

Benefits 791

Chapter 791: Ditched

Cai raised his glass for a toast, "To my success and to many more in the future..." he murmured, his voice trailing off as he sighed at the vacant round table in front of him. It was supposed to be a celebratory dinner, Instead, he found himself abandoned at his own party. Dora had been summoned back to Estonia on a 'national' matter, and being the devoted boyfriend he was, Kael had rushed to her side without a second thought.

With a resigned shrug, Cai set his glass down and determined to not let the evening end on a sour note, Cai decided to head out for a bit of bar hopping. Since he was feeling 'lonely', it was best to surround himself with some loud noise and a lot of people!

However, even with all the dancing and chatting with the many locals, Cai realized that his mood had not yet improved. In fact, it seemed to be getting worst. Wow.. he turned his head to look at his reflection in the mirror of the elevator and sighed to himself.. Not even thirty and he was already feeling like a middle aged man. This is what happened when someone cut himself off from friends early on. Hmm. Friends. That was a much better option. Getting new friends instead of dating.

The elevator doors slid shut, and he leaned his head back against the cool metal wall, closing his eyes for just a moment.

It felt so peaceful, the soft hum of the machinery lulling him into a comfortable daze.

But the tranquility was short-lived. The sudden jolt of the elevator stopping brought him back to reality, and he opened his eyes, blinking against the bright lights.

To his surprise, he saw a girl standing across from him, facing him instead of the usual forward position that most people assumed when riding in an elevator. However, that was not what shook him. It was her face. She looked exactly like Jasmine...

Or at least what Jasmine would have looked like if she'd been given a chance to grow and maybe lose the baby chubbiness... This girl's features were somehow sharper than Jasmine's but the resemblance was there none the less.

Cai felt a slight wave of intoxication wash over him, mixing with the haunting memories of Jasmine and her smiling face. Shaking his head, he tried to remind himself that this woman could not possibly be her. "Just the alcohol playing tricks on you. She is dead..." he muttered under his breath as he took a tentative step forward, drawn to her.

As he moved closer, she stepped back a bit, until he found himself gently pressing her against the elevator's number panel. There was an exhilarating tension in the air, but he maintained a respectable distance, not wanting to invade her space too much. "What's your name?" he asked, curiosity lacing his voice.

"Lily," she replied cautiously staring up at him with puppy like wide eyes.

A smirk tugged at the corners of his lips. "So, you're named after a flower too?"

"You know someone else who is named after a flower too?" she asked curiously.

Cai ignored the question and instead cocked his head at her, "So, Lily? Why were you staring at me?"

"Because you look... prettily sad." she said with a nod of her head, as if saying something important.

He frowned at the term, his brow furrowing in confusion. "What does that even mean? Prettily sad?"

"Well," she started, her expression growing serious for a moment, "you're undeniably pretty, but since you're a guy, it's not really something you can be described as, right? And then you just look so sad, so I thought... prettily sad."

A grin broke across his face at this, genuine and wide, chasing away the remnants of his melancholy. The answer was perfectly weird! Just the way he liked it! "That's the strangest compliment I've ever received."

"Compliment or not, it's the truth," she said, her tone a bit silly.

Just as Cai opened his mouth to respond, the elevator doors slid open with a quiet ding. Lily stepped back, breaking their moment, and turned to face the outside world. "Well, it looks like this is my stop," she said, glancing back at him. "Goodbye, Cai! Don't stay too prettily sad!"

With a wave, she slipped out of the elevator, leaving Cai standing there, a mix of surprise and exhilaration flooding through him. He watched her go, the familiar ache of nostalgia battling with a newfound curiosity. And he realized that he wanted to chase her. Get to know her more.. extend this encounter, whatever name they could call it.

But all he did was whisper, "Goodbye, Lily," his heart racing with the thrill of an unexpected encounter.

It was only a long time later, as Cai threw himself on the bed that he remembered something odd about the encounter... He had never told her the name Lily. So, how did she know his name?

But soon enough, he put the thought out of his mind. After all, the girl had been wearing the hotel's uniform and she was the one who had probably been in his hotel room this morning as well so it was not something to worry his head over.

However, even as Cai rationalised the entire encounter, putting it out of his mind to get a good sleep, the young girl lay on the small narrow bed, her hand rubbing her chest as if to calm her heart at the way the man had enclosed her in the 'prison' of his arms! It was so romantic that she could still feel her toes curling.

"Cai Frost... you haven't changed a single bit! You are just the same as in the past.. Or maybe not... you are somehow more 'er'- hotter, prettier, sexier. Ready to send people to the ER1 with his looks..."

"I wonder if you will recognise me, like I recognised you. Though you might not... After all, I have changed a bit..."

Chapter 792: The Girlfriend Replica

"Dad... how did you feel when you found out Aunt Nora wasn't my biological mother? You know, when Uncle Demetri was trying to get a reaction out of you and all that."

Erasmi glanced up from the file in his hands, locking eyes with his son through the camera. He narrowed his gaze, studying Cai closely. It wasn't like his son to initiate video calls to him—those were usually

reserved for the women in the family. Erasmi was more accustomed to receiving brief texts or the occasional phone call. A video call paired with this particular question from Cai...

"Why are you asking?"

"I asked first," Cai pointed out, a hint of stubbornness in his tone. Erasmi merely shrugged, leaning back in his chair. "Too bad, kid. I don't have to answer you until you answer me first."

Cai sighed dramatically, rolling his eyes. "This is so unfair... it's just curiosity, okay? I mean, you never really reacted much over the years, so I thought maybe you didn't care. But then, when he started showing you Aunt Nora's pictures and everything, your reaction was almost... violent. So, at least at the beginning, you really believed she was my biological mother, right? And whatever chemical reaction detonated that response is also what finally pushed your brain into giving responses, right?"

He raised an eyebrow at that, his voice trailing off, waiting for a response.

Erasmi frowned and nodded, "Yes. It is quite probable that was the cause for it. According to the doctors that I have met over the years, it was possibly a surge of adrenaline that might have pushed my brain into getting super active, ultimately making me return from the 'dead.'

"So, after waking up, did you ever mistake Aunt Nora for her? I mean... were you interested in her...physically?"

Erasmi coughed, nearly choking on air as he shot his son a horrified look. "What? No!" he exclaimed, eyes wide with disbelief. "Nora was already married to Demetri by then. And even if she wasn't, I knew she wasn't the one, Cai." He shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around his son's bold question. Thankfully, Demetri was not here or he would definitely have hung poor Cai upside down like a bat from the ceiling.

He leaned forward, narrowing his eyes as if to make sure Cai was still listening. "There was never anything like that between us. I didn't confuse her for anyone, especially not... physically. I knew she wasn't your mother even though they looked too similar..."

Erasmi sighed and cocked his head at him, "Cai? Your questions sound more than curiosity... Care to tell?"

"Nah.. At this point they really are just curiosity, okay? Chill old man."

"Hey! You are the old man, Cai Frost."

"If I am old then you would be ancient, Dad. Ciao. Thanks for answering!"

Erasmi sighed and shook his head at his son's antics. Thankfully, Cai was not all serious all the time these days and had gotten more playful again.

"How do you know my name?"

Lily looked up from her phone, startled by the unexpected voice that broke the silence. She hadn't even noticed anyone near the back door when she slipped out. Her heart raced as her eyes met his, and she instinctively placed a hand over her chest, glaring at him. Without a word, she turned on her heel and began walking away, but he was quick, easily matching her pace and falling into step beside her.

"You said you were wondering if I remembered you," he pressed, his voice firmer now. "What did you mean by that?"

Lily stopped for a moment, glancing at him from the corner of her eye before flashing a playful grin. She gave a casual shrug, "I don't want to tell you."

He raised an eyebrow, clearly not satisfied with that response. "Why not?"

Her smile faded just a little, a shadow of disappointment crossing her face. "Because, Caius Frost, I'm a little hurt that you don't remember me." She sighed, her voice softer now. "You, of all people. Aren't you supposed to be famous for that legendary memory of yours? So, how could you forget me? I get it—

I was probably just a blip on your radar, barely worth noticing. But really... I mean... you used to give me chocolates everytime we met. I thought you might remember me."

Caius frowned, confusion clouding his expression. "I've never claimed to have a great memory. That's just what people say about me. Hearsay, mostly. As for chocolates, I always kept some in my pockets. I have a lot of little annoying cousins so I needed to bribe them at times. But you are not my cousin... then why would I give you chocolates?" He shook his head, taking a step closer to her, his curiosity piqued. "So, go on. Tell me who you are."

But instead she glared at him, "So, you're indirectly telling me that I was nothing but an annoying kid to you?"

Cai grinned. Her nose was all scrunched up at the insult, "I did not do that.."

"Yes you did! You indirectly meant that you gave me chocolates as bribe..."

"Nope! I did not say that indirectly. I just said that directly. You were probably an annoying kid I wanted to get out of my way..."

Lily's mouth fell open at the direct insult and with a huff, she started walking faster. He'd ruined her childhood with that sentence! Jerk! Well, he could now figure out for himself or die wondering!

But, the long legged Cai Frost easily matched her steps and she glared at him as he grinned, "Okay okay! I was just teasing okay? I am sure you were not annoying. So, tell me, please?"

Lily opened her mouth to respond, her glare still fixed on Caius when suddenly, out of nowhere, a small blur shot past them—a wild, frantic ball of fur darting right across her path. Startled, she let out a soft yelp and jumped forward, instinctively reaching out to hold the person nearest to her. Before she could process what was happening, she felt Caius' arms wrap around her, steadyng her before she fell.

Instinctively, Cai's arms wrapped around hers to help her calm down, while she buried her face in his chest, her hands gripping his shirt tightly.

Chapter 793: The Girlfriend Replica (2)

It took a few moments for Lily to realize what had just happened. And as her heart calmed down a bit, she realized just what she had done. She could feel his heart beating steadily under her ear... Her pulse thrummed in her ears at this, and she could feel the warmth of Caius' body seep into hers as she held him just a little too long.

Realizing how close they were and how she was clinging to him, she quickly stepped back, breaking the contact, her cheeks flushing with a heat she couldn't quite control. She smoothed her shirt as if trying to compose herself, avoiding his eyes as she did so.

"I—uh, thanks," she muttered, still flustered. "That was... unexpected. I am sorry about this... I didn't mean to grab you. Its just that the horror stories of animal attacks I have heard along this road is huge and I was kind of scared."

Caius blinked, as if snapping out of his own daze, and took a step back too, shoving his hands into his pockets with an awkward chuckle. "Yeah, well... that little guy came out of nowhere. You okay?"

Lily nodded, though she still felt a bit unsteady—not from the scare, but from the way Caius had held her. She tried to laugh it off, though her voice came out a little shakier than she intended. "I'm fine. Just... startled."

Caius tilted his head, his gaze lingering on her for a beat too long, as if he was still trying to figure out what had just happened. But then, he asked, "So, not that we have even hugged and all, would you care to share your memory about the past?"

Lily paused and shook her head, the feelings inside her getting subdued as she watched him and sighed, "Come on a date with me."

Caius frowned. "Huh?"

Lily shrugged, " Lets have dinner together and I will remind you of old times'."

Caius paused for a moment, before sighing, " Alright, fair enough. Lets make it a meal.: So, tomorrow?"

Lily hesitated before nodding her head, "Okay. Tomorrow. I will see you outside the hotel at the same time tomorrow.

As they began to walk together, a comfortable silence settled between them. Lily shot him a sidelong glance, curious. "Why are you still here? I mean, you could have just walked away after agreeing to the dinner."

He shrugged nonchalantly, but his expression was serious. "The road is too deserted and dark for me to feel comfortable letting you walk alone. I was planning to see you off."

"I walk down this road everyday, Cai."

"That makes me even more uncomfortable. I think I should take up this matter with the hotel managers..."

Lily rolled her eyes and sighed, "This is public property. What will the poor managers do? They are swamped as it is...."

But even as she said this, she could not help but feel the butterflies. This was the problem with Caius Frost. When he was with you, he made you feel as if you were the only woman in this world.

After a few moments, they reached a small building. She stopped and turned to him, feeling a bit reluctant as she wondered if only she had taken up residence a bit further away. That way, she would have been able to spend more time with him. With a sigh, she bid him goodbye and turned to leave, "Well, this is me. I've reached. Thank you for bringing me here."

Caius nodded, a warm smile gracing his lips. "Goodbye, Lily. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodbye," she echoed, her heart fluttering as she watched him take a few steps back. As he turned to walk away, she felt a mixture of excitement and nervousness wash over her. Tomorrow would be their chance to reconnect...Sigh, tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

Cai frowned as he walked back home. He had been debating himself all day about whether to approach the girl or not. But he could not keep away. He'd even felt like a stalker when he'd been waiting outside to see her.

And he had no idea what had prompted him to do that. He could have simply asked to see her at the hotel reception, but he hadn't wanted to meet her in an official setting.

She looked so much like Jasmine, could it be that she was.... and then it came to him. A little girl... she'd been around eight or nine at the time? She'd usually follow him around whenever he would visit Jasmine's. And so, he'd started to give her chocolates so that...Oops...He grinned. It seemed she really had been bribed by him. He couldn't tell her that tomorrow though...

His grin, however, faded the next moment as he thought of cancelling the date. Now that he remembered, he wasn't sure that he really wanted to reconnect with her.. She was his first love's little sister...And then he paused. Could it be that he had subconsciously guessed this and that was why he had questioned dad about Aunt Nora...

No. He could not go on this date. His thoughts were elsewhere. Even when she had just hugged him, he had been tempted. And what if she wanted to talk about Jasmine tomorrow? He was not prepared for something like this. He should cancel. Yes. He would give her a random excuse to get out of it and then they would not see each other again.

But then, he realized. They had not even exchanged phone numbers. He had no way of cancelling the date...unless he simply did not go at the gate tomorrow... which would make him a total jerk.

And a coward, his ever-willing conscience happily supplied. Yes. And a coward is what he would be.

Better to be a coward and a jerk than do something that might end up creating a mess that could not be handled later. And so it was decided, he would be pulling a ghosting act tomorrow...

Chapter 794: Ghost Or Ghosted

Lily stood outside the door, her frown deepening with every passing minute. It had been over an hour since she started waiting, and there was still no sign of her date. She tried to reason with herself, convincing her mind that maybe he was caught up in traffic or running late. But considering all he had to do was take the elevator down from his room, that excuse seemed less and less believable with each tick of the clock.

Another, more painful possibility began to creep into her thoughts—maybe he had ghosted her. That idea made her heart sink, and she felt more than just a little sad. She had been looking forward to this moment for so long. Caius Frost had been her dream boy for as far back as she could remember. Even when he had been Jasmine's boyfriend, she had harbored that guilty crush, secretly liking the same guy her sister was dating. It had felt wrong, but the crush had never faded.

And then, later, when Caius had stayed by Jasmine's side, supporting her through the most difficult times, holding her hand through the worst of the pain, Lily's admiration for him had only deepened. She had decided that he wasn't just some random crush anymore—he was the ultimate man. The green flag of all green flags. The kind of guy any girl would be lucky to have.

But now, standing here alone, it seemed like her perfect 'green flag' image of him was about to crumble. If he didn't really want to go on this date, he should've just said so. He could have declined, or at least had the courtesy to inform her. Her conscience reminded her, though, that they hadn't exchanged phone numbers, so maybe it wasn't entirely his fault that he hadn't reached out. Still, he could've found a way.

He did wait here last evening didn't he? She looked down at herself and frowned. She'd even dressed up a bit for tonight's date. All her excitement now seemed to have gone.

She sighed, glancing up at the hotel building. She could go upstairs, knock on his door, and confront him, but that didn't feel right. She wasn't the type to chase after someone, and certainly not in a way that felt desperate. Checking her watch again, she made a silent decision—she'd give him another fifteen minutes at most. If he didn't show up by then, she'd leave without looking back.

At least she would have her dignity intact, even if her girlhood dreams were all shattered.

Cai knew he shouldn't have hesitated until the last moment. He knew it, and yet he had done exactly that. Ghosting her had felt wrong from the beginning, but now, as the minutes ticked by, he couldn't help but wonder if she would still be waiting for him. He was an hour late—an entire hour! How in the world was he supposed to explain this? He couldn't even come up with a reasonable excuse in his mind, let alone say it out loud.

Glancing down at his watch again, he let out a frustrated sigh before picking up his pace, racing towards the back door of the hotel through the staff staircase. This was no time to stroll in through the main entrance like a regular guest, casually walking around to the back. No, he needed to take every shortcut he could find if he had any hope of salvaging this disaster of a date.

Bursting into the kitchen, Cai's sudden entry startled everyone. The loud clatter of dishes and the startled gasps from the staff filled the room, creating a commotion that made him frown. Why were they all reacting as though they had seen a ghost? Sure, it wasn't every day a guest came barreling through the staff area like this, but did they really need to cause such a scene about it? He understood it was unconventional, but this level of chaos seemed a bit much.

The problem was, if Cai had only taken a moment to look at himself, he would have realized why everyone was reacting this way. He didn't just look like a man in a hurry—he looked like a ghost. Or maybe a zombie. Or worse, a murderer. His clothes were splattered with blood, and his face was twisted in a mixture of urgency and frustration, making him look angry enough to smash anyone who dared to get in his way. The kitchen staff had frozen, wide-eyed, and a few were already reaching for their phones, probably about to call the police.

In his rush to make it to the date, Cai had completely forgotten the event that had caused all this chaos. He had been on track, more or less on time, when he had stumbled across a man in the hotel lobby who was having a severe seizure, collapsing right in front of him. It was impossible for Cai to just walk past so of course he had to stop and help.

Instinct had kicked in, and without thinking, he had rushed to the man's side, barking at the hotel staff to call for help.

The situation had quickly escalated. The man had bitten his tongue, and blood had spilled everywhere, staining Cai's hands and clothes as he tried to keep the man stable until paramedics could arrive.

He had done what he could to keep the man breathing and conscious, but it had been a messy, frantic situation. By the time the ambulance finally arrived and whisked the man away, Cai had been covered in blood and sweat, his clothes ruined, and his nerves frayed.

He hadn't even thought to clean himself up before running straight for his date. hoping against hope that she would still be waiting. Of course, he probably deserved the title of a jerk if she did decide to give him that...

Finally, a waiter seemed to have gathered his courage and started to follow him, intending to stop the crazy man from doing whatever he was planning to do.

Chapter 795: Ahhhh

Lily huffed in frustration, finally reaching the end of her patience. She took a deep breath, trying to calm the bubbling disappointment inside her, and steeled herself for what she knew she had to do—leave. Enough was enough. She had waited long enough. Straightening her posture, she turned on her heel, ready to walk away for good. But just as she took her first step, a voice rang out behind her, "Lily!"

She froze in place, her heart skipping a beat. He was here. After all this time, he had finally shown up. For a moment, relief washed over her, but when she turned around to face him, the sight that greeted her stopped her cold.

What she saw wasn't the charming, well-put-together man she had been dreaming of all night. Instead, she found herself staring at a nightmare. Her eyes widened in shock, and her heart raced as fear gripped her chest. Caius stood there, but he looked like something out of a horror movie. His clothes were drenched in blood, his face pale and strained, and his expression wild.

Worried about him, she walked forward only to stop short when one of her colleagues came from behind him and jumped at Cai strangling his neck...The suddenness of the attack took her by surprise and then, to top off all the confusion, the waiter screamed, "Run, Lily run."

And then in the next minute, the man had been thrown over Cai's shoulder and onto the ground unceremoniously, with Cai looking at him in confusion as he asked, "Why did you attack me? And why are you asking my date to run away?" He then turned to Lily, "Lily? You know him?"

The same question was asked by the man on the floor as well, and as both men looked at her questioningly, she could only nod her head and then ask Cai, "What happened to you? Why are you covered in blood?"

Cai frowned at the question for a moment before his frenzied brain caught on and he looked down at himself and cursed, "Hol* shi*!" He looked up then and tried to explain, "This is not my blood."

"That is not reassuring." Lily pointed out and then looked at her friend who was even now standing protectively in front of Lily. She sighed and looked at her colleague and spoke meaningfully. "He is a guest in the hotel here. A VIP guest..."

Just then, a man appeared onto the scene and sizing the situation up, quickly walked to Cai, "Dr Cai. Thank you for everything just now! We've just received word from the ambulance that he is already stable and should survive till reaching the hospital."

The waiter was the first one to react as he questioned his manager carefully, "Sir? This man is a doctor?"

The manager nodded and explained, "I know just now everyone in the kitchen had a scare. But one of our guests was having a seizure and Dr Cai stepped in to save him. But he left as soon as the paramedics arrived. It was only now that, I was able to find him..."

"Well, I guess it is reassuring now that it is not your blood." Lily quipped, attracting the attention of the manager.

"Miss Lily, you know you are not supposed to connect with guests outside of work...."

"Miss Lily is an old acquaintance, Mr manager. So I hope you understand. Wait..."

With that, Cai fished out his phone and quickly pulled up a picture. "Here, see this. This is here when she was a little kid..."

The manager leaned over and peeked at the picture before answering, "Ahh! I understand I understand. Its okay then. You two really knew each other. That is understandable then."

Finally, the manager and the waiter left, leaving Cai and Lily alone.

Cai looked down at his blood-stained clothes and sighed, the weight of the night finally crashing down on him. "I know I'm already quite late, but would you mind giving me a few minutes? I'll go and get cleaned up..."

Lily raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk forming on her lips. "Cleaned up? Are you sure you don't want to change into a costume for Halloween instead? Because right now, you look like a zombie who just had a bad day."

Cai chuckled despite the situation, the tension in the air lightening slightly. "You're not wrong. But I promise, I'll come back looking more like Prince Charming than a horror movie extra. Just give me a moment."

"Okay, but I have to warn you," she replied, crossing her arms playfully. "This time I won't be waiting long..."

"Would you like to come up? You can wait in my room."

Lily hesitated for a moment, before nodding, " Okay. At least this way, if you find some patient again, at least I will know."

Cai laughed at this and extended his hand to her before quickly taking it back. That was covered in blood too. "Lets go. May you first hand witness my transformation from zombie to handsomeness."

Lily rolled her eyes as she started to walk along side him and said, " Your handsomeness is still there, you know, despite the 'zombieness.'

"Haha! Tell me, my dear Miss Lily, is this the most interesting first date or not? Hmm? Maybe down the line you can tell your children and grandchildren about how you had a first date with a man who came covered in blood. I am sure they will all think that you were really cool!"

"Yes yes! I am sure...But I'm even more sure that the kids will also think I have terrible taste in men," Lily shot back, grinning at him. "Who needs horror movies when you've got a real-life thriller on your hands?"

Cai laughed, the sound easing the lingering tension in the air. "Maybe I should warn them that the 'cool' part comes with a side of potential insanity."

Lily felt her heart stop as she thought of him still being there in the future but then she shook her head. He was simply teasing... no need to make mountains out of molehills... no this was not even a mole hill but a sand particle...

Chapter 796: A Dream Date

So, Lily," Cai began, leaning back with an exaggerated stretch as if he'd just completed a monumental task, "now that I'm finally dressed..." He paused dramatically, giving a pointed glance down at his neatly buttoned shirt, acting as though it had taken sheer willpower to accomplish it.

Lily nearly choked on her water, fighting back a laugh as she shot him a side-eye. The waitress, who had been walking past, clearly wasn't amused either, casting him a look of mild disapproval. There was definitely no need to talk about nudity in public.

Completely unfazed, Cai grinned mischievously and continued. "And considering this is officially a date now—because, you know, we're out here dining in public—" he emphasized, lifting his eyebrows at her with playful drama, "how about you tell me what you've been up to all these years? And more importantly, what in the world brings you to Petrovia? Don't tell me you came all this way to become a housekeeping staff at a hotel?"

Lily smiled, grateful he wasn't steering the conversation in a more awkward direction. She had been half-expecting him to bring up Jasmine or dredge up some old memories that would have them spending the evening in a somber mood. Instead, she found herself relaxing, ready to engage in the playful banter Cai always seemed to encourage.

"Well, Petrovia has one of the best hospitality management programs, and with tourism growing, it's the perfect place to gain experience. More people are flocking here every year, and I want to learn from the best. I plan to run a BnB back home someday," she said, sounding both confident and hopeful.

"A bed and breakfast, huh?" Cai cocked his head, visibly intrigued. It wasn't exactly a plan he'd expected from her, and he tried to picture it. "Wow... I don't think I know anyone with such a dream."

Lily shot him a mock glare. "What, are you looking down on me because it's a simple dream?" she teased.

"Absolutely not," he said, raising his hands in defense, eyes widening dramatically. "I'm just trying to wrap my head around why a young woman like you would want to spend her life running a BnB when you could be out partying, living it up, you know?"

Lily leaned forward, laughing and poking his arm. "Hey, I'm all about partying and living it up—for now. I said it's a future plan, not something I'm jumping into right away."

Cai chuckled, picking up his glass and raising it in a mock toast. "Touché! So, you're here to build experience and prepare for your BnB empire... fair enough."

She clinked her glass against his. "Exactly."

Cai's eyes sparkled with curiosity, and he leaned in. "But what about you, Dr. Cai?" Lily asked, returning the favor. "What brings you here? And don't tell me you came here to scout for hospital patients."

Cai raised a brow, taken slightly off guard. "You know about my work?"

Lily smiled and shrugged. "I know you're some sort of doctor, but not much more than that. So... what kind of doctor are you, really?"

Cai grinned, clearly amused. "A very good one," he said with a smug smile.

Lily burst into laughter, shaking her head. "Wow, so humble! You really know how to sell yourself."

"Hey, I never said I was modest," Cai shot back, raising his chin proudly. "But if you really want the details, I'm a surgeon. I came to Petrovia for research and development of a new procedure, and these days I'm just hanging around, trying to soak up the local culture."

Lily raised her eyebrows. "A surgeon, huh? Now that sounds impressive. Wow. I didn't expect you to become a doctor. I always thought that..."

Lily trailed off..." You are Dr Caius Frost, the one who is setting up the hospital... you are a neuro-surgeon."

Cai grinned at this and nodded,"Yep! The one and only."

Lily looked down then as her mood plummetted. He was a neurosurgeon. Why did he become a neurosurgeon? Could it be because of Jasmine? And that reminded her of the picture he had shown her manager...

"You've gone quiet all of a sudden." Cai murmured, as he looked at her carefully.

Lily shook her head before glancing up at Cai," Its nothing."

Cai sighed and shook his head,"Well, it doesn't look like nothing. You suddenly look as if you are giving bad thoughts."

Lily looked away. This man was still as all seeing now as he was in the past. She was about to ask him about Jasmine but before she could, they were interrupted by an announcement, inviting everyone to dance to the local songs...

As the announcement echoed through the bustling restaurant, a lively tune began to play, inviting everyone to the dance floor. The hosts, beaming with enthusiasm, beckoned guests to join in.

"Come on, Lily!" Cai said, a grin spreading across his face as he stood up, extending his hand toward her. "Let's learn some local dance moves!"

Lily hesitated for a moment, looking at the crowd gathering on the floor. "I don't know if I'm ready for a dance lesson.. I've got two left feet" she teased, biting her lip, but the spark in Cai's eyes was infectious.

Cai made a show of looking under the table as he sighed and answered," Nope! Those are two very pretty normal feet. So, come on! I promise I won't step on your toes. Much."

She laughed, rolling her eyes, and took his hand. "Fine! But if you do, I'm holding you responsible for my broken toes."

Cai led her to the dance floor, where a group of other patrons was already forming a circle. The energy was infectious, and Lily felt her pulse quicken with excitement. As they joined the throng, the hosts began to demonstrate the steps, guiding everyone with cheerful instructions.

"It's simple!" the lead dancer shouted. "Just follow my lead! Step to the right, clap, step to the left, and turn!"

Unexpectedly, it was Cai who turned out to have two left feet and she giggled as she watched him try to keep up. She never expected Caius Frost to not be able to keep up with the dance moves but what he lacked in skill, he made up in energy, keeping up with everyone else as they all bumbled through the dance moves.

Finally, as the music came to an end, they caught each other's hands and bowed before they returned to their table.

As they returned to the table and Cai pulled the chair out for her, he felt an immediate sense of loss. It took him a moment to realise that he had been holding her hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. As if her hand was made to fit his.

He shook his head at the absurd thought but as he walked around to his own seat, he could not help but look at her even more carefully. She was still breathing hard but her face was all red and shiny from the exertion. It made him think that this is what she would look like after a bout of love making.

She clicked her fingers in front of his face, "what are you thinking? You looked all lost."

Cai shook his head and sipped a bit of water, "You don't want to know what I am thinking."

"Hey! I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't."

Cai gave a slow smile then as he said, "Then, if you must know, I am thinking if you would look this beautiful after you've just made love..."

Lily's eyes widened in surprise, a blush creeping up her cheeks as she registered Cai's words. "Wow, Cai," she stammered, trying to recover from his unexpected boldness. "Is that how you always charm your dates?"

Cai leaned back, a smirk on his face, clearly enjoying her reaction. "Only the ones who can handle it. Besides, it's the truth. You looked radiant out there, completely lost in the moment. I couldn't help but think about how amazing you must look when you're in the throws of passion."

Lily looked down then, out of her depth, wondering how to answer this. She had not expected Cai Frost to be this big a flirt...

Thankfully, the server arrived with their food then, and she shifted the topic immediately asking him about his favourite foods...and the most hated ones.

Later, as they walked towards her house, Lily could not help but wonder if they would ever meet again. She wanted to ask him out again but she'd already done it once so she could not possibly ask again. They had already exchanged numbers so maybe this time he could ask her...

As she was debating this, Cai suddenly stopped and she looked up in confusion before realizing that they had already reached her hostel. She gulped and looked up, ready to say goodbye when he suddenly caught her by the waist and pulled her close.

Chapter 797: The End...

She placed her hands on his shoulders and looked up into his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Well, we need to have a complete story for your grandchildren, don't we?" He grinned playfully, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "How can you say you dated a lunatic until you've at least kissed him? Hmm? So, a kiss?"

Lily blinked, her heart skipping a beat. Did that actually sound like a question? She studied his expression and realized it was. Even though he had made the classic move of pulling her into his arms, there was a

softness in his eyes. He was waiting, asking for her permission to kiss her. And that was incredibly sweet of him...

But in the few seconds it took for her to gather her thoughts and give him an answer, he seemed to take her silence as a no. He was already stepping away, looking slightly disappointed.

Hurriedly, she tightened her hands on his shoulders, stopping him, and leaned up on her toes. She pressed a quick kiss to the corner of his lips before pulling back just as fast, feeling her face warm with embarrassment.

He smiled at her then, shaking his head with amusement. "Well, okay then, I think that suffices for a kiss at the end of the first date. Goodbye, Lily. I'll see you later."

"Will you?" The words flew out of her mouth before she could stop them, and her face flushed as he raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I mean... unless you don't want to see me," she added quickly, suddenly nervous.

Cai shrugged, "I don't see why we shouldn't catch up..."

He chuckled, the sound warm and reassuring. She smiled back, nodding. "I'd like that. We can hang out together... only as friends, of course," she hurried to clarify, worried he might misunderstand her meaning. Then, she immediately wondered if she was overthinking it. There was no need to explain, really.

He laughed again, more heartily this time, and before she could say anything else, he leaned in close, surprising her with a quick kiss on her lips. As he pulled away, he flashed her a charming smile. "There. That's better. So, Lily, would it be too soon to ask you on a second date if I did that the moment I stepped away?"

Her heart fluttered at his words, and she wanted to immediately shake her head and say no it wasn't too soon, but she forced herself to pause, pretending to think about it for a moment. Then, with a small smile, she shook her head. "No, I don't think it's too soon."

Cai grinned, winking at her as he finally stepped back and began walking away. He had only taken a few steps when he pulled his phone from his pocket and turned to shout from the distance, "Wait for my message!"

As Cai walked away, Lily stood there for a moment, feeling the lingering warmth of the quick kiss still on her lips. A small, shy smile crept up as she turned around and started to walk into the hostel. Her mind raced with thoughts of the evening, and the unexpected spark between them.

Just as she was about to tuck her hands into her pockets, her phone beeped. She pulled it out and glanced down at the screen. It was a message from Cai. He really had messaged her the moment he was gone.

"So... I know it's only been like 5 minutes, but I couldn't wait. How about we make that second date official?"

Lily's heart did a little flip, and she bit her lip to stop herself from smiling too hard. She typed back quickly. But before she could send the reply, he'd already typed up and sent another message, "So, how about this weekend? Dinner and maybe a movie? I'll try not to be late like today..And definitely no blood."

Lily giggled to herself, feeling her cheeks warm again as she thought about it. It felt so easy with him.

That sounds perfect! What kind of movie are we talking about?

A few seconds passed, and her phone buzzed again. I'm thinking something light. A rom-com? Or maybe a classic adventure? Or... we could just argue about it until we agree on popcorn."

Lily couldn't help but laugh out loud this time. His playful nature was still the same. She could already feel her cheeks hurting from all the smiling.

There was a slight pause before his next message came through. "There are toppings in Popcorn? Okay, Deal! As long as I get to hold your hand during the scary parts.

Wait... are there scary parts in rom-coms?"

Lily laughed at that and simply sat down on the stairs, looking up for a moment, before shaking her head and replying, "Unless you count cheesy declarations of love as scary."

Lily's fingers hovered over her phone, eagerly waiting for Cai's next message. The smile on her face remained, her heart light from the unexpected sweetness of the evening. She was about to check her phone when, out of nowhere, a forceful slap knocked the device from her hands, sending it flying onto the cold, hard floor. The sting of the slap registered a split second later, making her gasp, her cheek burning.

She looked up, her eyes wide with shock, to see her mother standing in front of her, fury blazing in her eyes.

"Lily!" her mother snapped, her voice sharp and unforgiving. "What on earth do you think you're doing?!"

Behind her mother stood her father, arms crossed, his face hard with disapproval. His presence loomed over them both, casting an ominous shadow on the narrow hallway.

Lily's hand instinctively went to her cheek, her mind racing to process what had just happened. She hadn't seen her parents for almost three years and now, they were suddenly coming here and slapping her?

She glanced down at her phone, which now lay a few feet away, the screen flickering where it had landed.

"M-Mom?" she stammered, her voice trembling as she looked back up at her mother, the sharpness of the slap still echoing in her mind. "W-what are you doing here?"

Chapter 798: You Are Not Her

"Mom? What are you doing here?"

Her mother's eyes blazed with fury as she stepped closer. "What am I doing here? What are you doing here, Lily?" she spat, her voice rising, filled with accusation.

Lily flinched, her mind scrambling to find an explanation, but the words felt trapped in her throat. She opened her mouth, trying to make sense of the situation, but all she managed was a stammered, "I... I wasn't doing anything wrong..."

Her mother scoffed, her expression filled with disbelief. "Not doing anything wrong? Is that what you're telling me right now?" She stepped closer, her voice dropping dangerously low. "What did you say when you left us, Lily? That you were tired of living in Jasmine's shadow? That even though Jasmine was gone, we wished it had been you? That you were sick of being her replacement?"

Lily's heart clenched painfully at the mention of her older sister, Jasmine. The wounds of the past were ripped open in an instant. She bit the inside of her cheek, trying to hold herself together.

Her mother wasn't done. She jabbed a finger toward her, her voice sharp and venomous. "And now look at you. Look at what you're doing just now! That was Caius Frost, wasn't it? Jasmine's boyfriend!" Her mother's voice dripped with disgust. "How could you—your own sister's boyfriend—go out with him and then make out like some shameless girl in the streets? Is this how you honor your sister's memory?"

Lily's heart pounded in her chest. The guilt, the anger, the pain—it all surged up at once. She could feel her pulse in her throat, her mind whirling with everything her mother had thrown at her.

Her voice wavered as she finally found the strength to snap back. "Jasmine's gone, Mom! She's been dead for years!" She glared at her mother, the weight of those words choking her. "I didn't go out with Cai when Jasmine was alive. She is dead! He's moved on—and so have I!"

For a brief moment, silence hung in the air, thick and tense. But her mother just laughed—a cold, hollow sound that cut through the night air like ice. She turned to Lily's father, her lips curling in a cruel smile. "Do you hear this, Richard? Do you hear how she's talking about her sister now?"

Her father simply continued to stare at her, silently agreeing with her mother. She felt broken then. He had always been like this! Never standing up against her mother, even if he thought she was wrong. But she had never blamed him. However, today, when even now, he refused to stand up for her, she could only stand there and defend herself.

She clenched her fists at her sides, trying to keep her voice steady. "You're twisting everything!" she shot back, the frustration bubbling up uncontrollably. "Jasmine's not coming back, Mom! And it's not wrong for me to live my life. I didn't do anything to hurt her, but you—" she pointed accusingly at her mother, her voice shaking with emotion, "you've never stopped trying to make me live as if I'm a replacement for her!"

Her mother's eyes narrowed, a sneer pulling at her lips. "Oh, poor you. The poor forgotten sister who has to live in the shadow of the perfect Jasmine," she said mockingly, her tone cruel and dismissive. "Don't play the victim with me, Lily. Jasmine was everything you're not. You'll never be half of what she was. And you think running around with her ex makes you special? Pathetic."

"I'm not trying to be special!" Lily snapped, her voice shaking. "I'm just trying to live my life. Cai and I—what we have has nothing to do with Jasmine!"

Her mother scoffed, a bitter, mocking laugh escaping her lips. "Nothing to do with Jasmine? Oh, Lily, how can you be so naive? Haven't you looked in the mirror?" She folded her arms across her chest, her eyes gleaming with cruel satisfaction. "Do you really think it's a coincidence that he's with you of all people? You look just like her—just like Jasmine. Don't kid yourself."

Lily shook her head, feeling a growing pit in her stomach. "No, it's not like that. It's not about her..."

How can it not be about her? He was loyal to your sister to the very end. He loved her, Lily! Or have you forgotten that too?" Her mother leaned in, her voice a harsh whisper. "Don't you know the myth in his family? The Frosts love only once—and when they do, it's for a lifetime. He said it himself, back when Jasmine was alive. He's probably only with you because, deep down, he still wants to be with her."

Lily's throat tightened, her hands trembling. "No..."

"Face it, Lily," her mother continued, relentless. "You're just a stand-in. He's with you because you remind him of Jasmine. It's pathetic that you don't see it."

Lily's heart pounded in her chest, every word her mother said stinging like salt in a wound she didn't even realize she had. Her breaths came out shallow, and the walls seemed to close in around her. She

wanted to scream, to deny it all, but her voice faltered under the weight of her mother's cruel words. Doubts began to creep in—doubts she had buried deep but could no longer ignore.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she could barely hold them back. "Just... leave me alone," she choked out, her voice shaking with both anger and pain. "I don't want to see you again. Either of you."

"Lily! We came to bring you back home...", her father tried to speak but her mother was not done, pushing the knife in, "Yes. Come back home! At least we know you are not Jasmine and cannot be. There is no need to make him confused and then be disappointed that you are not the woman he cared for and loved."

Lily couldn't take it anymore. Without another word, she turned and bolted, her feet pounding against the pavement as she ran.

Chapter 799: Living in Shadows

It was late in the night, almost morning, when Lily finally stirred from a fitful sleep. Her eyes were still swollen from her earlier bout of crying, and a dull ache settled in her chest as she blinked against the dim light filtering through the curtains. She instinctively reached for her phone to check the time, but her hand found only empty sheets. Her phone was missing—left behind where her mother had thrown it, in the chaos of the evening. The thought of searching for it felt like a monumental task; she couldn't muster the energy to care about it right now.

Seeing her parents again had been nothing short of horrifying. Over the years, she had imagined this moment countless times, replaying it in her mind like a film that never quite matched her expectations. She had envisioned their reunion happening on her own terms, in a moment when she felt strong and confident, ready to confront the complicated emotions that came with it. She imagined her parents seeing her—not just as the younger sister of the perfect Jasmine that they had lost—but as Lily, with her own identity, her own worth, and her own life experiences. Someone whose life they would not regret. Not blame the heavens for not making her sick and sparing Jasmine.

It stung to think that she could never measure up academically or in any other way to Jasmine. No matter how hard she tried, the comparisons were always there, lurking in the shadows. Jasmine, with her flawless grades and effortless charm, seemed to cast a long shadow that Lily could never escape. But even with all her insecurities, she had believed she deserved her parents' love. Instead, their visit felt like a cruel reminder of her inadequacies. Hadn't she proven herself by coming this far even when they had not believed in her? Hadn't her mother been confident that she would return to her within a year? And yet, here she was, having supported herself and her education all this time?

But tonight, they had come to her unexpectedly. Even then, she would have been prepared for them, if not for Cai. Meeting him had been unexpected. That morning when she had mistakenly entered his room, she had been shocked and thus ended up banging her foot against the bed, causing him to wake up... and she had escaped from there, her heart racing and worrying that he would recognise her.

But she had not expected to meet him again in the elevator. Or for him to flirt with her when he was so drunk. Yes, she had wondered if he did that because of her resemblance with Jasmine... but then, later when he had waited for her outside the hotel, he had not been drunk.

And then during the dinner, he had not treated her as if she were Jasmine. For example, he had not assumed that she did not eat mushrooms just because Jasmine did not. He had asked her for her preferences and not even mentioned Jasmine once.

By the end of the evening, she had convinced herself that he was interested in her—not as a substitute for Jasmine, but as Lily. It had been a fleeting moment of hope, a sense of possibility that had been building throughout their time together. But that fragile confidence came crashing down with her mother's dismissive words echoing in her mind, a painful reminder that no matter how hard she tried, she would always be seen as the shadow of her sister, forever compared and never quite measuring up.

With a deep breath, she decided a walk might help clear her mind. She dressed lethargically, throwing on a comfortable pair of sweatpants and an oversized hoodie that felt like a warm embrace.

Before heading out, she caught her reflection in the mirror. The sight was sobering: her swollen eyes and disheveled hair made her look like a ghost and she smiled tiredly at herself. If she walked outside like this, at this hour, people would definitely run in fear.

Hurriedly, she went and washed her face before shaking her head and pointing to her reflection in the bathroom mirror, "It was just a simple date. Nothing to get worked up about." With her phone lost now, she could easily pretend they had never agreed to a second outing. There was a certain liberation in that thought. She had no intention of becoming Jasmine's substitute again, of looking into someone's eyes only to see disappointment reflected back at her because she wasn't the sister they longed for.

And even if, on the off chance that Cai was not treating her Jasmine's substitute, she would not let herself endure that position of never being sure, or seeing the gloating doubt in her mother's eyes.

With a determined nod, she walked out of her room, her heart set on finding solace in the quiet of the night. She'd taken to walking as a way to escape the depression that she had been shrouded in post Jasmine's death and it never failed to work.

As she stepped outside, the cool night air hit her like a refreshing wave, invigorating her senses. Just as she began to walk, she heard a voice call out from the shadows.

"Excuse me, miss!"

She turned to see a guard approaching, a small smile on his face. "I believe this is yours," he said, holding out her phone. "A man brought it in last night, saying you dropped it."

She took the phone hesitantly as she thanked the guard. The man had probably been her father. She sighed. He could give this to the security guard and yet, he did not have a single word of comfort for her.

Pushing the phone into her pocket, she resisted the urge to see if there were any more messages from him and decidedly increased her speed. Once she was back, she would definitely block his name and delete his contact. There was no way she was going to keep in touch with someone related to Jasmine. She had come all the way to Petrovia to escape those shadows, she would not willingly walk under them again.

Chapter 800: A Chance

"Kael hates you now," Dora muttered, glancing up from the menu as she placed her order for a hearty breakfast at the all-night diner that Cai had insisted on bringing her to.

Cai rolled his eyes dramatically, leaning back in his booth with a playful sigh. "He's always hated me. How is that news? It's practically a fact of life at this point."

"Hey! He didn't always hate you. There was a time when he was just jealous," she countered, her voice teasing as she settled into the plastic seat. "But this morning? He is really, really angry. You see, you robbed him of his precious early morning snack."

Cai leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Well, if that's the case, then why don't you take something tasty for him? This place has a multitude of delicious snacks." He gestured animatedly around

the diner, where neon lights flickered above and the smell of spices and condiments wafted through the air.

"Those are not the snacks I am talking about. You see, I was the snack," Dora muttered slyly, pretending to immerse herself back in the menu, her lips twitching with amusement.

"Eww! I do not need those kinds of visuals! How can you torture me like this?" Cai exclaimed, glaring at her at this point.

Dora shrugged, a playful smile dancing on her lips. "You are the one who pestered me into meeting you here at the crack of dawn! Heck, it's not even dawn yet, so you absolutely deserve to be punished for this."

"Really! Fine then! Go on and sleep!" Cai shot back, throwing his hands up in mock surrender. "I had something interesting to discuss with you, but if you don't want to know, feel free to doze off..."

Dora's curiosity piqued at his words. "Interesting, huh? You have my attention. What's so important that you had to drag me out of bed at this ungodly hour?"

"Well, I met a girl."

Dora, who had just taken a sip of water, choked at this. In a strained voice, as her eyes watered, she asked him carefully, "What did you say? You met a girl?"

Cai nodded and Dora narrowed her eyes, "Okay.... And what does she have? Tremors, memory loss, butterfly tumors? What?"

Cai's brow furrowed, and he shot her a look. "Do you think only thoughts of brain surgery make me excited? I just met a girl whom I want to get to know and you think I am talking about..."

Dora laughed and shook her head, "Hey! You know I was just teasing! So, the great Caius Frost has met a girl- a girl he is interested in and who has no connection to any neurological diseases..."

That made him pause. "Actually she does have some connection.."

Dora paused and gave him a stare, "She can't be a patient because then you would definitely not see her as a girl. So, don't tell me she is a doctor like you?"

"Huh? No no. She is not a doctor. But what is wrong with being a doctor?"

"Nothing is wrong? But you? And a doctor? The two of you would probably talk about nothing else all day. Nope nope! You need someone who brings you out of the medical field not someone who lets you drag her in there with you."

"You have quite strong opinions about this." Cai murmured.

"I have strong opinions about everything. You should know that by now, Cai. So, since she is not a doctor, as of now point is moot. Tell me about her." Dora asked, trying to suppress her excitement. It had been so long since Cai had mentioned a girl.

But when he did tell her about the person, she almost wished he had not. "She is Jasmine's younger sister. You remember Jasmine?" Cai asked and looked at Dora who was not looking at him with consternation.

Of course she remembered Jasmine. She was the girl that had altered Cai's course of life. She and her death had changed him. Even now, he had been insisting about naming the research centre after her.

Cai clicked his fingers in front of her face and Dora looked up at him, as he said, "What? Don't tell me you don't remember Jasmine."

"I do. So... her sister... Lily?"

Cai blinked. "You remember her name? No. Wrong question. How do you even know her name? As far as I know you only met Jasmine once and never met Lily."

"You mentioned her." Dora said quietly.

"I did?"

"Hmmm. It was during those last times when Jasmine was fading away. You mentioned how that their entire house seemed as if it were already shrouded in mourning. You'd started to hate going there and the only thing that gave you the strength to go there was Lily because she was always smiling and trying to cheer everyone up. Like a little sunshine."

Cai stilled. Now that Dora mentioned it, he could already feel those memories tugging at him. It was indeed true. She had indeed always been there, trying to make him and Jasmine smile with her antics. Even when Jasmine would scold her after a while, she would only slither away and not blame her older sister.

"Wow! I can't believe that you remember that." Cai murmured to Dora. She really did have an incredibel memory.

"Of course I do. She even wrote you a note when Jasmine passed away and you did not go to her funeral. I think Ava still has that note because you refused to read it or discuss Jasmine again."

Once again, Cai was shocked. He thought he remembered everything that he had never forgotten and yet, this simple conversation reminded him that he had indeed erased a lot from his mind. Not just the bad memories but also the good ones.

While he was lost in thought, so was Dora. She did have opinions about this as well. Him dating the younger sister of his first love... was not an ideal situation. But this time, she kept her opinion to herself. Because, she could sense that this was somehow important to him.