't understand why."

"I don't know how to get through to her. I've tried to be gentle and make her confide in me but it seems useless. I'm worried that if I push her more, she might pull further away."

Gabe sighed and finally spoke up, "Eras, what happened to you? When will the real you be back?"

Erasmi frowned and pulled the phone from his ear in confusion. How did they shift topics?

Gabe sighed and shook his head," Eras! I am not talking nonsense. Listen to me. You know how to have someone confide in you. Don't you remember you were our confession hall. The problem is that you're trying too hard.

Erasmi felt Gabe's words sink in. "What do you mean, trying too hard?"

"It means the more you look for answers and over think everything, the more she will feel the pressure even if you don't say it. You've become affected by the overthinking fever. You are not needed to be the knight in shining armour all the time. Yes, when you came into their life, they needed your help and protection. But now, they do not. So, go back to yourself. Instead of needing to work everything out."

"Give her time to work things out and let her come to you when she is ready."

Erasmi let Gabe's words resonate within him, realizing there was some truth to them. "You're right. I've been trying too hard to fix everything instead of just being there."

Gabe's voice softened. "Exactly. That is good. Just focus on being yourself Eras, instead of trying to be the hero."

There was a momentary silence as Erasmi let that settle in but the moment was soon broken by Gabe as he continued after a moment, "Who needs to be a hero when you can be the villain? Hmm? Girls love bad boys."

Erasmi chuckled and shook his head," Gabe Frost. Your degree in psychology has gone to waste with you joining the business."

"Hey! Who said that! I'm using it to counsel you all, aren't I? I am the smartest of the Frost brothers."

Erasmi laughed, feeling some of his tension dissipate. "Alright, Dr. Smart Frost, thanks for the therapy session. I think I know what to do now."

After ending the call, Erasmi slipped his phone back into his bag and returned to the squash court. He picked up his racket, feeling a renewed sense of determination. Gabe's words had given him a new perspective, and he was ready to approach the situation with Ava differently.

With each swing of the racket, Erasmi focused on clearing his mind. He let the rhythm of the game guide him, pushing away the overthinking and frustration that had clouded his thoughts earlier.